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*Drivers of Conflict and Convergence in
Eurasia in the Next 5-25 Years*

Integration Report: Executive Summary

Understanding the
Human Side of the
Environment

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Prepared for
Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment

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Introduction

Evaluating strategic risk in the Eurasia region over the next two to three decades is a complex challenge that is vital for USEUCOM planning and mission success. The depth of our understanding of the diverse set of political, economic, and social actors in the region will determine how effectively we respond to emerging opportunities and threats to US interests. A better understanding of Russia's priorities and interests, and their implications, both regionally and globally, will help planners and policy makers both anticipate and respond to future developments.

The official project request from the United States Navy asked that the Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) team "identify threats and opportunities in Eurasia (with particular emphasis on USEUCOM area of responsibility (AOR) countries). The study should examine future political, security, societal, and economic trends to identify where US interests are in cooperation or conflict with Russian interests and, in particular, identify leverage points when dealing with Russia in a 'global context.' Additionally, the analysis should consider where North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) interests are in cooperation or conflict with Russian interests."¹

To address these questions, SMA brought together a multidisciplinary team drawn from the United States Government (USG), think tanks, industry, and universities. The individual teams employed multiple methodological approaches, including strategic analytic simulation, qualitative analyses, and quantitative analyses, to examine these questions and the nature of the future operating environment more generally.

The diverse range of approaches and sources utilized by the individual teams working on the USEUCOM project is one of the strengths of the SMA approach; however, it also makes comparison and synthesis across individual reports more challenging. For this reason, NSI developed a structured methodology for integrating and comparing individual project findings and recommendations in a systematic manner.²

This report provides an overview of the regional issues identified by the US, Russia, NATO, and the EU in policy statements, speeches, and the media, and how they intersect with actor interests. It then presents the major themes arising from the integration of the team findings in response to USEUCOM's questions, in particular the importance of understanding Russia's worldview, and the subsequent recommendations for reducing conflict and increasing the probability of cooperation with Russia.³ The report is structured as follows:

1. Identifying issues and mapping actor interests in the USEUCOM AOR
2. Russia's worldview
3. Regional cooperation and conflict
4. Domestic stability and instability in Russia
5. Recommendations for reducing conflict and increasing cooperation

¹ See Appendix A of the full integration report for a list of the USEUCOM questions.

² This interested-based integration framework was originally designed for the SMA/USPACOM effort in 2014 and has been further refined for USEUCOM. Please contact Belinda Bragg at bbragg@nsiteam.com for a copy of the report.

³ A brief overview of team projects and hyperlinks to their reports is provided in Appendix B of the full integration report.

Identifying issues and mapping actor interests in the USEUCOM AOR⁴

Actors in the international environment act to protect and forward their interests. Most broadly, we can categorize actor interests as either security (preservation of the state and military security), economic (economic prosperity and development), or prestige (international influence and standing). These interests generate objectives for actors, which inform their foreign policy and responses to specific issues that arise in regional relations. For state actors (or actors such as NATO and the EU whose members are states), domestic constraints and pressures can intervene between interests and foreign policy objectives, potentially changing the nature of that objective, its relative importance, or both. Determining how key actors—in this case Russia, the US, NATO, and the EU—define their interests in the region and identify threats to those interests provides us with the context that can help identify both the activities that pose the risk of conflict and those that provide opportunities for cooperation.

NSI’s analysis of official policy statements related to the USEUCOM AOR found that, frequently, multiple interests were expressed in a single statement. This reflects the complexity of many of the issues important to the actors, and underscores the importance of considering the broader implications to both the US and other actors of security and military actions and objectives. Across all four actors, the policy statement analysis identified more than 70 issues related to the USEUCOM AOR. There is some crossover between these top issues among all actors, although even the US and NATO show variation in the issues of greatest concern.

Table 1: Top issues (by frequency) referenced in policy statements

United States	Russia	NATO	EU
Alliances & Partnerships	Alliances & Partnerships	Regional Security Cooperation	Alliances & Partnerships
Regional Security Cooperation	Economic Cooperation	Human Rights	Regional Security Cooperation
Mil-to-Mil Cooperation	Foreign Policy	Ukraine	Territorial Disputes
Military Capacity	Energy Security	Mil-to-Mil Cooperation	Sanctions
Ukraine	IGOs	Territorial Dispute	Trade
Human Rights	Trade	Illicit Trade & Transnational Crime	Military Capability
Economic Development	Illicit Trade & Transnational Crime	Russian Regional Military Activity	Aid
Foreign Policy	Regional Security Cooperation	Domestic Political Stability	Rule of Law
NATO	Ukraine	International Intervention	Energy Security
Democracy	Sovereignty	Sovereignty	International Intervention

⁴ Refer to full integration report for a detailed discussion of actor interest alignments and regional issues.

Many of the issues referenced by the actors are often categorized as either economic or military/security related. However, when we code for interests referenced in relation to specific issues, we find that many issues are considered by the actors to touch on multiple interests. That is, an “economic” issue, such as trade, is also considered to have security or domestic interest implications. The extent of the cross-domain nature of issues becomes clear when we map actor’s top issues to the interest combinations referenced in the policy statements. As Figure 1 below reveals, there are few issues referenced by any actor that are considered to affect a single interest.

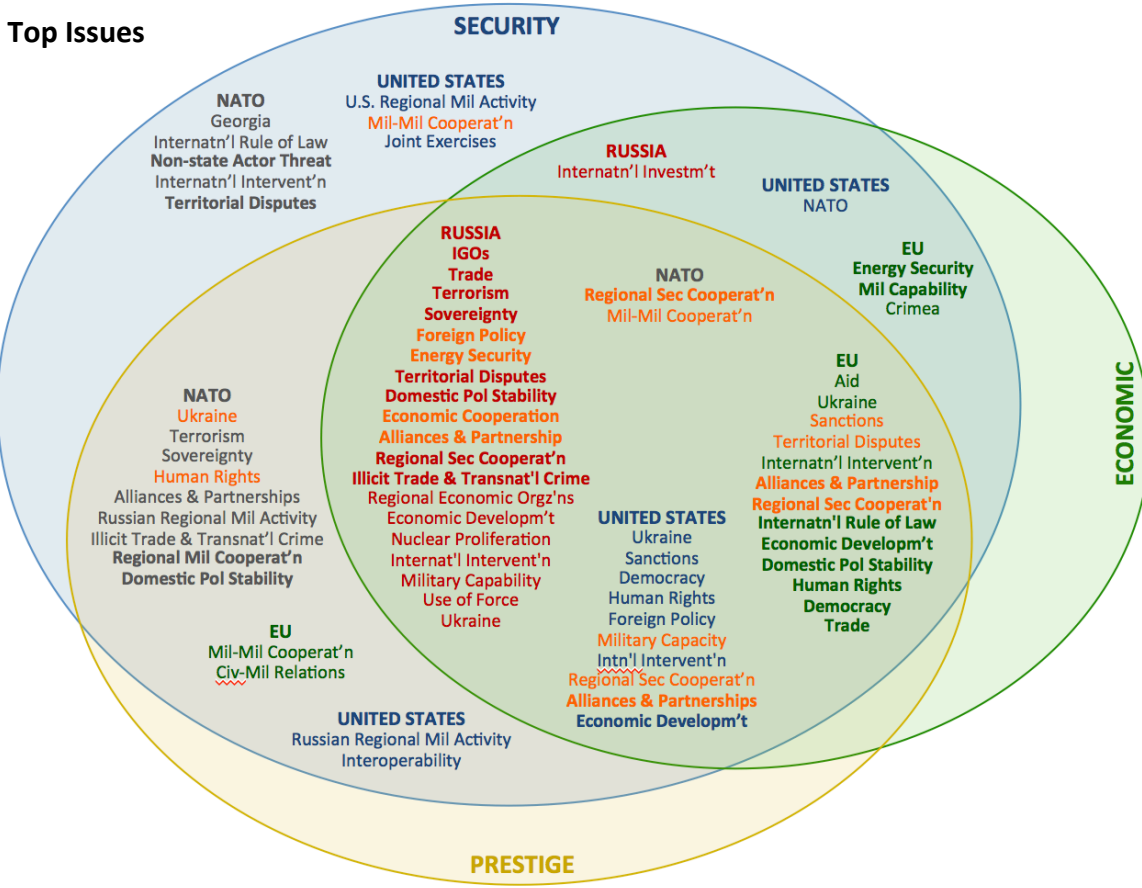


Figure 1: Interest map of top regional issues for US, Russia, NATO, and EU

The fact that there are such a substantial number of issues for all actors that are considered to have implications for multiple interests emphasizes the importance of economic, domestic, and prestige interests to our understanding of interstate relations in this region, even in the security realm. This, in turn, suggests that when considering the implications of and responses to USEUCOM engagement activities, an approach that explicitly links issues to a broad range of actor interests can provide a more complete picture of the potential for both cooperation and conflict. Furthermore, it can help identify areas where collaboration with other USG agencies and partners would be advantageous, consistent with USEUCOM’s goals. This perspective is reflected in much of the analysis done by the project teams.

Russia's worldview

Perhaps the strongest theme to emerge from the team findings is the importance of understanding Russia's perception of the current international system, and where that deviates from Russia's preferences, and interests.

Table 2: Implications of Russia's worldview for US and Western interests

Implications of Russia's worldview for US and Western interests

- Russia's sense of threat and vulnerability leads it to engage in efforts to shape its own sphere of influence through actions that NATO and the EU view as aggressive but Russia views as defensive (AOWG Baltic).
- Domestic instability within states in Russia's near abroad, especially when associated with moves toward political liberalization, increases the likelihood of conflict with Russia (START Stats).
- Russia is likely to engage in military trade with states it considers will help balance US and Western military capability (START VNSA).
- Maintaining a sphere of influence is part of this definition of great power status, and can compensate to some extent for US dominance in the wider region (NSI ViTTa).
- A threat to Russia's nuclear weapons, such as missile defense systems, is perceived as a threat to the survival of the state as independent and sovereign. For Russia, therefore, nuclear reductions cannot be considered without taking into account global missile defense systems (CEIP).
- Even if relations between Russia and the West improve, Russia will strive to build alternative international economic and political institutions to those that currently dominate the international system.

Russia's view of the current international environment

Russia sees the current system as dominated by a hegemonic United States, desperate to maintain its influence and power, despite its relative decline. To achieve this, the US has pursued policies that have increased global instability, creating the conditions for the rise of VEOs, marginalized the political voice of rising powers, and purposively kept Russia weak.

Sense of vulnerability and threat

Across multiple team analyses using varied data and methods, Russia's sense of vulnerability and threat emerged as a motivating force behind their actions and responses to US and European foreign policy behavior both regionally and globally (CEIP; NSI Discourse; NSI ViTTa; TAMU). Russian actions that the West interprets as aggressive are viewed by Russia as defensive. The team analyses also identified a fundamental difference between Russian and Western definitions of and assumptions regarding some concepts fundamental to the international system. In particular, as Russian responses to Western

intervention in Iraq, and support of regime change in Libya and other Middle East and North Africa (MENA) states demonstrates, they have a very different view of the conditions that create regional and state-level stability (NSI ViTTa). Their notions of sovereignty and citizenship are similarly divergent from those held by the West and underpinning current international law and institutions (CEIP; NSI ViTTa).

Relative military capability

Russia's perception that it faces an imminent security threat is compounded by a long-standing lack of confidence in their conventional military capabilities. "US and other NATO countries' conventional capabilities continue to impress Russian military observers and feed their insecurity with respect to their own" (CEIP; see also NSI ViTTa).

The conflict in Ukraine demonstrated to the Russian military that "the country, the army, and the navy are not yet ready for a large-scale conventional-only war," prompting a leading Russian military analyst to conclude that in a similar conflict [to Ukraine] with NATO forces, the only recourse Russia has is to threaten the use of tactical nuclear weapons (CEIP).

NATO enlargement

NATO and Russia perceive the alliance's enlargement in very different lights. Where NATO sees a zone of stability and security closer to Russia, Russia sees NATO military capacity closer to Russia (CEIP). As the CEIP report lays out, this opposition to NATO enlargement is not a new position for Russia, rather it can be seen as a consistent theme running through the Russian military, security, and diplomatic establishments since the fall of the Soviet Union.

The Russian response to the possibility of countries in its near abroad joining NATO has already been demonstrated in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, but is potentially not restricted to Russia's European neighbors. The CEIP report points out that NATO's Partnership for Peace program extended the alliance's reach into Central Asia and "could have been easily interpreted by Russian military planners as a maneuver to encircle Russia" (CEIP).

Russia seeks to undermine NATO

In contrast to its military strength, Russia perceives NATO to be politically weak and lacking in unity. Russia seeks to exploit the vulnerabilities created by NATO expansion, in particular the increased difficulty of gaining consensus to act among a larger membership with more diverse interests (NSI ViTTa). If they can target NATO political and unitary weakness, they can offset its military strength (NSI ViTTa). Putin's goal is to undermine the legitimacy of NATO by demonstrating that Article V is not as "ironclad as people think it is" (NSI ViTTa).

Political vulnerabilities and threat perception

Russia also considers Western political influence and enlargement of the democratic zone as a direct threat to its internal stability and regional influence (NSI ViTTa). Friendly, dependent, systemically corrupt regimes, as exemplified by the Yanukovich government in Ukraine, are what Russia needs to maintain influence and create problems for the West (NSI ViTTa). Although regional autonomy agreements (such as South Ossetia), and electoral plebiscites and referenda, enable Russia to solidify its influence without the use of direct force or coercion (START VNSAs) and limit the power politics

responses of European and American responders in these circumstances (START VNSAs), successful democratic transitions in regional countries, when combined with closer ties to the West, are seen as a threat to Russia (NSI ViTTa).

Economic vulnerabilities and threat perception

Economic decline precipitated by the sharp drop in oil prices has revealed the fragility of Russia's economy. Russia's leaders are aware of the systemic nature of the country's economic problems, but appear to have turned their backs on the idea of development and modernization talked about by Medvedev (CEIP; NSI ViTTa). Economics dominates Russian media, policy statements, and government speeches, more so than Russia's actions in Ukraine, Crimea, and Syria (NSI Discourse; NSI ViTTa). Analysis of media narratives shows that Putin's government is making efforts to frame Russia's economic problems as the result of the instability of the current global economic system; at once deflecting blame away from their policies and reinforcing the need for Russia to build alternative international economic and political institutions, free from US domination. Consistent with this framing, Russian national security experts maintain that Western sanctions are a form of undeclared war against Russia (CEIP).

EU enlargement perceived as a threat

Recent events in Ukraine have demonstrated that Russia perceives EU expansion as equally as threatening to its interests and influence as NATO expansion. The findings from START's analysis of Russian use of force indicate that, as with NATO expansion, extension of "the reach of EU policy preferences increases the salience of the crisis within Russian decision-making circles," and thus the likelihood of militarized interstate crises. Just as NATO increases its connections beyond member states through the Partnership for Peace (CEIP; see discussion above), the EU's European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) Eastern Partnership (EaP), officially designed to encourage economic and political ties between the EU and other European states, in practice grants "favored access to the EU market in return for extensive political, economic, and administrative reforms in the target country" (START VSNAs). Russia has condemned these initiatives in terms previously reserved for NATO (START VSNAs).

Russia's desired international system

Combined, these components of Russia's current worldview create a preference for an international order very different from the one we see today. Specifically, one that acknowledges Russia as a major power and grants a clear Russian sphere of influence. Consistent with this, they have a strong preference for a multipolar system, rather than the unipolar, US-dominated system that exists today.

Russia's great power status

The idea of building a Russian world, bringing back Russian global status and providing a reason for Russia's existence, is a common theme running through many of the SME's comments (NSI ViTTa). Putin's rhetoric of Russia as a great power is not only expected, but also respected and supported by the majority of Russians, and affects their expectations of the government (NSI ViTTa). Findings from surveys and focus groups indicate that Russians desire respect as a nation and a people, and this is

reflected in spikes in Putin’s popularity during action (such as Ukraine) and when the government shows decisiveness.

Nuclear capability

Experts interviewed for NSI’s ViTTa identified in the Russian leadership a tendency to view power in terms of capability, rather than technological prowess or moral authority. This leads them to see Russia’s nuclear capabilities as the bedrock of its power, providing Russia the latitude to “punch above its economic weight greatly” (NSI ViTTa). Although nuclear weapons provide a guarantee against NATO intervention in Russia (CEIP), and have become one of the hallmarks of major powers, as the CEIP report notes, they proved “of little use when it came to deterring NATO enlargement” (CEIP). For that they require a conventional capacity they do not yet have, despite increased military spending in recent years (CEIP; NSI ViTTa). This has given rise to discussions among Russian military strategists about the possibility of limited nuclear strikes against an enemy as a de-escalation strategy.

Desire for Russian sphere of influence

Not only does Russia desire to halt the encroachment of NATO toward its borders, but both Medvedev and Putin have made it clear that Russia regards its “near abroad” as an area of “privileged interests” (CEIP). Putin has presented Russian security as irrevocably linked to retaining close ties to states in its near abroad. The close connection between economic and security interests demonstrated in Russia’s policy statements and leaders’ speeches (NSI Discourse) is reflected in the dual emphasis placed on building and maintaining both security and economic ties. As all former Soviet satellite states that have joined the EU have gone on to join NATO (CEIP), this approach would appear to have merit.

Russian notions of nationality and sovereignty

Perceptions of threat and vulnerability aside, Russia’s desire for a clear sphere of influence is also related to its concept of sovereignty, and by association, its ideas about citizenship and national identity. The Russian National Security Strategy makes the protection and support of ethnic Russians a foreign policy priority, providing Putin and other senior leaders a foundation for interventions in neighboring states, and affecting the strategic decision calculus of its own population (GMU). Putin has demonstrated a commitment to the idea that a unique Russian civilization exists, one that transcends borders. States in Russia’s near abroad are regarded not as fully sovereign, but rather as part of the broader Russian Empire, irrespective of national borders. As a result, any attempt by these states to join supranational political or economic groupings affiliated with the West is seen as directly threatening to Moscow (NSI ViTTa).

Regionally, Russia’s efforts to unify ethnic and linguistic Russian populations directly increases conflict by violating sovereign rights of states (START VSNA’s), and encouraging Russian support of secessionist groups in its near abroad. These actions further various Russian interests; they can provide direct territorial gain (Crimea), enable the expansion of basing rights and transnational military infrastructure (Georgia) (START VSNA’s), push back against EU enlargement (Ukraine), and work to undermine the credibility of NATO (Ukraine) (NSI ViTTa). More generally, it breeds a uncertainty and sense of potential threat within states in Russia’s near abroad (NSI ViTTa), and, by increasing the salience of nationalism

and nationalist movements (START), has the potential to increase social cleavages within these states and Russia itself (NSI ViTTa).

Several SME's also consider that Putin's increasing reliance on ethnic nationalist rhetoric will be "very corrosive to national cohesion" in the longer-term. The strategy, designed to increase popular loyalty to the current leadership, is escalating popular belief that Russia is faced by enemies and under threat, increasing the likelihood of risky behavior and miscalculation, and thus the risk of unintended escalation (NSI ViTTa).

Preference for a multipolar system

Russia's desire for greater regional global influence to offset its vulnerability to the West, combined with its belief that US hegemony and support for democratization has created systemic instability, generates preferences that are in fundamental conflict with those of the US and its European partners. Russia would much prefer to see a multipolar international system than the existing status quo, which they regard as de facto US hegemony (CEIP; START FMS; TAMU). Such a system would enable Russia to build its own acknowledged sphere of influence, increase its international standing, and create room for the development of alternate international institutions that reflect the changing loci of global economic power and translate this into greater political influence. "Russia's ideal global system is one in which international balances of military and economic power do not favor any one country or alliance, especially not the United States and its allies" (START FMS; see also START Stats).

Support for alternative international institutions

Part of Russia's strategy to create a multipolar system, and increase its own great power status and sphere of influence, is to form an "anti-hegemonic alliance" by bringing together other countries that feel threatened by US power (NSI ViTTa). Russian policy elites argued that incorporating Eastern European countries into American-dominated institutions will force them to accept Western policy decisions, moving the world further in the direction of unipolarity (START VSNA's). Putin's current foreign policy agenda focuses on Eurasian integration. Beginning with a "common economic space" and evolving to political union, he seeks to create a "powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world" (quoted in CEIP).

Russia is also looking beyond Europe, attempting to position itself on the side of the rising BRICS powers (NSI ViTTa; TAMU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (TAMU). It is also pursuing closer ties with China and states in Central Asia (NSI ViTTa; TAMU). These new partnerships are presented as important, not because of Russia's desperation, but because these emerging economies will form a new world economic order (TAMU). Russia does face several problems with orienting its economy toward the BRICS: It's current economic position; logistical costs and feasibility given their distance from Russia; and "only a handful of countries have a less than negative popular perception of Russia, and all are either weak or far away from Russia" (NSI ViTTa).

Regional cooperation and conflict

The potential of a situation or action to create conflict or cooperation between states is a function of how those states' interests align and whether their leadership perceives these interests to align or conflict. When interests lead states to seek or prefer different outcomes, conflict (not necessarily military) is created and all states involved face some risk that their interests will be threatened; although, if they prevail, there is also opportunity to further or secure an interest. When the interests of states align and all involved can benefit from the same outcome, opportunity also exists.

Implications of cooperation and conflict factors for US and Western interests

- Without improvement in relations between the West and Russia, the likelihood of cooperation, even in areas of shared interests, is low.
- The domestic political climate in Russia incentivizes Putin to employ narratives that demonize the West, and present them as the enemy of Russia, making overt cooperation politically risky.
- Russia's preference for a multipolar system, and their unwillingness to be a "junior partner" to the West, makes it likely that they will continue to seek partners for economic and security cooperation among the BRICS and those states dissatisfied with the current dominance of Western states and institutions.
- "The West's plans for improving conventional capabilities and missile defenses are eroding Russian military planners' confidence in their nuclear deterrent" (CEIP).
- In the Baltic States there exists the possibility of a miscalculation or inadvertent incident that could lead to war, as well as the specter of Russian intervention under the pretext of humanitarian intervention (AOWG).
- In its periphery, Russia will pursue a strategy of low-level violations of sovereignty and influence operations that take advantage of NATO's political and organizational weaknesses that make response to Russian actions slow and uncertain, in an attempt to undermine NATO credibility and erode confidence in Article V.
- NATO expansion may decrease the ability of the alliance to quickly respond to Russian actions, undermining its deterrent credibility and legitimacy.
- "Blanket condemnation of Russian policy and Vladimir Putin are likely to fail, as they are interpreted primarily as indicative of an indiscriminate anti-Russia doctrine" (TAMU).
- NATO's conventional military superiority leaves Russia two choices: first-use nuclear strike to de-escalate, or gray actions (CEIP).
- In light of Europe's current dependence on Russian energy, the US and European nations "will have to be willing to either increase cooperation to share limited resources or allow these countries to be at the mercy of Russian influence" (NSI ViTTa).

Intersection of cooperation issues and actor interests

As well as coding for interests and issues, we coded the policy statements to capture higher level, or more conceptual, themes, including cooperation and conflict. By examining the subset of cases that reference each of these themes, we can get a closer idea about how actors perceive the regional environment, and how perceptions differ between them. Figure 2 below maps the issues each actor referenced in the context of cooperation. When we compare this map to Figure 1 (all top issues), considerable overlap can be seen. For Russia in particular, many cooperation issues are also top overall issues, and likewise are considered to affect their economic, security, and prestige interests. Russia, more than any other actor, also sees these cooperation issues as influenced by domestic constraints and pressures.

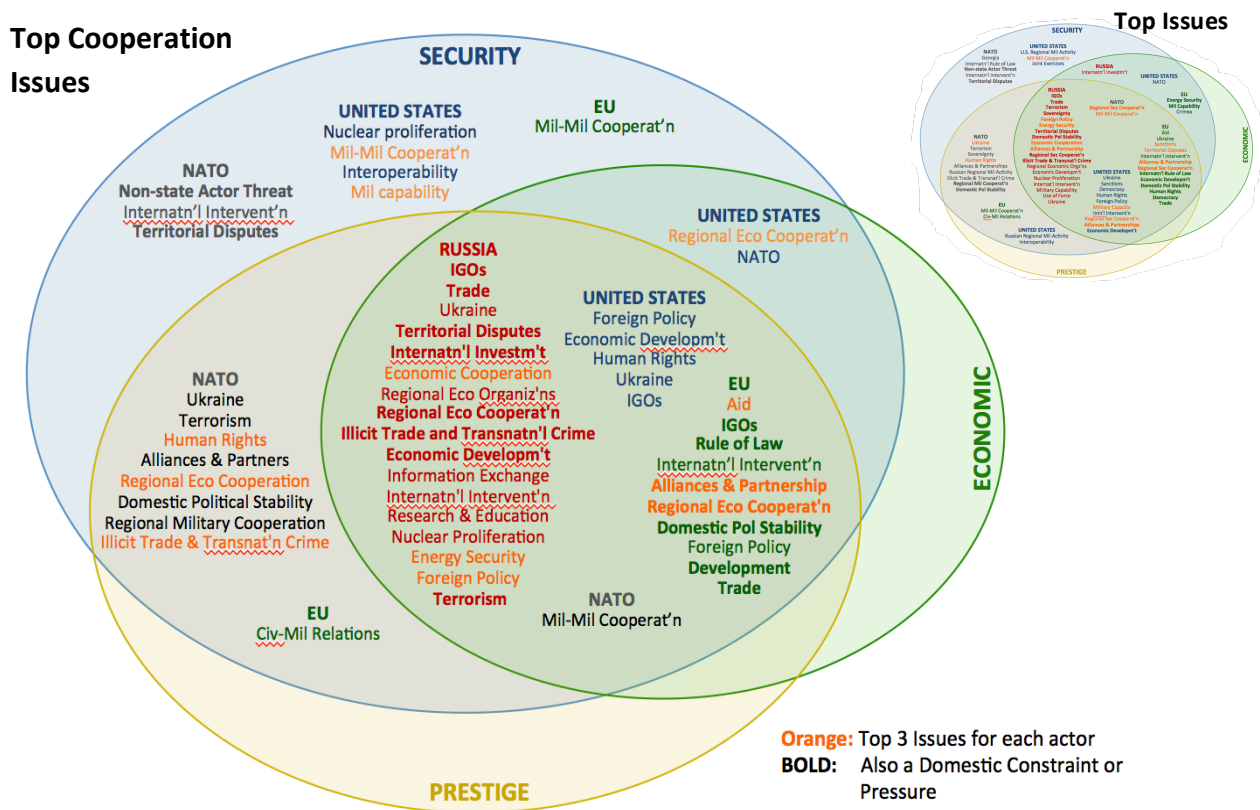


Figure 2: Interest map of cooperation issues for US, Russia, NATO, and EU

Cooperation issues identified by project teams

Issue area	Interest alignment between Russia and West	Potential problems/risks
Counter radicalization & counter terror	<p>Shared security interests</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Radicalization of Islamic populations in the Caucasus is a real possibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ISIL recruiting for foreign fighters from the region Russia also concerned about returning ISIL fighters (NSI VITTa) Also other groups, such as Caucasus Emirates (START) Potential for ISIL influence to extend into Central Asia West and Russia share a problem with white supremacist radicalization (START) 	<p>Political climate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflictual relations between Russia and the West (CEIP, GMU, NSI VITTa) Current Russian preference for cooperation with non-Western states and international organizations (TAMU) <p>Russian approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian approach involves force and torture (NSI VITTa) Motivations are a potential danger to Muslim minorities (START Stas)
Arctic	<p>Interests expressed by Russia are primarily economic, but security interests can be inferred.</p> <p>Search and rescue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk is aggressive, but behavior is cooperative, and there is a history of cooperative action (NSI VITTa) While US and Russian military were holding joint tabletop exercises, these have been put on hold since Russia's actions in Crimea (GMU Arctic) <p>Managing maritime traffic and illegal fishing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> US and Russia have an agreement for collectively managing maritime traffic and illegal fishing in Arctic waters (GMU Arctic) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As area opens up possibility of collisions and environmental damage increases (NSI VITTa) Unintended event involving NATO and Russian forces; accident, such as fighter collision most likely (NSI VITTa) <p>Political Climate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Previous military cooperation between Russia and US focusing on search and rescue has been put on hold in response to Russian actions in Crimea (GMU Arctic).
Trade agreements	<p>Shared economic interests, especially in energy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Energy an obvious choice, Russia wants "to be part of the club," but as an equal partner (NSI VITTa) There are Russian companies that "would love the freedom that these agreements would bring" (NSI VITTa) 	<p>Political climate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russians not willing to engage with the US, NATO, or EU (NSI VITTa) <p>Russian preference for a multipolar system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia seeking economic ties to non-Western states
Illicit trade & transnational crime	<p>Top cooperation issue for NATO, seen to affect security and prestige interests. Russia perceives economic, security, prestige, and domestic interests to be affected.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russians and Europeans want eradication of drug trafficking, in particular trade routes that run through Russia to Europe (NSI VITTa) <p>See cooperation on counter terrorism and international coordination against transnational organized crime (START Stas)</p>	<p>Political climate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russians not willing to engage with the US (NSI VITTa) <p>Russia ignores narco-trafficking in Central Asia when it benefits elites (NSI VITTa)</p>
Common spaces agreement	<p>Spans economic, security, and prestige interests, with domestic considerations for Russia as well</p> <p>Structural factors of cooperation still exist, but are declining.</p>	<p>Political climate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russians not willing to engage with the US, NATO, or EU (NSI VITTa) <p>As long as Russia remains belligerent, agreement will be unworkable for West (NSI VITTa).</p>

Barriers to cooperation

Looking across team discussions of these substantive areas of cooperation, it becomes clear that there are crosscutting barriers to cooperation with Russia that reflect some of the themes that also emerge in the earlier discussion of Russia's worldview. In particular, Russia's sense of threat and vulnerability, combined with the Russian government's control of the information space, creates a political climate inimical to cooperation with the West. There is, of course, also a barrier on the Western side—opposition to Russia's recent actions in Crimea and Ukraine.

Political climate

Domestically, Putin has created a set of narratives that frame the West, and the US in particular, as an enemy of Russia (NSI Discourse; NSI ViTTa; TAMU). Maintaining this enemy image is in Putin's interest as it deflects blame for Russia's current problems away from his policy choices (NSI ViTTa). Russia's control of the information space makes this narrative particularly difficult to alter.

Russian perception that NATO and EU are a threat

Russia perceives NATO, and in particular NATO expansion, as a direct threat to its security, prestige, and domestic interests (CEIP; NSI ViTTa; START). Coordination among member states in NATO generates distrust that any benefit will accrue to Russia (START Stats), creating an environment hostile to the fostering of any cooperative action, even when interests align. A similar concern that encroaching EU influence in its near abroad is a threat undermines the possibility of cooperation between the West and Russia on economic issues. Putin's policy of Eurasian integration, beginning with economic integration and evolving to political union, provides a means to further their strategic goal of multipolarity (CEIP), one that would be undermined by substantial cooperation with the West. On security issues such as terrorism and transnational organized crime, Russia has demonstrated a desire to foster cooperation with the BRIC nations and regional organizations such as the SCO groups (TAMU).

Intersection of conflict issues and actor interests

Moving to conflict issues, as the interest map (Figure 3 below) illustrates, all actors reference fewer specific issues in the context of conflict than they do for cooperation. Perhaps not surprisingly given NATO's mission, there are more specific issues referenced in association with conflict by NATO than any other actor. NATO calls out by name more areas of conflict (Crimea, Georgia, Abkhazia, and Ukraine) than any other actor. All of these are conflicts involving Russia, which adds further weight to its placement of Russian regional military activity as a top conflict issue. With the exception of Russia, all actors frequently reference territorial disputes as a source of conflict in the region. Ukraine is a top conflict issue for all four, although both the US and Russia also reference it in the context of cooperation.

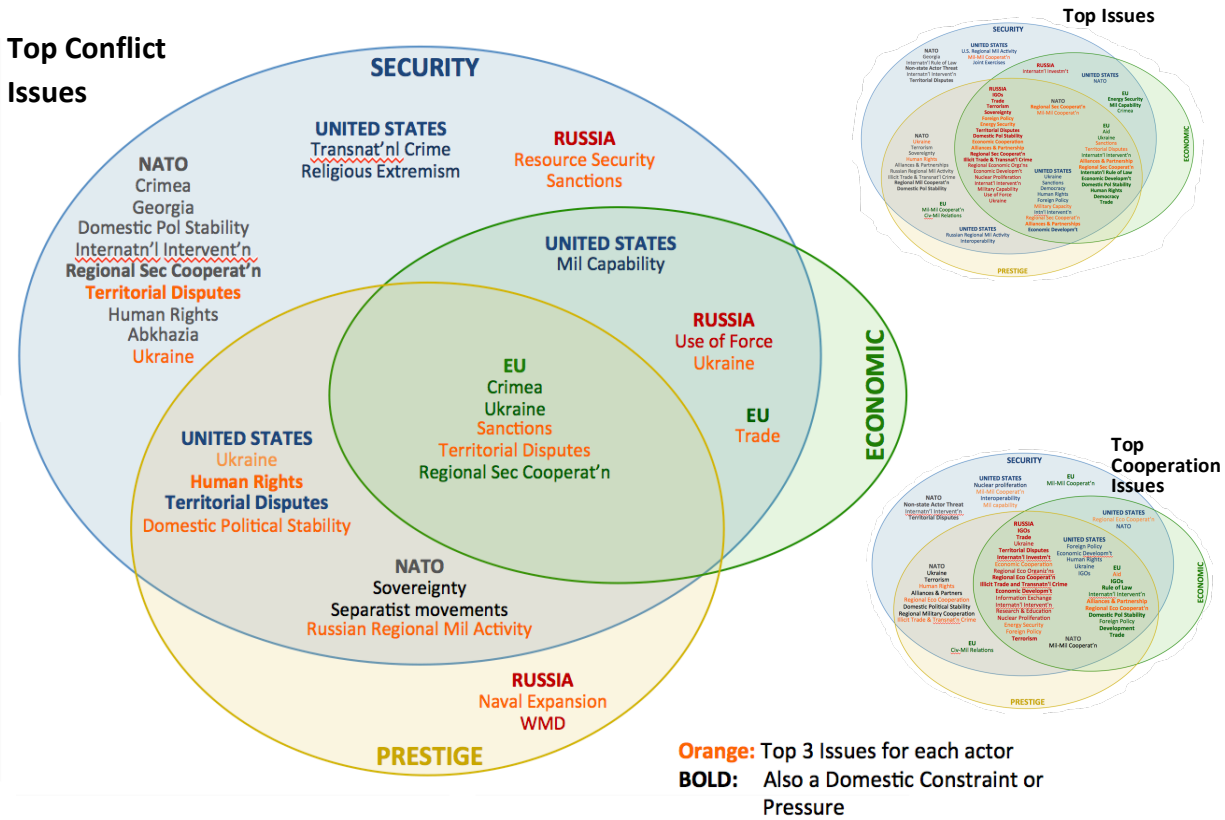


Figure 3: Interest map of conflict issues for the US, Russia, NATO, and EU

Conflict issues identified by project teams

Table 3 below presents the specific issues and areas of interest identified by the project teams as most likely to trigger conflict between Russia and the West. Russia's concern over WMD reflects the teams' discussions on missile defense. Russian opposition to NATO training exercises and Western military deployment is to be expected in light of the earlier discussion regarding Russia's concept sovereignty, and their references in policy to the use of force (see Figure 3 above).

Table 3: Substantive areas of conflict between Russia and the West and associated interests

Issue area	Relevant interests for Russia and West
NATO training exercises	<p>Both a security and prestige influence for Russia and NATO.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NATO training exercises in the Baltic Sea dealing with forward deploying of forces seen as threatening by Russia (START Stats).
Western military deployments	<p>Both a security and prestige influence for Russia, although only security interests generally referenced by Western actors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deployment of Western forces in Russia’s near abroad are a red line for Russia (NSI ViTTa), There are Russian companies that “would love the freedom that these agreements would bring” (NSI ViTTa).
Missile defense	<p>Seen as security interest for US, spans economic, security, and prestige interests for EU and NATO, as for Russia, who also see it as affecting domestic interests.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Missile defense systems deployed in Russia’s near abroad are a red line for Russia much as Soviet missiles in Cuba were for the US (NSI ViTTa). “A deployment (hypothetic as it is) of elements of a European missile defense system in Lithuania could trigger protestations from Moscow and attempts to find some sort of asymmetric response—but not an intervention (NSI ViTTa).
Ukraine	<p>Seen as a security issue by NATO, security and economic by EU and Russia, and security and prestige for US.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deployment of Western forces in Russia’s near abroad are a red line for Russia (NSI ViTTa).
Baltic States	<p>For Russia, all interests are affected by events in the Baltics, for the West, it is primarily security and prestige interests at stake.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Threat “resides much more in efforts to divide their societies than it does in efforts to annex their territory (AOWG). Russian decision calculus model, under current conditions, does not favor a Russian decision to occupy Latvia, Lithuania or Baltic States (GMU).
Arctic EEZ	<p>Primarily an economic issue for Russia.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia is attempting to establish a wider EEZ by claiming the continental shelf that extends to the North Pole. Economic interests make this a priority (GMU).
Support for political liberalization	<p>Russia considers security, prestige, economic, and domestic interests to be at stake.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Western political influence and enlargement of the democratic zone seen as a direct threat to Russia’s internal stability and regional influence (CEIP; NSI ViTTa).
NATO expansion	<p>Russia considers security, prestige, and domestic interests to be at stake.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia sees NATO enlargement as threatening, as it brings NATO military capacity closer to Russia (CEIP). “International polarization, particularly if it involves the potential for NATO expansion or extends the reach of the EU policy preferences, increases the salience of the crisis within Russian decision-making circles, and thus the likelihood of militarized interstate crises” (START VNSAs).
EU expansion	<p>Russia considers security, prestige, economic, and domestic interests to be at stake.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Western political influence and enlargement of the democratic zone seen as a direct threat to Russia’s internal stability and regional influence (CEIP; NSI ViTTa).

Impediments to countering Russian aggression

Overall, there is agreement that Russia is in an offensive mode and that over the coming years the tension between Russia and the West is unlikely to decrease. In particular, increased competition, hostile language, and military exercises, as well as the continuation of frozen conflicts, including eastern Ukraine, are expected. Russia is also likely to continue attempts to undermine the EU and NATO members through interventions in its periphery and efforts to strengthen control over its allies and stop other countries in its near abroad from moving closer to NATO and the EU. The US and its European partners face various difficulties in countering Russian aggression. Russian control of the information space and its use of gray actions can be understood in light of its perceived vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Others—Western response to Russian aggression and reliance on Russian energy—are a function of Western vulnerabilities.

Russian control of information space

There was consensus among the teams that Russian media dominates the information space within Russia and also states in its near abroad. Russian narratives create an environment in which cooperation with the West is likely to be seen as betrayal or capitulation. By deploying a constant stream of pro-Russian programming in its near abroad region, Moscow is able to cultivate a subjective understanding of international affairs that is decidedly anti-Western (NSI ViTTa). An expert interviewed for NSI'S ViTTa characterized Russia's media as "...an arm of the military that can be used to create havoc in overseas environments with non-military means."

Use of gray zone actions

The precarious security environment surrounding Russia, and the internal challenges facing the country, give support to its perception of threat and vulnerability. Combined with NATO's conventional military superiority, and concern over its [Russia's] second strike nuclear capability, this places Russia's leaders in the position of deterring a superior adversary (CEIP). Given this environment, they are left with two choices: Go bigger and resort to first use nuclear strike as a de-escalatory measure (CEIP); or go gray. Grey activities discussed by experts included hybrid warfare, political influence operations, and economic pressure or incentives (CEIP; NSI ViTTa).

Political influence operations

Considerable concern was evident in team reports over Russia's efforts to influence NATO allies and members from within through propaganda, financing of pro-Russian political parties (NSI ViTTa), and the manufacture of internal popular disturbance to justify Russian intervention to protect ethnic Russians (AWOG). Russia's energy supplies, trade embargos, and trade agreements, as well as bribery of top officials, are also used as tools to influence the governments of neighboring states to adopt policies preferred by Russia (NSI ViTTa).

Barriers to organizing Western intervention in a crisis situation

Russia's use of gray actions, internal organizational barriers to quick, decisive, response within Western organizations, combined with their perceived unwillingness to use force for political ends, all make timely response to Russian aggression difficult (CEIP; NSI ViTTa).

Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine, scared a lot of Russia's neighbors, even those desiring closer ties to Europe (NSI ViTTa). The findings from the ICONS simulation also suggest there is a reluctance on the part of Eastern European countries to request Western assistance in a crisis, often until the point that it is too late.

European dependence on Russian energy

Although there is variation in dependence on Russian energy among EU states, several European countries run the risk of substantial economic blowback from supporting actions such as sanctioning Russia, which "explains some of the hesitance from the Germans and other nations, particularly in Central Asia, to act strongly against Russian aggression" (NSI ViTTa). Furthermore, many Western companies are linked to Russia, making their interests inconsistent with those of their political leaders who support either decreasing economic ties with Russia or imposing sanctions (NSI ViTTa).

Domestic stability and instability in Russia

The project teams identified multiple factors influencing domestic stability within Russia. There is no expectation of a major political shift in the next five years, primarily because there is "no better alternative to Putin even in economic decline" (NSI ViTTa). Putin has been so successful in eliminating political opponents that a coup is viewed as unlikely, and civil society is so weak that "a bottom up rebellion seems unrealistic" (NSI ViTTa).

Sources of instability

All the factors identified as negatively affecting stability are economic in nature: specifically, lack of economic development, low oil prices, and sanctions, which is consistent with the emphasis placed on economic issues by Russia's leaders (NSI Discourse).

Many experts identify the steep drop in oil prices as the most significant threat to Russia's current economic stability. Sanctions were also identified as a driver of economic instability for Russia, although their impact is considered to be far less than that of low oil prices (NSI ViTTa). Sanctions have, however, resulted in the Kremlin moving "toward economic nationalism and isolationism" (CEIP), and further motivated Russia to turn to other potential economic and development partners. Both these changes decrease the economic leverage of the West (NSI ViTTa).

All of the teams who discussed Russia's economy agreed that lack of economic reform and modernization are significant barriers to Russia developing a more diverse and stable economy. Without increased revenue, Russia is unlikely to remain able to afford its program of military spending (NSI ViTTa), increasing their perception of a capability gap with NATO. Domestically, Putin may find it harder to maintain popular and elite support. Economic decline also leaves Russia with fewer resources to devote to bringing near abroad states into its sphere of influence.

Sources of stability

While all of the major factors experts identified as threatening the stability of Putin's government were directly or indirectly economic, in many cases their potential impact is dampened by non-economic

factors. Most of these are rooted in the level of political control and support Putin has built through control of the media and elites, and stifling of civil society, all of which have helped bolster his popular support.

Control of narrative

Russia's regime exercises tight control over the media, enabling regime-created narratives to drive public opinion (NSI ViTTa). For these reasons, most teams doubt whether presenting counter narratives (though something like Voice of America) would gain much traction within Russia, although they do consider alternative sources of information as more important, and potentially influential, for Russian-speaking communities outside Russia.

Lack of political opposition and civil society

Putin has reinforced his control of narrative by systematically repressing political opposition and civil society (NSI ViTTa). The opposition that does exist is concentrated in very small, pro-Western urban groups that "...don't reflect the view of 'average Russian' to extent there is an average Russian" (NSI ViTTa). Combined with the regime's control over media, this serves to effectively buffer the government against the possibility of large-scale organized political opposition or revolt.

Support for Russian leadership

In spite of Russia's current economic crisis, and public concern over recent foreign policy actions, Putin's regime continues to enjoy massive popular support. Putin's popularity rests as much on his image as a strong leader as it does on his earlier economic successes (NSI ViTTa). Experts caution, however, that it is "important not to mistake high levels of support for Putin and dislike of United States as social consensus around Putin's approach and policies... Russia is a divided, complex society, with no social consensus behind Putinism" (NSI ViTTa).

Fear

Uncertainty among the population regarding what would replace Putin's regime, combined with Russia's historical experience that strong governments can turn against them, effectively works to reinforce stability and hold Russians in place (NSI ViTTa). Economic reform, although recognized as necessary, is also fraught with uncertainty for Russia. Economic reforms, the CEIP report argues, "... will require political reforms that will challenge the very political order that for the past decade and a half has served as the foundation of Russian domestic stability and Putin's personal power" (CEIP).

Recommendations for reducing conflict and increasing cooperation

Antecedent conditions matter

None of the project teams evinced great optimism regarding the likelihood of increasing cooperation with Russia, which is supported by Russia's perception of the West as a threat and desire to move toward a multipolar system. They did, however, discuss some factors and strategies the US could pursue that might lower the present barriers to cooperation. Arguably, any and all of the recommendations given by the project teams are more likely to succeed if the US and its allies recognize and account for Russia's world view, and are able to weaken the power of Russia's narrative.

Account for Russia's world view

This perception colors Russia's interpretation and response to all actions by the West, and "leads it to engage in efforts to shape its own sphere of influence through actions that NATO and the EU view as aggressive but Russia views as defensive" (AOWG Baltic). This sense of external threat is heightened by the current domestic conditions within Russia. Russia's elites recognize that the country is in a "systemic crisis," but fear that solutions to it could prove destabilizing (CEIP; see also NSI ViTTa). One expert suggests "lets not humiliate Russia" should be considered a "critical mantra," a view shared by other experts interviewed (NSI ViTTa).

Russia's desire to move the system toward multipolarity

Russia's actions in its periphery are driven by its desire to establish a sphere of influence, and its wider foreign policy by its strong preference for establishing a multipolar world—one in which Russia is a major power. The idea of Russia as a great power also has relevance and importance to the Russian population, creating domestic expectations for Putin. If the West attempts to "push [Russia] off the world stage," it risks losing a point of leverage for both cooperation and de-escalation.

Address the power of Russian narrative

Russia's perception of the US and its NATO allies as malevolent powers bent on taking over Russia and its neighbors, increases its sensitivity to any Western involvement—economic, political, or military—in its periphery, and provides justification to the Russian public for both domestic policy failures (particularly economic) and aggressive foreign policy action. Eroding the dominance of Russia's narrative both within Russia and the states in its periphery could help to decrease both barriers to cooperation and countering Russian aggression.

Develop an alternative to the Russian narrative

Developing an alternative narrative however, will be difficult. There are doubts that US counter-narratives would have any credible impact on Russian viewers who are so heavily saturated by state-sponsored messaging (NSI ViTTa). The TAMU analysis supports the view that it will be difficult to change the narrative within Russia, but argues that it will be less so in the periphery.

Focus on transcendent narratives

In terms of the content and framing of US narratives, the TAMU analysis suggests that "developing transcendent narratives that both acknowledge Russian concerns and perceptions but build upon common interests and aspirations are likely to have a greater impact than narratives that seek to isolate Putin from the Russian populace" (TAMU). That is, rather than attempt to directly counter Russian narratives, which effectively pre-empt such efforts by framing the US as seeking to destabilize Russia, transcendent narratives seek to "create new narratives that incorporate Russian concerns and beliefs in a larger narrative of joint interests and cooperation" (TAMU).

Table 4: Recommendations for reducing conflict and increasing cooperation: Actions to consider

Actions to consider		
What	How	Why
Improve communication	Articulate a clear US strategic policy in Eurasia (NSI ViTTa)	Reduces uncertainty, clarifies US position and interests in the region
	Make US objectives and redlines clear, be prepared to back them up with force (GMU; NSI ViTTa; TAMU)	Prevents Russia from presenting US/NATO actions as a threat to Russia Increases deterrent credibility
	Reestablish lines of communication with Kremlin (NSI ViTTa)	Lack of communication is detrimental to crisis management
	Demonstrate understanding of Russia's interests and areas of concern (GMU)	Can reduce domestic pressure on Kremlin Useful escalation control tool
Increase partner engagement	Independent of NATO, provide US military advisors, equipment, and training to countries at risk of Russia aggression (GMU)	Balance Russian influence and build US assurance credibility Develop a forward intelligence capacity, particularly on the human side to engage with diaspora ethnic Russian populations
Improve conditions for ethnic Russians in near abroad countries	US and partner actions to improve conditions and treatment of ethnic Russian populations (AWG; GMU)	Lessen grievances among these populations, reducing potential pressure on Russian governments to protect them Decrease Russia's ability to build support among these populations for Russian intervention
Decrease European energy dependency	Work toward decreasing European energy dependence on Russia If not possible, mitigate the negative impacts for allies and partners	Reduced barrier to EU states to taking or supporting actions that could provoke Russia to stop energy supplies (NSI ViTTa)

Table 5: Recommendations for reducing conflict and increasing cooperation: Actions to avoid

Actions to avoid		
What	How	Why
Economic pressure	Actions to further weaken Russian economy (CEIP; NSI ViTTa)	Eastern European and Eurasian stability, prosperity, and security depends on Russian stability and prosperity (CEIP)
	Sanctions (CEIP; NSI Discourse; NSI ViTTa; TAMU)	Putin has shown a pattern of distracting domestic attention from economic problems by pursuing an aggressive foreign policy (NSI ViTTa) Deeper and more sustained economic crisis may drive Putin to provoke geopolitical crises that contradict Western interests (NSI ViTTa; TAMU)
	Other attempts to isolate Russia economically (CEIP; NSI Discourse; NSI ViTTa)	Closer ties between China and Russia in particular have the potential to create a relationship that negatively affects US interests and influence in the Asia-Pacific region as well as in Eurasia (NSI ViTTa). Losing their energy power would predictably cause a shift toward risk taking behavior, in addition to eliminating a bargaining chip from the deterrence decision calculus (NSI Discourse)

Table 6: Recommendations for reducing conflict and increasing cooperation: Actions to be very careful about

Actions to be very careful about		
What	Benefits	Risks
Costly signaling as a deterrence	Russian behavior, if it is to be influenced, will be influenced by actions not words (NSI ViTTa)	Given Russia's perception of threat, and its commitment to creating a sphere of influence around its periphery, such actions could be interpreted as aggressive by Russia, and trigger escalation
Joint exercises and forward deployment of US troops	Provide a credible deterrent against further Russia absorption of ethnic Russian populations outside of Russia (NSI ViTTa)	May exacerbate Russia's sense of vulnerability and conventional military disadvantage. May erode Russia's confidence in their nuclear deterrent" and reinforce their belief that limited nuclear strikes are their best de-escalation strategy (CEIP)
Missile defense	Strengthens NATO and US deterrence capability	May reduce Russia's confidence in their nuclear deterrent, increasing their willingness to consider a limited nuclear strike de-escalation strategy (CEIP) Russian officials have made it clear that they consider missile defense to be an integral part of calculations of the strategic balance, and thus of any discussion over arms reduction (CEIP)

Table 6 cont. : Recommendations for reducing conflict and increasing cooperation: Actions to be very careful about

Actions to be very careful about		
What	Benefits	Risks
Strengthen state institutions in Russia's periphery	May strengthen partner resolve and provide an appealing alternative" to dependence on Russia (NSI ViTTa)	Such soft power approaches have not historically been successful in deterring aggression If Russia perceives such interventions as a threat to its interests such efforts may actually increase the likelihood and intensity of Russian intervention
Demonstrate unity in response to Russian aggression	US and Western response to recent Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine have created the perception they are unwilling to use force to counter Russian aggression (CEIP; NSI ViTTa) Key to continued successful deterrence is consistency and unity of effort among European partner nations, especially in the face of Russian provocations (NSI ViTTa) For actions that do not constitute an existential threat to Russia, NATO can favorably influence Russia's decision calculus (GMU)	May increase Russia's perception of threat and vulnerability Russia leaders have indicated a desire to work with the US to solve regional problems (NSI Discourse) Russia's strong dislike toward NATO will continue in the near future as the organization expands eastward
Deal one on one with Russia	Formal bilateral agreements have a significant effect on increasing cooperation (START Stats) Russia's interactions with NATO and the EU are different than their relations with the US and individual EU States (START Stats)	The US moving to distance itself from its European allies could potentially weaken NATO in just the manner Russia has been attempting to achieve (NSI ViTTa) A collective Western position and approach to Russia strengthens collective defense and economic structures, which is in the United States' interests as much as Europe's.
Limit reliance on EU and NATO	Coordination through NATO and the EU, "shifts the dynamic toward fewer cooperative actions and more conflict events" (START Stats)	Given the intertwined nature of economic and security interests for all actors in the region, even if the US were to attempt to restrict bilateral agreements to economic and cooperative areas, it is hard to see how spillover into the realm of security interests could be avoided.
Use alternative multilateral organizations	Provides a mechanism for demonstrating European unity without triggering Russia's fear of NATO and EU encroachment (ICONS)	May potentially weaken NATO in just the manner Russia has been attempting to achieve (NSI ViTTa)

Concluding remarks

While this integration report does not force consensus, some areas of agreement clearly emerged from this multidisciplinary study. First, none of the teams are optimistic about the opportunities for increasing cooperation with Russia in the near future. There is also a general consensus that tensions between Russia and the West, particularly NATO and the EU, are likely to remain high. This tension arises from systemic factors and Russia's domestic pressures, and is intensified by Russia's strong sense of threat and vulnerability.

At the system level, Russia and the West have fundamentally incompatible goals with regard to the distribution of global power and influence. The West seeks to strengthen and enlarge existing international institutions, maintaining its own dominant position, whereas Russia perceives NATO enlargement as a direct threat, and desires a multipolar system in which it has influence and prestige and regains its own sphere of influence. NATO's conventional military superiority and concern over Russia's second-strike nuclear capability place Russia's leaders in the position of deterring a superior adversary. Given this reality, they are left with two choices: Go bigger and resort to first use nuclear strike as a de-escalatory measure or go gray.

Domestically, Russia's economic crisis has exposed the critical need for fundamental economic reform, which, if either ignored or unsuccessful, creates the conditions for severe political and social instability. The Putin government has responded to these domestic pressures and systemic conditions by creating a set of narratives that frame the West as an existential threat to Russia, deflecting blame for Russia's current problems away from his policy choices, and heightening the salience of nationalistic rhetoric. Framing of Russia's foreign policy goals in nationalist terms, combined with the belief that Russia is faced by enemies and under threat, increases the likelihood of risky behavior and miscalculation, and thus the risk of unintended escalation. Actions that further undermine Russia's economy will only intensify this cycle.

This environment leaves little room for increasing cooperation; a conclusion reflected in the team recommendations. Given Russia's perception of the current international environment, and their domestic vulnerabilities, almost any action taken by the West is likely to be interpreted as a threat. Recognizing and acknowledging Russia's worldview, and improving communication of US and partner state interests and goals to the Russia government, and populations within Russia and its near abroad, will be critical to reducing tensions and increasing assurance. Even with these measures, unless Russia is able to overcome its economic crisis, and maintain stability, regional stability and prosperity—interests of the US and its European partners—will be difficult if not impossible to achieve.