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

*Integration Report*

**Prepared for**

Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) Office

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## Introduction

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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 USEUCOM asks that SMA "identify emerging Russian threats and opportunities in Eurasia (with particular emphasis on EUCOM 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 interests are in cooperation or conflict with Russian interests" They also provided a list of questions covering: regional outlook; China; regional balance of power; Russian foreign policy; leadership; internal stability dynamics; media and public opinion; US foreign policy and regional engagement; NATO<sup>1</sup>.

To address these questions, SMA brought together a multidisciplinary team drawn from the 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 EUCOM 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.<sup>2</sup>

This report provides an overview of the regional issues identified by the US, Russia, NATO and 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 question, in particular the importance of understanding Russia's worldview, and the subsequent recommendations for reducing conflict and increasing the probability of cooperation with Russia.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A of the full integration report for a list of the USEUCOM questions

<sup>2</sup> This interested-based integration framework was originally designed for the SMA/PACOM effort in 2014 and has been further refined for USEUCOM. Please contact Belinda Bragg at [bbragg@nsiteam.com](mailto:bbragg@nsiteam.com) for a copy of the report.

<sup>3</sup> A brief overview of team projects and hyperlinks to their reports are provided in Appendix B of the full integration report.

## Integration Framework

The diverse range of approaches and sources utilized by the individual teams working on the USEUCOM project is one of the strengths of the Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) approach, however it also makes comparison and synthesis across individual reports more challenging. For this reason, we need a structured methodology for integrating and comparing individual project findings and recommendations in a systematic manner. Therefore, NSI developed an interest-based integration framework (initially in support of the 2014 SMA USPACOM project), which has been further refined in support of this USEUCOM effort (see Figure 1 below).

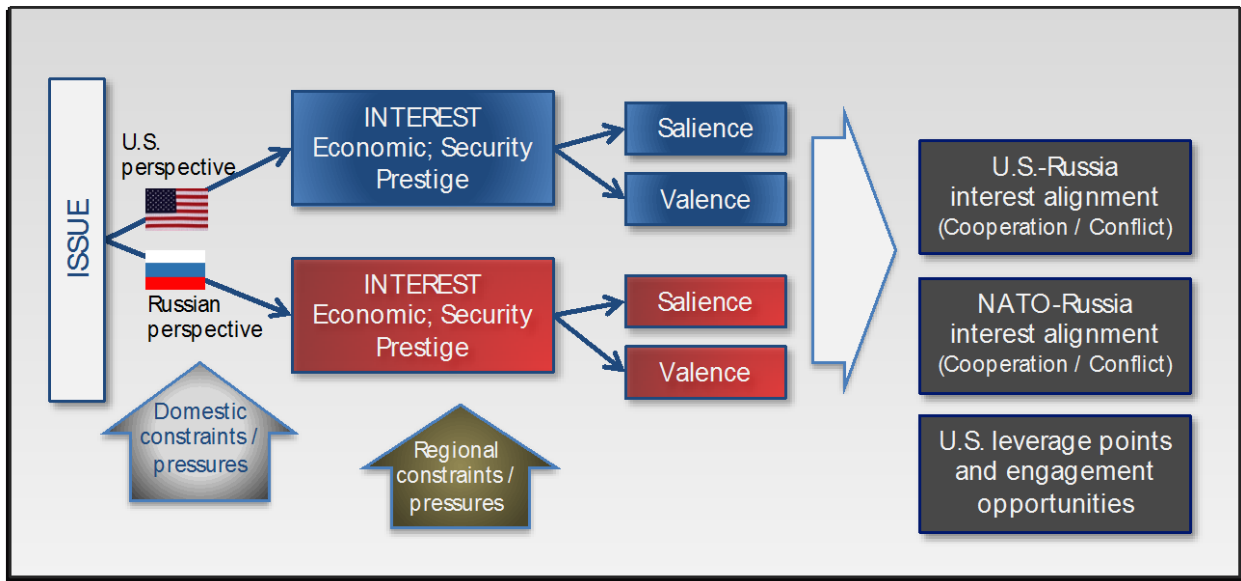


Figure 1: NSI Integration Framework

An interest-based approach assumes that the potential of an issue to create conflict or cooperation is a function of how the interests of actors align. A framework that considers the range of national interests at stake in a particular issue, therefore, provides a way of determining areas of risk and opportunity for US/NATO-Russia relations. The saliency and valence of interests at stake in an issue, and the associated domestic political implications, provide understanding of how Russia may respond to a changing situation, or an engagement activity. Considering interest alignments provides insight into the potential of USEUCOM engagement activities to further US regional interests and the possible limitations or unexpected consequences of US policies.

Given the structure of the integration framework, one of the first tasks we needed to undertake was to determine the issues at stake in the region. Many of the effort's individual team projects touched on this area, in particular the discourse analyses and the subject matter expert (SME) elicitation. However, as a starting point for mapping out the scope of interests for major regional actors, we undertook an examination of policy statements relating to the USEUCOM area of responsibility (AOR) to provide an initial overview. Although these policy statements provide an indication of the official positions taken by

these actors, it is important to keep in mind that what is stated in official documents provides only one perspective on how actors perceive their interests in a region..

For this overview we examined recent policy statements from the United States government (USG), Russia, NATO, and the European Union (EU). These statements were then coded to indicate the issues each actor was discussing, the interests associated with those issues and the region as a whole, and the themes associated with specific interests and issues.

### **Identifying issues and mapping actor interests in the USEUCOM AOR**

NSI's integration framework rests on the assumption that actors in the international environment act to protect and forward their interests. Most broadly, we categorize actor interests as either security (preservation of the state and military security), economic (economic prosperity and development), or prestige (international influence and standing) interests. These interests generate economic, social, and international prestige 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 salience, or both.

#### **Key actor interests**

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. Figure 2 below shows the frequency with which actors referenced each of these interests in policy statements related to the USEUCOM AOR. In many instances, 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.

As Figure 2 shows, security interests alone (red) are the dominant interest expressed by all four actors, with the US referencing security interests alone in more than half of its statements (54%). When we look at the total proportion of statements that referenced security, the dominance of this interest for all actors becomes even clearer. NATO, perhaps not surprisingly given its identity as a security organization, referenced security interests alone most frequently (64% of statements), and only 12% of all its statements made no reference at all to security. 83% of US statements and 74% of EU statements made reference to security. Although security interests were mentioned more frequently in EU statements than economic interests (41%), the EU did demonstrate the most frequent linkage of economic and security interests (19%). Overall, Russia mentioned security least, both overall (57%) and alone (30%).

Russia has the highest percentage of policy statements that referenced economic issues alone (23%), higher even than the EU (10%), and 47% of all Russian statements made mention of its economic interests. Prestige was also an expressed interest for all four actors, referenced most frequently by Russia (38% of statements) and least frequently by the US (28% of statements; the EU 29%, NATO 30%). Russian statements also had the most linkages between prestige and economic or security interests,



although the combination of security and prestige interests is seen in the statements of all four actors, and most frequently with the US and NATO (16% of statements for both actors). Of the four interest categories defined in the integration framework, domestic constraints and pressures were mentioned the least. Only 2% of US and 3% of NATO statements made reference to domestic considerations, and this figure was only marginally higher for the EU (9%) and Russia (7%).

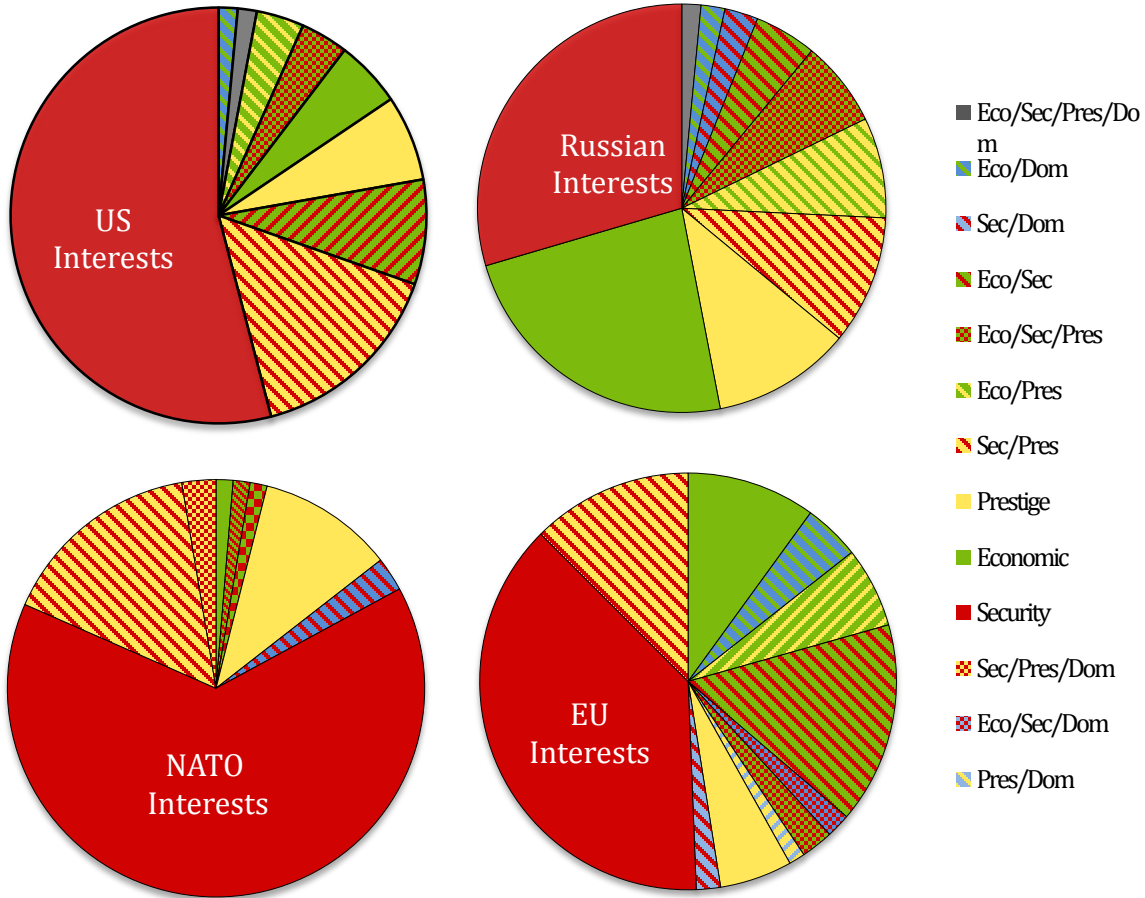


Figure 2: Frequency of Interest References in Actor Policy Statements

**Regional issues identified by key actors**

Across all four actors we identified more than 70 issues related to the USEUCOM AOR, although a number of these were mentioned only a single time by a single actor. The discussion of actors’ interests below focuses on those issues that were mentioned most frequently (mean and above) by each actor. As can be seen, 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.

For the US, alliances and partnerships, regional security cooperation, and military-military cooperation were the most common issues referenced in policy statements (see Figure 3). Reflecting the interest orientation of the majority of US statements, all of the United States’ top issues are related to security in some way. There are fewer mentions of specific issues, such as Ukraine or Crimea, than there are in other actor statements, and there is more focus on general issues such as development and cooperation.



Figure 3: Issues mentioned most frequently in US statements



Figure 4: Issues mentioned most frequently in NATO statements

NATO (see Figure 4) demonstrates a similar focus on security related issues to the US in its statements. The specific issues differ, however. Unlike the US, NATO policy makes frequent mention of illicit trade and transnational crime, terrorism, and non-state actor threats as issues of concern in the region. NATO demonstrates a similar, but greater emphasis on regional security cooperation, and references Russian regional military activity more frequently than does the US.

Overall, Russia references a larger number of specific issues in their policy statements (see Figure 5) than do the US and NATO. Russia policy statements reference the same top issue as the US—alliances and partnerships. Where they differ from the US and NATO is in the number of economic issues they reference among their top issues. Economic cooperation is the second most frequent issue referenced and energy security, economic development, and regional economic organizations are also among their top issues. Like NATO, they also make multiple references to illicit trade and transnational crime.



Figure 5: Issues mentioned most frequently in Russian statements

Like the US and Russia, EU statements (see Figure 6) reference alliances and partnerships most frequently. They also share a similar focus to that of the US and NATO on regional security cooperation.

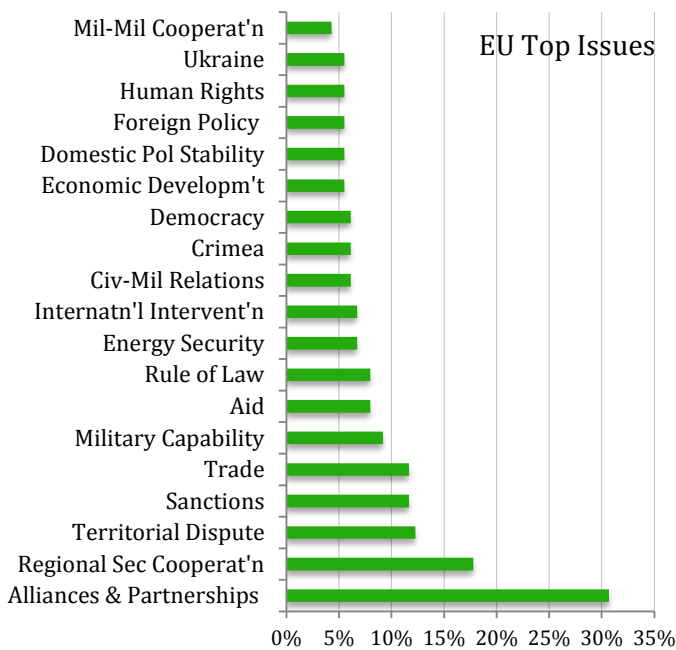


Figure 6: Issues mentioned most frequently in EU statements

Given the economic nature of the organization, it is interesting to note that almost one quarter of the top issues EU statements reference are related to security or military matters.

Many of the issues referenced by the actors can be categorized as either economic or military/security related. However, what the interest coding demonstrates is that many issues are considered by the actors to touch on multiple interests. That is, an “economic” issue, such as trade, may also be considered to have security or domestic interest implications.

The next part of our analysis of top issues, therefore, involved mapping each actor's top issues to the interest combinations they were associated with in the policy statements. Not all statements regarding a specific issue referenced the same interests, so the mapping was done on the cumulative interests. The Venn diagram in Figure 7 below places all top interests of the US, Russia, NATO, and the EU according to the interests expressed in relation to those issues.

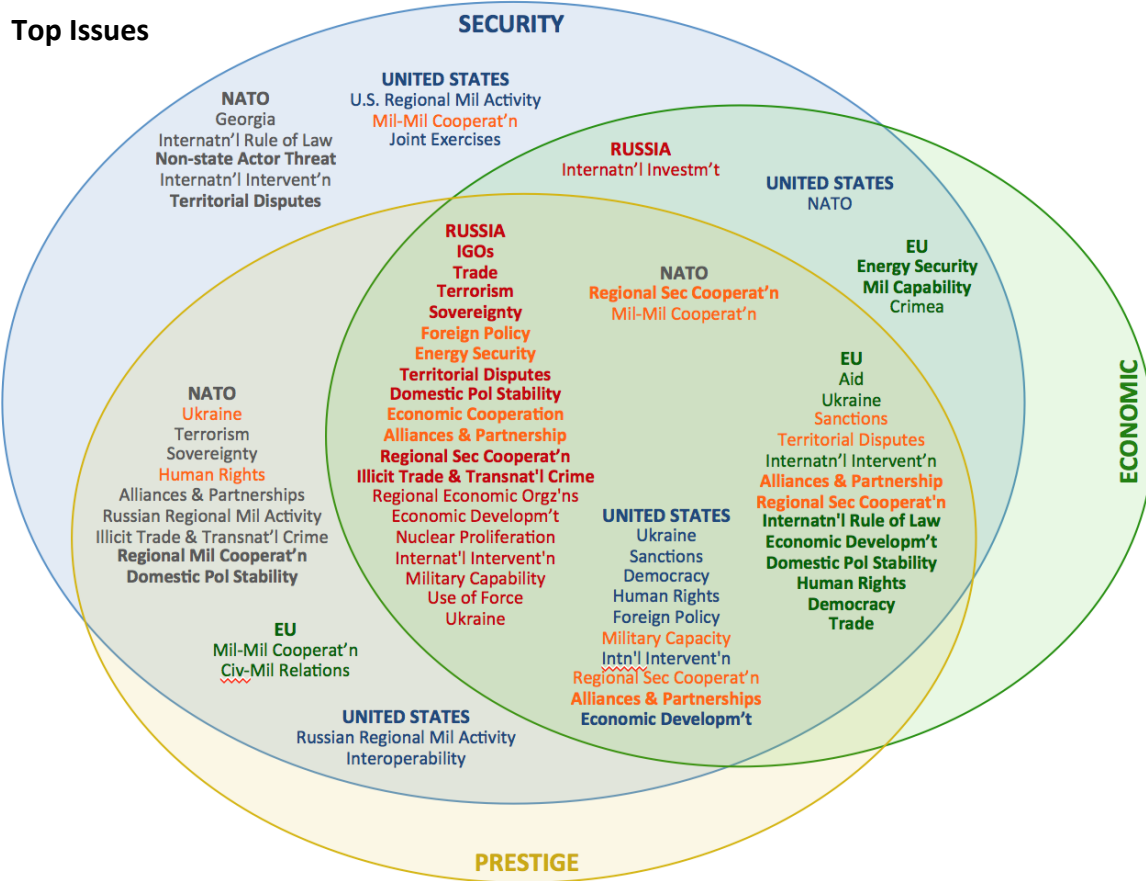


Figure 7: Interest map of top regional issues for US, Russia, NATO and EU

As figure 7 makes clear, there are few issues referenced by any actor that are considered to affect a single interest. This suggests initial support for the contention that examining issues from a broader perspective than their security implications is critical to fully understanding all of the dynamics. Only the US and NATO have single interest issues, and all of these are related to security interests. There is not a single top issue referenced by Russia that is not considered to affect their economic interests, and the large majority is considered to affect economic security and prestige interests, with half of these also bearing some domestic implications. Perhaps not surprisingly, NATO is the only actor for whom economic interests are not connected to the majority of their top issues. While the US indicates a similar emphasis on the economic, security, and prestige interest combination as Russia and the EU, it makes less mention of domestic considerations.

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.

## 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. 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, Russia perceives that 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.

Table 1: Implications of Russia’s worldview for US and Western interests

<b>Implications of Russia’s worldview for US and Western interests</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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).</li> <li>• 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).</li> <li>• Russia is likely to engage in military trade with states it considers will help balance US and Western military capability.</li> <li>• 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).</li> <li>• 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).</li> <li>• 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 system.</li> </ul>

## Russia's view of the current international environment

In the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has become increasingly dissatisfied with the international status quo. Russia regards the dominance of Western states and international institutions as inconsistent with the reality of the rise of the BRICS countries, and unresponsive to their interests and preferences. They see US foreign policy as hegemonic; designed to protect US global influence by diminishing Russia's power and status. 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. 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. Their notions of sovereignty and citizenship are similarly divergent from those held by the West and underpinning current international law and institutions.

### Sense of vulnerability and threat

Across Russian media (TAMU), policy documents (CEIP), and leader speeches (NSI Discourse), the US and its allies are identified as the principal threat to Russia, if not in active conspiracy against Russia (NSI Discourse). Although much of the focus of this threat is on security interests, in particular NATO expansion, it encompasses economic and political interests as well. The multidimensional nature of Russia's threat perception is reflected in their framing of the US and Western Europe as motivated by a desperate desire to retain their dominant global position, despite relative economic and military decline (CEIP; TAMU; NSI ViTTa). The discourse analysis of Putin's speeches indicates his government "feels very much threatened by an international conspiracy to destabilize Russia" (NSI Discourse).

### Security vulnerabilities and threat perception

Russia's engagement in regional conflicts, and their perception of US and NATO intentions, drives the Putin government to refer to security concerns more than any other polity (NSI Discourse). This finding is consistent with the interest assessment of Russian policy statements (see previous section: Identifying issues and mapping actor interests in the USEUCOM AOR), which found that most issues referenced were considered to have security implications for Russia. This emphasis on security interests is founded in the perception that the West is a major aggressive threat to Russia and determined to finish the work of the Cold War (NSI Discourse).

### *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).

In addition, although Russia has recently increased its spending on military capability and modernization, more money proportionally is going to the security services, reflecting perhaps a priority on domestic control over foreign policy expansionism. Connected to this desire for domestic control is the rhetoric of nationalism and state strength that many of the experts have commented on. There are also questions about the sustainability of current military spending, given current revenue levels and the extent to which this increased spending is actually going toward improving and modernizing the military due to the high levels of corruption and cronyism within the military and defense industries (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. Neither is it restricted to conservative politicians:

*The conservative wing of Russian politics represented by the nationalists and the Communists opposed the alliance’s expansion for geopolitical and ideological reasons. The liberals-reformers opposed it because they saw it as damaging to their already tenuous position in Russian domestic politics, vulnerable to criticism from opponents who accused them of betraying Russian national interest and being agents of the West (CEIP).*

While it is perhaps inevitable that Russia would oppose NATO expansion on principle, START’s analysis of Russian use of force suggests that we should not dismiss this opposition as purely rhetorical. Their findings indicate that “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). Part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that “NATO membership provides regime security to non-pro-Russian governments while also curtailing Russia’s response to politically disloyal regimes in what it considers its sphere of influence” (START). 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*

Given Russia’s perception of NATO, it is not surprising that they seek to undermine the alliance’s legitimacy and create a rift among its members, in particular between “new” and “old” NATO states (NSI ViTTa; TAMU). 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 or 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). This leads to the possibility that Russia may initiate an action in the Baltic States with the intent of either provoking NATO to do something "trigger happy" or by not acting demonstrate that they are not capable of providing protection against Russian aggression (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).

Western support for color revolutions is seen by Russia as intended to "create a zone of instability around Russia, encircle it with Western agents of influence, and create opportunities for Western intervention" (CEIP). Protests in Russia following Putin's 2011 decision to reclaim the presidency led not only to increased restrictions on political protest, but a media campaign accusing the West of instigating the protests in order to undermine and weaken Russia and promoting values that were alien to Russian society (CEIP). In effect, charging the West with engaging in the very influence operations they criticize Russia for conducting.

### **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). Separate analyses of Russian speeches and policy statements find that the Putin government references economic issues at one of the highest levels, indicating that economic interests are a key factor in their decision calculus (NSI Discourse). Economics dominates Russian media and government speeches, more so than Russia's actions in Ukraine, Crimea, and Syria (NSI Discourse; NSI ViTTa). Analysis of speeches by both Medvedev and Putin reveals that "despite the bravado concerning Russia's primary export commodity and its power as a negotiating chip... concern with the fluctuations in energy prices and their implications for the Russian economy" receives equal attention (NSI Discourse).

Putin's initial economic policies stabilized the currency and living standards of many Russians, and were key to his early popular support (NSI ViTTa). Similarly, his control over the allocation of the goods of



office ensures the loyalty of many elites (NSI ViTTa). The inability to continue to provide economic benefits to the elite and general public has the potential to undermine support for Putin, although this has not yet been reflected in public opinion data (NSI ViTTa). Economic decline also undermines the Russian narrative that emphasizes the growing economic importance of the BRICS countries (TAMU).

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). This perception reflects the themes of overcoming adversity and victimization seen in Putin's speeches (NSI Discourse) and is also apparent in the media's use of the related theme of resilience (TAMU). This may help explain why the current economic crisis has not significantly hurt Putin's popularity.

*The media present clear story lines of a Russian government attempting to overcome the crisis along with its people. The media give a clear enemy in the United States and explains their economic hardships in light of global ones. The media also offer hope, both in the historic power of Russian solidarity and in new actors with emerging economic influence that Russia can partner with. A dying model of power is shown as being replaced with a new one; one that Russia will actively help to structure and lead toward a prosperous future (TAMU).*

#### ***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 crisis in Ukraine apparently came as a surprise for the Kremlin. But the severity of its response to the crisis—the annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine, the virulent political propaganda campaign against the new government of Ukraine and the West supporting it, and the destruction of the entire post-Cold War European security system—reflects the perceptions of threat associated by Russian national security elite with the “loss” of Ukraine to NATO and the EU (CEIP).*

The findings from START's analysis of Russian use of force find that, as with NATO expansion, extension of “the reach of EU policy preferences increases the salience of the crisis within Russian decision-making circles” (START), 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 in NATO enlargement), 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 VSNA). Russia has condemned these initiatives in terms previously reserved for NATO (START VSNA).

Russian media narratives also reflect Russia's strong opposition to the expanding reach of EU influence. To counter support for EU linkages in its near abroad, they portray the West as using false promises to

attract away Russia's strong trading partners. The United States and Europe then exploit these countries for raw materials and labor in order to prop up their own failing economic system" (TAMU). Analysis indicates that EU (or NATO) expansion into Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, or Azerbaijan would be perceived as most threatening to Russia, and that they have all "...become the battleground states, to one degree or another pulled in different directions in the geopolitical tug-of-war between Russia and the West" (CEIP).

### **Russian concept of stability**

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine are "the culmination of a long-term rejection by Russia of the post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic security order" (CEIP). As discussed above, unlike Western European states and the US, Russia does not see the enlargement of NATO and the EU as increasing regional stability, rather as creating a direct threat to Russia. Russian media narratives portray "Russia as a rational and moderate geopolitical actor standing against the corruption and recklessness of the 'Euro-Atlantic' world; namely, the United States and the European Union" (TAMU).

Furthermore, beyond the potential damaging effects on Russia's domestic stability and regional influence discussed earlier, Russia's opposition to Western support for color revolutions reflects a fundamentally different perception of stability. Russia considers that the United States' promotion of democracy has led to chaos around the world and created the space for the rise of violent non-state actors such as ISIL (NSI ViTTa; START Stats). To Russia, this policy represents warfare by other means, against the legitimate governments of sovereign states (CEIP), and thus violates international law (NSI ViTTa). This perception is reflected in a key Russian narrative that US dominance leads to chaos (TAMU).

### **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**

There is a disconnect between how the current Russian leadership sees, and wishes to see, itself and the reality of Russia's current position. 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, which affects their expectations of the government: "When populations think that they are a great power, they expect their government to act that way" (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. It is suggested that their desire for great power status might be driven in part by historical experience. Russians look back at the USSR and see not only a superpower, but also a state that had a stable economy and stable ethnic relations (NSI ViTTa). This interpretation is supported by the TAMU media analysis, which found references to the historical strength and resilience of the Russian (and the Soviet Union) state and people to be a key narrative

component. Consistent with this, the NSI discourse analysis found that Russia's cultural framing appeals to a historical tradition of overcoming great odds against those who threaten their independence.

Part of the way that Russia looks to overcome the limitations to its claims of great power status is by emphasizing that is the relative, rather than absolute, measure of state power that matters. This connects their portrayal of the United States and Western Europe as declining powers and explains some of its narrative importance (NSI ViTTa). Russia is taking the long view. They know the United States is fatigued with being the sole superpower and see Western Europe as appearing to be in economic decline, and are proposing Russia as an alternative (NSI ViTTa; TAMU). 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).

### **Nuclear capability**

Experts interviewed for NSI's ViTTa identified a tendency in the Russian leadership 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," despite its conventional limitations and the devaluation of its most critical asset (economic power of oil). Russia currently possesses no "other markers of great power status," and SME's suggest that they might be willing to be less militarily aggressive if they had an alternative means of expressing power (NSI ViTTa).

Although nuclear weapons provide a guarantee against NATO intervention in Russia (CEIP), and have become one of the hallmarks of major powers, the CEIP report notes that they proved "of little use when it came to deterring NATO enlargement ever closer to Russian borders and securing a sphere of influence for Russia around its periphery" (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.

*In the worst possible case, which to Russian planners is not unimaginable, a combination of NATO's conventional, nuclear, and missile defense capabilities could prove devastating to Russia's nuclear arsenal and deny it the ability to deliver a retaliatory strike. Faced with this [no matter how remote] prospect, Russian military planners have to consider first-use options as a de-escalatory measure that will persuade the enemy of the futility of his actions. Otherwise, if nuclear weapons are not used early in the conflict for the purpose of ending it, Russia may not be able to use them at all and be defeated (CEIP).*

### **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 (see introductory section on Identifying issues and mapping actor interests in the USEUCOM AOR) 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. 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.

### Russian notions of citizenship and sovereignty

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). As far back as the early 1990s, the Russian foreign policy establishment articulated its belief in Russia’s “special rights, even responsibilities, throughout the territories of the former Soviet states and suggested that Russian interests transcended the borders of these newly-independent states” (CEIP). The specific definition of which populations Russia considers in this light is broad and fairly ill-defined (GMU), leaving the Russian leadership considerable leeway regarding the circumstances and places where they invoke these rights and responsibilities. In January 2015, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated:

*Like any other country that wants to preserve its cultural heritage, we maintain and will work to expand our ties with all these people [ethnic Russians] through available legitimate methods, including the creation of scientific and cultural centers and various organizations of the Rusky Mir Foundation, and we will support our compatriots when they need legal assistance to protect their rights in the countries of their residence (quoted in NSI Discourse).*

Russia’s 2008 Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance Treaties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia provide one illustration of how this perception is translated into policy. Among other things, the treaties link Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s domestic-legal systems to Russia’s “for eventual absorption,” provide free entry into Russia, and “pledge to ‘unify their civil, tax, welfare, and pension laws [as well as] their banking, energy, transportation, and telecommunications system’ with Russia’s” (START VSNA). START’s analysis contends that, under the organizing principle of Novorossiya,

*...there is constitutional innovation taking place within Russia to replace the nation-state model with a civilization-state model, which somewhat overturns the three pillars defined in the nation-state model to instead include boundary expansion, associate membership, and neo-imperialism. The nation-state model is in conflict with the civilization-state model, which is creating different logics of order and disorder with Russia (START Stats).*

Consistent with this, the SMEs interviewed in the NSI ViTTa stated that Putin has demonstrated a commitment to the idea that a unique Russian civilization exists, one that transcends borders. He has consciously elevated ethnicity and language over statehood, citizenship, and “the sanctity of borders,” believing that there is a mismatch between state/political borders and national/ethnic/cultural groups that is both a historical injustice and a threat to Russia’s security. 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 an 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.

Several SME's also believe 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).

Interestingly, the NSI Discourse analysis found Putin seldom mentioned the concept of Novorossiya (ranked 127th out of 219 themes). It concludes that:

*Combined with the lack of emotive speech used by the Putin government, this prima facie indicates that they are not seeking great power status, or that they are being deceptive. The other polities that do mention Novorossiya (Russian nationalists and Donetsk) actually mention it 9 times more densely. This may represent their independent wishes, or possibly the Russian government's wishes by proxy (NSI Discourse).*

### **Preference for a multipolar system**

This very different concept of stability, combined with Russia's own desire for greater regional global influence to offset its vulnerability to the West, creates 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 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, as 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). Media narratives present Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank as “blackmailing other countries, acting as loan sharks, and found to be overall inconsistent and holding double standards. These institutions, in addition to the United Nations, were also viewed as anachronistic due to their dominance by Western countries despite other developing countries’ recent economic growth, specifically BRICS countries” (TAMU), tying in to broader narratives regarding the inconsistency between the West’s declining power and its continued global dominance. 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

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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. Consciously or not, state leaders and decision makers attribute objectives, goals, interests, and intentions to other states, and interpret their actions in light of these attributions.

Table 2: Implications of cooperation and conflict factors for US and Western interests

Implications of cooperation and conflict factors for US and Western interests
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Without improvement in relations between the West and Russia, the likelihood of cooperation, even in areas of shared interests, is low.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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 countries and those states dissatisfied with the current dominance of Western states and institutions.</li> <li>• “The West’s plans for improving conventional capabilities and missile defenses are eroding Russian military planners’ confidence in their nuclear deterrent” (CEIP).</li> <li>• 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).</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• NATO expansion may decrease the ability of the alliance to quickly respond to Russian actions, undermining its deterrent credibility and legitimacy.</li> <li>• “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).</li> <li>• NATO’s conventional military superiority leaves Russia two choices: first-use nuclear strike to de-escalate, or gray actions (CEIP).</li> <li>• 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).</li> </ul>

**Defining risk and opportunity**

Determining how the issues, goals, and constraints facing regional states in the Eurasia region will develop and evolve over the next decade, creating either risk or opportunity for the US, requires a consideration of how risk and opportunity are defined and the interests or objectives to which they refer. The interest-based integration framework informs the way in which risk and opportunity were defined and assessed. For this project, risk to national interest is defined as *situations or actions that threaten a state’s achievement or protection of an interest*. Opportunities to pursue national interest can be defined as *a situation or action that helps a state to protect or further an interest*.

In many cases, states have multiple interests at stake in a single issue. If we only assess a state’s preferences on one interest dimension (e.g., assuming that a territorial dispute involves only security interests) when, in fact, that state perceives the issue to impact other interests as well (e.g., seeking control of territory for economic purposes or in response to domestic nationalist pressures), we are unlikely to accurately predict its actions or responses. The challenge lies in accurately assessing how other states perceive their interests to be affected by a particular situation in order to be able to craft the most effective approach, rather than assuming their interests will mirror ours. The benefit of considering issues from this interest-based approach lies in the potential it creates to identify more areas of potential cooperation. When states have multiple interests at stake, there is an increased possibility of trade-offs, or mutually beneficial outcomes. If a state has only a single interest at stake in an issue, then their perception of the losses and gains from a particular outcome will be based only on that single issue. This increases the probability that in contentious issues a zero-sum game will emerge, making a negotiated outcome less likely. However, when a state has multiple interests at stake in an issue, or competing states have asymmetric interests, there is more bargaining space in which to locate an outcome that benefits all actors. The implications for the balance between risk and opportunity this creates is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 3: An interest-based approach to strategic risk and opportunity and their relationship to the probability of conflict

		Nature of the issue outcome	
		Zero-sum	Variable-sum
Interests at stake for actor	Single interest	This combination creates the <b>greatest potential for risk</b> . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If all relevant actors share the same single interest, conflict is most likely, as it is not possible for all states’ interests to be secured.</li> <li>• If there are different interests at stake for relevant actors and a single outcome can accommodate both, the likelihood of conflict is reduced and <b>some opportunity</b> is present.</li> </ul>	This combination creates <b>some opportunity</b> , as it is possible for all relevant actors’ interests to be at least partially realized from the same outcome. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If there are different interests at stake for relevant actors and a single outcome can accommodate both, the <b>opportunity is substantially increased</b>.</li> </ul>
	Multiple interests	This combination creates the potential for <b>some risk</b> , as it is not possible for all actors to achieve all of their interests from the same outcome. <b>Opportunity</b> exists if actors are willing to trade-off across interests—take a loss on one in return for a gain on another.	This combination offers the <b>greatest opportunity</b> , as it is possible for all actors to achieve their interests at least partially.



### Cooperation and conflict issues identified by key actors

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.

As Figure 8 shows, when considering cooperation and conflict cases alone, the top issues of for the US change on several points; furthermore, a greater range of issues are associated with the theme of cooperation than those associated with conflict in US statements. The issues discussed with greatest frequency by the US in the context of cooperation include economic issues (development, regional economic cooperation) that do not appear in the top issues overall. Nuclear proliferation also emerges as an issue associated by the US with cooperation. Military capability appears in the context of

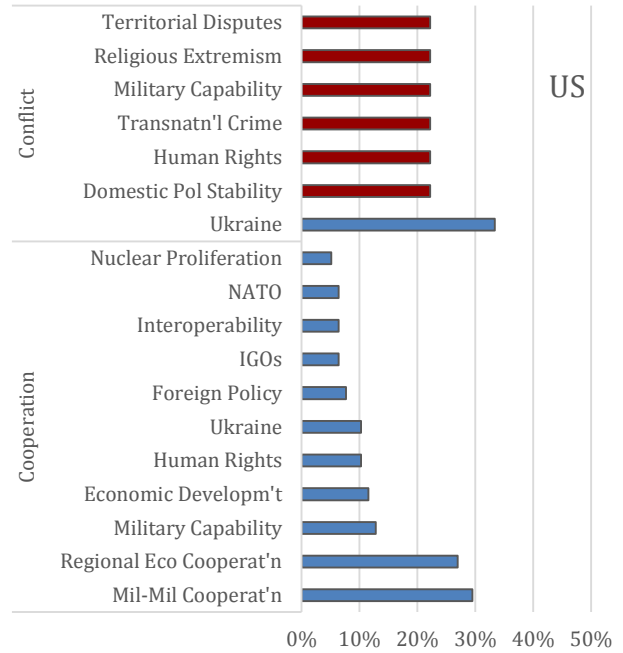


Figure 8: Top issues associated with conflict and cooperation for the US

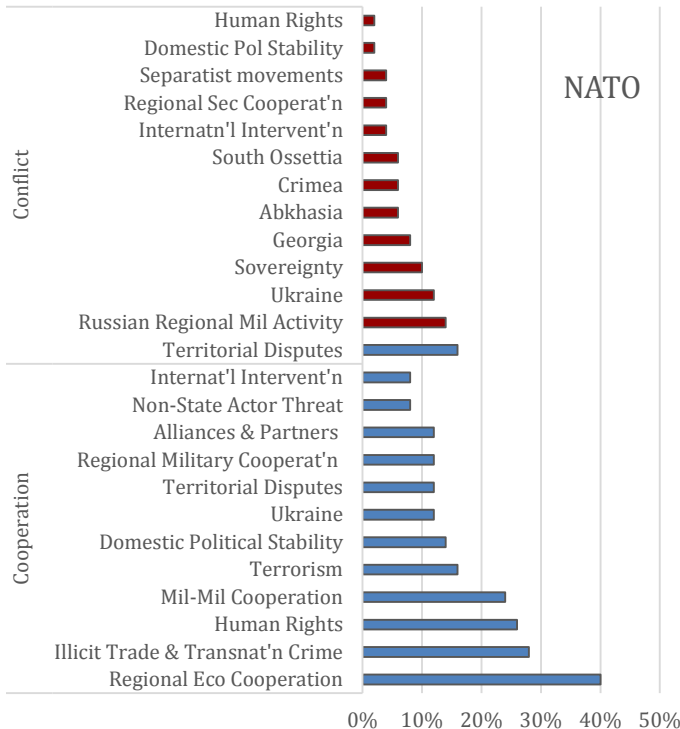


Figure 9: Top issues associated with conflict and cooperation for NATO

both cooperation and conflict themes, and going back to the text we see that the variation here is a function of whose (NATO and allies or Russian) military capability is being discussed. Conflict statements also see the emergence of illicit trade and transnational crime—a top concern overall for both NATO and Russia—as a top conflict issue for the US.

Russia (Figure 9) too references more issues in the context of cooperation than it does conflict. There are also several cooperation issues it shared with the US, including nuclear proliferation, regional economic cooperation, and economic development. However, looking back at the text of the statements, we find that although the US and Russia both see regional economic cooperation as an

important issue, they are talking about very different things. Most of Russia’s discussion of economic cooperation implicitly or explicitly references the establishment of regional organizations separate from those the US supports. Although this initially appears as a point where US and Russian interests may align, the reality is a little more complicated.

NATO’s top interests (Figure 10) also vary when considered in the context of cooperation and conflict themes alone. More so than any other actor, NATO conflict statements reference conflicts or crises, specifically those involving Russia. This, combined with the concern over Russian regional military activity, general territorial disputes, and their frequent references to sovereignty in the context of conflict, seems to indicate a very clear focus on Russia as the regional source of conflict. Like the US, however, NATO also references Ukraine in the context of cooperation, mainly with reference to a need to find a political solution to the



Figure 11: Top issues associated with conflict and cooperation for Russia

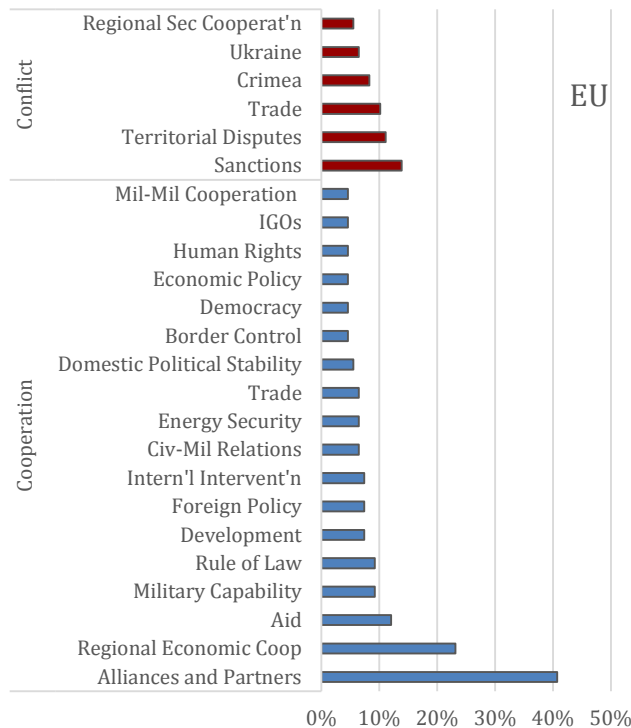


Figure 10: Top issues associated with conflict and cooperation for the EU

crisis. Illicit trade and transnational crime, a top issue overall for NATO, is even more of a focus when considering cooperation statements.

For the EU, (Figure 11) many of the issues associated with cooperation were directly or indirectly economic in nature. As with Russia, energy security is frequently mentioned in the context of cooperation, as is economic development and trade.

Looking across all the actors, with the exception of NATO, we see policy statements referencing a larger number of issues in the context of cooperation than in the context of conflict. Some issues, most notably Ukraine, were discussed as both conflictual and cooperative events. This reflects the complex

nature of many of the issues in the region, which, as shown in interests map (Figure 7 above), are often associated with multiple interests for actors.

In order to develop a clearer picture of how themes of cooperation and conflict affect the level of complexity of the issues-interests conjunction for actors, we composed similar interests maps for the top conflict and cooperation issues for all actors.

### Intersection of cooperation issues and actor interests

Figure 12 below maps the issues each actor referenced in the context of cooperation. When we compare this map to Figure 7 (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. For the US, cooperation issues deviate more from their top overall issues. Interestingly, more cooperation issues are considered to affect security interests alone, although some top issues with security implications, such as regional security cooperation, alliances and partnerships, and joint exercises, are not referenced directly in the context of cooperation. Similar to Russia, NATO and the EU also demonstrate similarities between their perception of cooperation issues and regional issues overall. Two of the EU's top issues overall are also top cooperation issues. For NATO, the ranking of the issues changes, but most retain their overall placements in terms of interests affected.

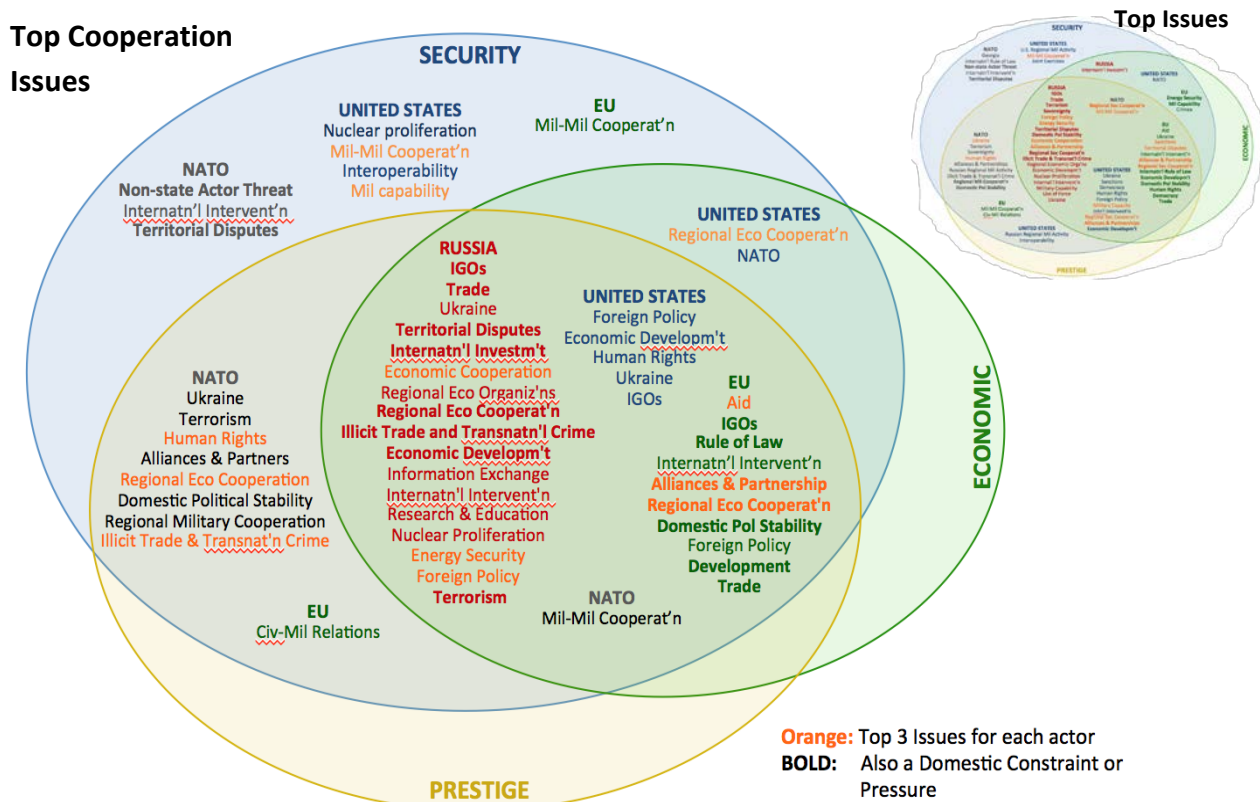


Figure 12: Interest map of cooperation issues for US, Russia, NATO and EU

### **Cooperation issues identified by project teams**

Table 3 below lists the substantive areas of cooperation discussed by the project teams, and the potential problems and risks associated with each. Both counter terrorism and illicit trade and transnational crime were also among the top issues referenced in relation to cooperation in Russian and NATO policy statements. Trade and regional economic cooperation were issue referenced in both Russia and the EU policy statements. However, as the following discussion of barriers to cooperation illustrates, shared interests do not necessarily correspond to shared goals and outcomes.

Table 4: Substantive areas of cooperation and associated problems and risks

Issue area	Interest alignment between Russia and the West	Potential problems/risks
<b>Counter radicalization &amp; counter terror</b>	<p><b>Shared security interests</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Radicalization of Islamic populations in the Caucasus is a real possibility                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ISIL recruiting foreign fighters from the region</li> <li>Russia also concerned about returning ISIL fighters (NSI ViTTa)</li> <li>Also other groups, such as Caucasus Emirates (a Salafist nationalist organization) (START)</li> </ul> </li> <li>Potential for ISIL influence to extend into Central Asia</li> <li>West and Russia share a problem with white supremacist radicalization (START)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Political climate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conflictual relations between Russia and the West (CEIP; GMU; NSI ViTTa)</li> <li>Current Russian preference for cooperation with non-Western states and international organizations (TAMU)</li> </ul> <p><b>Russian approach</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russian approach involves force and torture (NSI ViTTa)</li> <li>Russian motivations are “disturbing and non-liberal,” which is a potential danger to Muslim minorities in Russia (START Stats)</li> </ul>
<b>Arctic</b>	<p><b>Interests expressed by Russia are primarily economic, but security interests can be inferred.</b></p> <p><b>Search and rescue</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Talk is aggressive, but behavior is cooperative, and there is a history of cooperative action (NSI ViTTa)</li> <li>While US and Russian military were holding joint tabletop exercises, they have been put on hold since Russia’s actions in Crimea (GMU Arctic)</li> </ul> <p><b>Managing maritime traffic and illegal fishing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>US and Russia have an agreement for collectively managing maritime traffic and illegal fishing in Arctic waters (GMU Arctic)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As area opens up possibility of collisions and environmental damage increases (NSI ViTTa)</li> <li>Unintended event involving NATO and Russian forces; accident, such as fighter collision most likely (NSI ViTTa)</li> </ul> <p><b>Political climate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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)</li> </ul>
<b>Trade agreements</b>	<p><b>Shared economic interests, especially in energy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Energy an obvious choice, Russia wants “to be part of the club”, but as an equal partner(NSI ViTTa).</li> <li>There are Russian companies that “would love the freedom that these agreements would bring” (NSI ViTTa)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Political climate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russians not willing to engage with the US, NATO, or EU (NSI ViTTa)</li> </ul> <p>Russian preference for a multipolar system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russia seeking economic ties to non-Western states</li> </ul>

Issue area	Interest alignment between Russia and the West	Potential problems/risks
<b>Illicit trade &amp; transnational crime</b>	<p><b>Top cooperation issue for NATO, seen to affect security and prestige interests. Russia perceives economic, security, prestige, and domestic interests to be affected.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russians and Europeans want eradication of drug trafficking, in particular trade routes that run through Russia to Europe (NSI ViTTa)</li> <li>See cooperation on counter terrorism and international coordination against transnational organized crime (START Stats)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Political climate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russians not willing to engage with the US (NSI ViTTa)</li> <li>Russia ignores narcotrafficking in Central Asia when it benefits elites (NSI ViTTa)</li> </ul>
<b>Common spaces agreement</b>	<p><b>Spans economic, security, and prestige interests, with domestic considerations for Russia as well</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structural factors of cooperation still exist, but are declining</li> </ul>	<p><b>Political climate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russians not willing to engage with the US, NATO, or EU (NSI ViTTa)</li> <li>As long as Russia remains belligerent, agreement will be unworkable for the West (NSI ViTTa)</li> </ul>

## 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 (see [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 in Russia

Looking across all the areas identified as having shared interests and the potential for cooperation for Russia and the West, the current political climate is a constant factor discussed as a barrier to that potential becoming reality. Even in counter terror, an issue of high salience and shared goals for all key actors, there has been little or no follow through on the initial cooperation post 9/11 (NSI ViTTa). Responsibility for this failure of cooperation is shared between both the US, which has concerns over Russia's methods, and Russia, which is concerned over autonomy and control (NSI ViTTa; START Stats). 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 (discussed in more detail below, see [Russian control of information space](#)) makes this narrative particularly difficult to alter. Because of this, experts interviewed for NSI's ViTTa believe the only effective mechanism of communicating a willingness to engage to Russian elite and the population is through action. By focusing on engagement rather than conflict with Russia, the West erodes Putin's ability to message that the USG is the enemy of Russia. It opens the door for the population and elite to see the potential for economic prosperity through cooperation (NSI ViTTa).

### Russian perception that NATO is a threat

Consistent with this general political climate, 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.

### Preference for cooperation with non-Western states

Cooperation between the West and Russia on economic issues is constrained by Russia's perception of threat. Specifically, that encroaching EU influence in its near abroad will undermine its influence over neighboring states. Russia's response has been to attempt to strengthen control over its allies and prevent countries in its near abroad from moving closer to NATO and the EU (NSI ViTTa). 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 BRICS nations and regional organizations such as the SCO—groups

“with the potential to support and strengthen their collective security inside and outside the confines of the current international fora” (TAMU).

### Intersection of conflict issues and actor interests

Moving to conflict issues, as the interest map (Figure 13 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.

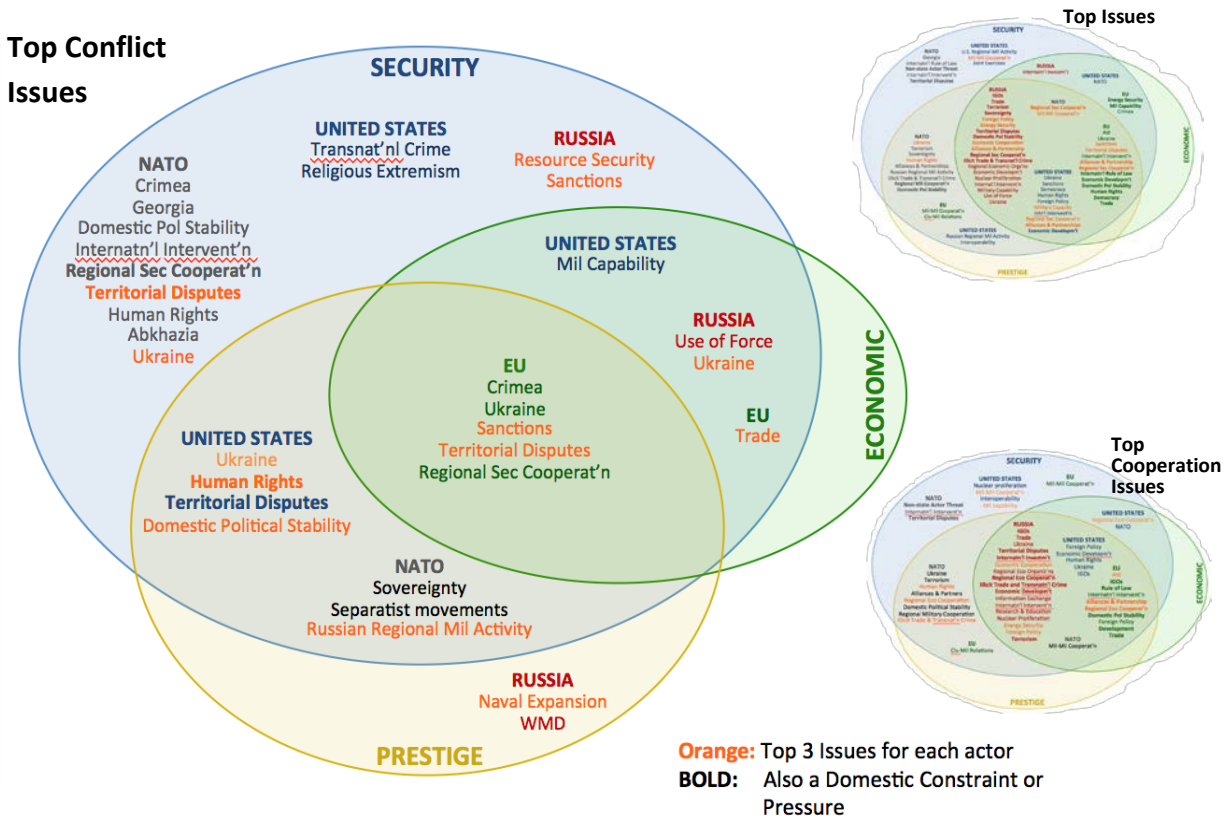


Figure 13: Interest map of conflict issues for the US, Russia, NATO and EU

### Conflict issues identified by project teams

Table 4 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 weapons of mass destruction (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 of sovereignty, and their references in policy to the use of force (see Figure 13 above).

Table 5: Substantive areas of conflict between Russia and the West and associated interests

Issue area	Relevant interests for Russia and the West
NATO training exercises	Both a security and prestige influence for Russia and NATO. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NATO training exercises in the Baltic Sea dealing with forward deploying of forces seen as threatening by Russia (START Stats).</li> </ul>
Western military deployments	Both a security and prestige influence for Russia, although only security interests generally referenced by Western actors. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deployment of Western forces in Russia’s near abroad is a red line for Russia (NSI ViTTa).</li> </ul>
Missile defense	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. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Missile defense systems deployed in Russia’s near abroad is a red line for Russia, much as Soviet missiles in Cuba were for the US (NSI ViTTa).</li> <li>“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).</li> </ul>
Ukraine	Seen as a security issue by NATO, security and economic by EU and Russia, and security and prestige for US. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deployment of Western forces in Russia’s near abroad is a red line for Russia (NSI ViTTa).</li> </ul>
Baltic States	For Russia all interests are affected by events in the Baltics, for the West it is primarily security and prestige interests at stake. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Threat “resides much more in efforts to divide their societies than it does in efforts to annex their territory (AOWG).</li> <li>Russian decision calculus model, under current conditions, does not favor a Russian decision to occupy Latvia, Lithuania, or Baltic States (GMU).</li> </ul>
Arctic exclusive economic zone (EEZ)	Primarily an economic issue for Russia. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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).</li> </ul>
Support for political liberalization	Russia considers security, prestige, economic, and domestic interests to be at stake. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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).</li> </ul>

<b>NATO expansion</b>	Russia considers security, prestige, and domestic interests to be at stake. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Russia sees NATO enlargement as threatening, as it brings NATO military capacity closer to Russia (CEIP).</li> <li>• “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).</li> </ul>
<b>EU Expansion</b>	Russia considers security, prestige, economic, and domestic interests to be at stake. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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).</li> </ul>

**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. There was agreement that Russian leaders view the use of information technologies as a key tool of statecraft to be employed continuously in both domestic and international contexts to achieve their political and security goals (NSI ViTTa). Media control is regarded as critical to Putin’s regime and is given extensive funding and support by the Kremlin (AOWG; NSI ViTTa; TAMU). “The new National Security Strategy states that in the interest of protecting state and public security, the government will undertake the necessary steps to improve protections of citizens and society from the effects of destructive information propagated by extremists and terrorists organizations, foreign intelligence services, and propaganda outlets” (CEIP).

The government’s domestic information campaign has high production values and represents large government investment with technologies and well thought out narratives showing planning and progress. It is designed to be addictive and to brainwash: “In a bad way it is a piece of art” (NSI ViTTa; see also AOWG; TAMU). Russian narratives present the US and the West as the dominant threat to Russia, and the cause of Russia’s current difficulties (TAMU: NSI ViTTa); they create an environment in which cooperation with the West is likely to be seen as betrayal or capitulation.

Experts debate the ultimate intent of these information operations. Some argue that they are a means of passively mobilizing Russian society in the regime's favor, while others suggest that the goal is rather to foster confusion by crafting mirroring realities so the public was distrustful of everything—not only in the Russia, but in the West as well (NSI ViTTa). 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." Despite public skepticism about these narratives (ICONS; NSI ViTTa), their amorphous nature and the lack of alternative sources of information make them difficult to counter.

### 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 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. Gray activities discussed by experts included hybrid warfare, political influence operations, and economic pressure or incentives (CEIP; NSI ViTTa).

*Russia's reliance on these unorthodox forms of warfare are fully justified in the eyes of the country's security establishment as asymmetric means warranted by the perceived Russia-NATO imbalance. Russian reliance on them and the intensity of its opposition to the Euro-Atlantic security order are unlikely to diminish if its economic prospects or domestic stability erode. To the contrary, it may become even greater as other instruments in its toolkit become scarcer (CEIP).*

### 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).

Russia's perceived mandate to protect ethnic Russians (see discussion above on Russian notions of citizenship and sovereignty) can be operationalized [by Russia] in many ways to further Russia's economic, security, prestige, and domestic interests, and used as a justifications for intervention, extending and strengthening Russia's influence in its near abroad. SME's interviewed for NSI's ViTTa expressed concern that the US and NATO do not have the deterrence capability for this political influence that they do for military threats.

**Barriers to organizing Western intervention in a crisis situation**

The use of gray actions, in particular political influence operations, create difficulties for the West, as identification, attribution, and significance are much harder to determine, making timely response difficult. Their own internal organizational barriers to quick, decisive reaction further hamper Western states. Crimea and Ukraine made it clear to the region that Russia is willing to use military means for political ends, and the West is not (NSI ViTTa).

Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine scared a lot of Russia's neighbors, even those desiring closer ties to Europe (NSI ViTTa). Russia's narrative that the West is not truly committed to the states on Russia's periphery, and cannot be trusted to protect them, is given weight by the slowness of Western response and the avoidance of direct confrontation of Russia. The ICONS simulation found that "...lengthy discussion over proper channels of assistance and appropriate observer bodies—to avoid escalating the situation ... carried substantial risk of worsening the situation on the ground as the fire spread in the meantime" (ICONS).

The teams offer two reinforcing explanations of the difficulties inherent in European response to Russian aggression. The TAMU analysis argues these difficulties in reaching joint decisions stem from "historical tensions within Europe" and "deference of Europe to the hegemonic United States" (TAMU). Others suggest that the causes are organizational; it is harder to coordinate and gain consensus within a group (such as NATO or the EU) that has a large number of members with diverse interests and constraints (NSI ViTTa). For this reason, they warn that expansion of NATO creates vulnerabilities. If the organization expands to include an even more diverse range of members, including those with historical or contemporary ties or vulnerabilities to Russia (such as ethnic Russian populations), generating timely responses to Russian actions will become even more challenging (NSI ViTTa), undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the alliance.

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. The ICONS report suggests several possible explanations for this reticence, none of which are mutually exclusive. First, consistent with the discussion above, it could be a response to the organizational barriers faced by NATO and others. Second, it could reflect "apprehension about inadvertently signaling escalation—rendered the usefulness of such assistance limited at best" (ICONS). This would also be consistent with the findings from the TAMU and NSI ViTTa reports regarding the strength of Russian narratives in neighboring states. These narratives frame the West as unreliable allies, and create the perception that cooperation with the West is likely to be seen as betrayal or capitulation.

**European dependence on Russian energy**

Europe's dependence on Russian energy has long been a source of concern for US and European leaders concerned over the influence it provides the Kremlin (CEIP). 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).

Analysis of Russian policy and speeches by Russian leaders indicate that economic issues rank high among their security concerns, and speeches “often mention the reliance of European nations on Russian energy” (NSI Discourse). Analysis of Russian media identifies several narrative themes consistent with perspective. Russia’s economic downturn is presented as “devastating to European businesses and economies” and a threat to global markets. European industries are represented as needing Russian customers, and Europeans as needing Russia investment and trade (TAMU). Viewed in this light, it is easy to see how moves by Ukraine, the transit country for almost half of Russia’s gas exports to Europe, “would translate into an unacceptable loss of power and influence” (CEIP).

## Domestic stability and instability in Russia

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The project teams identified multiple factors influencing domestic stability within Russia. 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). These destabilizing factors are balanced by Putin’s control over the media and elites, as well as his popular support. Several experts discussed the influence of corruption, expressing varying opinions on whether it enhances or erodes stability. With regard to political stability, overall, more certainty was expressed regarding what type of political change would *not* occur in Russia than about what a transfer of power away from Putin would look like. 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

#### Economic crisis and the failure to modernize

The most significant threat to Russia’s current economic stability is identified as the steep drop in oil prices. The oil and gas sector account for 50% of government revenue, and for Russia to have any kind of sustained growth and economic development, or to provide resources to population, the price of oil needs to be \$75 per barrel (NSI ViTTa). Russia’s dependence on oil means that the current low prices affect all aspects of the economy, not just the oil and gas sectors (NSI ViTTa). There has been little attempt to diversify the petro economy to reduce vulnerability to oil prices. Some argue, however, that it is not the current low oil prices that have created this problem for Russia, but rather the reverse. Historically, each time oil prices rise, Russia’s leaders have decided that economic reform was unnecessary. As a result, proposed reforms for decentralization and modernization have ended, corruption has continued, and economic dysfunctionality increased as a result (NSI ViTTa; consistent with CEIP).

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). For sanctions to really undermine stability, experts argue that they need to be unified and long-term and damage key Russian industries. At the moment, existing sanctions are targeting income much more than wealth (NSI ViTTa). Combined with low oil prices, European sanctions and Russia's countersanctions will contribute to inflation and decrease real income and purchasing power, having a cumulative effect on the Russian economy. Russians are now experiencing multiple sources of diminished income—lower employment in the oil and gas sector, potential reductions in government spending, and reduced purchasing power.

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. Succinctly stated in the CEIP report: "The Russian economy has outlived its model of development and can at best stagnate; the political system is not able to address the tensions that are building within the society...[and the] leadership has yet to offer a credible strategy for leading the country out of its crisis." (CEIP). The need for economic reform is widely understood and acknowledged within Russia, but there is an unwillingness to make the necessary structural changes (CEIP; NSI Discourse; NSI ViTTa). The "experience of the Gorbachev-era reforms continues to serve as a potent cautionary reminder of the dangers associated with radical change" (CEIP).

Without reforms, however "defeat awaits [Russia] in the future political, economic, and military-strategic competition of the 21st Century" (Sergey Karaganov, head of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, quoted in CEIP). 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. Economic decline also leaves Russia with fewer resources to devote to bringing near abroad states into its sphere of influence. Russia can continue to offer energy and trade concessions to neighboring states in return for closer economic ties, but other advantages of closer cooperation with Russia, especially for those seeking work, decrease as Russia's economy contracts. Russia's goal of positioning itself as an alternate pole of global power, through economic and security cooperation with the BRICS countries and other states hostile to the West, is similarly hampered by its critical economic position. Sanctions have encouraged the Kremlin "move toward economic nationalism and isolationism" (CEIP), and further motivated Russia to turn to other potential economic and development partners. In particular China, which has increased its "bargaining power in leaps and bounds," while decreasing the economic leverage of the West (NSI ViTTa).

Domestically, Putin may find it harder to maintain popular and elite support. Economic downturn makes it harder for Putin to keep the elite satisfied, either through graft or increased military spending. If elites see that being associated with Putin is no longer an advantage, it may crystalize some of their underlying concerns with his leadership and policy choices. Similarly, although popular support for Putin has not yet been significantly undermined by the economic downturn, the same Russians who have done well under Putin are now in danger of losing all the economic gains of the past fifteen years, making them more likely to mobilize in opposition than if they had not experienced those gains in the first place (NSI ViTTa).

Whether and how this economic dissatisfaction and protest will translate into political action, however, is not so clear. Historically, economic protests in Russia have led to political demands (NSI ViTTa); however, the uncertainty regarding what would replace Putin’s regime, and the upheaval that change would inevitably create (CEIP), may in fact be inhibiting public demonstrations of dissatisfaction with Putin’s policies. Concern over public responses to the economic crisis can be inferred from Russian media narratives, in which the hardships facing Russian citizens are tied to the global recession and antagonistic policies of the US rather than the policies of the Putin government (TAMU).

### 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

As discussed earlier (see Impediments to countering Russian aggression), Russia’s regime exercises tight control over the media, enabling regime-created narratives to drive public opinion (NSI ViTTa). Central to the use of media and narrative control to bolster stability is the use of themes of resilience and overcoming odds (TAMU; NSI Discourse).

*“The ideological framework created through these resilience narratives serves to create an image of system resilience. They have also, thus far, served to secure public opinion around Vladimir Putin and his regime, even during a time of severe economic contraction. The media present clear story lines of a Russian government attempting to overcome the crisis along with its people...This piece of the framework allows citizens to place their faith in the government, and its plans, and unites the two toward moving forward. It is a deeply rooted narrative that evokes a sense of identity that stretches through tsars, world wars, and the expanses of the Soviet Empire. Citizens are reminded that Russia always will be a world power, and that its people know how to overcome crisis (TAMU).*

Public opinion experts interviewed for NSI’S ViTTa found in their research that there is complete unanimity among Russians interviewed and polled on unreliability of anything on Russian media, other than weather and sports. However, when they asked for impressions of specific events, people would reference what they had heard on the news. For these reasons, experts 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, a view consistent with the TAMU media analysis findings.

### Lack of political opposition and civil society

Putin has reinforced his control of narrative by systematically repressing political opposition and civil society (NSI ViTTa). “Russian opposition has been decimated as a result of a series of systematic measures by the Putin administration to limit the ability of opposition parties and civil society at large to

organize, recruit members, raise funds, and participate in the political life of the country” (CEIP). The opposition that does exist is concentrated in very small, pro-Western urban groups that “...don’t reflect the view of the ‘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; it rises when he is seen as strong and decisive in foreign policy, even if he does not win (NSI ViTTa). This ties into the importance Russians place on being seen as a great power. Even in more recent focus groups where contributors have expressed more doubts about what is going on in Ukraine, they blame the United States not Putin (NSI ViTTa), reflecting the success of the regime’s control of narrative (TAMU). Experts caution, however, that it is “important not to mistake high levels of support for Putin and dislike of the 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).

While Putin’s government relies heavily on control of information and stifling of political opposition to protect against popular revolt, with the elites it relies more on reducing the incentives for opposition. Over his tenure in office, Putin has also done much to eliminate any potential rivals for his position. Some of Russia’s oligarchs are very close to Putin and “will never betray him” (NSI ViTTa), but even those who do not share his political views benefit hugely from his patronage, and their wealth directly depends on its continuation (NSI ViTTa). After the imposition of sanctions by the West, Putin was careful to reward his inner circle in compensation for the damages caused to them, and despite constraints on his resources due to sanctions and low oil prices, he still remains in control of the most lucrative sources of financial gain (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). For the elites, fear is also present, but generated more by the risks and consequences of challenging Putin's control. The elite are rallying around the flag, knowing that if they express doubts about the regime, they will be reported (NSI ViTTa). This creates resilience in the short-term, but erodes the stability of the regime in the longer-term.

Economic reform, although recognized as necessary, is also fraught with uncertainty for Russia. The shift from a state-centered oligarchy to a more open economic system with stronger rule of law, transparency, and competitiveness, will inevitably require political modernization as well (CEIP). It also poses a threat to the spoils of the widespread corruption currently enjoyed by Russia’s elite (NSI ViTTa). Such 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

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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. Reduced Russian bellicosity and aggression would, of course, also lower barriers to cooperation for the West, as well as decrease the likelihood of conflict. Although the START analysis, found that "there are no substantive effects that reduce conflict in the current model," they concluded [this] "does not bode well for our understanding of what can reduce conflict activity" (START Stats), other teams suggested several potential strategies for reducing the risk of conflict, or at least avoiding further escalation of tensions between the West and Russia.

### **Account for Russia's world view**

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.

### **Current international system renders Russia vulnerable and threatened**

As discussed earlier, "Russian elites are guided by a deep-seated sense of vulnerability vis-a-vis the West and fear Western encroachment on the country's security, economic, and geopolitical interests, as well as on their hold on power in Russia" (CEIP). This perception colors their 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).

### **Russia desires 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's behavior. Russia desires respect in the international community—to be treated as an equal partner. There are indications that Putin wants to make sure the international community takes Russia's views into account before taking any action, and if this does not happen, it will seek respect through disruptive actions (NSI ViTTa). Russia's use of its seat on the UN Security Council is an example of this. For Russia, their position provides a means of constraining Western powers and reasserting Russia's great power status. This is one reason why it reacts so strongly when the Security Council is bypassed, as it was with the invasion of Iraq and NATO intervention in Kosovo (NSI ViTTa). If the West attempts to "push them off the world stage," it risks losing a point of leverage for both cooperation and de-escalation. One expert suggests "lets not humiliate Russia" should be considered a 'critical mantra,'" a view shared by other experts interviewed (NSI ViTTa).

## **Address the power of Russian narrative**

As discussed earlier, one of the major barriers to cooperation with Russia across all substantive areas is their narratives, many of which explicitly paint the United States and its NATO allies as malevolent powers bent on taking over Russia and its neighbors. This perception also increases Russian 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. Avoiding behavior—both US and partner—that supports this narrative (GMU) is a starting point. However, the nature of the narratives themselves (TAMU), combined with Putin’s ability to “spin” events through his control of the media (NSI ViTTa), suggests that more will be needed. 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). Furthermore, the US does not currently have effective means of reaching out to the Russian public, a task made more difficult by Putin’s control of Russian media outlets and Russian “saturation” of media outlets in neighboring states (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. NATO and the EU have established centers of excellence to address this task, and some individual European states have started their own efforts to counter Russian “trolls” on local news sites (ICONS). These initiatives may provide valuable insights into how to most effectively confront Russia’s narrative dominance.

## **Focus on transcendent narratives**

In terms of the content and framing of US narratives, the TAMU analysis suggest 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). Potential gaps within Russia’s dominant narratives that might provide an opening for this include Russia’s over-dependence on resource-based economics, discomfort among Russia’s neighbors over Russian actions, and comparisons of contemporary Russian life with historical periods of relative Russian political openness (TAMU).

## **Actions to consider**

### **Improve communication**

Clarifying the US position in Eurasia requires articulating a clear strategic policy, communicating that policy clearly to Russia and others, and standing by that policy. The importance of improving communication with Russia was raised in a number of reports. As one expert pointed out, a total

breakoff in communication is not good for crisis management, although that is effectively what has happened between Russia and the US over the last year (NSI ViTTa). Cooperation also requires clarification of where boundaries and redlines exist for the US (NSI ViTTa). It can also be improved by demonstrating an understanding of Russia's interests and areas of concern. As the GMU analysis discusses, "US and partner actions that reduce domestic pressures on Russian government to protect interests in 'near abroad' areas may be a useful escalation control tool; problem is 'selling' these actions to Congress" (GMU).

### **Make US objectives and red lines clear**

A number of the team reports emphasize the need for the US to be extremely clear about redlines and prepared to back them up with a show of strength (GMU; NSI ViTTa; TAMU). Putin has not been shown that we are willing to confront Russian actions that violate international law, and that, if Russia's economic and domestic situation worsens, Russian foreign policy behavior is "only going to become more unpredictable" (NSI ViTTa). "Without clearly stated goals, US involvement in countries surrounding Russia's borders allows for Russia to present US/NATO activity as a threat to their own national interests" (TAMU).

### **Increase partner engagement**

Rather than attempting to directly engage with Russia, GMU found that "partner engagement activities are often more effective than those targeting Russia." Independent of NATO, experts suggest the US could provide military advisors, equipment, and training to countries at risk of Russian aggression. Providing arms alone, however, is considered a different matter "since it is costly and requires sustained investment to maintain the equipment" (NSI ViTTa). There was also discussion of the benefits of developing "a forward intelligence capacity, particularly on the human side, to engage with Russian ethnic regions in the Baltic States (NSI ViTTa).

### **Improve conditions for ethnic Russians in near abroad countries**

Russia's concept of sovereignty and citizenship creates a belief in Russia's "special rights, even responsibilities, throughout the territories of the former Soviet states" (CEIP) and a responsibility to ethnic Russian populations in these states. This can be leveraged to justify Russian intervention in neighboring states. It has been suggested that if these populations were able to experience greater benefits for ties to their countries of residence and with the West, they would be less vulnerable to Russian information operations and less likely to support Russian intervention—military or otherwise—in these states (AOWG). In many instances, economic success in these states is tied to language, and ethnic Russian communities earn lower wages and have higher unemployment, creating an exploitable grievance for Russia (AOWG). US and partner actions to improve conditions and treatment of ethnic Russians in its near abroad could lessen these grievances and also reduce potential pressure on the Russian government to protect [this] critical interest (GMU).

### **Decrease European energy dependence**

European states that are dependent on Russia for even a portion of their energy needs are understandably hesitant to take or support actions that could provoke Russia to retaliate by stopping energy supplies (NSI ViTTa). This makes gaining consensus for a regional response to Russian actions

both slower and more difficult, undermining its eventual effectiveness. The West “needs to work toward decreasing European energy dependence on Russia. Or, if the West cannot insulate countries against Russian blowback, it should attempt to mitigate the negative impact for allies and partners” (NSI ViTTa).

## Actions to avoid

### Economic pressure on Russia

A consistent theme running through all of the team reports is the central importance economic considerations have for Russia, and the extent to which they condition Russia’s perception and behavior. There is also consensus that actions to further weaken Russia’s economy would be detrimental to regional stability. As stated in the CEIP report:

*Russia, in other words, remains the essential security pillar in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. A stable, prosperous, secure, and friendly Russia is virtually certain to be a source of the same to its neighbors. The alternative is just as likely to cast a long and dark shadow over them (CEIP).*

To date, one way that Putin has managed the political fallout associated with declining state revenues is through a strategy of distraction, pursuing an aggressive foreign policy in the USEUCOM and USCENTCOM AORs to redirect the attention of domestic audiences (NSI ViTTa). Deeper and more sustained economic crisis may drive Putin to provoke geopolitical crises that contradict Western interests, in order to maintain domestic control (NSI ViTTa). Threatening a vital interest of a state brings with it clear risks:

*In classic deterrence theory, the key is identifying what the adversary values and holding it at risk. From the analysis of this corpus, the key resource Russian leaders value is their energy resources and the power it gives them. They simultaneously indicate the power it gives them over their European adversaries, their ability to exercise options in Asia, as well as their anxiety over how decreases in energy prices threaten this power. Their anxiety signals that this is a value they fear to lose; actually 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).*

Finally, sanctions and other attempts to isolate Russia are not only failing, but also driving Russia to pursue the creation of new political and economic institutions and ties (NSI ViTTa; TAMU). Some of these, in particular closer ties between China and Russia, have the potential not only to reduce the effectiveness of Western economic pressure, but also create a relationship that negatively effects US interests and influence in the Asia-Pacific region as well as in Eurasia (NSI ViTTa).

### Actions to be very careful about

Some of the recommendations from team reports come with their own caveats and warning of the potential that they will inadvertently trigger an aggressive response from Russia. Some others represent points of divergence between different teams. In all cases, potential blowback can be traced back to Russia’s worldview. In particular, their sense of vulnerability and desire for their own sphere of influence.

### **Choice of engagements structure; bilateral or multilateral**

The question of how to most effectively engage with Russia is one area in which there appears to be a difference of opinion among experts, and in some cases conflicting recommendations. Some experts emphasize the importance of demonstrating the West is acting collectively in the face of Russian aggression. Others, citing Russia's perception of the threat posed by NATO and the EU, recommend the US increase its bilateral ties, and create a relationship with Russia separate from the one it has as a member of NATO.

### **Demonstrate unity in response to Russian aggression**

As discussed above (see Impediments to countering Russian aggression), the US and its Western allies have demonstrated slowness and disunity in their response to recent Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine, and are perceived as unwilling to use force to counter Russian aggression. How well NATO and EU members respectively come to agreements and work together enhances the impact of the deterrence value of discussion. There is even greater deterrent impact when the EU and NATO, which have many common members, work towards the same goal or share a commonality of views (NSI ViTTa). Experts contend that Russian aggression has already unified NATO and reinvigorated the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), and the key to continued successful deterrence is consistency and unity of effort among European partner nations, especially in the face of Russian provocations (NSI ViTTa).

### **NATO assurance activities**

NATO assurance activities such as Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) / Readiness Action Plan (RAP) demonstrate to new NATO states that the alliance is serious about defending NATO Europe. However, it also "feeds into Russian paranoia that NATO wants to destroy it" potentially increasing the likelihood of Russian aggression (NSI ViTTa).

### **Deal one on one with Russia**

However, unity in response needs to be balanced by consideration of Russia's perception of NATO and the EU. As discussed earlier, Russia has long seen NATO as an existential threat, and is increasingly viewing the EU in a similar light. In contrast, although Russian narratives portray the US as an antagonist to Russia, responsible for much of the chaos in the international system, (NSI Discourse; TAMU), Russian leaders (such as Medvedev, and Ivanov) reference having good relations with the US President and wanting to work with the US to solve regional problems (NSI Discourse). This could reflect Russia's preference for bilateral relations, and dealing with countries one-on-one, rather than through multilateral organizations, like the EU (NSI ViTTa). START's analysis found that formal agreements between states had a significant effect on increasing cooperation, "a straightforward result that suggests that more diplomatic engagement will lead to more cooperation" (START Stats).

### **Limit reliance on EU and NATO**

START's analysis found that "Russia's interactions with NATO (and the EU) are different than their interactions with the United States and individual European countries" (START), consistent with the consensus opinion that Russia regards the involvement of NATO and the EU in its periphery as a direct

threat. START suggests that coordination through NATO and the EU, “shifts the dynamic toward fewer cooperative actions and more conflict events” (START) than the specific issue area or particular interests affected. They conclude that “[w]hile the Russo-American relationship could likely be improved under certain circumstances, Russia’s strong dislike toward NATO will continue in the near future as the organization expands eastward” (START Stats). If NATO involvement is necessary, GMU’s analysis suggests that the alliance can, for actions that do not constitute an existential threat to Russia, favorably influence Russia’s decision calculus. By focusing on reducing the cost and increasing the benefit of exercising restraint or “altering Russia’s perception of US/ NATO decision calculus so that it does not assess that it must act to preempt US and NATO actions during periods of instability” (GMU).

It should be noted, however, that the US moving to distance itself from its European allies could potentially weaken NATO in just the manner Russia has been attempting to achieve (see section on Russia seeks to undermine NATO). A collective Western position and approach to Russia strengthens European collective defense and economic structures, which is in the United States’ interests as much as Europe’s. 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**

Results of the ICONS simulation found that “the OSCE was seen as having both the mandate and the capacity to mediate, and on several occasions participants expressed a desire for its greater involvement. It also became a logical venue because, as efforts to secure Russian cooperation in de-escalation continued, the EU and NATO were not appropriate venues to foster that multilateral dialogue” (ICONS).

#### **Engaging in costly signaling as a deterrent**

Some experts believe there is no evidence that discussion between the US and its European allies has changed Russia’s decision calculus on foreign aggression (NSI ViTTa). While there has been a great deal of discussion about the new security environment, Russian behavior, if it is to be influenced, will be influenced by actions not words. “All Russia sees now on the part of European and American leaders has been weakness and indecision” (NSI ViTTa). However, given Russia’s perception of threat, and its commitment to creating a sphere of influence around its periphery, actions such as those discussed below could be interpreted as aggressive by Russia, and trigger escalation.

#### **Joint exercises and forward deployment of US troops**

The West could signal its commitment to European security by physically positioning US forces forward in meaningful numbers, particularly in the Baltics (NSI ViTTa). “Unless there’s physical skin in the game and the troops are forward,” the West will not have a credible deterrent against further Russia absorption of ethnic Russian populations outside of Russia (NSI ViTTa). This, it is argued, would provide a significant deterrent to Russian aggression, without requiring a large number of troops or resources (NSI ViTTa). Military training exercises are suggested by some as an effective deterrent action (NSI ViTTa). However, plans by the West to increase conventional capabilities in the region will exacerbate Russia’s

sense of vulnerability and conventional military disadvantage. This risks “eroding Russian military planners’ confidence in their nuclear deterrent” and reinforce their belief that limited nuclear strikes are their best de-escalation strategy (CEIP).

### Missile defense

Nuclear weapons continue to play a vital function in Russia’s defense strategy, and the West’s plans for missile defense are also reducing Russia’s confidence in their nuclear deterrent, which might in turn increase their willingness to consider a limited nuclear strike de-escalation strategy (CEIP). Furthermore, 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:

*In order to move ahead with nuclear weapons reductions, it is necessary to take into account other factors—first of all the factor of the global missile defense system, which the Americans, despite all [our] arguments, stubbornly do not want to discuss with us (Ministry of Foreign Affairs special envoy Grigoriy Berdennikov, quoted in: CEIP).*

### Strengthen state institutions in Russia’s periphery

Russia has demonstrated a willingness to and facility for using economic tools to increase its influence in regional states. Trade and energy deals, as well as bribery of top officials, are used to influence neighboring governments to adopt policies preferred by Russia (NSI ViTTa). Actions to induce economic instability can be used to create popular discontent and political instability. Investing in institution capacity building, anti-corruption, and promoting investment and trade with the West “may strengthen partner resolve and provide an appealing alternative” to dependence on Russia (NSI ViTTa). However, such soft power approaches that focus on democracy and free markets have not historically been successful in deterring aggression. Furthermore, as recent events in Ukraine highlight, Russia is likely to see such interventions as a direct threat to its interests. If this is the case, then such attempts to strengthen states against Russian influence may actually increase the likelihood and intensity of Russian intervention.

## Concluding remarks

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While this integration report does not force consensus, some areas of agreement clearly emerged from this multidisciplinary study. First, none of the teams is 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, deflects blame for Russia's current problems away from his policy choices, and heighten 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.



## Appendix A: Russia's relations with the countries in its near abroad

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Consistent with its desire to establish a sphere of influence and move the system from a unipolar to multipolar balance of power, Russia is making a concerted effort to persuade (or pressure) states in its near abroad to abandon ties to the West and join the Eurasian Union (NSI ViTTa). START's analysis of foreign military sales finds that "...a top Russian foreign policy interest lies in cultivating friendship with countries with whom it shares extensive energy resource development opportunities" (START FMS).

Despite these efforts, it has few allies in the region, and the alliances and cooperation commitments Russia has been able to secure are not enough to greatly assist Russia, being too small to change the relative balance of power, either economically or militarily (NSI ViTTa). The allies Russia does have do not all express the same degree of alliance to Russia (NSI Discourse).

### Armenia

Armenia is currently a close ally of Russia, having abandoned the EU and joined the Eurasian Union under "massive pressure" from Moscow (NSI ViTTa). Analysis of leader speeches finds that Armenia expresses pro-Russian sentiments, but only weakly (NSI Discourse). The TAMU media analysis found that, consistent with its efforts to undermine NATO, they have cited statements from high ranking officials critical of NATO, including the Armenian Speaker of the federation council: "time-tested relations [with] Russia and Armenia [will] not be influenced.... time-tested age-old ties of brotherhood and mutual understanding between the Russian and Armenian peoples cannot be...influenced by external...they remain the same" (quoted in: TAMU). Experts suggest that the Armenian government is "clearly under Russia's thumb," although there are indications that they would like to reach out to the West (NSI ViTTa).

### Baltics

Even though the Baltic States are part of NATO, they are still worried about recent Russian foreign policy actions and feel they need to be protected. Specifically, they are worried about invasion or take over by Russia, under the auspices of protection of ethnic Russian populations. This fear is exacerbated over existing Russian influence with local populations through schools and universities (NSI ViTTa).

### Belarus

Historically a close ally of Russia, Belarus is the top recipient of Russian weapons in USEUCOM's AOR, and the two states have extensive foreign policy coordination and military cooperation (START FMS). Recently, however, tensions have surfaced over trade relations, and Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine (NSI Discourse). Recent internal political changes in the country indicate a growing ambivalence toward separatism, and there has been improved cooperation with the EU (NSI Discourse). The Russia-Kazakhstan-Belarus customs union established in 2000 is the foundation of Putin's plans for a Eurasian Union, "vaguely patterned on the EU and rather transparently intended to create a regional counterweight to it" (CEIP), which suggests that it may react strongly to Belarus moving to closer ties with the West.

Discourse analysis suggests this could indicate that Belarus could play an intermediary role in regional politics between Russia and the West (NSI Discourse). However, START's analysis of event data finds that conflict between Belarus and Russia is "almost non-existent, highlighting the strong bond between the two allies. As Russian attempts to keep Ukraine under its influence remain unbalanced, ties with Belarus are surging" (START Stats).

### **Caspian Sea region**

Since 2008, Russia has concluded multiple foreign military sales contracts and increased cooperation with each country bordering the Caspian Sea, suggesting a desire to maintain or increase positive relations with these states (START FMS).

### **Azerbaijan**

Russia, Turkey, and Iran are all competing for influence in Azerbaijan, which CEIP assesses to be the "biggest driver of change in the South Caucasus" (CEIP). The regime's increasingly repressive policies have undermined the nascent ties it has with the West, and an ongoing conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh (CEIP) makes it vulnerable to Russian pressure. "Purchasing weapons from Russia, especially for its land forces, offers Azerbaijan a way to keep up with the ongoing arms race with Armenia, while also holding at bay the threat of domestic political transformation emerging out of Iran and the EU" (START FMS).

### **Kazakhstan**

Although a close ally of Russia, Kazakhstan, like Belarus, is concerned about becoming the "next Ukraine" (NSI ViTTa). Their leadership has been building potential for resistance to Russian pressure or aggression through various means, including closer cooperation with the EU in an attempt to decrease their dependence on Russia (NSI ViTTa). China has also been building up its soft power potential in the state (NSI ViTTa). Despite this, the current leadership in Kazakhstan has good relations with Russia (NSI ViTTa). The Russia-Kazakhstan-Belarus customs union established in 2000, is the foundation of Putin's plans for a Eurasian Union, "vaguely patterned on the EU and rather transparently intended to create a regional counterweight to it" (CEIP), which suggests that it may react strongly to Kazakhstan moving to closer ties with the West.

### **Georgia**

Over the next five-to-ten years, it is expected that Georgia will continue to face problems in its relations with Russia, including military threat (NSI ViTTa). Prior to Russia's 2008 invasion, and in response to NATO's promise of future membership, Putin warned that Georgia's entry into NATO would be viewed as a "direct threat" to Russian security (CEIP). The Russians are engaging in a tactic of "creeping annexation," moving the border in very small but successive increments (NSI ViTTa). Georgia was one of several Eastern European countries in the process of negotiating association agreements with the EU "as Putin announced his vision of Eurasian integration" (CEIP). Given Russia's history with Georgia and its 2008 invasion, it is not surprising that their leaders demonstrate a net negative sentiment toward Russia (NSI Discourse).

## Moldova and Transnistria

Moldova remains divided between those who advocate closer ties with Romania and those who want closer ties with Russia (CEIP). An important, though decreasing, part of the Moldovan population is pro-Western and wants to join the EU (NSI ViTTa). However, the state is strategically important to Russia and under pressure to join the Eurasian Union (NSI ViTTa). Moldova's position is further complicated by the situation in Transnistria, with which it has a "rational, economic relationship" (NSI ViTTa). Transnistria's ruling class is Russiaphiles and want to be part of Russia, but, despite two referendums on the issue over the past 10 years, their status has not been resolved. There are also local Cossack movements and paramilitary forces in Transnistria and "lots of guns, armed people, and discontent" creating a volatile situation (NSI ViTTa). Moldova has been in dispute with Russia over Transnistria since 1992, making their leaders' net negative sentiment toward Russia not surprising. However, they mention Russia negatively much less than they do NATO partners (NSI Discourse).

## Ukraine

Although Russia's actions in Ukraine surprised Western national's security and foreign policy establishments, CEIP argues that:

*...a careful examination of Russia's own narrative about European security and its evolution since the end of the Cold War suggests that Russian actions in Ukraine were entirely logical, perhaps even inevitable, as an extension of Russian threat perceptions. As seen from Moscow, the rapid change in Ukrainian politics—the collapse of the presidency of Victor Yanukovich and the coming to power of a political coalition advocating Ukraine's pro-European and Euro-Atlantic orientation, including eventual membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—carried with them profound geopolitical consequences for Russia and signaled the emergence of new threats to its security right at its doorstep, threats that no Russian leader is likely to tolerate without a wholesale change in the country's ideology and understanding of its national security (CEIP).*

There is disagreement among the experts interviewed for NSI's ViTTa regarding the potential for resolution of the crisis in Ukraine. Some feel resolution will be achieved while others expect the conflict to fester and continue to create problems. In the eastern part of the country, Putin remains very popular, and the proportion of the population seeing the United States and the West as partners rather than competitors is decreasing. Ukrainian attitudes toward NATO and the West are equally as complex. There is a lot of suspicion of NATO among ethnic Ukrainians in the southeast who are majority opposed to NATO membership. However, almost two-thirds of Ukrainians overall now support NATO membership—a dramatic increase from pre-Crimean figures (NSI ViTTa).

For Putin, open Russian engagement in Ukraine is problematic as, despite their support for the rebels, most Russians do not want to see Russian forces fighting in Ukraine and, if Russia is dragged into an open war, Putin's popularity will suffer (NSI ViTTa). However, CEIP contends that: "For Russia, for Putin personally, the 'loss' of Ukraine to the EU would not be a tolerable outcome" (CEIP). Especially after Putin "had elevated Eurasian integration to the top of his policy agenda as a counterweight to the United States and the EU" (CEIP). Ukraine's security concerns "imply a defensive posture and a perception that they are under siege" (NSI Discourse). Their top security concerns "indicate a fear of

violent conflict (terrorism, military, war, annexation, threats to sovereignty), and a desire for resolution (political process and the defense of democracy and encouragement of good governance) (NSI Discourse). Overall, Ukraine, indicated significantly higher concern over security issues of all kinds than any other regional actors (NSI Discourse).

## Appendix B: USEUCOM guiding questions

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### Regional outlook

- Q1 What are reasonable and pragmatic assumptions about the Eurasia region regarding Russia in five-year increments out 15 years, to include its diplomatic, economic, and security interests in the Arctic region?
- Q25 What is Russia's long-term strategy (priorities, military infrastructure, activities, interests, and red lines) in the Arctic region?
- Q10 How does Russia see its great power status in the 21st century?
- Q4 Who are Russia's allies and clients and where is it seeking to extend its influence within the USEUCOM AOR?
- Q11 Where does Russia see the line between peace and war?
- Q20 How might Russia leverage its energy and other economic resources to influence the political environment in Europe and how will this leverage change over the next 15 years? How effective is the EU's economic leverage (sanctions) on influencing Russian behavior and what is the political willingness of the EU (and its member states) to sustain or increase this leverage given Russian economic and political influence to counter it?
- Q19 Analyze the vitality of Russian energy reserves and their ability to expand market share in multiple markets.

### China

- Q35 Is Russia willing to become a client state to China? If not, how can the West exploit this potential seam to isolate China and attempt to integrate Russia with the West?
- Q36 How does China perceive its future energy relationship with Russia?
- Q37 Does Russia have any interests in developing diplomatic and/or economic relations with India as they have done with China?

### Regional balance of power

- Q2 As Russia declines demographically, will they be more likely to choose cooperation or conflict with NATO? What actions (political, militarily, economic) may they take to target NATO/US or EU/US cohesion?
- Q13 Will Russia become more assertive as its military capabilities continue to improve?
- Q31 Is Russia considered in compliance with its political and military treaty obligations, specifically with INF?
- Q28 Are Russia's actions in its "near abroad" such as disrupting energy supplies or severing trade agreements intended to affect political or economic stability?

- Q24 Given that we now know that Ukrainian Government's desire to align with the West was a 'red line' with Russia, what other 'redlines' may exist that, if crossed, could generate a Russia aggressive response?
- Q15 Describe the nature and interaction of military spending and arms transfer data between Russia and other European states.

### **Russian foreign policy**

- Q3 Explain the internal dynamics that are likely to motivate Russian actions in the USEUCOM AOR over the next 15 years outlining multiple plausible future pathways and a set of de-escalation considerations to help US planners, strategists, and communicators.
- Q14 Is Russia deterred by NATO's Article V and will they continue to be? How does Russia view its strategic deterrence posture? How is this evolving?
- Q30 Given ongoing tensions, will Russia attempt to be constructively engaged with the West on regional and transnational security issues to include counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and weapons proliferation?
- Q12 How does the Russian conception of the use of information technologies to pursue its political and security interests compare to the US view of what constitutes political conflict and warfare?

### **Leadership**

- Q5 What is the likelihood that Putin's departure will lead to a significant change in Russian foreign policy? If it does, what direction will that change take?
- Q6 What do we know about potential successors to Putin? (Analyze the record of current and future leaders to predict their decision-making processes and attitudes / exposure to the West.) Who will lead Russia next, what changes can we expect, and how will Putin continue to exert influence after he "departs" government?

### **Internal stability dynamics**

- Q29 What economic factors (current or near-term) are having an impact on the stability of Putin's government?
- Q27 What type of political crisis could ultimately threaten the Russian style of government and do you see any signs or warnings of civil unrest?
- Q26 Given changing social economic and demographic trends in Russia, how are they affecting government stability?

### **Media and public opinion**

- Q7 Conduct analysis of open source Russian media to understand key frames and cultural scripts that are likely to frame potential geopolitical attitudes and narratives in the region.
- Q8 How much does the US image of Russia as the side that "lost" the Cold War create support for more aggressive foreign policy behavior among the Russian people?
- Q9 How might ultra-nationalism influence Russia's foreign policy rhetoric and behavior?
- Q33 Are Russian efforts to destabilize regions of Europe deemed credible by local populations?

## US foreign policy and regional engagement

- Q17 How has the US-led discussion of the “new European security environment” changed Russian action to date? How does the USG influence NATO and the EU to maintain efforts to counter and deter Russian aggressive actions?
- Q18 How does the US strengthen partner nations in the region in a constrained fiscal environment and how can USEUCOM better focus and identify requirements for theater engagement and security cooperation across its area of responsibility?
- Q22 Are recent US assurance activities such as Operation Atlantic Resolve having a deterrent effect on Russia's decision making and its strategy for its near abroad?
- Q21 What US military actions or posturing can be perceived as provocative in nature by Russia and potentially create an escalatory response?
- Q34 Despite US efforts to communicate the operational and technical intent of its European Phased Adaptive Approach Missile Defense System to defend against only rogue nations, does Russia still perceive it as an escalatory in nature and a threat to its security, and if so, what overt and covert actions have or may they take in response?

## NATO

- Q16 If conflict occurs, will NATO be willing and able to command and control a response?
- Q23 Are recent NATO assurance activities such as the establishment of a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) or their Readiness Action Plan (RAP) having a deterrent effect on Russia's decision making and overall strategy for its near abroad? What does Russia perceive as NATO's intentions in its near abroad?
- Q32 How supportive is the European Union (EU) and NATO leadership with regards to USEUCOM's reassurance activities and initiatives?

## Appendix C: Projects integrated in this report

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### Asymmetric Operations Working Group (AOWG)

[Ambiguous Threats and External Influences in the Baltic States and Poland Phase 1: Understanding the Threat](#)

[Ambiguous Threats and External Influences in the Baltic States Phase 2: Assessing the Threat](#)

### Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP)

Carnegie provided a written analysis of threats that Russia poses to US and allied security interests and potential opportunities associated with Russia in the European theater as well as in the global context. The main product of this project was a comprehensive written qualitative analytical study of these threats and opportunities. It informs EUCOM leadership and staff about threats and opportunities presented by Russia and analytic insights for EUCOM leadership, planners, and other staff about Russia in the aftermath of the crisis in Ukraine and the associated breakdown in US-Russian and NATO-Russian relations.

### **George Mason University (GMU)**

GMU used future political, security, societal, and economic trend information from SMA partners and other SMEs, developed a framework to build Timed Influence Net (TIN) models of US strategic risk elements in Eurasia for use by USEUCOM and other planners to inform their discussions on potential Eurasia strategies.

GMU met with USEUCOM representatives to demonstrate use of the Pythia modeling tool and discuss opportunities to best support USEUCOM needs. The decision calculus framework that serves as the foundation for the TIN models has been used to develop two initial TIN models—one that examines Russian proliferation of ballistic missile technology to a client state, and another that examines the Russian decision calculus to invade a Baltic state. The GMU team conducted computational experiments on both TIN models and will continue to enhance them as additional SME data becomes available. GMU provided the decision calculus framework to the Air National Guard's 217 Air Operations Group (AOG), an augmentation unit to USEUCOM, and worked with them to apply the framework to Transnistria-Moldova. Working with GMU, the 217 AOG then applied this framework to support their participation in the ICONS simulation. Dr. Levis met with the Arctic team at NGA to discuss the GMU report on Russia and the Arctic, and participated in a classified DTRA simulation that yielded additional insights for USEUCOM use. GMU will visit USEUCOM headquarters to facilitate their use of the decision calculus framework and associated modeling tool (Pythia).

[Eurasia Strategic Risk  
Russia and the Arctic](#)

### **National Geospatial Agency (NGA)**

NGA produced an Arctic GeoNarrative assessment of challenges and opportunities in a thawing Arctic. Anticipating Russian intentions, interests, and behavior in the Arctic Region require an understanding of the geopolitical context of that region, including both internal Russian dynamics and external multinational interests and considerations. NGA applied a variety of spatial temporal analytics to explore a range of factors including current and historical geographic, environmental, economic, political, military, and demographic data for Russia and its neighbors. From these data and analytics, NGA produced an Arctic GeoNarrative to provide context for the complex issues and diverse perspectives facing the region while exposing non-obvious relationships, patterns, and trends found in the data. The end result yielded insights into Russian decision making and potential actions in the region and help inform potential policy implications for US unilateral or multilateral Russian policy actions.

### **Naval Postgraduate School (NPS)**

The Naval Postgraduate School developed a systems approach to studying the dynamics of the issues involved to overcome the limitations of current conceptualizations. Among the key issues of mutual concern are US-Russia economic trade barriers and imbalances, food security, agricultural policies, water management, climate change and carbon-based fuel alternatives, scarcity of resources (from soil nutrients to mineral so for manufacturing), freedom/denial of access and intrusion issues (EEZ, cyberspace, et al), military challenges and opportunities, high technology and academic exchanges, human rights, national demographics and their impacts on economies, human migration, Third World

development, and others. The systems dynamics model created recognizes the systemic nature of the issues surrounding the drivers of conflict and convergence and their interconnectedness, and possible bifurcating “economic” and “strategic/security” topics. The approach gives the USG an added advantage in understanding the situation, since Russia almost certainly views all of these issues within the context of a unified strategy.

### **NSI Discourse Analysis (NSI Discourse)**

NSI conducted a discourse analysis of leaders’ speeches in 22 state and non-state polities in Eurasia as well as the U.S. and NATO, in order to identify each polity’s leading issues and the importance of those issues to each polity. Key findings include:

- The Putin Government does not express a desire for superpower status
- Russia and its allies express a pervasive fear and distrust of the West and NATO, and likely misinterpret Western actions as threats
- A key cultural frame for Russia and its allies is the notion of overcoming great odds to defend their freedom; this frame sometimes is coupled with the Nazi threat, both historically and in reference to neo-Nazis
- Economic issues are constantly discussed by Russia and its allies, indicating that these issues may be leveraged in negotiations
- Russia is well aware of the power its energy resources give it, but is also sensitive to price fluctuations
- NATO and allies in the region express a high degree of resolve to counter threats to regional security

#### Identification of Security Issues and their Importance to Russia, Its Near-abroad and NATO Allies

### **NSI SME Elicitation Virtual Think Tank (NSI ViTTa)**

NSI conducted a series of interviews from May-November 2015 to respond to EUCOM’s original 20 questions. NSI interviewed 27 subject matter experts to solicit international perspectives, integrate empirical and academic research, challenge assumptions, and develop a rich, baseline understanding of cooperation and conflict in Eurasia.

#### Virtual Think Tank Summary Report

The transcripts and audio recording of the interviews and SMA speaker series events are available on the SMA SharePoint site at [https://nsiteam.net/x\\_sma](https://nsiteam.net/x_sma).

### **Texas A&M University (TAMU)**

Performed cross-platform media analysis of Russian language media to uncover large geopolitical narratives that might drive Russian international relations. Media, in numerous formats, has an inordinately large role in shaping and conditioning public opinion, as well as in social organization and mobilization. In order to better understand the dynamics of foreign policy decision-making by the leadership of the Russia, this study analyzed Russian language media (broadcast and web) to understand key frames and cultural scripts that are likely to shape potential Russian political beliefs and attitudes.



Specifically, the team did analysis of Russian media coverage of Russian economic issues, emerging power blocs, and key geopolitical events. The team also analyzed both Russian language media coverage of its military intervention in Syria, and Arabic language analysis of the Russian intervention.

Geopolitical Visions in Russian Media

**University of British Columbia (UBC)**

The UBC team assessed integrative complexity (IC) and motive imagery (MI) as these measures are relevant to: (a) The strategic decisions of leaders and potential leaders during periods of conflict and stress; (b) Leaders’ and potential leaders’ success in retaining or increasing their status in a hierarchy; and (c) Guidelines to identify communication strategies that would have a positive effect on cooperative behavior by the recipient of the message. The UBC team conducted thematic content analysis (TCA) for IC and MI of texts produced by Vladimir Putin and other members of, or aspirants to, leadership in the Russian government. The goal was to add to our understanding of each leader’s reactions to changing events and levels of stress (threat and opportunity), to assist in forecasting their response patterns in a dynamic multinational environment, to assess their probable career track and to indicate the kinds of messages (in terms of the IC and MI of the message) that would be most likely to elicit positive responses from them.

**University of Maryland/ICONS (ICONS)**

UMD ICONS Conducted a crisis management simulation focused on US and NATO political-military response to Russia initiating and/or engaging in another asymmetric low intensity conflict on its territorial periphery in the Black Sea region. The scenario started with a Russian military transport aircraft crashing in Moldova’s region of Transnistria, with further subsequent Russian provocations in cyber, naval, air power, energy supply, and media realms while Moldova’s neighbors, NATO members, and the US attempted to establish the cause of the crash. The simulation explored the dynamics of Russian assertiveness, nationalism, and use of asymmetric warfare techniques, as well as a range of NATO responses to a possible future conflict of concern to EUCOM. This 6-hour-long distributed exercise involved 25 players from 9 countries distributed over 5 time zones, representing 10 teams. Over the ensuing weeks, ICONS produced an analytical report, tying the simulation findings to the EUCOM request, and prepared a briefing on the subject matter. ICONS ran a series of controlled experiments, which will advance the understanding of the nuclear deterrence dynamics in Russia’s relationships with the US and its neighbors. In this process, ICONS analyzed the record of Russian crisis behavior and drew on the abovementioned simulation for insights. The completed work resulted in findings that contributed policy-planning value to the SMA effort.

EUCOM Crisis Simulation by ICONS Project

**University of Maryland START (START)**

In its research role, START used event data from ICEWS and other sources to address USEUCOM questions. START integrated the research efforts of several partner teams into our reports to harness a variety of methodologies and disciplinary approaches and examined future political, security, societal, and economic trends in the Eurasian region.

**(START)**

START produced analyses of Russian arms sales and military transfers since the beginning of Medvedev's Presidency, distinguishing transfers to state actors from those to non-state actors.

**(START VSNA)**

START produced an analysis of nationalism on Russian foreign policy behavior and sponsorship of responses to terrorism.

The Influence of Nationalism on Russian Security Policy

**(START Stats)**

START produced an empirical analysis of the drivers of conflict and cooperation in bilateral relationships between Russia, the United States, and up to 3 key actors identified by USEUCOM and project participants.

**(START FMS)**

START analyzed how minor powers, including Ukraine, Georgia, and up to two other countries, play into cooperation and conflict trends between the United States and Russia, and how the patterns of conflict and cooperation shape the national security strategies of these minor powers using descriptive data and statistical modeling techniques.

Russian Clients and Global Foreign Policy Strategy