Europe

The transatlantic alliance—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—has been the linchpin of America’s security since the end of the Second World War. In many cases, the United States and its European allies have helped to create the conditions for prosperity and peace across large areas of the world.

However, despite the centrality of the transatlantic relationship, fractures have appeared, and many of these fractures are self-imposed. With the end of more than a decade of out-of-area combat operations in Afghanistan, NATO has entered a period of soul-searching as Russia at the same time becomes more assertive. Many European NATO members no longer possess the military capability or political will to contribute to the alliance in a meaningful way.

While defense spending has been declining, threats to the region have not disappeared. The resurgence of an aggressive, belligerent Russia has thrown conventional post–Cold War thinking into the waste bin. While policies pursued by the U.S. and our allies vis-à-vis Russia have given Russia space to expand its regional influence, Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine and annex Crimea has changed post–Cold War norms.

From the Arctic to the Baltics, Ukraine, and the South Caucasus, Russia has proven to be the source of much instability in Europe.

Threats to the Homeland

Russia is the only state adversary in the region that possesses the capability, both with conventional and with non-conventional means, to threaten the U.S. homeland. Although there is no indication that Russia plans to use its capabilities against the United States absent a broader conflict involving America’s NATO allies, the plausible potential for such a scenario serves to sustain their strategic importance. Russia’s explicitly belligerent behavior during the past year further adds to the need for the U.S. to give due consideration to Russia’s ability to place the security of the U.S. at risk.

Russian Strategic Nuclear Threat. Russia possesses the largest nuclear weapons arsenal among the nuclear powers (when short-range nuclear weapons are included). It is one of the few nations with the capability to destroy many targets in the U.S. homeland and in U.S.-allied nations and to threaten and prevent other nations from having free access to the commons. Russia has both intercontinental-range and short-range ballistic missiles and a varied nuclear weapons arsenal that can be delivered by sea, land, and air.

Russia is currently relying on its nuclear arsenal to ensure its invincibility against any kind of enemy, to intimidate European powers, and to deter counters to its predatory behavior in its “near abroad,” primarily in Ukraine but also concerning the Baltic States. The arsenal provides Russia with a protective umbrella under which it can modernize its conventional forces at a deliberate pace. While its nuclear deterrent protects Russia from a large-scale attack, Russia needs a modern and flexible military
to fight local wars such as the ones in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Russian military doctrine allows for the use of nuclear weapons in local and regional conventional wars and considers such use de-escalatory.

In December 2014, President Vladimir Putin signed a new version of the military doctrine, emphasizing the threat of NATO and global strike systems to Russia. Russia’s defense budget increased by $20 billion in 2015 and was spared a 10 percent across-the-board cut due to lower prices of oil, costs of sanctions, and costs of maintaining the Ukrainian conflict. Russia’s nuclear forces are the primary beneficiaries of the budget increase. Russia is planning on deploying 38 new strategic missiles, one strategic submarine, and seven modified strategic bombers in addition to seven air defense systems and three Yars missile regiments.

The Defense Ministry states that the new structure of the armed forces is being created with the goal of increased flexibility, mobility, and readiness for combat in limited-scale conflicts. Strategic Rocket Forces are the first line of defense (and offense) against Russia’s great-power counterparts.

Russia has two strategies of nuclear deterrence. The first is based on a threat of massive launch-on-warning and retaliatory strikes to deter a nuclear attack; the second is based on a threat of limited demonstration and “de-escalation” nuclear strikes to deter and terminate a large-scale conventional war. Russia’s reliance on nuclear weapons is based partly on their small cost relative to conventional weapons (especially in terms of their effect) and on Russia’s inability to attract sufficient numbers of high-quality servicemembers. Thus, Russia sees its nuclear weapons as a means with which to offset the lower quantity and quality of its conventional forces.

Moscow has repeatedly threatened U.S. allies in Europe with nuclear deployments and even pre-emptive nuclear strikes. It has also scaled up flights penetrating Air Defense Identification Zones of the United States and its allies. The Russians justify their aggressive behavior by pointing to deployments of U.S. missile defense systems in Europe. These systems, however, are not scaled or postured to mitigate Russia’s ballistic missile and nuclear weapons advantage to any significant degree. In March 2015, Russia’s ambassador to Denmark threatened that Danish ships taking part in NATO’s missile defense have made themselves targets for a nuclear attack. Russia continues to violate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which bans the testing, production, and possession of intermediate-range missiles. According to Keith Payne and Mark Schneider, “These Russian actions demonstrate the importance the Kremlin attaches to its new nuclear-strike capabilities. They also show how little importance the Putin regime attaches to complying with agreements that interfere with those capabilities.”

WWTA: The WWTA states that Russia has made headway in its nuclear modernization efforts including “developing long range precision strike capabilities.”

Summary: The sizable Russian nuclear arsenal remains the only threat to the existence of the U.S. homeland emanating from Europe and Eurasia. While the potential for use of this arsenal remains extremely low, it is an important capability in Russian security calculations, especially in light of Russia’s continued threatening of Europe with nuclear attacks. Russia’s nuclear arsenal will continue to play a central strategic role in shaping both Russia’s military and political thinking and its level of aggressive behavior beyond its borders.

Threat of Regional War

To many U.S. allies, Russia does pose a threat. At times, this threat is of a military nature. At other times, Russia uses less conventional tactics such as cyber attacks, utilization of energy resources, and propaganda.

Today as in Imperial times, Russia’s influence is exerted by both the pen and the sword. Organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or Eurasia Economic Union attempt to bind regional capitals to Moscow through a series of agreements and treaties, for example. However, Russia also will not hesitate to use military force to exert influence in the region.

There are four areas of critical interest to the U.S. in the European region where Russia poses a direct threat: Central and Eastern Europe, the Arctic or High North, the Balkans, and the South Caucasus.

Russian Pressure on Central and Eastern Europe. Moscow poses a security challenge to members of NATO that border Russia. Although the likelihood of a conventional Russian attack against the Baltic States is low, primarily because it would trigger a NATO response, Russia has used non-conventional means to erode the political systems and legitimacy of these states. The Baltic States continue to view Russia as a significant threat.
After World War I, the three Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania proclaimed their independence, and by 1923, the U.S. had granted full recognition to all three. In June 1940, as part of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, Soviet troops entered and occupied the three Baltic countries. A month later, the acting U.S. Secretary of State, Sumner Welles, issued what was later to be known as the Welles Declaration, condemning Russia’s occupation and stating America’s refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Soviet control of these three states. The three states regained their independence with the end of the Cold War. Due to decades of Russian domination, the Baltic States factor Russia into their military planning and foreign policy formulation in a way that is simply unimaginable in many Western European countries and North America. Estonia and Latvia have sizable ethnic Russian populations, and there is a concern that Russia might exploit the situation as a pretext for aggression. This view is not without merit, considering Moscow’s irredentist rhetoric and Russia’s use of this technique to annex Crimea.

Russia has also demonstrated a willingness to use military force to change the borders of modern Europe. When Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych failed to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) in 2013, months of street demonstrations led to his ouster in early 2014. Russia responded by violating Ukraine’s territorial integrity, sending troops, aided by pro-Russian local militia, to occupy the Crimea Peninsula under the pretext of “protecting Russian people.” This led to Russia’s eventual annexation of Crimea. Such annexation by force is unprecedented in the 21st century.

Backed, armed, and trained by Russia, separatist leaders in eastern Ukraine declared the Lugansk People’s Republic and the Donetsk People’s Republic, leading to creation of the Federal State of Novorossiya. Russia has continued to back separatist factions in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine with advanced weapons, technical and financial assistance, and the use of Russian conventional and special operations forces.

The number of Russian troops operating in Ukraine has fluctuated depending on the security situation on the ground. For example, when Ukrainian forces were making headway against the separatist factions, Moscow responded by sending an estimated 5,000 troops into Ukraine. Two cease-fire agreements—one in September 2014 and another in February 2015, known as Minsk I and Minsk II, respectively—have come and gone. Since the most recent agreement went into effect, dozens of Ukrainian soldiers have been killed and hundreds more have been wounded. In fact, the separatists violated the Minsk II agreement 139 times in the first 24 hours alone—almost once every 10 minutes.

While the formal cease-fire has held, fighting has continued between Ukrainian forces and forces of pro-Russia rebels or regular Russian troops fighting alongside them. Russian convoys including howitzers, tanks, and air defense systems have continually crossed the border into Ukraine. Additionally, General Philip Breedlove, commander of NATO forces in Europe, has confirmed that Russia moved forces “that are capable of being nuclear” into Crimea, although it remains unclear whether nuclear forces have indeed been deployed to the Crimean peninsula. Russian fighter jets flying from newly seized bases in Crimea practiced penetrating NATO anti-air systems in the Black Sea in March 2015.

These cease-fire agreements have resulted in the de facto partition of Ukraine and have created the region’s newest frozen conflict. Moscow’s track record in implementing cease-fires means that nobody should expect Russia not to use its influence to control the separatists in eastern Ukraine. Seven years later, Russia is still in violation of the 2008 peace agreement signed to end the war against Georgia. Russia still has its troops based in areas where they are not supposed to be, and Moscow still prevents international observers from crossing into South Ossetia and Abkhazia even though they patrol freely in the rest of Georgia.

Whether in Georgia or in eastern Ukraine, it is in Russia’s interests to keep these conflicts frozen. Russia derives much of its regional influence through these frozen conflicts. Bringing these conflicts to a peaceful conclusion would only decrease Russia’s influence in the region.

The other countries in Central and Eastern Europe also see Russia as a threat, although to varying degrees. Most tend to rely almost completely on Russia for their energy resources, some have felt the sharp end of Russian aggression in the past, and all were once in the Warsaw Pact and fear being forced back into a similar situation.

In addition to the historical experiences that shape Russia’s aggressive image among those in
Central and Eastern Europe, Moscow’s behavior in the region has been a cause for concern. Russia has deployed Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad Oblast enclave, and there have been reports that Russia has deployed tactical nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad. 

Russia also has dedicated resources to major training exercises involving tens of thousands of troops that many in Eastern Europe fear are directed at them. In March 2015, without warning, Russia staged a five-day exercise involving 45,000 troops, 3,000 vehicles, 110 aircraft, 15 submarines, and 40 surface vessels. The Russian Northern Fleet was brought to full combat readiness as part of the exercise. While there is nothing necessarily wrong with Russia conducting military exercises, the scale of the snap exercise and its being held coincidentally with NATO’s long-planned, 5,000-troop Joint Viking exercise in northern Norway were meant as a signal of Russian strength. “Conducting this single exercise in the area stretching from Norway to the Baltics through Poland and into Crimea is clearly angled toward NATO and its Eastern European members.”

The frequency of large-scale Russian exercises has been increasing in recent years. In 2013, Russia and Belarus took part in joint exercises called Zapad 2013. According to official Russian numbers, 12,000 Russian troops and 10,400 Belarusian troops participated; however, some Western observers believe the total number of troops was closer to 70,000. The exercise was intended to test the efficacy of Russia’s military modernization efforts in its Western Military District and its ability to reinforce the Western Military District rapidly from less vital military districts. For example, Zapad 2013 included the mobilization of 20,000 troops from internal Russian districts to support the Western Military District.

The Zapad exercises also highlighted the growing military and political partnership between Russia and Belarus, a particular concern for U.S. allies in the Baltics and Poland. According to the Russians, the Zapad 2013 scenario envisioned the “deterioration of relations between states due to inter-ethnic, and ethno-religious controversies, and territorial claims.” Considering that similar justifications were used to invade Ukraine, the exercises clearly have real-world implications.

More worrisome still, Russian exercises at times have included a nuclear element, such as in 2009, when a Russian exercise scenario included a nuclear attack on Warsaw.

WWTA: The WWTA notes that Russia is pressuring neighboring states to join the Eurasian Economic Union as way to achieve greater regional influence. By utilizing a growing relationship with China and multilateral forums, Russia also continues to work to dilute U.S. influence in Europe.

Summary: NATO members in Eastern and Central Europe view Russia as a threat, a fear that is not unfounded considering Russian aggression against Ukraine and Georgia. The threat of conventional attack against a NATO member by Russia remains low, but Russia’s grasp and use of unconventional warfare against neighboring countries should remain a top issue for U.S. and NATO planners.

Militarization of the High North. The Arctic region is home to some of the roughest terrain and harshest weather found anywhere in the world. Increasingly, Arctic ice is melting during the summer months, causing new challenges for the U.S. in terms of Arctic security. Many of the shipping lanes currently used in the Arctic are a considerable distance from search and rescue (SAR) facilities, and natural resource exploration that would be considered routine in other locations in the world is complex, costly, and dangerous in the Arctic.

The U.S. is one of five littoral Arctic powers and one of only eight countries that have territory located above the Arctic Circle, the area just north of 66° north latitude that includes portions of Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Canada, Greenland, Iceland, and the United States.

Arctic actors take different approaches to military activity in the Arctic. Although the security challenges currently faced in the Arctic are not yet military in nature, there is still a requirement for military capability in the region that can support civilian authorities. For example, civilian SAR and natural disaster response in such an unforgiving environment can be augmented by the military.

Even so, Russia has taken steps to militarize its presence in the region. Russia’s Northern Fleet, which is based in the Arctic, counts for two-thirds of the Russian Navy. A new Arctic command was established in 2015 to coordinate all Russian military activities in the Arctic region. Over the next few years, two new so-called Arctic brigades will be permanently based in the Arctic, and Russian Special Forces have been training in the region. Old Soviet-era facilities have been reopened; for example,
**MAP 3**

**Russia Fortifying Bases in Arctic Region**

- **Key regional headquarters**
- **Confirmed bases Russia is building/upgrading**
- **Bases Russia may upgrade**

Source: Heritage Foundation research. heritage.org
the airfield on Kotelny Island has been put into use for the first time in almost 30 years.\footnote{33} The ultimate goal is to deploy a combined Russian arms force in the Arctic by 2020, and it appears that Russia is on track to accomplish this.\footnote{34}

NATO continues to debate what, if any, role it should have in the Arctic. Although NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept (the most recent) was praised for acknowledging new security challenges for the alliance, such as cyber and energy security, Arctic security was not included. In fact, the word Arctic cannot be found in either the 2010 Strategic Concept or the 2014 Wales NATO Summit declaration.

Inside NATO, different U.S. allies view the Arctic differently. Norway is a leader in promoting NATO’s role in the Arctic. Although Norway has contributed troops to Iraq and Afghanistan and was one of only seven NATO members to carry out air strikes during the Libya campaign, the primary force driver for its armed forces is still Arctic security. The Norwegians have invested extensively in Arctic defense capabilities, and Norwegian officials, both military and civilian, want to see NATO playing a larger role in the Arctic.

The Norwegian position regarding NATO’s role in this area is in contrast to Canada’s. Like Norway, Canada has invested heavily in its Arctic defense and security capabilities. Unlike Norway, however, the Canadians have made it clear that they do not want NATO involved. Generally speaking, there is a concern inside Canada that non-Arctic NATO countries favor an alliance role in the Arctic because it would afford them influence in an area where they otherwise would have none.

WWTA: The WWTA does not mention the Arctic region.

\textit{Summary:} While NATO has been slow to turn its attention to the Arctic, Russia continues to develop and increase its military capabilities in the region. The likelihood of armed conflict remains low, but physical changes in the region mean that the posture of players in the Arctic will continue to evolve. It is clear that Russia intends to exert a dominant influence.

\textit{Threat from Russian Propaganda.} Russia has used propaganda stealthily and consistently to garner support for its foreign policies. In the 2013 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, the Russian government is explicit about its aims to utilize mass media to further its foreign policy aims.

In its propaganda, Russia will seek to ensure its objective perception in the world; develop its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad; strengthen the role of Russian mass media in the international information environment, providing them with essential state support and participating actively in international information cooperation; and take necessary measures to counteract information threats to its sovereignty and security.\footnote{35}

Russian media are hardly independent. In 2014, Russia ranked 148th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders’ \textit{World Press Freedom Index}.\footnote{36} “Ever since Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin in May 2012,” reports the \textit{Index}, “more and more draconian laws have been adopted. Activists, news media and bloggers have all been targeted. Defamation has been criminalized again, websites are being blacklisted and the range of activities that can be construed as ‘high treason’ is now much broader.”\footnote{37}

While much of its propaganda is meant for a domestic Russian audience, Russia is working actively to influence audiences abroad as well. In 2015, RT, a Russian television news station that broadcasts in Arabic, English, French, German, Russian, and Spanish, will receive $400 million in state funding.\footnote{38} Rossiya Segodnya, a radio and wire service crafted from RIA Novosti and the Voice of Russia, will receive $170 million in state funds for 2015.\footnote{39} Russian propaganda efforts also include newspaper supplements\footnote{40} and the hiring of Western public relations firms. In 2013, for instance, Ketchum helped to place an op-ed in \textit{The New York Times} written by Vladimir Putin criticizing American exceptionalism.\footnote{41}

Russia’s plans have met with some success abroad; in December 2014, RT claimed that its combined YouTube channels made it the first news channel to hit 2 billion views.\footnote{42} While Russian state propaganda instruments have proliferated in Western capitals, however, the number of Western journalists inside Russia has decreased. In September 2014, “the Russian Duma passed a law restricting foreign ownership of media companies to 20 percent. The law effectively forces foreign owners to relinquish control over independent outlets, further consolidating the government’s control over the media.”\footnote{43}

Russian propaganda was in full force during the country’s invasion of Ukraine and subsequent annexation of Crimea and continued stealth invasion of eastern Ukraine. General Philip Breedlove described the importance of propaganda for
Russian military operations: “Undergirding all of these direct approaches is the pervasive presence of the Russia propaganda machine, which inserts itself into media outlets globally and attempts to exploit potential sympathetic or aggrieved populations.”44 Russian media have worked to push the false claim that Russia is simply defending ethnic Russians in Ukraine from far-right thugs. Russian media also have claimed that the government in Kyiv is to blame for the violence that has enveloped parts of the country or that the U.S. has instigated unrest in Ukraine.45 After a civilian airliner was shot down by Russian-backed separatists, Russian propaganda spun stories that the plane was shot down by the Ukrainian government.46

Russian propaganda efforts are not limited to TV channels; there are widespread reports of the Russian government’s paying people to post comments on Internet articles that parrot the government’s propaganda.47 Twitter has also been used in Ukraine to disseminate false or exaggerated claims from the Russian government. Russian propaganda poses the greatest threat to NATO allies that have a significant ethnic Russian population: the Baltic States, especially Estonia and Latvia. Many ethnic Russians in these countries get their news through Russian-language media (especially TV channels) that give the official Russian state line, often interspersed with entertainment shows, making it more appealing to viewers. In 2014, Lithuania and Latvia temporarily banned certain Russian TV stations such as RTR Rossiya in light of Russian aggression in Ukraine.48

The inability to reach ethnic Russians in their vernacular remains a glaring vulnerability for planners when thinking about Baltic security. In an effort to provide an independent alternative Russian-language media outlet, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are in various stages of planning and creating their own programming for Russian-language TV channels to counter Russian propaganda efforts.49

WWTA: The WWTA states that Putin has utilized state media propaganda to justify the seizure and annexation of Crimea and to bolster his personal approval ratings. “Russian state controlled media publish false and misleading information in an effort to discredit the West, undercut consensus on Russia, and build sympathy for Russian positions.”50

Summary: Russia has used propaganda consistently and aggressively to advance its foreign policy aims. This is unlikely to change and will remain an essential element of Russian aggression and planning. The potential for its use to stir up agitation in the Baltic States and to expose fissures between Western states makes Russian propaganda a continued threat to regional stability and a possible threat to the NATO alliance.

Russian Destabilization in the South Caucasus. The South Caucasus sits at a crucial geographical and cultural crossroads and has proven to be strategically important, both militarily and economically, for centuries. Although the countries in the region (Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan) are not part of NATO and therefore do not receive a security guarantee from the U.S., they have participated to varying degrees in NATO and U.S.-led operations—especially Georgia, which has aspirations to join NATO.

Russia views the South Caucasus as part of its natural sphere of influence and stands ready to exert its influence in the region by force if necessary. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, coming as close as 15 miles to the capital city of Tbilisi. Seven years later, several thousand Russian troops occupied the two Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In 2015, Russia has signed so-called integration treaties with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Among other things, these treaties call for a coordinated foreign policy, creation of a common security and defense space, and implementation of a streamlined process for Abkhazians and South Ossetians to receive Russian citizenship.51 The Georgian Foreign Ministry criticized the treaty as a step toward “annexation of Georgia’s occupied territories.”52 These agreements are the first step in a process of Russian annexation of these two breakaway regions—both of which are still internationally recognized as part of Georgia. Considering Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, Georgians have serious cause for concern.

Today, Moscow continues to take advantage of ethnic divisions and tensions in the South Caucasus to advance pro-Russian policies that are often at odds with America’s or NATO’s goals in the region. However, Russia’s influence is not restricted to soft power. In the South Caucasus, the coin of the realm is military might. It is a rough neighborhood surrounded by instability and insecurity reflected in terrorism, religious fanaticism, centuries-old sectarian divides, and competition for natural resources.

Russia maintains a sizable military presence in Armenia based on an agreement giving Moscow
The bulk of this force, consisting of approximately 5,000 soldiers and dozens of fighter planes and attack helicopters, is based around the 102nd Military Base. Russia has long had difficulty supplying these forces, especially since a transit right through Georgian airspace has been closed and Turkey refuses transit. This has left reliance on Iran, which for obvious reasons is not ideal for Russia.

Consequently, there is concern that Russia is exploiting ethnic tensions in the ethnic Armenian-populated Georgian province of Samtskhe–Javakheti in order to create a sphere of influence linking Russia with Armenia through South Ossetia and Samtskhe–Javakheti. Causing instability in Samtskhe–Javakheti would achieve two goals for Moscow.

**First,** it would further dismember the territorial integrity of Georgia. The Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are already under Russian occupation. By some accounts, they are closer than ever to being annexed by Moscow. An independent Samtskhe–Javakheti, or one under Russian influence, would divide Georgia down the middle.

**Second,** and more important for Russia, bringing the region under Moscow’s influence would bring a land corridor between Russia and Armenia via South Ossetia one step closer. This is important because Russia maintains a sizeable military presence in Armenia.

Samtskhe–Javakheti is strategically important for a number of reasons. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline and the South Caucasus Pipeline, carrying oil and gas, respectively, from the Caspian to the Mediterranean, pass through the province. As the possibility of increased Central Asian gas transiting to Europe becomes more likely, the South Caucasus Pipeline could become vital for Europe.
This is especially true at a time when many European countries are dependent on Russia for their energy resources. The Kars–Tbilisi–Baku railway, which opened in 2015, also runs through Samtske–Javakheti with the goal of eventually transporting 3 million passengers and over 15 million tons of freight each year.56

Armenian separatism in Samtske–Javakheti might not be as vocal as it was only a few years ago, but there is still a fear that Moscow could easily reenergize separatist movements in the region. Many Javakheti Armenians have Russian sympathies. Until its closure in 2007, the Russian military base there was the single biggest source of employment.

But Russia is only part of the problem. Many of the Javakheti Armenians’ grievances are a result of poor policymaking by the central government in Tbilisi. Many Javakheti Armenians feel that their culture and language are subject to official discrimination. There has been a decrease in the quality of education among the Javakheti Armenian population, and the bilingual education program of teaching in both Georgian and Armenian has been described as a “total failure” because there are not enough qualified teachers with proficiency in both languages.57

Additionally, unemployment is high in Samtske–Javakheti, and future economic prospects in the region look bleak. Many Javakheti Armenians travel to Russia or Armenia for work. The Russian ruble has lost almost one-third of its value in the past year, as a result of which remittances have also decreased.

Then there is the issue of citizenship and immigration. Many Javakheti Armenians do not have Georgian citizenship. Instead, many hold Armenian passports because an Armenian passport makes it easier to find seasonal work in Armenia and Russia. Until recently, Armenian citizens were allowed to live and work inside Georgia without any special authorization as long as they crossed the border back into Armenia at least once a year. In September 2014, this changed. Now Javakheti Armenians without Georgian citizenship can stay in Georgia for only three months at a time. Longer-term residency permits are costly.

These policies breed animosity and form a perfect storm that could easily be exploited by Russia.

The Nagorno–Karabakh conflict is another area of instability in the region. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan started in 1988 when Armenia made territorial claims to Azerbaijan’s Nagorno–Karabakh Autonomous Oblast.58 By 1992, Armenian forces and Armenian-backed militias occupied 20 percent of Azerbaijan, including the Nagorno–Karabakh region and seven surrounding districts. A cease-fire agreement was signed in 1994, and the conflict has been described as “frozen” since then.

There are concerns that the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict offers another opportunity to exert malign influence and consolidate Russian power in the region. As Dr. Alexandros Petersen, a highly respected expert on Eurasian security, has noted:

It is of course an open secret to all in the region as well as to Eurasianists in the EU that the Nagorno–Karabakh dispute is a Russian proxy conflict, maintained in simmering stasis by Russian arms sales to both sides so that Moscow can sustain leverage over Armenia, Azerbaijan and by its geographic proximity Georgia.59

Senior Russian leaders have made their views quite open regarding whose side Moscow would support in the event of a conflict. In an interview in 2013, Colonel Andrey Ruzinsky, the commander of Russian forces in Armenia, affirmed Russia’s preparedness and intention to “join the armed conflict” against Azerbaijan if it “decides to restore jurisdiction over Nagorno–Karabakh by force.”60 After Russia’s actions in Crimea and the weak response from the West, Moscow could be emboldened to seek greater but riskier dividends from turning the frozen Nagorno–Karabakh conflict into a hot war, thereby attaining even greater leverage and latitude for follow-on actions.61

The South Caucasus might seem distant to many American policymakers, but the spillover effect of ongoing conflict in the region can have a direct impact on both U.S. interests and the security of America’s partners, as well as on Turkey and other countries that are dependent on oil and gas transiting the region.

WWTA: The WWTA projects that tensions between Russia and Georgia remain high, with continued pressure for Georgia to abandon further moves to integrate into NATO or the EU. The simmering conflict and occasional violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan continues, and a peaceful resolution is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Summary: Russia views the South Caucasus as a vital theater and uses a multitude of tools that include military aggression, economic pressure, and stoking of ethnic tensions to exert influence and
control, usually to promote outcomes that are at odds with U.S. interests.

The Balkans. Although security has improved dramatically in the Balkans since the 1990s, there is still potential for more violence resulting from sectarian division based on religious and ethnic differences. These tensions are exacerbated by sluggish economies, high unemployment, and political corruption. In 2014, Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced some of the most violent anti-government riots in 20 years.

On a positive note, Albania and Croatia have joined NATO, and Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are official aspirant countries. The first two have made great progress toward joining the alliance. However, the situation in the region with Kosovo remains fragile, although an EU-led rapprochement between Kosovo and Serbia has seen modest success.

There has been an increase in Russian activity in the region. Serbia in particular has long served as Russia’s foothold in the Balkans. Both Russia and Serbia are Orthodox countries, and Russia wields huge political influence in Serbia. Moscow backed Serbian opposition to Kosovo’s independence in 2008 and continues to use Kosovo’s independence to justify its own actions in Crimea, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.

Serbia and Russia have signed a strategic partnership agreement focused on economic issues. Russia’s inward investment is focused on the transport and energy sectors. Russia’s recent decision to scrap the South Stream gas pipeline is a huge blow to Serbia and will likely cost Serbia billions of euros of inward investment and thousands of local jobs. Except for those in the Commonwealth of Independent States, Serbia is the only country in Europe that has a free trade deal with Russia. Even with the negative impact of the South Stream cancellation, it is likely that Serbia will continue to consider Russia its closest ally.

The Russian–Serbian military relationship is similarly close. Russia signed an agreement with Serbia to allow Russian soldiers to be based at Niš airport, which has been used by Serbia to meddle in northern Kosovo. Serbia has observer status in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russia’s answer to NATO. Serbia and Russia have signed a 15-year military cooperation agreement that includes the sharing of intelligence, military officer exchanges, and joint military exercises. Russia’s handling of the situation in Ukraine has not changed Serbian attitudes regarding military cooperation with Russia. During a state visit to Serbia in October 2014, Putin was honored with the largest Serbian military parade since the days of Yugoslavia. The two countries have also carried out military training exercises.

Russia is also active in Bosnia and Herzegovina—specifically, the ethnically Serb region, Republika Srpska, one of two sub-state entities inside Bosnia and Herzegovina that emerged from that country’s civil war in the 1990s.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the path to joining the transatlantic community but has a long way to go. It negotiated a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU, but the agreement is not in force because key economic and political reforms have not been implemented. In 2010, NATO offered Bosnia and Herzegovina a Membership Action Plan, but progress on full membership has been stalled because immovable defense properties in the country are still not under the control of the Ministry of Defense. Moscow knows that the easiest way to prevent Bosnia and Herzegovina from entering the transatlantic community is by exploiting internal ethnic and religious divisions between the Serb and Bosniak and Croat populations.

The leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has long been an advocate of independence for Republika Srpska and has enjoyed a very close relationship with the Kremlin. Recent events in Ukraine, especially the annexation of Crimea, have inspired more separatist rhetoric in Republika Srpska. In many ways, Russia’s relationship with Republika Srpska looks like a relationship with another sovereign state and not with a semi-autonomous region inside Bosnia and Herzegovina. When Putin visited Serbia in October 2014, Dodik was treated like a head of state and invited to Belgrade to meet with him.

Russia has also thrown the future of the European-led peacekeeping operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina into doubt. Russia, which holds veto power in the U.N. Security Council, recently abstained during the annual vote extending the peacekeeping mission. This was the first time in 14 years that Russia failed to vote for this resolution. Russia also requested that a sentence mentioning “the Euro-Atlantic perspective of Bosnia-Herzegovina” be omitted from the annual Security Council resolution.

Montenegro is another focus of Moscow’s diplomacy. Russia and Montenegro have had close
relations for three centuries. Today, Montenegro walks a fine line between keeping its close ties with Russia and strengthening its ties to the West. On balance, Montenegro has been successful at remaining focused on joining the transatlantic community, but there are signs that Montenegrins are losing patience with the West after long delays in joining NATO and the EU.

After Russia annexed Crimea, the Montenegrin government backed European sanctions against Moscow and even implemented its own sanctions. However, when NATO failed to invite Montenegro to join the alliance at the September 2014 Wales Summit, some senior Montenegrin officials, including the Prime Minister, questioned whether sanctions were the right course of action.65 Russia has significant economic influence in Montenegro and is the country’s largest inward investor. Up to one-third of all enterprises are owned by Russian companies.66

Russia has also tried to squeeze its way into the security sphere in Montenegro. Due to uncertainty surrounding the future access to its main Mediterranean naval port in Syria, Russia has requested access for the Russian navy to use Montenegro ports for refueling and maintenance. This request was turned down because of concerns that such an agreement with Russia might negatively affect Montenegro’s NATO membership prospects.

Another challenge for the region is the increasing presence of the Islamic State and the rise of extremism. Thankfully, the region has not yet suffered an attack from ISIS, but the Balkans have served as a fertile recruiting ground for the Islamic State. This should come as no surprise. High unemployment and stagnant economies have added to the social pressures in the Balkans. Many young Muslim men feel marginalized from mainstream society and see little hope for their future.

ISIS recruiters have taken advantage of this situation. There are several hundred fighters from the Balkans in Iraq and Syria.67 These foreign fighters have even formed a so-called Balkans Battalion for Islamic State. The bulk of these fighters have come from Kosovo, but others can be traced back to Albania, Bosnia, and the Republic of Macedonia. The region is also important to ISIS for reasons beyond recruitment. The Balkans are becoming an important transit route for ISIS fighters traveling between Western Europe and the Middle East. This is especially true for Greece and Croatia with their long coastlines.68 It is only a matter of time before the Islamic State uses the Balkans to plan and launch attacks across the rest of Europe.

The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. servicemembers have served in the Balkans, and billions of dollars in aid have been spent there—all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community.

Summary: The Balkans are being squeezed from three sides: by increased Russian involvement in internal affairs, ISIS using the region as a transit and recruiting ground, and the potential political and economic spillover from Greece. The U.S. and NATO would be wise not to dismiss the region as “mission accomplished.”

Threats to the Commons

Other than cyberspace, and to some extent airspace, the commons are relatively secure in the European region. This is especially true when it comes to the security of and free passage through shipping lanes in the region. The maritime domain is heavily patrolled by the navies and coast guards of NATO and NATO partner countries. Except in remote areas in the Arctic Sea, search and rescue capabilities are readily available. Maritime-launched terrorism is not a significant problem, and piracy is virtually nonexistent in the European region.

Airspace. There has been an increasing number of aggressive Russian air force activities near the airspace of other European countries, both NATO and non-NATO. The provocative and hazardous behavior of the Russian armed forces or groups sponsored by Russia pose a threat to civilian aircraft in Europe as demonstrated with the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew on board over the skies of southeastern Ukraine. In addition, there have been several incidents of Russian military aircraft flying in Europe without using their transponders: For example, in February 2015, civilian aircraft in Ireland had to be diverted or prevented from taking off when Russian bombers flying with their transponders turned off flew across civilian air lanes.69 Similarly, in March 2014, an SAS plane almost collided with a Russian SIGINT plane, with the two coming within 90 meters of each other.70
Incidents of Russian military aircraft flying near the airspace of American allies in Europe have increased in recent years. NATO jets had to be scrambled 400 times in 2014, a 50 percent increase over 2013. The number of actual intercepts of Russian planes flying into NATO airspace also increased in 2014 to over 100, three times more than in 2013. NATO’s Baltic Air Policing mission, begun in 2004, has helped defend the airspace above Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania from incursions by Russian fighters, bombers, and surveillance aircraft. As a reassurance measure, since early 2014, NATO has quadrupled the number of aircraft patrolling the Baltic skies.

Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the number of air incursions has been on the rise. In June 2014, three British Royal Air Force (RAF) fighters that were part of the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission intercepted seven Russian planes, including one Tu22 Backfire bomber, that were flying near Baltic airspace. This was the highest number of such interceptions for a single day since the beginning of the Baltic Air Policing mission.

The RAF also responds regularly to Russian aircraft closer to home off the coast of Great Britain. In 2014, there were eight incidents of the RAF scrambling to respond to Russian planes approaching British airspace. The Norwegian air force has similarly seen an uptick in the number of identified Russian planes flying close to Norway’s airspace. In 2012, Norway scrambled fighter jets 41 times and identified 71 Russian planes; in 2013, there were 41 scramblings with 58 planes identified; and in 2014, the number of scramblings rose 27 percent to 49 with 74 planes identified. Norway has also observed bigger and more diverse groupings of Russian planes flying near its airspace.

Non-NATO members have been the target of aggressive Russian aerial activity as well. In March 2013, two Russian bombers and four fighter jets took off from St. Petersburg and carried out a mock strike on targets in the Stockholm region. Swedish experts have assessed that this mock attack in fact simulated a nuclear strike against two targets in Sweden. The Swedish air force did not react, as it was on low alert during the Easter break. Instead, NATO scrambled two Danish jets from a base in Lithuania to intercept the Russian planes.

However irritating (in the case of countries like the United Kingdom) and threatening (as in the case of the Baltic States), Russian aerial activity is nowhere near the levels seen during the Cold War, when it was common to see 500–600 identifications of Russian planes near NATO airspace annually. Nevertheless, the U.S. and its NATO allies must be prepared to respond to Russia when it tests the airspace of the alliance.

The shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 in July 2014 by Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine showed that a threat to the commons is growing as a result of Ukraine’s continued instability and Russia’s arming of separatist forces with advanced surface-to-air missiles. Furthermore, Russia’s continued reckless flying poses a risk to civilian aviation in Europe because Russian pilots often do not submit a flight plan or have their transponders turned on so that civilian aircraft can avoid them. For example, in March 2015, Baltic Air Policing and Swedish forces intercepted four Russian planes—two bombers and two fighters—flying without a flight plan or transponder turned on. One of the two bombers was flying at supersonic speeds through Riga’s flight information region, the first time a supersonic flight had been observed.

WWTA: The WWTA does not refer any threats to the global commons in Europe or Eurasia.

Summary: Despite ongoing Russian aerial activity and the shooting down of Flight MH17, the airspace commons in the region remain relatively secure.

Space. Admiral Cecil Haney, head of U.S. Strategic Command, said in March 2015 that “[t]he threat in space, I fundamentally believe, is a real one.” Russia’s space capabilities are robust, but Moscow “has not recently demonstrated intent to direct malicious and destabilizing actions toward U.S. space assets.” However, Admiral Haney also testified in March 2015 that “Russian leaders openly maintain that they possess anti-satellite weapons and conduct anti-satellite research.”

In May 2014, General William Shelton, commander of Air Force Space Command, warned of the dangers of U.S. reliance on Russian-made rocket boosters to send half of the nation’s military and intelligence payloads into space, especially in light of tensions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While Russia has threatened to ban the sale of rockets to the United States, it has not yet acted on this threat. The U.S. has not included many Russian companies that sell rockets in sanctions. One Russian firm signed a $1 billion deal in January 2015 to sell 60 rockets to a U.S. company that supplies the International Space Station.
However, the U.S. is attempting to move away from a reliance on Russian rockets. The 2015 National Defense Authorization Act directs the Pentagon to stop using Russian rockets by 2019.\(^{88}\) The Air Force is expected to release a draft request for proposal in April 2015 for a replacement rocket.\(^{89}\)

**WWTA:** According to the WWTA, “Russia’s 2010 military doctrine emphasizes space defense as a vital component of its national defense,” and “Russian leaders openly maintain that the Russian armed forces have antisatellite weapons and conduct antisatellite research. Russia has satellite jammers and is also pursuing antisatellite systems.”\(^{90}\)

**Summary:** Despite some interruption of cooperation in space as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, cooperation on the International Space Station and commercial transactions on space-related technology have continued unabated. However, the Ukraine crisis has fueled U.S. efforts to develop alternate sources for rockets and space shuttles. Additionally, Russia continues to build out its counterspace capabilities and has sought to deepen its space cooperation with China as a result.\(^{91}\)

**Cyber.** Perhaps the most contested domain in Europe is the cyber domain. Russian cyber capabilities are incredibly advanced. In his 2010 book *Cyberwar*, former White House cyber coordinator David Smith quoted a U.S. official as saying that “[t]he Russians are definitely better, almost as good as we are.”\(^{92}\) Such an assessment is not an outlier, as multiple other organizations and reports have noted, from the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community to the cybersecurity firm FireEye, which described Russian cyber attacks as “technically advanced and highly effective at evading detection.”\(^{93}\)

The two most obvious examples of Russian cyber aggression are the 2007 attack against Estonia and the 2008 attack against Georgia. However, Russia is suspected of conducting cyber attacks in Ukraine as well.\(^{94}\)

In April 2007, Estonian officials moved the Bronze Soldier, a war memorial to the Soviet liberation of Estonia during World War II, from its public location in central Tallinn to a military cemetery, prompting Russian outrage. Soon thereafter, distributed denial-of-service (DDOS) attacks flooded Estonia, taking down banking and government websites for prolonged periods of time over the course of several weeks.\(^{95}\)

In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia. During this time, at least 54 government, finance, and communication websites were disrupted by hackers, making it difficult for Georgia to communicate with its citizens or with the outside world.\(^{96}\)

Moreover, it is unlikely that the world has seen the full extent of Russian capabilities. Though the cyber attacks on Georgia and Estonia were among the most public such attacks yet seen, they were not conducted by Russian military or intelligence organizations. Rather, both were conducted by Russian “patriotic hackers” who were likely coordinated or sponsored by Russian security forces.

Worryingly, these are not even Russia’s best military cyber capabilities or organizations, about which little is publicly known. Given Russia’s history and known capabilities, Russian cyber weapons to target critical infrastructure and military targets are likely sufficiently robust for a larger, more significant conflict if Russia should need them.

**WWTA:** The U.S. intelligence community notes that Russia’s cyber capabilities include the establishment of a cyber command by the Russian Ministry of Defense. The new command will be responsible for conducting offensive cyber activities, including propaganda operations and inserting malware into enemy command and control systems. Russia’s armed forces are also establishing a specialized branch for computer network operations.

**Summary:** Russia’s cyber capabilities are advanced. Russia has shown a willingness in the past to utilize cyber warfare, including against Estonia in 2007 and Georgia in 2008. Russia’s use of cyber capabilities, coupled with the likelihood that Russia possesses more advanced cyber capabilities not yet used, presents a challenge for the U.S. and its interests abroad.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the threat to the U.S. homeland originating from Europe remains low, but the threat to American interests and allies in the region remains significant. Behind this threat lies Russia. Although Russia has the military capability to harm, and in the case of its nuclear arsenal pose an existential threat to, the U.S., it has not demonstrated the intent to do so.

The situation is different when it comes to America’s allies in the region. Through NATO, the U.S. is obliged by treaty to defend and come to the aid of the alliance’s 26 European members. NATO has been the cornerstone of European security and stability since its creation 66 years ago, and it is in America’s
interest to ensure that the military capability is available to fulfill its treaty obligations. Certain policies pursued by the Obama Administration, however, such as the cancellation of the “third-site” missile defense site in Poland and the Czech Republic, the so-called Russian reset, the removal of two heavy brigade combat teams from Europe, and the cancellation of Phase 4 of the European Phased Adoptive Approach missile defense system, have led many in Europe to question America’s commitment to transatlantic security.

Russia will continue to exploit this situation. There is nothing to indicate that Crimea will be the end of Putin’s imperial ambition, just as there was nothing in 2008 to indicate that Putin was content with limiting his actions in Georgia.

In the middle of the 19th century, British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston said about Russia:

The policy and practice of the Russian Government has always been to push forward its encroachments as fast and as far as the apathy or want of firmness of other Governments would allow it to go, but always to stop and retire when it met with decided resistance and then to wait for the next favorable opportunity.97

What was true then is true today. Russia will continue to behave in a belligerent manner, and Putin will do what he knows he can get away with doing. The U.S. must be ready and must have the ability to respond to Russian aggression if required to do so.

Threat Scores by Country

Russia. Russia is not the threat to U.S. global interests that the Soviet Union was during the Cold War, but it does pose challenges to a range of American interests and those of its allies and friends closest to Russia’s borders. Russia’s leadership seeks to spend $340 billion by the end of the decade to overhaul the military.98 Russia possesses a full range of capabilities, from ground forces to air, naval, space, and cyber. It still maintains the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, and although a strike on the U.S. is highly unlikely, the latent potential for such a strike still gives these weapons enough strategic value vis-à-vis America’s NATO allies and interests in Europe to keep them relevant.

However, as the crisis in Ukraine illustrates, it is Russian provocations far below any scenario involving a nuclear exchange that pose the most serious challenge to American interests, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, the Arctic, the Balkans, and the South Caucasus. It is in these contingencies that Russia’s military capabilities are most relevant.

According to the IISS Military Balance, among the key weapons in Russia’s inventory are 378 intercontinental ballistic missiles, 2,600 main battle tanks, more than 5,125 armored infantry fighting vehicles, over 6,000 armored personnel carriers, and over 4,180 pieces of artillery. The navy has one aircraft carrier; 59 submarines (including 12 ballistic missile submarines); six cruisers; 18 destroyers; 10 frigates; and 84 patrol and coastal combatants. The air force has 1,201 combat-capable aircraft. IISS counts 230,000 members of the army. Russia also has a reserve force of 2,000,000 combined for all armed forces.99

With regard to these capabilities, Russia remains a significant continental military power and has announced research and development plans for a new ICBM, although The Military Balance states that “such ICBMs are a distant prospect, with analysts assessing little progress likely before 2020.”100 The first of the Borey-class SSBNs, the Yuri Dolgoruky, formally joined the fleet at the beginning of 2013 and is intended as part of a broader recapitalization of the country’s nuclear capability. The armed forces continue to undergo process modernization begun by Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov in 2008.101 The success of some reform measures was put on display during the seizure of the Crimean peninsula. The invasion showcased Russia’s use of a host of tools in a new form of hybrid warfare. However, most of the forces used were highly trained special forces, so the successes for Russia in Crimea may not reflect the impact of modernization on the larger army.102

Russia has been investing huge sums of petrodollars in modernizing its armed forces, especially its nuclear arsenal, but Russian forces remain much weaker than they were at their Soviet peak and face huge problems from corruption and a long-term shortage of recruits thanks to declining birthrates, poor access to decent health care, and the reduction of conscription service to one year.103 Although it looked like a stunning success on the TV screens, the Russian military also faced problems during its 2008 invasion of Georgia, particularly in the areas of communications and logistics. In comparison, “Russian forces in Crimea benefited from improvements in personal equipment, logistics, personnel discipline,
electronic-warfare capability and junior-commander training.”

This Index assesses the overall threat from Russia, considering the range of contingencies, as “aggressive” and “gathering.”

**Threats: Russia**

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