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Russia: Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

Updated April 15, 2021

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R46761



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Since Russian President Vladimir Putin's rise to leadership more than 20 years ago, tensions have increased steadily between Russia and the United States. Some observers attribute Russian foreign policy actions to the personality and individual interests of Putin and certain hawkish advisers. Some contend Russian authorities are focused mainly on reclaiming Russia's status as a great power. Others argue Russian foreign policy is centered on protecting the country's status as the dominant power in the post-Soviet region and defending against foreign interference in Russia's domestic affairs. Whatever the motivations, most observers agree Russia's natural resources and military modernization program, launched in 2008, provide Russia's leadership the means to conduct a flexible and often aggressive foreign policy, as well as to project force in neighboring countries and further afield (such as in the Middle East).

Russia's foreign policy priorities traditionally have focused on the post-Soviet region and the West, including relations and tensions with NATO, the United States, and Europe. However, Russia under Putin (like the Soviet Union before it) also pursues a global foreign policy. As relations with its neighbors and Western countries have become more adversarial, Russia—seeking to balance against U.S. and European power and interests—has cultivated deeper relations with China and other countries.

Russian authorities have demonstrated a capacity and willingness to use force to accomplish its foreign policy goals. In 2014, Russia invaded Ukraine's Crimea region and instigated an ongoing insurgency in eastern Ukraine. In 2015, Russia intervened to support the government of Syrian President Bashar al Asad, including through the use of "private" military companies that Russia has deployed in conflicts elsewhere. Russia has been linked to numerous malicious cyber operations, including interference in U.S. elections. Russia uses disinformation and propaganda to undermine opponents and promote favorable narratives. Its intelligence agencies reportedly conduct wide-ranging and often brazen operations against perceived opponents, including assassinations and the use of chemical weapons.

Energy exports, primarily oil and natural gas, are a pillar of Russian foreign policy. Energy resources are central to the Russian economy, help fund military modernization, and give Russia leverage over energy-importing countries. Russian authorities seek to increase Russia's market share and access by constructing natural gas pipelines, such as Nord Stream 2 (under construction to Germany), TurkStream (to Turkey and southeastern Europe), and the Power of Siberia (to China). Russia also conducts an aggressive and often militarized approach to the Arctic to exert control over current and potential energy deposits and shipping routes. Russia's arms exports, behind only the United States in monetary value, also are an important source of hard currency and fulfill key foreign policy objectives.

Significant tensions in the U.S.-Russia relationship include Russia's use of force against its neighbors; cyber and influence operations, including interference in U.S. elections; targeted attacks on political opponents; and involvement in numerous conflicts worldwide. Congress and successive U.S. Administrations have imposed several rounds of sanctions against Russia in response to various malign activities. To reassure allies and deter further aggression in the wake of Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, the United States increased its military presence in Europe, enhanced military cooperation with NATO allies and non-NATO partners, and provided lethal weaponry to countries such as Ukraine and Georgia. Despite tensions, U.S. and Russian authorities have stated the importance of continued engagement on certain issues of common interest.

The Biden Administration and the 117th Congress continue to respond to Russian malign activities while considering the contours of the U.S. relationship with Russia. The Biden Administration has imposed sanctions on Russia or Russian persons for the poisoning and arrest of opposition figure Alexei Navalny, 2020 U.S. election interference, the so-called SolarWinds cyberattack, and other malign activities. In recent years, Congress has called on the executive branch to address various issues, including Russia's use of energy exports as a foreign policy tool, deployment of private military companies, global influence operations, money laundering and corruption, and human rights abuses. Key recent Russia-related legislation is included in the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA; P.L. 115-44, Title II), the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA; P.L. 116-92), and the FY2021 NDAA (P.L. 116-283).

For information on Russia's domestic politics, human rights situation, and economy, see CRS Report R46518, *Russia: Domestic Politics and Economy*. On U.S. sanctions on Russia, see CRS In Focus IF10779, *U.S. Sanctions on Russia: An Overview*, and CRS Report R45415, *U.S. Sanctions on Russia*.

R46761

April 15, 2021

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Contents

Introduction	1
Foreign Policymaking Institutions and Processes	2
Presidential Administration	3
Security Council.....	4
Intelligence Agencies	5
Foreign Relations	7
Post-Soviet States.....	7
NATO and the European Union	9
NATO.....	9
European Union	11
China.....	12
Global Engagement	13
Use of Force and Military Power	15
Ukraine	15
Crimea.....	16
Eastern Ukraine	17
Maritime Conflict.....	17
Conflict Resolution.....	18
Georgia.....	19
Moldova	21
Syria.....	23
Power Projection.....	25
Arctic	29
Private Military Companies.....	31
Targeted Overseas Attacks	33
Influence Operations and Cyber Operations	33
Influence Operations.....	33
Cyberespionage and Cyberattacks	35
U.S. Election Interference.....	37
2016 U.S. Presidential Election	37
2018 U.S. Midterm and 2020 Presidential Elections.....	39
Energy and Arms Sales	40
Energy.....	40
Defense Industry and Arms Sales	42
U.S.-Russia Relations	44
Historical Overview.....	45
U.S. Policy During the Trump Administration	46
U.S. Policy During the Biden Administration.....	47
Congressional Action in the 116 th Congress	50
Selected Issues in U.S.-Russia Relations	51
Countering Russian Aggression	51
U.S. Policy Toward Russia’s Conflicts.....	52
Ukraine.....	52
Georgia and Moldova.....	53
Deconfliction in Syria	54

Diplomatic Reductions	55
Arms Control.....	57
Outlook.....	58

Figures

Figure 1. Russian Federation.....	6
Figure 2. Ukraine	18
Figure 3. Georgia.....	20
Figure 4. Russia’s Military Presence Abroad.....	27

Tables

Table 1. Selected World Rankings of Russia’s Energy Portfolio, 2019.....	40
--	----

Contacts

Author Information	59
--------------------------	----

Introduction

The Russian Federation (Russia) is a global power with a multifaceted and often contentious relationship with the United States. Russia is the world's largest country by territory; a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council; a European, Asian, Arctic, and Pacific power; a leading nuclear-armed power, military spender, and arms exporter; and a leading producer and exporter of oil and natural gas. Russia's economy is the 11th largest in the world (6th on a purchasing-power-parity basis). In international fora, Russia engages on global issues such as nonproliferation, including addressing the nuclear weapons programs of Iran and North Korea; counterterrorism; counterpiracy; and global health challenges.

Although Russian foreign policy has become increasingly sophisticated and aggressive under Russian President Vladimir Putin, observers note that some of its guiding principles have been consistent since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. One such principle is to reestablish Russia as the center of political gravity for the post-Soviet region and to minimize the influence of rival powers, particularly NATO and the European Union (EU). A second principle is to assert Russia's role as one of a handful of dominant powers in global politics, capable in particular of competing—and, as necessary, cooperating—with the United States.

Most observers agree that Russia's capabilities to conduct a sophisticated foreign policy have increased over Putin's tenure. In particular, Russia's natural resources and the military modernization program it launched in 2008 have provided its leadership the means to conduct a flexible and often aggressive foreign policy, as well as to project force in neighboring countries and further afield (such as in the Middle East).

Russia's foreign policy actions have fluctuated over time, however, and have prompted debates on related issues. These issues include the following: whether strong responses by outside powers can deter Russian aggression, or whether these responses run a risk of escalating conflict; how much states that disagree with Russia on key issues can cooperate with Moscow; whether the Russian government is primarily implementing a strategic vision or reacting to circumstances and the actions of others; the extent to which Russian leadership takes actions abroad to strengthen its domestic position; and whether conditions can emerge for Russian foreign policy to be less aggressive and more in line with U.S. interests over time.

For almost 30 years, the United States and Russia have struggled to develop a constructive relationship. Tense relations worsened after Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia. Relations continued to fray with Putin's return to the Russian presidency in 2012 (after serving as prime minister from 2008). After Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, 2015 intervention in Syria, and 2016 interference in U.S. elections, successive U.S. Administrations and Congress focused increasingly on countering aggressive Russian actions abroad. Despite tensions, U.S. and Russian authorities have stated the importance of continued engagement on certain issues of common interest.

This report focuses on Russian foreign policy, key issue areas, and related U.S. policy. The report first addresses foreign policymaking institutions and processes within Russia. It next examines Russia's relations with key countries and regions. It follows with sections on Russia's use of force and military power; influence and cyber operations; and foreign economic policies. The report then analyzes U.S.-Russia relations, including U.S. policy during the current and prior Administrations and recent congressional actions. The report is compartmentalized, so that readers primarily interested in a particular issue may find the relevant information in a subsection

of the report. Russia's domestic politics, human rights situation, and economy are not within the scope of this report.¹

Foreign Policymaking Institutions and Processes

Understanding the nature of policymaking in Russia is difficult, given the Russian government's opaque and personalized nature. President Putin is the most important figure responsible for Russian foreign policy, but he does not decide or determine policy alone.² Observers debate the extent and nature of power among Russian foreign policy decisionmakers but often are unable to definitively identify the policymaking process.³ Nevertheless, analysts have identified key institutions, people, and interactions in Russian foreign policymaking.

Foreign policy decisionmaking in Russia is based on a mix of formal institutions, on the one hand, and personal or informal relationships that cross and can supersede more formal institutional processes, on the other.⁴ Russia's security and defense institutions traditionally have had an outsized role in domestic and foreign policymaking.⁵ In some situations and for certain issues, informal and small-group decisionmaking appears dominant; in others, policymakers control policy through formal institutions and committees. Businesspeople, leaders of state-owned enterprises, and religious or cultural figures all have been alleged or documented as being involved in foreign policy decisionmaking.⁶

Two key policymaking institutions are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs nominally is responsible for conducting Russian diplomacy. Reportedly, however, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov has been excluded increasingly from key policy discussions and relegated to explaining Russian policies more than formulating them.⁷ The Ministry of Defense, by contrast, has become increasingly important in

¹ See CRS Report R46518, *Russia: Domestic Politics and Economy*, by Cory Welt and Rebecca M. Nelson.

² Gleb Pavlovsky, "Russian Politics Under Putin: The System Will Outlast the Master," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 3 (2016); David W. Rivera and Sharon W. Rivera, "The Militarization of the Russian Elite Under Putin: What We Know, What We Think We Know (But Don't), and What We Need to Know," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 65, no. 4 (2018), pp. 221-232; and Andrew Higgins, "How Powerful Is Vladimir Putin Really?," *New York Times*, March 23, 2019.

³ Kirill Petrov and Vladimir Gel'man, "Do Elites Matter in Russian Foreign Policy? The Gap Between Self-Perception and Influence," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 35, nos. 5-6 (2019), pp. 450-460; Dmitry Gorenburg, "Circumstances Have Changed Since 1991, but Russia's Core Foreign Policy Goals Have Not," PONARS Eurasia, January 2019; and Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy," *International Security*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2020), pp. 95-139.

⁴ Alena V. Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernize? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2013).

⁵ Carolina Vendil Pallin, "The Russian Power Ministries: Tool and Insurance of Power," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2007), pp. 1-25; and Kimberly Marten, "The 'KGB' State and Russian Political and Foreign Policy Culture," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2017), pp. 131-151.

⁶ Kimberly Marten, "Informal Political Networks and Putin's Foreign Policy: The Examples of Iran and Syria," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 62, no. 2 (2015), pp. 71-87; Dmitry Gorenburg, "The Political Elite Under Putin," George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (Marshall Center), April 2020; and Tatiana Stanovaya, "Unconsolidated: The Five Russian Elites Shaping Putin's Transition," Carnegie Moscow Center, November 2, 2020.

⁷ Reports suggest Lavrov has been requesting to retire for some time but Putin is hesitant to let him leave. Susan B. Glasser, "Minister No: Sergei Lavrov and the Blunt Logic of Russian Power," *Foreign Policy*, April 29, 2013; and Mark Galeotti, "If Lavrov Goes, Can We Hope for Better from Russia's Diminished Foreign Ministry?," *bne IntelliNews*, October 22, 2020.

Russian foreign policy. Over the last decade, the capabilities of Russia's armed forces, led by Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, have grown dramatically due to an ambitious modernization and reform program. Increased military capabilities have helped support and implement an increasingly militaristic foreign policy.⁸ Additionally, Shoigu reportedly has a close personal relationship with Putin, increasing the military's influence.⁹

In Russia's centralized presidential system, Putin is involved in all major decisions and policy formulations and retains significant control and decisionmaking. Much of the lower and day-to-day operations in the presidential administration are delegated to formal institutions and key leaders and advisers, such as Security Council head Nikolay Patrushev. Institutions such as the Ministry of Defense, intelligence agencies, and the Security Council can initiate or guide policy independent of specific directives from Putin, as can some entrepreneurial stakeholders (e.g., Igor Sechin, head of state-owned oil company Rosneft).¹⁰ Although some institutions (e.g., the presidential administration and the Security Council) were created to coordinate policy, they often do not exert direct authority and are not able to override the responsibilities of other institutions.¹¹

Presidential Administration

In Russia's centralized system of government, the presidency is the most powerful branch. To manage and control politics and decisionmaking, Putin relies heavily on the presidential administration, which observers consider to be "the true locus of power."¹² Anton Vaino, the head of the presidential administration (i.e., chief of staff), is responsible for managing the flow of information to the president and for communicating, executing, and monitoring policy. Due to its formal position, the presidential administration is politically powerful. It is able to direct the flow of information and people up to Putin and set the conditions and limits of policies and directives for the wider government. However, it does not control direct briefings of Putin by certain agency leaders (such as Federal Security Service, or FSB, head Alexander Bortnikov) or those with a personal relationship to Putin (such as Minister of Defense Shoigu or businessmen Arkady and Boris Rotenberg).¹³

⁸ See CRS In Focus IF11603, *Russian Armed Forces: Military Modernization and Reforms*, by Andrew S. Bowen; and CRS In Focus IF11589, *Russian Armed Forces: Capabilities*, by Andrew S. Bowen. Also see Michael Kofman, "The Moscow School of Hard Knocks: Key Pillars of Russian Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, January 17, 2017; Alexander Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2019); and *Economist*, "Russian Military Forces Dazzle After a Decade of Reform," November 2, 2020.

⁹ Tatiana Stanovaya, "Meet Russia's 'Saviour-in-Chief,'" *Riddle*, November 13, 2019; and Roger McDermott, "Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu Survives Government Reshuffle," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (February 5, 2020).

¹⁰ Fabian Burkhardt, "The Institutionalization of Relative Advantage: Formal Institutions, Subconstitutional Presidential Powers, and the Rise of Authoritarian Politics in Russia, 1994–2012," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 6 (2017), pp. 472–495; Mark Galeotti, "Russia Has No Grand Plans, but Lots of Adhocrats," *bne IntelliNews*, January 18, 2017.

¹¹ Russia's legislature also plays a role in Russian defense, security, and foreign policy. Due to Russia's centralized presidential system of government, however, its influence is relatively limited and is confined to approving plans and policies formulated by other stakeholders.

¹² Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2014), p. 2.

¹³ Although the presidential administration has a role in brokering, influencing, and directing information and people to the president, most staffers are not intelligence analysts. Andrey Pertsev, "Powerful, but Not Omnipotent," *Meduza*, November 3, 2020; Mark Galeotti, "The Presidential Administration: The Command and Control Nexus of Putin's Russia," Marshall Center, February 2020; and Fabian Burkhardt, "Institutionalizing Authoritarian Presidencies: Polymorphous Power and Russia's Presidential Administration," *Europe-Asia Studies* (online version), May 6, 2020.

The presidential administration handles both domestic and foreign policy. Reportedly, much of the foreign affairs portfolio is controlled by First Deputy Chief of Staff Alexei Gromov. Although Vaino and Gromov are important officials, they reportedly lack the political influence and personal relationship to Putin of their predecessor Sergei Ivanov, who led the presidential administration from 2011 to 2016.

Security Council

Most national security and foreign policy is handled by the Security Council, which is nominally part of the presidential administration but operates largely autonomously. The Security Council is led by Nikolay Patrushev, a former head of the FSB and close adviser to Putin. Originally created in 1992, the Security Council was not that significant until after Putin's rise to power, when it became a powerful institution able

to coordinate and formulate security policy. The Security Council is responsible for drafting high-level policies, such as the National Security Strategy, and provides analytical support to the presidential administration. It also holds formal meetings where members discuss policy and resolve disputes.¹⁴ Informally, the Security Council is a venue in which members and agency leaders can meet to discuss and coordinate policy outside of formal meetings and institutional processes. For example, Putin has stated that the decision to occupy Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014 was made at a smaller meeting of Putin, Patrushev, Bortnikov, and former presidential administration head Ivanov after a formal session of the Security Council.¹⁵

Observers and analysts report that although the Security Council's formal role is to coordinate, monitor, and broker among various security and intelligence agencies and stakeholders, the council also plays a more political role by initiating, influencing, and directing policy. The Security Council's political role has become even more pronounced under Patrushev, a career intelligence officer once referred to as "Russia's most underestimated public figure."¹⁶

Security Council

Leadership

Vladimir Putin, President and Chairman of the Security Council

Nikolay Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council

Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council

Permanent Members

Alexander Bortnikov, Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB)

Sergei Ivanov, Special Representative for Environmental Protection, Ecology, and Transport

Vladimir Kolokoltsev, Minister of Internal Affairs

Sergei Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Valentina Matviyenko, Chairwoman of the Federation Council

Mikhail Mishustin, Prime Minister

Sergei Naryshkin, Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR)

Sergei Shoigu, Minister of Defense

Anton Vaino, Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration

Vyacheslav Volodin, Chairman of the State Duma

Note: The Security Council also includes regional presidential plenipotentiary envoys; the governors of Moscow and St. Petersburg; and other government officials, such as Viktor Zolotov, head of the National Guard.

Source: President of Russia, at <http://en.kremlin.ru/structure/security-council/members>.

¹⁴ Mark Galeotti, "Russia's Security Council: Where Policy, Personality, and Process Meet," Marshall Center, October 2019.

¹⁵ *BBC News*, "Putin Reveals Secrets of Russia's Crimea Takeover Plot," March 9, 2015.

¹⁶ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), p. 342; and Howard Amos, "Vladimir Putin's Man in the Balkans," *Politico*, June 21, 2017.

Intelligence Agencies¹⁷

Russia's intelligence agencies play a large role in Russian foreign policy. They are active and influential, and they operate with significant support from the Kremlin. The relative power and influence of the intelligence agencies often are shaped by their leaders' close personal connections to Putin and other policymakers.¹⁸

Observers suggest Russian intelligence agencies and personnel share various traits and worldviews. Often referred to as *siloviki* (men of force), senior intelligence agency personnel do not form a coherent bloc but do reflect a background in security, intelligence, or military services. Observers and analysts note that Russian intelligence agencies tend to share a view that Russia has an adversarial relationship with the West, believe in the utility of aggressive and confrontational policies, and support the domestic status quo.¹⁹

Four main agencies—the FSB, Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Main Directorate of the General Staff (GU, commonly referred to as the GRU), and Federal Protective Service (FSO)—are responsible for the collection of foreign intelligence. The FSB, SVR, and FSO each provide Putin with a daily briefing; the GRU also can brief the president directly.

- **FSB.** Led by Alexander Bortnikov, the FSB is Russia's primary domestic security agency. It combines domestic law enforcement and intelligence operations, and it is responsible for counterintelligence and domestic political security. In recent years, the FSB has expanded its foreign intelligence collection capabilities.
- **SVR.** Led by Sergei Naryshkin, the SVR is Russia's primary civilian agency responsible for the collection of foreign intelligence. It uses a full range of espionage tactics, including human, signals, and cyber. SVR officers operate worldwide under legal (diplomatic) cover out of Russia's embassies and under illegal or nonofficial (without diplomatic) cover.
- **GU (or GRU).** Led by Admiral Igor Kostyukov, the GRU is Russia's military intelligence agency. It oversees Russia's elite light infantry force (*Spetsnaz*) and has significant cyber capabilities. Its intelligence officers operate under both diplomatic and illegal or nonofficial cover.
- **FSO.** Led by Dmitry Kochnev, the FSO is responsible for guarding the president, government officials, and state property. It controls the Presidential Security Service. It also reportedly operates as an overseer of various security services, helping to monitor infighting and the accuracy of intelligence reporting.

¹⁷ For more, see CRS Report R46616, *Russian Military Intelligence: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew S. Bowen; CRS In Focus IF11647, *Russian Law Enforcement and Internal Security Agencies*, by Andrew S. Bowen; and CRS In Focus IF11718, *Russian Cyber Units*, by Andrew S. Bowen.

¹⁸ Mark Galeotti, "Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services," European Council on Foreign Relations, May 11, 2016; Mark Galeotti, "Spooks in the Kremlin," *Foreign Policy*, April 27, 2019; and Kimberly Marten, "The Intelligence Agencies and Putin: Undermining Russia's Security Strategy?," in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*, ed. Roger E. Kanet (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 192-202.

¹⁹ Amy Knight, *Spies Without Cloaks: The KGB's Successors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Brian D. Taylor, "The Russian *Siloviki* & Political Change," *Daedalus*, vol. 146, no. 2 (2017), pp. 53-63; Mark Kramer, "The Soviet Legacy in Russian Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 134, no. 4 (2019/20), pp. 588-589; and Mark Galeotti, "The Intelligence and Security Services and Strategic Decision-Making," Marshall Center, May 2019 (hereinafter, Galeotti, "Intelligence and Security Services").

The intelligence agencies are not to be viewed as a singular bloc but as multiple and overlapping entities that often compete—both directly and indirectly—for greater responsibilities, budgets, and political influence.²⁰ Putin reportedly supports competition to reduce the influence of and reliance on one particular agency or agency leader.²¹

Although competition can incentivize initiative and risk-taking, it also can contribute to uncoordinated and duplicated intelligence efforts. Competition has led to the ousting of agency leaders, the creation of new agencies, and even the total dissolution of agencies. Competition sometimes is factional, defined by personal relationships, or crosses organizational lines in pursuit of opportunities for enrichment and political advancement. It also has led to temporary or issue-specific cooperation between agencies, which occasionally unite to prevent or deny another agency from gaining too much power or influence.²² Competition also reportedly results in agencies providing intelligence that confirms policymakers' worldviews instead of accurate, if inconvenient, information.²³

Figure I. Russian Federation



Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS), using data from the Department of State and Esri.

²⁰ Mark Galeotti, “Russian Intelligence and Security Agencies Vie for Central Role,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, August 29, 2018; Joss I. Meakins, “Squabbling *Siloviki*: Factionalism Within Russia’s Security Services,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2018), pp. 235-270; Peter Reddaway, *Russia’s Domestic Security Wars: Putin’s Use of Divide and Rule Against His Hardline Allies* (London: Palgrave, 2018); and Tatiana Stanovaya, “Why the Kremlin Can’t Keep Its Chekists in Check,” *Riddle*, July 25, 2019.

²¹ Andrei Soldatov, “Putin’s Secret Services: How the Kremlin Corralled the FSB,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 31, 2018.

²² Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia’s Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), pp. 13, 20; and Mark Galeotti, “What Putin’s Security Appointments Say About How Russia Works,” *War on the Rocks*, February 9, 2016.

²³ Leonid Bershidsky, “Putin’s Spies Can’t Even Get Along with Each Other,” *Bloomberg*, July 17, 2018; and Galeotti, “Intelligence and Security Services.”

Foreign Relations

Russia's foreign policy priorities traditionally have focused on the post-Soviet region and the West, including relations and tensions with NATO, the United States, and Europe. However, Russia (like the Soviet Union before it) also pursues a global foreign policy. As relations with its neighbors and Western countries have become more adversarial, Russia—seeking to balance against U.S. and European power and interests—has cultivated deeper relations with China and other countries.

Post-Soviet States

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a consistent goal of Russian foreign policy has been to retain and, where necessary, rebuild close ties with neighboring states that were once part of the Soviet Union.²⁴ Many observers inside and outside Russia interpret this policy as laying claim to a traditional sphere of influence. Although Russian policymakers avoid reference to a *sphere of influence*, they have used comparable terms at various times. In the early 1990s, Russia's foreign minister and other officials employed the term *near abroad* to describe Russia's post-Soviet neighbors. In 2008, Russia's then-president, Dmitry Medvedev, referred to Russia's neighbors as constituting a "region" where Russia has "privileged interests."²⁵

The original mechanism for reintegrating the post-Soviet states was the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which the presidents of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine established in December 1991. The CIS has had limited success in promoting regional integration. It currently includes as members or participants all post-Soviet states except the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, all NATO and EU members), Georgia, and Ukraine.²⁶

Russia has had some success developing multilateral relations with a narrower circle of states. In recent years, Russia has accomplished this aim mainly via two institutions: (1) the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a security alliance that includes Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and (2) the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), an evolving but limited single market that includes all CSTO members except Tajikistan (a prospective candidate).²⁷

²⁴ See, for example, Alexander Cooley, *Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Carnegie Endowment), June 30, 2017; Paul Stronski, *There Goes the Neighborhood: The Limits of Russian Integration in Eurasia*, Carnegie Endowment, September 2020; Anna Arutunyan, "In Russia's Near Abroad, Its Influence Is More Optics Than Substance," *Moscow Times*, October 19, 2020; and Dmitri Trenin, "Moscow's New Rules," Carnegie Moscow Center, November 12, 2020.

²⁵ William Safire, "On Language: The Near Abroad," *New York Times*, May 22, 1994; and *Economist*, "Medvedev on Russia's Interests," September 1, 2008.

²⁶ The full members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan did not ratify the CIS charter in 1993 but considers itself an "associate member" and participates on par with full members. Ukraine did not ratify the CIS charter, but it signed various CIS treaties and participated in some CIS activities until Russia's 2014 invasion, after which Ukraine drew down its participation. Georgia withdrew from the CIS after Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia.

²⁷ On the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), see CRS In Focus IF10309, *Eurasian Economic Union*, by Edward Y. Gracia et al.; Evgeny Troitskiy, "The Eurasian Economic Union at Five: Great Expectations and Hard Times," Wilson Center, January 14, 2020; Andrei Yeliseyev, *The Eurasian Economic Union: Expectations, Challenges, and Achievements*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 2019; and Rilka Dragneva and Christopher A. Hartwell, "The Eurasian Economic Union: Integration Without Liberalisation?," *Post-Communist Economies* (online version), September 1, 2020.

Current members of these organizations mostly have joined voluntarily, if not always enthusiastically.²⁸ Their goals in joining have been diverse, including a desire to accommodate Russia, ensure opportunities for labor migration, promote intergovernmental subsidies, and bolster regime security. Their goals also include the facilitation of trade and investment and protection against a variety of external threats (including terrorism and drug trafficking).

Russia dominates the CSTO and the EEU. It has almost 80% of the EEU's total population, more than 85% of EEU members' total gross domestic product (GDP), and about 95% of CSTO members' military expenditures.²⁹ Russia maintains active bilateral economic, security, and political relations with CSTO and EEU member states. Observers consider these bilateral ties to be of greater significance to Moscow than Russia's multilateral relations in the region (see "Power Projection," below).

Russia's relations with its CSTO and EEU partners are not always smooth. In addition to Russia's dominance in the two organizations, Russian authorities use the CSTO and the EEU to advance Russia's security and economic interests, limiting its alliance responsibilities and economic integration when they perceive these contradict Russia's interests. Russian trade with EEU partners makes up less than 10% of Russia's total trade. In recent years, Russia has sought to deepen economic and political integration mainly with Belarus via a bilateral but largely aspirational "union state" that officially came into effect in 2000.³⁰

Russia's partners have been reluctant to commit fully to the CSTO and EEU or to bind themselves entirely to Russia on matters of foreign policy and economic development. Armenia and Belarus remain dependent on Russia, albeit for different reasons. Armenia relies on Russia to guarantee its security and that of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed region that was the focus of a war with Azerbaijan in 2020 (see "Power Projection," below).³¹ Belarus's authoritarian leader, Aleksandr Lukashenko, depends on Russia for support against domestic opposition, although many observers believe his relationship with Putin is poor and that Russian authorities would prefer a successor to Lukashenko who would deepen Belarus's integration with Russia. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan has cultivated relations with China and the West, particularly in the energy sector, and China is Kyrgyzstan's largest trading partner.³² Both Armenia and Kazakhstan have established institutional partnerships with NATO; Armenia is a troop contributor to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan and Kosovo Force. For more than 13 years, Kyrgyzstan hosted a major military base and transit center for NATO-led coalition troops fighting in Afghanistan.

Russia has partnerships with three post-Soviet states that are not members of the CSTO or the EEU: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These states largely seek to pursue independent foreign policies.³³ Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are significant energy producers; they partner with Russia but have developed their own major alternative transit routes for oil (in Azerbaijan's

²⁸ See, for example, Richard Giragosian, "Armenia's Strategic U-Turn," European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2014; and TASS, "No Option for Kyrgyzstan but to Join Customs Union—Kyrgyzstan President," October 27, 2014.

²⁹ World Bank, at <https://data.worldbank.org>; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Military Expenditure Database*, 2019.

³⁰ CRS In Focus IF10814, *Belarus: An Overview*, by Cory Welt.

³¹ CRS Report R46651, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, by Cory Welt and Andrew S. Bowen.

³² CRS In Focus IF10251, *Kazakhstan*, by Maria A. Blackwood; and CRS In Focus IF10304, *Kyrgyz Republic*, by Maria A. Blackwood.

³³ Turkmenistan is constitutionally neutral. Uzbekistan was a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization from 2006 to 2012. Azerbaijan contributes troops to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan.

case) and natural gas. Under new leadership since 2016, Uzbekistan has deepened security and economic cooperation with Russia and is considering membership in the EEU; however, it also seeks to balance Russian influence.³⁴

Among Russia's neighbors, Moscow's relations with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have been the most strained. Russia has entered into armed territorial conflict with all three states and stations military forces within their borders without their consent (see "Use of Force and Military Power," below). Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have sought to cultivate close ties with the West. Georgia is pursuing NATO membership and served as one of NATO's closest non-allied partners in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ukraine also is a close NATO partner.³⁵ All three states have concluded association agreements with the EU that include the establishment of free-trade areas and encourage harmonization with EU laws and regulations.

NATO and the European Union

NATO³⁶

NATO was established in the aftermath of World War II to provide a framework for coordinating U.S., Canadian, and Western European defense against threats from the Soviet Union and Soviet satellite states in the Eastern Bloc.³⁷ NATO's mutual defense clause—enshrined in Article 5 of NATO's founding North Atlantic Treaty—sought to deter Soviet expansion and prevent the Soviet Union from fracturing the alliance. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States and its allies preserved NATO but with a nonconfrontational posture based on a drawdown of military forces and the pursuit of partnership with Russia and former Eastern Bloc states.

Although Russian authorities took steps toward partnership with NATO in the 1990s, they generally opposed the decision to preserve the alliance and, especially, the inclusion of former Eastern Bloc states as members (by 2004, NATO had accepted 10 new states). They perceived NATO enlargement both as a security threat and as an effort to marginalize Russia and were skeptical of NATO claims to the contrary.³⁸ Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and 2014 invasion of Ukraine were at least partially driven by fear of NATO's growing influence and potential further enlargement along Russia's borders (see "Use of Force and Military Power," below).

Despite tensions, NATO and Russia identified a number of areas for cooperation before 2014. Russia allowed cargo transit over its territory for NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. Russia and NATO member states, in partnership with the U.N. Office on Drugs

³⁴ CRS In Focus IF10303, *Turkmenistan*, by Maria A. Blackwood; and CRS In Focus IF10302, *Uzbekistan*, by Maria A. Blackwood.

³⁵ Georgia and Ukraine are two of NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Partners, a cooperative status currently granted to six of NATO's close strategic partners. In 2008, NATO members agreed that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of NATO, but neither state has been granted a clear path to membership. NATO, "Partnership Interoperability Initiative," updated November 3, 2020; and NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," April 3, 2008.

³⁶ This section draws on CRS Report R45652, *Assessing NATO's Value*, by Paul Belkin. Also see CRS Report R46066, *NATO: Key Issues for the 117th Congress*, by Paul Belkin.

³⁷ In 1955, the Soviet Union and seven Eastern Bloc countries formed a military alliance commonly known as the Warsaw Pact. Alliance members included Albania (until 1968), Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany (until 1990), Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union.

³⁸ Alexei K. Pushkov, "Don't Isolate Us: A Russian View of NATO Expansion," *National Interest*, no. 47 (1997), pp. 58-63; and Ruslan Pukhov, "NATO is the Obstacle to Improving Russian-Western Relations," *Defense News*, March 28, 2019.

and Crime, jointly trained regional counternarcotics officers, with a view toward reducing drug transit to and through Russia.³⁹ In 2010, NATO and Russia agreed to pursue preliminary cooperation on missile defense; negotiations were marked by disagreement, however, and Russia increasingly opposed NATO's missile defense plans.⁴⁰

Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine led to what NATO leadership characterized as the greatest reinforcement of NATO's collective defense since the end of the Cold War. Three days after Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region, NATO's secretary-general declared NATO could "no longer do business as usual with Russia."⁴¹ NATO allies established an Enhanced Forward Presence of about 4,500 troops in the three Baltic states and Poland; bolstered NATO's naval and air presence in the region, including through NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission; increased military exercises and training activities in Central and Eastern Europe; expanded the NATO Response Force; and created a new rapid-reaction Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and new NATO command and control facilities in Central and Eastern Europe.⁴² NATO members also bolstered military cooperation with non-NATO countries Sweden and Finland to counter Russian assertiveness in the Nordic region.⁴³

The principal institutional mechanism for NATO-Russia relations is the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), established in 2002. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO temporarily suspended formal NRC meetings.⁴⁴ NATO civilian and military cooperation with Russia remains suspended, although NATO maintains channels of communication with Russia "to exchange information on issues of concern, reduce misunderstandings and increase predictability."⁴⁵

NATO members have expressed concerns about destabilizing Russian military activities, malicious cyber activities, and chemical weapon attacks. In 2019, NATO members concurred with the United States that Russia was in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (see "Arms Control," below). They expressed full support for the U.S. decision to

³⁹ In 2011, NATO and Russia also established a Helicopter Maintenance Trust Fund to provide maintenance training and spare parts for Afghanistan's Russian-produced helicopters. NATO, "NATO-Russia Counter-Narcotics Training Reaches Milestone," April 19, 2012; and NATO, "NATO-Russia Council Expands Helicopter Maintenance Trust Fund Project for Afghanistan," April 23, 2013.

⁴⁰ Josh Rogin, "Medvedev Announces Failure of U.S.-Russia Missile Defense Talks; Threatens to Withdraw from New START," *Foreign Policy*, November 23, 2011. For background, see CRS Report RL34051, *Long-Range Ballistic Missile Defense in Europe*, by Steven A. Hildreth and Carl Ek; and CRS In Focus IF10541, *Defense Primer: Ballistic Missile Defense*, by Stephen M. McCall.

⁴¹ NATO, "A Strong NATO in a Changed World," speech by NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Brussels Forum, March 21, 2014.

⁴² For details, see NATO, "Boosting NATO's Presence in the East and Southeast," updated October 20, 2020; NATO, "NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence," fact sheet, October 2020; and NATO, "NATO Response Force," updated March 17, 2020.

⁴³ Sweden and Finland both are NATO Enhanced Opportunity Partners and have concluded host nation support agreements to facilitate potential NATO deployments on their territory for military assistance or training exercises. Since 2014, Sweden and Finland also have taken part in numerous military exercises and have contributed to the NATO Response Force. CRS In Focus IF10740, *The Nordic Countries and U.S. Relations*, by Kristin Archick; Eli Lake, "Finland's Plan to Prevent Russian Aggression," *Bloomberg*, June 12, 2019; Thomas Erdbrink and Andrew E. Kramer, "Sweden Raises Alarm over Russian Military Exercises," *New York Times*, December 15, 2020; and Michael M. Phillips and James Marson, "Russian Aggression Spurs Neighbors to Rebuild Defenses," *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2021.

⁴⁴ NATO also suspended formal NATO-Russia Council meetings for several months after Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. NATO, "NATO-Russia Council," updated March 23, 2020.

⁴⁵ NATO, "Relations with Russia," updated October 9, 2020.

withdraw from the treaty and stated, “Russia bears sole responsibility for [the treaty’s] demise.”⁴⁶ Some European allies retained concerns over the possible reintroduction of land-based, intermediate-range missile systems in Europe.⁴⁷

European Union⁴⁸

Russian authorities oscillate between declaring Russia an alternative—more conservative and authoritarian—model of governance and center of gravity for European countries, on the one hand, and asserting Russia’s unique status as a Eurasian global power, on the other. Russia seeks to cultivate relations with the EU and European states in ways that can weaken or divide the transatlantic relationship with the United States. Russian authorities also strive for EU members to grant Russia’s regional integration projects as much legitimacy and status as they do their own.⁴⁹ Russia seeks to cultivate bilateral relations with particular EU member states, such as Germany, Italy, and Austria, as well as with conservative, far right, and far left European parties and social movements.⁵⁰ The EU as a whole is Russia’s largest trade partner; Russia is the EU’s fifth-largest trade partner and main supplier of natural gas.

Crafting common EU policies toward Russia is challenging, given EU member states’ varying national histories and economic relations with Russia. Many in the EU have long advocated for a pragmatic partnership with Russia based largely on commercial and energy ties, as well as cooperation on certain foreign policy issues. Those of this view contend that Russia is too big to isolate or ignore and that Europe’s stability and security ultimately depend on forging good relations with Moscow. Others view Russia more as a potential threat.

Views within the EU converged considerably after Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, but some differences in perspective persist. Some officials urge a robust NATO presence and support maintaining strong sanctions on Russia. Others question the effectiveness and sustainability of efforts to deter Russia and the long-term use of sanctions. Some stress the importance of a dual-track approach to Russia that complements deterrence with dialogue. Senior EU officials recognize the challenge of engaging Russia. Following a controversial visit to Moscow in February 2021, EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borell said Russian authorities were not interested in “constructive dialogue” and “Europe and Russia are drifting apart.”⁵¹ In response, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Russia at present has “no relations with the EU as an organization.”⁵²

⁴⁶ NATO, “Statement by the North Atlantic Council on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty,” August 2, 2019; NATO, “Secretary General: NATO Response to INF Treaty Demise Will Be Measured and Responsible,” August 2, 2019; and NATO, “NATO and the INF Treaty,” updated August 2, 2019.

⁴⁷ CRS In Focus IF11051, *U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty: What’s Next?*, by Amy F. Woolf.

⁴⁸ Also see CRS Report R44249, *The European Union: Ongoing Challenges and Future Prospects*, by Kristin Archick; and CRS Report R45745, *Transatlantic Relations: U.S. Interests and Key Issues*, coordinated by Kristin Archick.

⁴⁹ Dmitry V. Suslov, “Without A ‘Common Space’: A New Agenda for Russia-EU Relations,” *Russian in Global Affairs*, July 1, 2016; Vladimir Chizhov, “A Russian Perspective: The EU’s Only One Way to Succeed,” *Euractiv*, June 7, 2019; and Dmitry Trenin, “Russia and Europe: The Current Impasse and the Way Out,” Carnegie Moscow Center, February 18, 2021.

⁵⁰ Gustav Gressel, “Fellow Travellers: Russia, Anti-Westernism, and Europe’s Political Parties,” European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2017; and Andrew S. Weiss, *With Friends Like These: The Kremlin’s Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria*, Carnegie Endowment, February 27, 2020.

⁵¹ European External Action Service, “My Visit to Moscow and the Future of EU-Russian Relations,” February 7, 2021; and Michael Birnbaum, “An EU Diplomat Went to Moscow to Build Bridges. It Didn’t Go Well,” *Washington Post*, February 9, 2021.

⁵² TASS, “Moscow Has No Relations with EU As Organization Today, Lavrov Says,” March 23, 2021.

Like NATO and the United States, the EU expresses firm support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and concern about Russia's malicious cyber activities, influence operations, chemical weapon attacks, and human rights abuses. After the 2014 downing over Ukraine of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 (in which over 200 EU citizens died), the EU closely coordinated with the United States to impose sanctions on Russia for its actions in Ukraine. The EU, like the United States, has imposed sanctions in response to Russian chemical weapons attacks and human rights abuses.

Russia's energy diplomacy continues to divide European states. Some in the EU, including the German and Austrian governments, support the construction of Russia's Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline to Germany (see "Energy," below). Supporters of the pipeline argue it would enhance EU energy security by increasing the capacity of a direct and secure supply route. Others argue Nord Stream 2 would give Russia greater political and economic leverage over Germany and other states that depend on Russian gas and leave some countries, like Ukraine, more vulnerable to Russia.

China

The Russia-China partnership largely is the product of a long-term trend of closer alignment, after two decades of estrangement during the Cold War.⁵³ Russia and China have many reasons to cooperate. Although tensions have arisen between the two countries on various issues, both aim to counter what they consider to be U.S. hegemony, regionally and worldwide. Both are wary of the U.S. military presence in Asia and have criticized efforts to upgrade the United States' defense capabilities with its treaty allies Japan and South Korea. Both Russia and China hold vetoes on the U.N. Security Council, and they often work together to adjust or oppose U.N. Security Council resolutions Western states have supported, including on human rights issues.⁵⁴

Despite occasional statements signaling a potential full-fledged alliance, Chinese and Russian officials consider their relationship to be a strategic partnership.⁵⁵ Beijing has not wanted to enter into an explicitly anti-Western union; its trade volume with the United States dwarfs its trade with Russia, and it has not sought to confront the West directly. Some observers, however, believe U.S. efforts to counter China and Russia could lead the two countries to develop closer relations.⁵⁶

China is Russia's single largest trading partner (although Russia's total trade with the EU is larger), and Russia is China's ninth-largest trading partner.⁵⁷ Energy trade plays an important role in the Russia-China relationship. Oil and petroleum products made up more than 50% of Russian exports to China in 2020 (and almost 65% in 2019). In 2019, Russia and China opened a major

⁵³ This section draws in part on CRS Report R44613, *Northeast Asia and Russia's "Turn to the East": Implications for U.S. Interests*, by Emma Chanlett-Avery.

⁵⁴ Russia and China have cooperated tacitly on various issues at the United Nations. For example, analysts have noted China generally has been willing to let Russia determine positions on Syria, whereas Russia often follows China's lead on North Korea (although differences have arisen over North Korea sanctions). Jeffrey Feltman, *China's Expanding Influence at the United Nations – and How the United States Should React*, Brookings Institution, September 2020.

⁵⁵ Gustav Gressel, "The Authoritarian Entente: Sino-Russian Security Cooperation," European Council on Foreign Relations, October 17, 2019 (hereinafter, Gressel, "Authoritarian Entente"); Vladimir Isachenkov, "Putin: Russia-China Military Alliance Can't Be Ruled Out," Associated Press, October 22, 2020; and Alexander Gabuev, "Is Putin Really Considering a Military Alliance with China?," Carnegie Endowment, December 1, 2020.

⁵⁶ Matthew Kroenig, "The United States Should Not Align with Russia Against China," *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2020; and Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, "Kissinger Revisited: Can the United States Drive a Wedge Between Russia and China?," Carnegie Endowment, March 2, 2021.

⁵⁷ China Customs Statistics, as presented in Trade Data Monitor.

new pipeline, the Power of Siberia, to supply Russian natural gas to China. The two countries have discussed additional gas pipeline routes.⁵⁸

Security relations between Russia and China have advanced significantly in recent years.⁵⁹ The two countries conduct increasingly large and frequent military exercises. Under the auspices of the multilateral Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Russia and China have conducted annual military exercises, dubbed “Peace Mission,” since 2005.⁶⁰ Most bilateral exercises focus on improving strategic cooperation rather than tactical interoperability. China also sends troops to Russia’s annual strategic exercises, most recently to Kavkaz 2020 in Russia’s Southern Military District. Most large-scale exercises are naval exercises, with Russia and China conducting naval exercises dubbed “Joint Sea” since 2012. Russian and Chinese strategic bombers began conducting joint patrols over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea in 2019.⁶¹

Defense sector cooperation between Russia and China continues to evolve. China may be interested in purchasing advanced Russian air defense systems (such as the S-500 or recently introduced S-350) and continues to purchase Russian aircraft engines (the United States has imposed sanctions on China for purchasing S-400 air defense systems from Russia). As China’s defense sector is developing, direct arms sales from Russia are decreasing. Cooperation increasingly centers on joint production and development, potentially including advanced technologies, such as missile defense and missile technologies (see “Defense Industry and Arms Sales,” below).⁶² In addition, Russia and China signed an agreement in March 2021 to create an International Scientific Lunar Station.⁶³

Global Engagement

Over the last decade in particular, Russia has increased its global engagement, although observers have debated the depth and sustainability of Russia’s global relations.⁶⁴ Several reasons may explain Russia’s increased global engagement. These include, to varying degrees, the following: (1) growing alignment between Russia’s military capabilities and its aspiration to conduct foreign

⁵⁸ CRS In Focus IF11514, *Power of Siberia: A Natural Gas Pipeline Brings Russia and China Closer*, by Michael Ratner and Heather L. Greenley.

⁵⁹ Vasily Kashin, “The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation,” CNA, August 2018; Gressel, “Authoritarian Entente”; and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, David Shullman, and Dan McCormick, “Navigating Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation,” *War on the Rocks*, August 5, 2020.

⁶⁰ The Shanghai Cooperation Organization also includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, and Pakistan. Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia have observer status.

⁶¹ Michael Kofman, “The Emperors League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation,” *War on the Rocks*, August 6, 2020 (hereinafter, Kofman, “Emperors League”); Catherine Wong, “Chinese Troops to Take Part in Russia’s Kavkaz 2020 Military Exercises,” *South China Morning Post*, September 10, 2020; Geoffrey F. Gresh, “The New Great Game at Sea,” *War on the Rocks*, December 8, 2020; and TASS, “Russian, Chinese Strategic Bombers Carry Out Joint Air Patrol in Asia-Pacific Region,” December 22, 2020.

⁶² Dmitry Stefanovich, “Russia to Help China Develop an Early Warning System,” *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2019; and Dmitry Gorenburg, “An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation,” Marshall Center, April 2020.

⁶³ Matthew Bodner, “Russia and China Unveil Plans for Joint Lunar Space Station as Moscow Drifts away from NASA,” *NBC News*, March 11, 2021.

⁶⁴ Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky, *The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework*, Carnegie Endowment, December 2017; Thomas Grove, “Russia Reaffirms Its Global Ambitions After Political Transition,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2019; Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, *Russia’s Global Ambitions in Perspective*, Carnegie Endowment, February 2019; Bryan Bender, “Russia Beating U.S. in Race for Global Influence, Pentagon Study Says,” *Politico*, June 30, 2019; and Holly Ellyatt, “From Africa to Azerbaijan, Here’s How Far Russia’s Global Influence Stretches,” CNBC, February 10, 2020.

relations befitting a great power; (2) a desire to cultivate diverse economic relations, given U.S. and European sanctions; and (3) an opportunity to court authoritarian leaders who seek leverage against U.S. pressures for democratization or harbor concerns about the reliability of U.S. backing.

Russia has notably increased its engagement in the Middle East and North Africa, most prominently through its military intervention in Syria (see “Syria,” below).⁶⁵ Beyond Syria, Russia has deepened relations with other key states in the Middle East, including Iran, Turkey, and Israel, and has sought to build relations with both traditional Soviet-era partners (e.g., Algeria, Egypt, Libya) and former adversaries (e.g., Saudi Arabia). In Libya, Russia has provided assistance to the Libyan National Army movement, based in the east of the country. Turkey is Russia’s seventh-largest trading partner (amounting to \$21 billion in 2020), and Russia has secured new arms and energy deals (oil, gas, and nuclear) across the Middle East and North Africa in recent years.⁶⁶ With the exception of Turkey, Russia’s overall trade with the region is relatively low and is dominated by Russian exports (including arms, grain, and oil). Egypt is Russia’s second-largest regional trading partner, with Russia reporting total annual trade of \$4.5 billion in 2020.

After a post-Cold War period of relative disengagement, Russia also has sought to cultivate economic and security partnerships with a number of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁶⁷ Russia’s defense and security relations with African states include military cooperation agreements, arms and equipment sales, and the deployment of military advisers and private security contractors that U.S. officials and other observers assert have close ties to the Russian government (see “Private Military Companies,” below). In some cases, security cooperation has been accompanied by increased access to African countries’ energy, mineral, and precious metal resources for Russian firms, some of which have ties to Russia’s national security apparatus. In addition to new defense markets and commercial interests, Russia has sought greater diplomatic influence in Africa and, with the support of African countries, within U.N. bodies.

Russia also has increased engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean, although its engagement is relatively limited compared with that of the United States and China.⁶⁸ Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua are Russia’s primary regional security partners. In Venezuela, Russia recognizes Nicolás Maduro as president and has provided Maduro’s government with security and economic support, including by facilitating Venezuelan oil exports to third countries. In Latin America, Brazil is Russia’s largest regional trading partner, with Russia reporting total annual trade of \$4 billion in 2020.

⁶⁵ Kathrin Hille et al., “Russia’s Middle East Ambitions Grow with Syria Battlefield Success,” *Financial Times*, January 9, 2017; Eugene Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None*, Carnegie Endowment, October 2019; Becca Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, RAND, November 2019; Alec Luhn, “Putin’s Game in the Middle East,” *Politico*, January 17, 2020; and Jalel Harchaoui, “The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya,” *War on the Rocks*, January 7, 2021 (hereinafter, Harchaoui, “Pendulum”).

⁶⁶ Trade data in this section are from the Federal Customs Service of Russia, as presented in the Global Trade Atlas.

⁶⁷ Paul Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia’s Return to Africa*, Carnegie Endowment, October 2019; Eric Schmitt and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Russia Exerts Growing Influence in Africa, Worrying Many in the West,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2020; and Giovanni Faleg and Stanislav Secrieru, *Russia’s Forays Into Sub-Saharan Africa*, EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), March 2020.

⁶⁸ Julia Gurganus, *Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America*, Carnegie Endowment, May 2018; and Andrey Pyatakov, *Russia and Latin America in the 21st Century: A Difficult Rapprochement*, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), July 2020.

In Asia, in addition to its ties to China, Russia has improved relations with Japan, with which it has a territorial dispute over islands Russia annexed at the end of World War II. Russia also has cultivated relations with India, Pakistan, Vietnam, and countries across Southeast Asia, again building on Cold War-era ties.⁶⁹ In Afghanistan, the Russian government has taken an active role in efforts to bring that country's internal conflict to a negotiated end. U.S. officials have indicated, however, that Russia also has provided some measure of political and potentially material support to the Taliban (see "Targeted Overseas Attacks," below).⁷⁰

Use of Force and Military Power

As Russia's economic and military power has grown, Russian authorities have demonstrated a capacity and willingness to use force to accomplish foreign policy goals, both in neighboring countries and further afield. Russia also projects power abroad via an expansive and increasingly aggressive posture of air and sea patrols, the use of "private" military companies, and targeted attacks on perceived opponents. In addition, Russia conducts an often militarized approach in the Arctic to exert control over current and potential energy deposits and shipping routes.

Ukraine⁷¹

Many observers believe that of all the post-Soviet states, Ukraine's independence has been the most difficult for Russians to accept. Many Russians traditionally considered much of Ukraine to be a historical province of Russia and Ukrainians to be close ethnic brethren. In June 2019, President Putin said, "Russians and Ukrainians are one people ... one nation."⁷²

Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine occurred soon after Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity, when then-President Viktor Yanukovich fled to Russia. Russian government officials cast the Revolution of Dignity as a Western-backed "coup" that, among other things, could threaten the security of the ethnic Russian population in Ukraine's Crimea region, could eject Russia's Black Sea Fleet from the region, and even could bring Ukraine into NATO. The Russian government covertly deployed forces to Crimea and, after holding what most observers consider to have been an illegal referendum, declared it was incorporating Crimea (with a population of about 2 million) directly into the Russian Federation (for a map, see **Figure 2**).

Moscow then engineered the rise of new separatist movements in eastern Ukraine (the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, collectively known as the Donbas, with a population of about 6.6 million in 2014). Militants forcibly took power in several cities and towns, announced the establishment of two separatist entities, and gradually expanded their control in the two regions. Ukrainian government and volunteer forces fought back, restoring state control over a portion of each region but suffering some major defeats, including in battles in which regular Russian forces reportedly participated. In 2019, one study estimated that about half the pre-conflict population of the

⁶⁹ Bennett Murray, *Russia's Struggle to Gain Influence in Southeast Asia*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, August 31, 2020; and Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Aleksandar Vladicic, *Russia in the Asia-Pacific: Less Than Meets the Eye*, Carnegie Endowment, September 3, 2020.

⁷⁰ Philip Ewing, "Why Is Russia Helping Anti-U.S. Insurgents in Afghanistan?," NPR, February 13, 2017; Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Russia Is Sending Weapons to Taliban, Top U.S. General Confirms," *Washington Post*, April 24, 2017; Justin Rowlett, "Russia 'Arming the Afghan Taliban,' Says U.S.," *BBC News*, March 23, 2018; and David G. Lewis, *Return to Kabul? Russian Policy in Afghanistan*, Marshall Center, June 2020.

⁷¹ For more, see CRS Report R45008, *Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy*, by Cory Welt.

⁷² Associated Press, "Putin: Russians, Ukrainians Are 'One People,'" July 20, 2019.

Donetsk and Luhansk regions (or 3.2 million people) were living under the control of Russian proxies.⁷³

For Russia, the establishment of separatist entities in eastern Ukraine may have served multiple purposes. The Russian government claimed it was seeking to “protect” relatively pro-Russian populations in these regions. Many observers believe that Moscow sought to complicate Ukraine’s domestic development and foreign policy and to increase Russian leverage in potential negotiations over Ukraine’s future trajectory.⁷⁴

The conflict’s intensity has declined since 2015, but fighting has continued. A July 2020 cease-fire led to a reduced number of cease-fire violations and casualties for several months.⁷⁵ However, a new round of hostilities occurred in March 2021, as Russia reportedly amassed troops along its border with Ukraine and in occupied Crimea. The size and sustained nature of Russian troop deployments concerned Ukrainian and Western governments, and some observers speculated that Russia could be preparing a new offensive.⁷⁶

The conflict has led to about 10,000 combat deaths and 3,375 civilian fatalities.⁷⁷ Ukraine has registered more than 1.4 million people as internally displaced persons, although many have returned to their homes. Ukrainian officials estimate that more than 375 Ukrainians remain in illegal detention in Russian-controlled areas of eastern Ukraine, occupied Crimea, or Russia.⁷⁸

Crimea

Since 2014, Russia has increased its military presence in Crimea and suppressed local dissent, including by minority Crimean Tatars. Russia has deployed more than 30,000 armed personnel to Crimea. Russia’s military forces in Crimea include ground, artillery, coastal defense, air defense, and fighter units.⁷⁹ In March 2021, Russia announced plans to permanently move the 56th Air Assault Brigade to Feodosia, Crimea, thereby increasing its power projection capabilities in the region. Additionally, Russia has increased the size and capability of its Black Sea Fleet,

⁷³ Yuriy Vyshnevskyy, “Demography of ORDLO (Separate Districts of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions),” *Delovaya Stolitsa* (Ukraine), n.d., at <https://www.dsnews.ua/static/longread/donbas-eng/demography-of-ordlo.html>; and International Crisis Group, *Peace in Ukraine (III): The Costs of War in Donbas*, September 3, 2020.

⁷⁴ Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (New York: Routledge, 2017); and Andrew S. Bowen, “Coercive Diplomacy and the Donbas: Explaining Russian Strategy in Eastern Ukraine,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3-4 (2019), pp. 312-343.

⁷⁵ Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 1 August 2020-31 January 2021*, March 11, 2021.

⁷⁶ Andrew E. Kramer, “Fighting Escalates in Eastern Ukraine, Signaling the End to Another Cease-Fire,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2021; Michael Kofman, “Russia’s Military Buildup near Ukraine is an Intimidation Tactic,” *Moscow Times*, April 3, 2021; and Isabelle Khurshudyan et al., “On Ukraine’s Doorstep, Russia Boosts Military and Sends Message of Regional Clout to Biden,” *Washington Post*, April 10, 2021.

⁷⁷ This count includes the 298 foreign nationals killed in the July 17, 2014, downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 (or MH17), a commercial aircraft en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur that was shot down in Ukrainian airspace. OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 November 2019-15 February 2020*, p. 8; and OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 1 August 2020-31 January 2021*, March 11, 2021, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Stabilization Support Services, *IDPs: Life Before and During the Coronavirus*, July 2020; International Crisis Group, *Peace in Ukraine (III): The Costs of War in Donbas*, September 3, 2020; and *Ukrinform*, “109 Ukrainian Political Prisoners Jailed in Russia and Occupied Crimea,” February 2, 2021.

⁷⁹ This includes units equipped with the latest S-400 surface-to-air and Bastion-P coastal defense systems. Patrick Tucker, “U.S. Intelligence Officials and Satellite Photos Detail Russian Military Buildup on Crimea,” *Defense One*, June 12, 2019; and *Ukrinform*, “Already 31,500 Russian Troops Deployed in Occupied Crimea,” November 7, 2019.

headquartered in Sevastopol.⁸⁰ Despite this growth in capabilities, most analysts assess that military forces in Crimea are primarily defensively oriented and that Russia lacks the forces to conduct sustained offensive operations without reinforcements.⁸¹

Much of the international community does not recognize Russia's purported annexation of Crimea. Many have condemned Russia's occupation as a violation of international law and of Russia's own international commitments. Since 2014, the U.N. General Assembly has voted several times to affirm Ukraine's territorial integrity, most recently in December 2020.⁸² The Ukrainian government and state-owned companies have pursued claims in international arbitration courts concerning the violation of their rights in Crimea and nearby maritime waters.⁸³

Eastern Ukraine

In contrast to its policy toward Crimea, Moscow officially recognizes the areas it controls in eastern Ukraine as Ukrainian territory. Although the Russian government denies military involvement in eastern Ukraine, in 2018, then-U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations Kurt Volker stated, "Russia has 100 percent command and control of what is happening in the occupied areas there—military forces, political entities, and direct economic activity."⁸⁴ In April 2020, Ukrainian officials estimated that more than 2,000 Russian military forces, mostly in command and control positions, were fighting in eastern Ukraine, with the total number of Russian-led fighters estimated at more than 30,000.⁸⁵ In January 2020, Russian officials stated that Russia had granted citizenship to more than 196,000 residents of Donetsk and Luhansk (about 30% of whom live in areas controlled by Ukraine). In 2020, the number of new applicants for Russian citizenship reportedly declined.⁸⁶

Maritime Conflict

Russia seeks to establish greater control over maritime regions adjacent to Crimea and eastern Ukraine, including in the Sea of Azov; the Black Sea; and the Kerch Strait, which connects the two seas. In 2018, Putin opened a 12-mile-long bridge over the Kerch Strait linking Russia to

⁸⁰ Dmitry Gorenburg, "Is a New Russian Black Sea Fleet Coming? Or Is It Here?," *War on the Rocks*, July 31, 2018; Igor Delanoe, *Russia's Black Sea Fleet: Toward a Multiregional Force*, CNA, June 2019; and Mike Eckel, "The Guns of April: Six Questions About the New Russia-Ukraine Tensions," *RFE/RL*, April 7, 2021.

⁸¹ Michael Kofman, "The Crimean Crisis and Russia's Military Posture in the Black Sea," *War on the Rocks*, August 19, 2016; and Gustav Gressel, "Occupational Hazards: The Russian Military in Crimea," European Council on Foreign Relations, April 17, 2019.

⁸² U.N. General Assembly Resolutions A/RES/68/262, March 27, 2014, and A/RES/75/29, December 7, 2020.

⁸³ Stuart Elliott, "Ukraine's Naftogaz to Pursue \$8 Billion Arbitration Case Against Russia over Crimea," *S&P Global*, February 10, 2020; Embassy of Ukraine in the Netherlands, "Permanent Court of Arbitration," October 23, 2020; and UNIAN, "Ukraine's Oschadbank Loses Case vs. Russia on Compensation of Crimean Assets," March 31, 2021.

⁸⁴ U.S. Department of State, "Press Briefing with Kurt Volker, Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations," November 8, 2018.

⁸⁵ Currently, Russian-led fighters are organized into two army corps, loosely modeled on the Russian army. Mark Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine* (Oxford, UK: Osprey, 2019); International Crisis Group, *Rebels Without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine*, July 16, 2019; Tim Ripley, "Donbass Conflict Offers Pointers for Future Russian Military Action," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 18, 2019; and *Ukrinform*, "Joint Forces Commander: Over 2,000 Russian Career Officers Stationed in Occupied Donbas," April 30, 2020.

⁸⁶ UNIAN, "About 200,000 Donbas Residents Obtain Russian Citizenship in 2019 – Russian Media," January 2, 2020; and Hayla Coynash, "Putin's Russian Passport Aggression Against Ukraine Fizzles in Occupied Donbas," Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, October 9, 2020. Also see Fabian Burkhardt, *Russia's "Passportization" of the Donbas*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), August 2020.

occupied Crimea. Russia interferes with commercial traffic traveling to and from Ukrainian ports on the Sea of Azov in Mariupol and Berdyansk, which export steel, grain, and coal.⁸⁷ Russia also has bolstered its maritime forces in the Sea of Azov. In November 2018, Russia forcibly prevented Ukrainian naval vessels from passing through the Kerch Strait to reach Ukrainian shores and illegally detained 24 crew members for 10 months.⁸⁸

Figure 2. Ukraine



Source: CRS, using data from the Department of State, Esri, and DeLorme.

Conflict Resolution

With respect to eastern Ukraine, Russia and Ukraine participate in a conflict resolution process structured around a set of measures known as the Minsk agreements (Russia refuses to engage in a similar conflict resolution process with respect to Crimea, as Russia claims to have annexed that region).⁸⁹ A 2015 agreement commonly known as Minsk-2 includes measures to end hostilities.⁹⁰ These measures largely remain unfulfilled to date.

⁸⁷ Oksana Grytsenko and Kostyantyn Chernichkin, “Dangerous Waters: As Russia Monopolizes Azov Sea, Mariupol Feels Heightened Danger,” *Kyiv Post*, August 3, 2018; *Ukrinform*, “How Russia Violates Security in Azov-Black Sea Region,” June 1, 2020; and Ihor Kabanenko, “Russia’s Strategy in the Sea of Azov: The Kerch Bridge, Artificial Shipping Delays and Continued Harm to Ukraine,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 14, 2021.

⁸⁸ Dmitry Gorenburg and Michael Kofman, “Russia and Ukraine Had a Short Naval Battle. Here’s What You Need To Know,” *Washington Post*, November 28, 2018.

⁸⁹ The Minsk agreements were signed in 2014 and 2015 by representatives of Russia, Ukraine, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)—members of what is known as the Trilateral Contact Group—together with Russian proxy authorities in eastern Ukraine.

⁹⁰ “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements,” February 12, 2015, at https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/UA_150212_MinskAgreement_en.pdf.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who came to power in 2019, initially sought to invigorate what had been a relatively dormant conflict resolution process. Ukrainian- and Russian-led forces implemented one long-planned confidence-building measure: the withdrawal of armed forces and hardware from three *disengagement areas* near populated areas.⁹¹ Several major prisoner exchanges also have occurred.⁹² A cease-fire declared in July 2020 was more successful than previous cease-fires.⁹³ However, armed hostilities continue and efforts to settle thornier issues, including withdrawal of Russian forces and the legal status of Russian-controlled areas, have not been successful.

Georgia⁹⁴

Since the 1990s, Georgia's relations with Russia have been tense. Georgian authorities accuse Moscow of obstructing Georgia's Western integration. Many observers believe Russia has supported the secession of Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to prevent Georgia from joining NATO (for a map, see **Figure 3**).

Abkhazia and South Ossetia originally sought to secede from Georgia in the early 1990s, during and after Georgia's pursuit of independence from the Soviet Union.⁹⁵ At the time, many observers believed Soviet and, later, Russian authorities instigated the conflicts, assisted local forces to halt Georgia's efforts to distance itself from Russia, or both. After the conflicts ended, Russian peacekeeping forces remained in both regions. As in occupied regions of Ukraine, Russia has provided citizenship to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁹⁶

2008 Russia-Georgia War

Georgia's relations with Russia worsened after former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in 2003 and sought to accelerate Georgia's integration with the West. The Georgian government established greater control over Georgian-populated villages in South Ossetia and the remote and thinly populated Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia. In 2004, new clashes between Georgian and local forces occurred. After another round of escalation in 2008, Russia invaded Georgia to prevent the Georgian government from reestablishing control over South Ossetia. A five-day war in August 2008 led to the deaths of more than 800 civilians and military personnel, the expulsion of some 20,000 Georgian residents from South Ossetia, the destruction of villages, and Georgia's loss of control over long-held areas.⁹⁷ In Abkhazia, local forces took

⁹¹ International Crisis Group, *Peace in Ukraine (II): A New Approach to Disengagement*, August 3, 2020.

⁹² RFE/RL, "Ukraine, Russia-Backed Separatists Hold Another Prisoner Swap," April 16, 2020.

⁹³ Olha Polishchuk and Franklin Holcomb, "Breaking the Pattern: The Relative Success of the Latest Ceasefire Agreement in Ukraine," Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, November 24, 2020.

⁹⁴ For more, see CRS Report R45307, *Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Cory Welt.

⁹⁵ Most Georgians were forced to flee Abkhazia during the 1992-1993 war and became internally displaced persons. Abkhazia's population in the 1989 Soviet census was about 525,000, of which 46% were ethnic Georgians and 17% were ethnic Abkhaz. Authorities in Abkhazia allege the region's population in 2011 was about 240,000 (50% Abkhaz, 19% Georgian). Authorities in South Ossetia allege the region's population in 2015 was about 54,000 (90% Ossetian, 7% Georgian). In the 1989 Soviet census, the region's population was about 98,000 (66% Ossetian, 29% Georgian).

⁹⁶ Toru Nagashima, "Russia's Passportization Policy Toward Unrecognized Republics: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 66, no. 3 (2019), pp. 186-199.

⁹⁷ Cory Welt, "The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 62, no. 1 (2010), pp. 63-97; Council of the EU, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia* (3 vols.), September 2009; and Ruslan Pukhov, ed., *The Tanks of August* (Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2010).

control of the Kodori Gorge. Russian forces temporarily occupied Georgian territory outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia and recognized the latter as independent states.

Figure 3. Georgia



Source: CRS, using data from the Department of State, National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, Esri, and DeLorme.

After the 2008 War and Recent Developments

Since 2008, Moscow has tightened control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In these two regions, Russia has established military bases and border guard outposts that reportedly each house 3,500-5,000 military and border guard personnel.⁹⁸ Russian and local authorities have constructed boundary fences, imposed transit restrictions, and frequently detained Georgian citizens for “illegal” crossings. Since 2015, at least four Georgian citizens have been killed or have died under suspicious circumstances while in detention or in incidents involving local armed forces.⁹⁹

In recent years, new tensions have arisen around South Ossetia. In 2019, Russian and local authorities hardened and extended the boundary line. Georgian authorities responded by

⁹⁸ The 7th Military Base in Abkhazia is in Gudauta; the 4th Military Base in South Ossetia is in Tskhinvali. The estimated number of armed forces does not include local military formations. Abkhazia maintains local forces under the command of the Russian military; some local South Ossetian forces have been absorbed into the Russian military. International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance 2020*, p. 208; and Margarete Klein, *Russia’s Military Policy in the Post-Soviet Space: Aims, Instruments, and Perspectives*, SWP, January 2019.

⁹⁹ In 2018, the Georgian government compiled a list of human rights offenders in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and called for international sanctions. *Agenda.ge*, “327 Detained Illegally by Occupying Forces in Georgia Between 2017-19,” February 26, 2019; *Civil Georgia*, “Independent Expert Speaks of Preliminary Details of Kvaratskhelia’s Forensic Examination,” March 17, 2019; *Civil Georgia*, “Government Unveils Tatumashvili-Otkhozoria List,” June 27, 2018; and *Agenda.ge*, “Tbilisi Demands Release of Illegally Detained Citizens at Meeting with De Facto Tskhinvali ‘Officials,’” March 5, 2021.

establishing a new police checkpoint nearby, after which local authorities closed the crossing point for one Georgian-populated area (with an estimated resident population of under 2,000 and approximately 400 daily crossings). The closure reportedly has contributed to the deaths of at least 16 residents who were unable to be transported for medical care.¹⁰⁰ In 2020, authorities in both regions enacted new crossing point closures, ostensibly related to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) concerns; authorities in Abkhazia occasionally have opened humanitarian corridors across the boundary line.¹⁰¹

Conflict Resolution Process

The 2008 war ended with a six-point cease-fire plan and a follow-on implementation plan brokered by then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The six-point plan included a nonuse of force pledge and the return of Russia's armed forces to the positions they held prior to the start of hostilities.¹⁰² Regular Russian forces withdrew from areas they had occupied outside South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but within the two regions Russia deployed new forces in greater numbers and outside preexisting peacekeeping formats. As a result, U.S. officials and others consider Russia to be in noncompliance with the six-point plan.¹⁰³

All parties to the conflict, together with the United States, the EU, the United Nations, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), participate in the Geneva International Discussions, convened quarterly to address issues related to the conflict. Parties to the conflict, together with the United Nations and the OSCE, also participate in joint Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) to address local security issues and build confidence. Abkhaz and South Ossetian representatives frequently suspend participation in the IPRMs.¹⁰⁴ The EU leads an unarmed civilian monitoring mission in Georgia that monitors compliance with the cease-fire; Russian authorities do not permit the mission to operate in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁰⁵

Moldova¹⁰⁶

Since Moldova gained independence in 1991, it has coped with the de facto Russian-backed secession of Transnistria, a multiethnic and predominantly Russian-speaking region with at least 10% of Moldova's population and a substantial industrial base.¹⁰⁷ Moldovan authorities support a

¹⁰⁰ Giorgi Lomsadze, "Russia Advances Its Great Wall of Georgia," *Eurasianet*, August 15, 2019; Human Rights Center (Georgia), *State of Human Rights Along the Dividing Lines of Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, 2019; *Georgia Today*, "Occupied Akhgori Faces Humanitarian Crisis," January 16, 2020; and *Civil Georgia*, "Akhgori Patient Dies After Delayed Transfer to Georgia Proper, Tbilisi Says," November 16, 2020.

¹⁰¹ *Georgia Today*, "Occupied Tskhinvali, Abkhazia Close Entrances to Rest of Georgia," February 28, 2020; and U.S. Mission to the OSCE, "Statement on the 51st Round of the Geneva International Discussions (Conflict in Georgia)," December 17, 2020.

¹⁰² Council of the EU, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, vol. 3, pp. 587-594.

¹⁰³ U.S. Mission to the OSCE, "Joint Statement of the Group of Friends of Georgia," December 4, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ *Civil Georgia*, "Geneva Talks Co-Chairs Hold Meetings in Tbilisi, Tskhinvali, Sokhumi," September 17, 2020; and OSCE, "98th Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism Meeting Takes Place in Ergneti," March 5, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia, at <https://eumm.eu>.

¹⁰⁶ For more, see CRS In Focus IF10894, *Moldova: An Overview*, by Cory Welt.

¹⁰⁷ Transnistria's population has been estimated at about 350,000-400,000. Authorities in Transnistria allege that the region's population in 2015 was 34% Russian, 33% Moldovan, and 27% Ukrainian. Tim Judah, "Moldova Faces 'Existential' Population Crisis," *Balkan Insight*, January 16, 2020.

special governance status for Transnistria, but Russian authorities and authorities in Transnistria have resisted making an agreement on such a status.

Despite its separatist tendencies, Transnistria has strong economic links with the rest of Moldova and the EU, the destination for about half of its exports.¹⁰⁸ Residents who have retained Moldovan citizenship may vote in Moldovan elections at polling stations outside Transnistria; some 31,000 such residents of Transnistria reportedly voted in Moldova's 2020 presidential election.¹⁰⁹

Russian Military Presence

In 1992, the ex-Soviet 14th Army, which came under Russian control, allied with local forces to fight a short secessionist conflict in Transnistria. After the conflict ended, Russian forces remained in the region. Currently, Russia stations about 1,500 soldiers in Transnistria, a few hundred of which Moldova accepts as peacekeepers.¹¹⁰ In 2017, Moldova's Constitutional Court ruled that Russia's non-peacekeeping troop presence was unconstitutional and its parliament adopted a declaration calling on Russia to withdraw these forces.¹¹¹ In 2018, the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution calling on Russia to withdraw its troops from Moldova "unconditionally and without further delay."¹¹²

Conflict Resolution Process

A conflict resolution process operates in a "5+2" format under the chairpersonship of the OSCE, with the OSCE, Russia, and Ukraine as mediators and the EU and the United States as observers.¹¹³ The EU also supports conflict management through the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine, which seeks to help the two countries combat transborder crime; facilitate trade; and resolve the conflict over Transnistria, which shares a long border with Ukraine.¹¹⁴

In 2016, the Moldovan government and Transnistrian leaders committed "to engage in a substantive, result-oriented dialogue" focused on a set of practical issues and confidence-building measures.¹¹⁵ The sides resolved several issues related to transit, education, agriculture, and the recording of civil statistics.¹¹⁶ In 2020, restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic slowed

¹⁰⁸ European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM), *Annual Report (1 December 2018 - 30 November 2019)*, October 4, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Andrew Wilson, "Separate Ways: Contrasting Elections in Georgia and Moldova," European Council on Foreign Relations, November 19, 2020.

¹¹⁰ IISS, *Military Balance 2020*, p. 208.

¹¹¹ Ana Maria Tourna, "Moldova Asks Russian Troops to Quit Transnistria," *Balkan Insight*, July 21, 2017.

¹¹² U.N. General Assembly Resolution A/RES/72/282, June 22, 2018.

¹¹³ OSCE Mission to Moldova, "Conflict Prevention and Resolution," at <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova/104529>.

¹¹⁴ See EUBAM, at <http://eubam.org>.

¹¹⁵ OSCE Mission to Moldova, "Special Representative of the Austrian OSCE Chairmanship Reaffirms the Need for Results-Oriented Dialogue in the Transdniestrian Settlement Process," January 20, 2017.

¹¹⁶ OSCE Mission to Moldova, "OSCE Special Representative Lauds Progress in Transdniestrian Settlement Process, Calls for All Commitments to Become Reality," September 10, 2018; and "Head of OSCE Mission Praises Decision by Moldova's Government to Certify Civil Status Facts of Transdniestrian Residents," May 29, 2019.

dialogue; nevertheless, in July 2020, the two sides agreed to discuss issues related to transit, telecommunications, and financial connectivity.¹¹⁷

Syria¹¹⁸

Russia's most prominent foreign engagement outside the post-Soviet region is the military intervention it launched in Syria in 2015. From the onset in 2011 of civil conflict in Syria, Russia provided military, financial, and diplomatic support to President Bashar al Asad's beleaguered government.¹¹⁹ The Asad government had responded with force to a domestic political uprising, sparking an insurgency that drew foreign support and created space for extremist groups. The United States called for Asad's resignation, provided support to Syrian opposition groups, and considered using military force in response to Syrian chemical weapons use. In 2013, the Russian government made a surprise proposal to work with the United States in establishing an international mission to remove chemical weapons from Syria as a way to avoid U.S. military intervention.¹²⁰

In 2015, Moscow intensified its support of the Asad government with a gradual buildup of personnel, combat aircraft, and military equipment. Russia then launched an active military intervention in support of Asad's government. The Syrian government forces' significant territorial losses, U.S. and other third-party security assistance to Syrian opposition groups, the growth of the Islamic State organization in Syria, and the potential for broader U.S.-led coalition military operations all may have contributed to Russia's decision to enter the conflict directly.¹²¹

For Russia, the Asad government's potential defeat would have had several negative implications. Asad's fall would have meant the loss of a key Russian partner in the Middle East, which would have undermined Russia's ability to strengthen its influence in the region. It also would have set another precedent (after Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011) for a U.S.-backed forceful regime transition in the Middle East, something Moscow firmly opposed.¹²² Finally, Russia feared that Asad's defeat would embolden Islamist extremists, including the Islamic State (IS, also known as

¹¹⁷ OSCE Mission to Moldova, "OSCE Special Representative Welcomes Recent Meeting Between Moldovan President and Transnistrian Leader and Hopes for Further 'Constructive, Forward-Looking Dialogue,'" July 29, 2020.

¹¹⁸ Carla E. Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs, and Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, contributed to this section. See CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Carla E. Humud.

¹¹⁹ Russian military involvement in Syria dates back to the 1950s. Former Syrian President Hafez al Asad (1971-2000) hosted Soviet military and economic advisers. Soviet and Russian naval forces have accessed a facility at the Syrian port of Tartus since the early 1970s, using it as a logistical hub to enable Mediterranean operations. Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 4 (2013), pp. 795-823; and Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy*, Carnegie Endowment, February 2013.

¹²⁰ Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. and Russia Reach Deal to Destroy Syria's Chemical Arms," *New York Times*, September 14, 2013; and Paul F. Walker, "Syrian Chemical Weapons Destruction: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead," *Arms Control Today*, December 2014.

¹²¹ Paul Stronski, "Russia's Fight in Syria Reflects the Kremlin's Fears at Home," Reuters, September 29, 2015; Ekaterina Stepanova, *Russia's Policy on Syria After the Start of Military Engagement*, PONARSEurasia, February 2016; and Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, "Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria," RAND, 2019.

¹²² Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," *Military Review*, January 2018; and Eugene Rumer, "Russia, the Indispensable Nation in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, October 31, 2019.

ISIS/ISIL), who could then broaden their appeal to Muslim populations inside Russia and neighboring Central Asia.¹²³

Russian authorities also may have viewed the Syria intervention as a way to reassert Russia's global influence after facing heavy international criticism and sanctions for its invasion of Ukraine.¹²⁴ By intervening in Syria, Moscow could demonstrate its ability to project military power, test existing and new capabilities, and make Russia a key diplomatic player.¹²⁵

Since 2015, Russia has sought a longer-term security presence in Syria. It concluded agreements with Damascus to maintain a military presence at the Tartus naval facility and Hmeimim airbase in Latakia. Russia maintains a force of reportedly 3,000-5,000 troops at its bases, supported by some 20-50 combat aircraft and numerous attack and transport helicopters, as well as air defense systems.¹²⁶ The Russian Navy's Mediterranean Squadron also has been reestablished, furthering Russia's ability to project power in the region.¹²⁷

Russia's military intervention in support of Asad's government has helped pro-Asad forces retake control of much of the territory the regime lost after 2011. Russia's intervention helped stabilize the Asad regime's control of Damascus and much of western Syria, including the city of Aleppo. Russian officials have asserted that operations to secure the surrender of opposition groups in different parts of Syria have been consistent with cease-fire and de-escalation agreements allowing operations against terrorist targets. (Russia shares the Syrian government's position that all armed groups opposed to the government are terrorists.) Russia also has supported or created local Syrian proxies (often former rebels) and deployed military police to help enforce cease-fires. Russia also worked to modernize Syria's armed forces, including through the creation of a new 5th Assault Corps.¹²⁸

¹²³ Pavel Baev, "Why Russia Is Failing the 'Syria Test' for Counterterrorism Cooperation with the West," PONARS Eurasia, May 2018; and Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Russian Way of War in Syria: Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism," in *Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, eds. Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller, and Aaron Stein (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), pp. 15-34 (hereinafter, volume cited as Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, *Russia's War in Syria*).

¹²⁴ Joshua Yaffa, "Putin, Syria, and Why Moscow Has Gone War-Crazy," *New Yorker*, October 14, 2016; Dmitriy Frolovskiy, "What Putin Really Wants in Syria," *Foreign Policy*, February 1, 2019; and Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Comeback Isn't Stopping with Syria," *New York Times*, November 12, 2019.

¹²⁵ In addition to testing new military systems and capabilities, Russia's Syrian deployment has given its officer corps considerable operational experience, with most senior officers rotating through Syria. It also has served as a testing ground for new strategies. Dmitry Adamsky, "Russian Lessons from the Syrian Operation and the Culture of Military Innovation," Marshall Center, February 2020; Michael Kofman, "Syria and the Russian Armed Forces: An Evaluation of Moscow's Military Strategy and Operational Performance," in Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, *Russia's War in Syria*; and Seth G. Jones, "Russian Goals and Strategy," in *Moscow's War in Syria*, ed. Seth G. Jones (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2020), pp. 7-17 (hereinafter, volume cited as Jones, *Moscow's War in Syria*).

¹²⁶ These numbers do not include personnel from various Russian private military companies. Brian Katz and Nicholas Harrington, "The Military Campaign," in Jones, *Moscow's War in Syria*, p. 21.

¹²⁷ Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's Naval Strategy in the Mediterranean," Marshall Center, July 2019; and Igor Delanoë, "Russian Naval Forces in the Syrian War," in Hamilton, Miller, and Stein, *Russia's War in Syria*, pp. 111-126.

¹²⁸ Russia has struggled to create an independent Syrian proxy force amidst competition with the Asad regime and Iran. Neil Hauer, "Russia's Military Police Face Their Toughest Challenge Yet in North Syria," *Middle East Institute*, November 21, 2019; Alexey Khlebnikov, "Russian and Syrian Military Reform: Challenges and Opportunities," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 26, 2020; Anton Mardasov and Kirill Semyonov, "Russian Operation Goes 'Offshore' in Syria," *Riddle*, August 17, 2020; and Anton Lavrov, "The Efficiency of the Syrian Armed Forces: An Analysis of Russian Assistance," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 26, 2020.

Observers have accused Russian forces in Syria of intentionally bombing civilian targets, including hospitals and humanitarian aid convoys.¹²⁹ Russia also has supported the Syrian government's denials that it used chemical weapons against civilian populations; it accused opposition forces of such actions and called into question the methods and results of investigations into alleged chemical attacks.¹³⁰

In 2019, the Russian government supported the drawdown of U.S. military forces from northern Syria and the Syrian government's return to the region.¹³¹ After an October 2019 Turkish military incursion into Kurdish-controlled territory in northern Syria, Russia helped broker an agreement between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian government to deploy government forces to the region. Today, Russian forces participate in joint patrols with Turkish and Syrian forces in parts of northern Syria to monitor the agreement.¹³²

In the winter of 2019-2020, Russia backed a Syrian government offensive in the northwestern province of Idlib, the only area of Syria still under the control of armed opposition groups actively seeking the removal of Asad. In February 2020, some observers speculated that attacks resulting in the deaths of dozens of Turkish soldiers may have been conducted in part by Russian forces or with Russian involvement.¹³³ In March 2020, Russia and Turkey agreed to a cease-fire in the area, the establishment of a security corridor, and joint Russian-Turkish military patrols.¹³⁴

Moscow also has played a leading diplomatic role in the Syria conflict. It seeks to resolve the conflict on terms favorable to Asad while conducting a complex balancing act that accommodates the interests of Damascus, Iran, and pro-regime forces, on the one hand, and other regional actors—in particular Israel, Turkey, and Syrian Kurds—on the other.¹³⁵ Russia has used its veto power at the U.N. Security Council to restrict the reauthorization of cross-border humanitarian assistance into Syria, which Russia argues should be funneled through the central government in Damascus.¹³⁶

Power Projection

Since 2008, Russia has undertaken an extensive military modernization effort. Military improvements have bolstered Russia's ability to project military power in support of foreign

¹²⁹ Louisa Loveluck and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Why Did They Wait To Kill Us?": How the Attack on the Aid Convoy Near Aleppo Unfolded," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2016; Evan Hill and Christiaan Triebert, "12 Hours, 4 Syrian Hospitals Bombed. One Culprit: Russia," *New York Times*, October 13, 2019; and Danika Newlee, "The Punishment Campaign," in Jones, *Moscow's War in Syria*, pp. 41-51.

¹³⁰ Richard Perez-Pena, "In a Chemical Weapons Debate, Russia Tries to Change the Subject," *New York Times*, June 26, 2018; Nawal al-Maghafi, "How Chemical Weapons Have Helped Bring Assad Close to Victory," *BBC News*, October 15, 2018; and U.S. Department of State, "The Russian and Assad Regime's False Allegations on Chemical Weapons Use in Aleppo," December 7, 2018.

¹³¹ Ben Hubbard et al., "In Syria, Russia Is Pleased to Fill an American Void," *New York Times*, updated October 17, 2019; and Jonathan Spyer, "Putin Is the New King of Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2019.

¹³² Kareem Fahim, Sarah Dadouch, and Will England, "Russia Patrolling Between Turkish and Syrian Forces After U.S. Troops Withdraw," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2019; and Tom Balmforth and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "More Russian Military Police Arrive in Syria Under Peace Deal," Reuters, October 25, 2019.

¹³³ Metin Gurcan, "Deciphering Turkey's Darkest Night in Syria," *Al Monitor*, February 28, 2020.

¹³⁴ Reuters, "First Russian-Turkish Patrol on Syrian Highway Cut Short by Protests," March 15, 2020.

¹³⁵ Jamie Dettmer, "Russia Now Juggling Challenges of War-Wracked Syria," *Voice of America*, January 4, 2019; Carol R. Saivetz, "Russia Might Regret the U.S. Drawdown in Syria," *Lawfare*, April 14, 2019; and Brian Katz, "The Diplomatic Campaign," in Jones, *Moscow's War in Syria*, pp. 52-63.

¹³⁶ Edith M. Lederer, "Russia and China Veto Cross-Border Aid to Syria's Northwest," Associated Press, July 7, 2020.

policy objectives. Russia can both dominate its immediate neighbors militarily and deploy expeditionary forces to conflict zones, such as in Syria.¹³⁷

Russia's military reforms have included an emphasis on recruiting professional soldiers, increasing overall military readiness, and improving interoperability and command and control among military branches. In addition, the reforms have focused on four areas that increase Russia's ability to deploy power quickly and efficiently in multiple strategic directions.¹³⁸ First, Russia has devoted efforts to streamlining and improving command and control structures to enhance interoperability and coordination among service branches and to increase responsiveness.¹³⁹ Second, Russia has made the development of precision-strike capabilities central to its military plans. As a result, it has developed subsonic and hypersonic weapons that can be launched from a variety of platforms and increased the accuracy of artillery by integrating information and reconnaissance into targeting.¹⁴⁰ Third, Russian military reforms have focused on modernizing older Soviet- and Russian-era systems and deploying newer designs.¹⁴¹ These reforms have increased the share of modern equipment across all branches of the military. Fourth, Russia has increased its ability to deploy rapid-response forces. Russia's Airborne, Marine Infantry, and *Spetsnaz* units receive priority for funding, professional recruitment, and political support.¹⁴²

To many observers, Russia's rapid-response forces are helping drive a strategy of *limited action*, the pursuit of defined objectives by small, well-supported military task forces. This strategy is based in part on the recognition that Russia lacks the strategic air and sea transport capabilities needed to sustain larger expeditionary forces.¹⁴³

At the same time, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reinforced the importance to the Russian military of heavy, armored formations for nearby land operations. Many of these units are located in Russia's Western and Southern Military Districts bordering Europe and the Caucasus (see **Figure 4**). Observers note the concentration of these units may reflect Russia's expectations regarding the type and location of future conflicts.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ For more, see CRS In Focus IF11589, *Russian Armed Forces: Capabilities*, by Andrew S. Bowen.

¹³⁸ CRS In Focus IF11603, *Russian Armed Forces: Military Modernization and Reforms*, by Andrew S. Bowen.

¹³⁹ Greg Whisler, "Strategic Command and Control in the Russian Armed Forces: Untangling the General Staff, Military Districts, and Service Main Commands," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2020), pp. 237-258.

¹⁴⁰ Roger N. McDermott and Tor Bukkvoll, "Tools of Future Wars—Russia Is Entering the Precision-Strike Regime," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2018), pp. 191-213; and Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, "The Russian Reconnaissance Fire Complex Comes of Age," Changing Character of War Centre, May 2018.

¹⁴¹ Russian Ministry of Defense, "Russian Defense Minister General of the Army Sergei Shoigu Holds Teleconference with Leadership of Armed Forces," December 25, 2020.

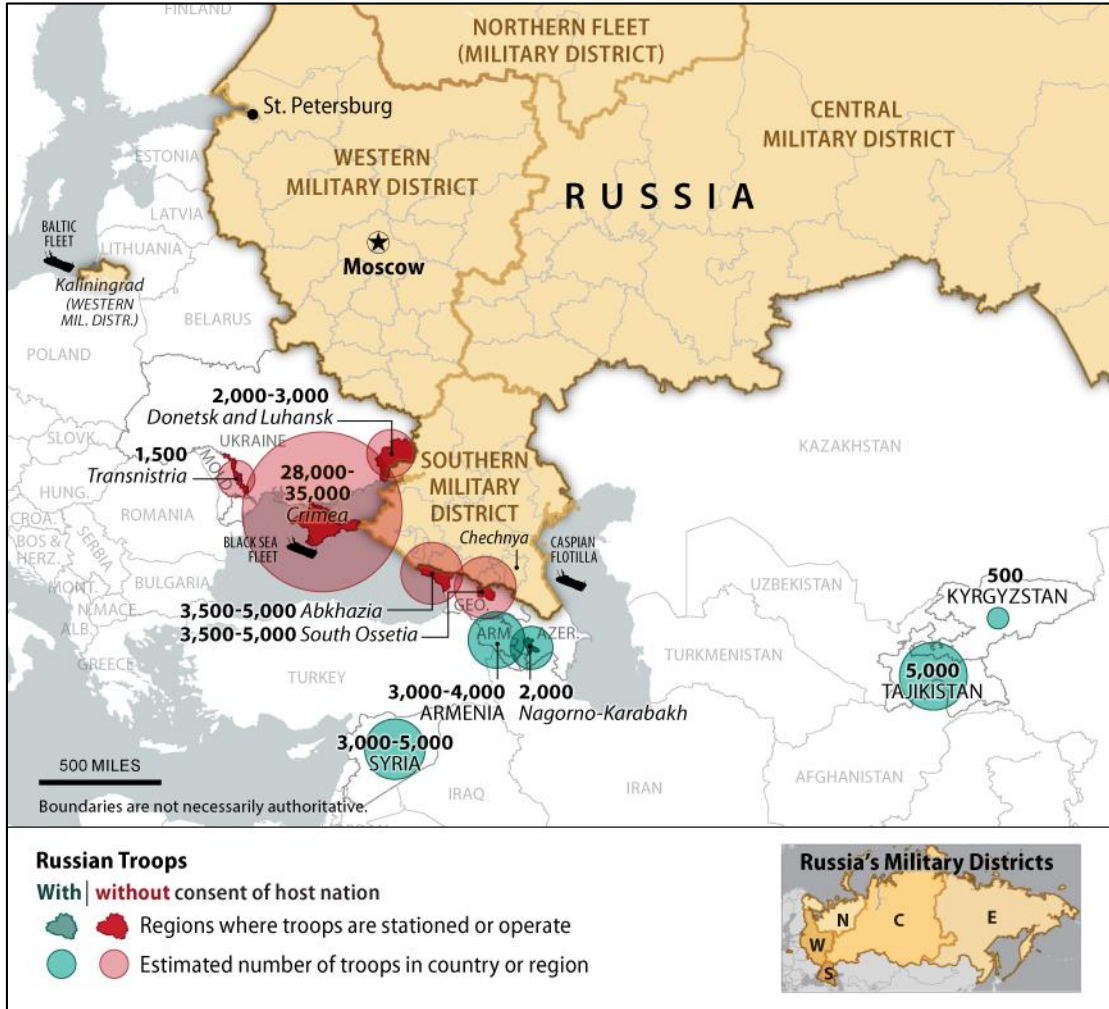
¹⁴² Jorgen Elfving, "The Tanks Are Coming: Russia Introduces Tank Units to Airborne Forces and Naval Infantry," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 4, 2018; Michael Kofman, "Rethinking the Structure and Role of Russia's Airborne Forces," Changing Character of War Centre, January 2019; and Mark Galeotti, "Spetsnaz: Operational Intelligence, Political Warfare, and Battlefield Role," Marshall Center, February 2020.

¹⁴³ This strategy is built upon Russia's lessons in Syria and, to a lesser extent, Ukraine. Michael Kofman, "Raiding and International Brigandry: Russia's Strategy for Great Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, June 14, 2018; Roger McDermott, "Gerasimov Unveils Russia's 'Strategy of Limited Actions,'" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 6, 2019; Dara Massicot, "Anticipating a New Russian Military Doctrine in 2020: What It Might Contain and Why It Matters," *War on the Rocks*, September 9, 2019; Dmitry Adamsky, "Russian Lesson from the Syrian Operation and the Culture of Military Innovation," Marshall Center, February 2020; and Samuel Charap, "Moscow's Calibrated Coercion in Ukraine and Russian Strategic Culture," Marshall Center, September 2020.

¹⁴⁴ Many of these units are located deep inside Russia, making deployments noticeable and requiring significant transport resources. Roger N. McDermott, "Deciphering the Lessons Learned by the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine,

Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave wedged between Poland and Lithuania, is a key strategic territory for Russia, allowing the country to project military power into NATO’s northern flank. The territory has a heavy military presence, including Russia’s Baltic Fleet and two airbases. Russia also has deployed 9K720 Iskander-M short-range ballistic missiles to Kaliningrad and is upgrading its current land forces there into a new division.¹⁴⁵

Figure 4. Russia’s Military Presence Abroad



Sources: Created by CRS. Troop estimates based on official and unofficial sources; citations available upon request. Boundary data from the U.S. Department of State, Esri, the U.S. interagency Humanitarian Information Unit, the U.N.-operated Humanitarian Data Exchange, and other sources.

Russia deploys forces abroad in regions of neighboring Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova without the consent of these governments (see “Use of Force and Military Power,” above). In addition,

2014-2017,” in *Russia’s Military Strategy and Doctrine*, eds. Glen E. Howard and Matthew Czekaj (Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2019), pp. 345-378; and Konrad Muzyka, “Russian Forces in the Western Military District,” CNA, December 2020 (hereinafter, Muzyka, “Russian Forces”).

¹⁴⁵ Reuters, “Russia Deploys Iskander Nuclear-Capable Missiles to Kaliningrad,” February 5, 2018; Reuters, “Russia Adds Firepower to Kaliningrad Exclave Citing NATO Threat,” December 7, 2020; and Muzyka, “Russian Forces,” pp. 42-51.

Russia stations military troops by consent on the territory of CSTO member Armenia, which hosts some 3,000-4,000 Russian troops at the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri and a contingent of fighters and helicopters at an air base in Erebuni. Armenia has agreements with Russia on a joint air defense system and a combined group of forces.¹⁴⁶

In 2020, Russia deployed almost 2,000 military personnel to serve as peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, a region with a majority-Armenian population that has sought to secede from Azerbaijan. Russia deployed its forces with the consent of Azerbaijan and local officials as part of an agreement to end the autumn 2020 war between Azerbaijan and Armenian/Nagorno-Karabakh forces, which were defending Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories.¹⁴⁷

In Central Asia, Russia maintains the 201st Military Base in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, with about 5,000 troops and helicopter support. Russia also maintains a small aviation base of about 500 support staff and ground attack fighters in Kant, Kyrgyzstan.¹⁴⁸

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia adopted an increasingly aggressive posture of air and sea patrols. Although Russia resumed long-range bomber patrols in 2007, the frequency of these patrols and Russia's ability to conduct such operations have increased dramatically in recent years. U.S. and allied fighter jets have intercepted Russian aircraft flying near or into NATO members' airspace on numerous occasions, including near U.S. airspace.¹⁴⁹ Russian fighters also have intercepted U.S. and allied flights and shipping in international territory or near Russian airspace and territorial waters.¹⁵⁰ Russia routinely conducts unsafe and dangerous maneuvers during these interceptions, including flying dangerously close or "buzzing" U.S. warships and aircraft.¹⁵¹

Russia also conducts aggressive naval maneuvers near U.S. and allied warships and territorial waters.¹⁵² Since 2008, Russia has prioritized modernization of its navy to conduct power-projection missions.¹⁵³ In addition to conducting long-range patrols, the Russian Navy has

¹⁴⁶ Emil Danielyan, "Russia, Armenia Agree to Boost Joint Military Force," *RFE/RL*, November 30, 2016; Eduard Abrahamyan, "Russia and Armenia Establish Joint Ground Forces," *CACI Analyst*, December 16, 2016; and IISS, *Military Balance 2020*, p. 208.

¹⁴⁷ CRS Report R46651, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, by Cory Welt and Andrew S. Bowen.

¹⁴⁸ IISS, *Military Balance 2020*, p. 208.

¹⁴⁹ Valerie Insinna, "British Air Force Charts a Rise in Russian Activity Around Baltic States," *Defense News*, July 18, 2019; Corey Dickstein, "U.S. Jets Intercept Russian Bombers off Alaskan Coast for 14th Time This Year," *Stars and Stripes*, October 20, 2020; and NATO, "NATO Intercepts Hundreds of Russian Military Jets in 2020," press release, December 28, 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Joseph Trevithick, "Russia Sent Three Types of Fighters to Intercept B-52s Flying Rare Mission into Sea of Okhotsk," *The Drive*, June 19, 2020; and Roger McDermott, "Russian Fighter Jets Intercept U.S. Strategic Bombers," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, September 16, 2020.

¹⁵¹ Ivan Watson and Sebastian Shukla, "Russian Fighter Jets 'Buzz' Warship in Black Sea, Photos Show," *CNN*, February 16, 2017; Elizabeth McLaughlin and Luis Martinez, "A Look at the U.S. Military's Close Calls with Russia in the Air and at Sea," *ABC News*, April 9, 2020; John Vandiver, "Russian Fighter Buzzes U.S. Aircraft for Second Time in Four Days," *Stars and Stripes*, April 20, 2020; and Gina Harkins, "Russian Jets Blocked U.S. Plane in Unsafe Maneuvers over Mediterranean, Navy Says," *Military.com*, May 27, 2020.

¹⁵² Atle Staalesen, "30 Russian Naval Vessels Stage Show of Force near Coast of Norway," *Barents Observer*, August 15, 2019; Reuters, "UK Navy Shadows Russian Warships After 'High Levels of Activity,'" March 26, 2020; Mike Baker, "'Are We Getting Invaded?' U.S. Boats Faced Russian Aggression near Alaska," *New York Times*, November 12, 2020; and *RFE/RL*, "Moscow Says U.S. Destroyer Forced Out of Russian Waters," November 24, 2020.

¹⁵³ Konstantin Bogdanov and Ilya Kramnik, "The Russian Navy in the 21st Century: The Legacy and the New Path," *CNA*, October 2018; and TASS, "Russian Navy Warship Returns Home After Arctic Deployment," November 6, 2020.

invested in long-range strike capabilities across multiple platforms; for example, it has conducted operations in the Mediterranean and reported plans to establish a naval logistics base in Port Sudan, Sudan, to sustain long-range missions.¹⁵⁴ Russia also has deployed its naval fleet further afield, including in the North Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Cuba.¹⁵⁵

Strategic and Snap Military Exercises

In recent years, Russia has increased the frequency of large-scale strategic exercises and short-notice snap drills, which bolster the readiness of its forces, increase interoperability, rehearse a variety of contingencies in its neighborhood, and provide experience in the rapid redeployment of large numbers of personnel and equipment. Russia conducts one large strategic-level exercise per year, focusing on the movement and coordination of forces and on command and control. This exercise rotates on a four-year basis among four Russian military districts: Western (*Zapad*), Southern (*Kavkaz*), Central (*Tsentr*), and Eastern (*Vostok*).

Russian military exercises involve all branches of the military and often emphasize joint operations among various branches. Sometimes, exercises involve 150,000 or more troops. Russia often hides the true size of exercises to remain below reporting requirements to which it agreed as a signatory to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Vienna Document, which requires foreign observers for exercises involving more than 13,000 troops. Russia's allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, as well as China, often contribute troops. Russia also conducts an annual strategic nuclear exercise called Thunder (*Grom*). In addition, Russia conducts smaller snap or surprise combat readiness inspections, generally at the military district level, which often involve high numbers of troops and various units, as well as numerous smaller unit-level exercises. For 2021, Russia plans to hold some 4,800 drills.

In addition to using these exercises to test units' readiness, mobilization procedures, equipment, and command systems, Russia uses them to demonstrate deterrence capabilities. Russia also used military exercises as cover to mass forces on the border of Ukraine for its invasion and occupation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014. As Russia has increased the frequency of exercises and drills, NATO members have expressed concerns about a repeat of tactics used during Russia's occupation of Crimea, with putative exercises acting as a precursor to an actual assault operation.

Sources: Diego Ruiz Palmer, *Theatre Operations, High Commands, and Large-Scale Exercises in Soviet and Russian Military Practice: Insights and Implications*, NATO Defense College, May 2018; Johan Norberg, *Training for War: Russia's Strategic-Level Military Exercises 2009-2017*, Swedish Defense Research Agency, October 2018; Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russia Tests Combat Readiness Despite Pandemic," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 23, 2020; Vira Ratsiborynska, Daivis Petraitis, and Valeriy Akimenko, *Russia's Strategic Exercises: Messages and Implications*, NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, July 2020; and TASS, "Russian Troops to Hold over 4,800 Drills Next Year," December 4, 2020.

Arctic

The Arctic region is one of Russia's top strategic priorities. As President Putin said in 2014, the Arctic "has traditionally been a sphere of [Russia's] special interest. It is a concentration of practically all aspects of national security—military, political, economic, technological, environmental and that of resources."¹⁵⁶ In March 2020, the Russian government adopted a new strategy document outlining plans to bolster Russia's Arctic military capabilities, strengthen its

¹⁵⁴ The agreement describes a relatively small Russian naval presence of some 300 Russian sailors and up to four naval ships. Stephen Blank, "New Missions and New Capabilities for Russia's Navy," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, November 18, 2019; Reuters, "Russia Sends Warships to Syria, Blames Ankara for Killing of Turkish Troops," February 28, 2020; Roger McDermott, "Russia's Navy Invests in Cruise Missile Capability," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 29, 2020; and Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Port Sudan Naval Base: A Power Play on the Red Sea," RUSI, December 7, 2020.

¹⁵⁵ TASS, "Russian Baltic Fleet Missile Frigate Enters Gulf of Aden on Anti-piracy Mission," August 7, 2018; Michael Weissenstein, Andrea Rodriguez, and Vladimir Isachenkov, "What's an Advanced Russian Warship Doing in Havana Harbor?" Associated Press, June 24, 2019; and TASS, "Russian Navy Warship Wraps Up 5-Month Atlantic Deployment," December 10, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ President of Russia, "Meeting of the Security Council on State Policy in the Arctic," April 21, 2014.

territorial sovereignty, and develop the region's resources and infrastructure.¹⁵⁷ The United States recognizes the potential for increased competition with Russia in the Arctic; each U.S. service branch has produced (or is in the process of producing) an Arctic strategy that addresses Russia's Arctic military power.¹⁵⁸

An increasingly ice-free Arctic has the potential to open up approximately 4,000 miles of Russia's northern coastline. Changes to the Arctic brought about by warming temperatures likely will allow more exploration for oil, gas, and minerals and could lead to increased commercial shipping. To effectively administer increased shipping traffic along an expected ice-free Northern Sea Route, Russia has been investing in the construction of ports and search-and-rescue facilities, some of which are referred to as *dual-use* (civilian-military) facilities.¹⁵⁹

Russia also has been upgrading or constructing new facilities in the Arctic and reactivating Soviet bases that fell into disuse with the end of the Cold War. The deterioration of relations between Russia and the West has led many Western analysts and officials to view military components of Russia's Arctic activities as part of an aggressive foreign policy and cause for concern.¹⁶⁰ In 2019, then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo criticized Russia's militarized approach to the international waters of the Northern Sea Route, noting that "Moscow already illegally demands other nations request permission to pass, requires Russian maritime pilots to be aboard foreign ships, and threatens to use military force to sink any that fail to comply with their demands."¹⁶¹

Russia's Northern Fleet, which covers much of the Arctic, traditionally has received priority in the Russian Navy. Since 2014, the Northern Fleet has represented an autonomous Joint Strategic Command; in 2021, the Northern Fleet officially received a status identical to that of Russia's other four military districts (see **Figure 4**).¹⁶² The Northern Fleet and the Pacific Fleet house Russia's submarine-based nuclear deterrent. The Kola Peninsula, where the Northern Fleet is based, is heavily defended to ensure Russia's second-strike capability.¹⁶³

In recent years, Russia has increased its air defense, naval, and ground forces in the Arctic region. This buildup includes the formation of two Arctic motorized rifle brigades (200th and 80th) and the

¹⁵⁷ *Basic Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic to 2035*, March 5, 2020. The Russian government also issued Arctic strategy documents in 2008 and 2013: *Foundations of the Russian Federation's State Policy in the Arctic Until 2020 and Beyond*, September 18, 2008; and *Russian Strategy of the Development of the Arctic Zone and the Provision of National Security Until 2020*, February 8, 2013.

¹⁵⁸ The U.S. Air Force released an Arctic strategy in July 2020, and the U.S. Department of the Navy released an Arctic strategy for the U.S. Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard in January 2021. The U.S. Army is expected to release an Arctic strategy in the near future. U.S. Department of the Air Force, *Arctic Strategy*, July 2020; and U.S. Department of the Navy, *A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic*, January 2021.

¹⁵⁹ Malte Humpert, "New Satellite Images Reveal Extent of Russia's Military and Economic Build-Up in the Arctic," *High North News*, May 3, 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Marlene Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Policy: A Power Strategy and Its Limits*, IFRI, March 2020; and Paul Goble, "As Arctic Wars, Moscow Increasingly Shifts Focus There from Trade to Security," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 20, 2020.

¹⁶¹ U.S. Department of State, "Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus," remarks by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, May 6, 2019.

¹⁶² TASS, "Russia's Defense Ministry Establishes Arctic Strategic Command," December 1, 2014; and Thomas Nilsen, "Putin Heightens the Strategic Role of the Northern Fleet," *Barents Observer*, June 8, 2020.

¹⁶³ Russian military strategy considers the region part of a "bastion defense" system that ensures Russia maintains the ability to retaliate in the event of a nuclear attack. Kristian Atland, "The Introduction, Adoption, and Implementation of Russia's 'Northern Strategic Bastion' Concept, 1992-1999," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 50, no. 4 (2007), pp. 499-528; and Matthew Melino, Heather A. Conley, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr. "The Ice Curtain: Modernization on the Kola Peninsula," CSIS, March 2020.

61st Naval Infantry Brigade. Nonetheless, relatively limited forces still cover the region from Murmansk to St. Petersburg.¹⁶⁴

Private Military Companies

One notable area of growth in Russia's global presence is the rise and deployment of so-called private military companies (PMCs), such as the Wagner Group, which the U.S. Treasury Department characterizes as a "Russian Ministry of Defense proxy force" allegedly financed by Putin colleague Yevgeniy Prigozhin.¹⁶⁵ Observers consider PMCs such as the Wagner Group to have close ties to the Russian government despite being illegal under Russian law.¹⁶⁶ Analysts have cited several possible motivations for Russia's use of PMCs to conduct security policy, including cost savings, tactical gains (speed and surprise), plausible deniability, avoidance of military casualties, and unofficial personal and corporate enrichment opportunities.¹⁶⁷

The U.S. government has imposed sanctions on Prigozhin, the Wagner Group, and/or related individuals and entities for actions tied to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, U.S. election interference, and malicious cyber activities. Entities and individuals subject to U.S. sanctions for their connections to Prigozhin include those that conduct "dangerous and destabilizing operations" in countries such as Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, Libya, the Central African Republic, and Mozambique.¹⁶⁸

Observers note that unlike most modern Western private security companies, Russian PMCs conduct direct combat operations, in addition to training and asset-protection missions. Russian PMCs have been identified fighting in conflicts globally, including in the following countries:

- **Ukraine.** Media reports and analysts documented the presence of Russian PMCs conducting combat operations and overseeing separatist rebel forces during Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine.¹⁶⁹
- **Syria.** Russian PMCs reportedly played a considerable role supporting Russia's intervention in Syria.¹⁷⁰ In 2018, Russian PMC contractors and Syrian

¹⁶⁴ Mathieu Boulegue, *Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a "Low Tension" Environment*, Chatham House, June 2019; Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russian Strategic Decision-Making in a Nordic Crisis," Marshall Center, July 2019; and Katarzyna Zysk, *Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic: To What End?*, CNA, September 2020.

¹⁶⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Financier's Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity," July 15, 2020 (hereinafter, Treasury, "Treasury Targets Financier").

¹⁶⁶ CRS In Focus IF11650, *Russian Private Military Companies (PMCs)*, by Andrew S. Bowen. Also see Mike Giglio, "Inside the Shadow War Fought by Russian Mercenaries," *BuzzFeed News*, April 17, 2019; and Neil Hauer, "The Rise and Fall of a Russian Mercenary Army," *Foreign Policy*, October 6, 2019.

¹⁶⁷ Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-state Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2019), pp. 181-204; Candace Rondeaux, *Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare*, New America, November 2019; and Paul Stronski, "Implausible Deniability: Russia's Private Military Companies," Carnegie Endowment, June 2, 2020.

¹⁶⁸ Treasury, "Treasury Targets Financier"; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Increases Pressure on Russian Financier," September 23, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Alec Luhn, "Volunteers or Paid Fighters? The Vostok Battalion Looms Large in War with Kiev," *Guardian*, June 6, 2014; and Sergey Sukhankin, *Unleashing the PMCs and Irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas*, Jamestown Foundation, September 3, 2019.

¹⁷⁰ Sergey Sukhankin, *Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond*, Jamestown Foundation, September 18, 2019.

government-linked fighters attacked U.S. and allied forces inside Syria (see “Deconfliction in Syria,” below).

- **Libya.** Russian PMCs reportedly have conducted direct combat operations and training in support of the Libyan National Army movement. In 2020, Commander of U.S. Africa Command General Stephen Townsend testified to Congress that PMCs “with strong links to the Kremlin” were “leading the fight” for Libyan partner forces.¹⁷¹ In March 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for “the immediate removal [from Libya] of all foreign forces and mercenaries.”¹⁷²
- **Central African Republic (CAR).** Russian PMCs have provided security services, asset protection, and military training to the CAR government, including personal protection for the president, since about 2018.¹⁷³ Some 300 additional Russian “military instructors” reportedly have deployed to CAR at the government’s request and have participated in operations to free parts of the country from rebel control.¹⁷⁴ Media reports have documented PMCs’ presence at diamond mines and other natural-resource sites in the country.¹⁷⁵
- **Sudan.** Since 2018, Sudan has pursued increased military assistance from and security cooperation with Russia, including via Russian PMCs tied to Prigozhin, in exchange for commercial agreements “spanning some of Sudan’s most lucrative sectors such as oil, natural gas, agriculture, and gold.”¹⁷⁶
- **Mozambique.** In 2019, Wagner Group personnel reportedly deployed to Mozambique’s far north to train and support government forces against a local Islamist insurgency with ties to the Islamic State. The Wagner Group appeared to suffer serious losses and reportedly was no longer involved in such activity as of late 2020.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷¹ General Stephen Townsend also said Russian contractors in Libya had “almost certainly” downed an unarmed U.S. drone in late 2019. Testimony of General Stephen Townsend, Commander, United States Africa Command, in U.S. Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, *United States Africa Command and United States Southern Command*, hearings, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., January 30, 2020; U.S. Africa Command, “Russia and the Wagner Group Continued to Be Involved in Both Ground and Air Operations in Libya,” press release, July 24, 2020; and Harchaoui, “Pendulum.”

¹⁷² U.S. Department of State, “House of Representatives Vote on a Libyan Interim Government of National Unity,” March 10, 2021.

¹⁷³ A Russian national serves as the president’s national security adviser. U.N. Security Council, *Midterm Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2399*, U.N. doc. S/2018/729, July 23, 2018; and Leslie Minney, Rachel Sullivan, and Rachel Vandenbrink, “Amid the Central African Republic’s Search for Peace, Russia Steps In. Is China Next?” U.S. Institute for Peace, December 19, 2019.

¹⁷⁴ *BBC News*, “Russia Sends 300 Military Instructors to Central African Republic,” December 22, 2020; and Reuters, “Central African Republic Retakes Rebel Stronghold in North,” February 24, 2021.

¹⁷⁵ Sergey Sukhankin, “Russia’s Hired Guns in Africa,” European Council on Foreign Relations, November 12, 2018; Jack Margolin, “Paper Trails: How a Russia-Based Logistics Network Ties Together Russian Mining Companies and Military Contractors in Africa,” C4ADS, June 13, 2019; and Dionne Searcey, “Gems, Warlords, and Mercenaries: Russia’s Playbook in Central African Republic,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2019.

¹⁷⁶ Treasury, “Treasury Targets Financier”; and Reuters, “Russian Contractors Are Training the Army in Sudan, Says Moscow,” January 23, 2019.

¹⁷⁷ Pjotr Sauer, “In Push for Africa, Russia’s Wagner Mercenaries Are ‘Out of Their Depth’ in Mozambique,” *Moscow Times*, November 19, 2019; and Samuel Ramani, “Russia Takes Its Syrian Model of Counterinsurgency to Africa,” *RUSI Journal*, September 9, 2020.

Targeted Overseas Attacks

Elements of the Russian government have been accused of sponsoring targeted attacks against perceived political opponents, such as Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny and other adversaries, including overseas.¹⁷⁸ Journalists, human rights activists, politicians, whistleblowers, and others have been killed or have died under mysterious circumstances. Many attacks reportedly have been linked to Russia's military intelligence agency, commonly known as the GRU.¹⁷⁹ Alleged overseas assassinations include those of former Chechen leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in Qatar in 2004, former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006, Chechen fighters in Ukraine, and former Chechen military commander Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin in 2019.¹⁸⁰ Others, including British citizen Sergei Skripal, a former Russian military intelligence officer once imprisoned in Russia for allegedly working as a double agent for the United Kingdom (UK), have survived reported attacks.¹⁸¹

In 2020, media reports indicated U.S. intelligence officials had “concluded” the GRU had provided payments, or “bounties,” to Taliban-linked militants to attack U.S. and other international forces in Afghanistan.¹⁸² Trump Administration officials rejected the reporting's accuracy and decried what they characterized as intelligence leaks, without fully denying the substance of the media reports. Reports suggested different U.S. intelligence agencies may have assigned varying levels of confidence to related intelligence information, in part based on their separate collection capabilities.¹⁸³

Influence Operations and Cyber Operations

Influence Operations¹⁸⁴

In recent years, Russia has used an array of tools, including cyber capabilities and social media, to influence political discourse, policymaking, and electoral processes in the United States and elsewhere, including countries in Europe and Africa (for more on the United States, see “U.S.

¹⁷⁸ CRS Insight IN11596, *Russia: Poisoning of Alexei Navalny and U.S. Policy*, by Cory Welt; and Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression*, Freedom House, February 2021, pp. 27-30.

¹⁷⁹ CRS Report R46616, *Russian Military Intelligence: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew S. Bowen.

¹⁸⁰ See, for example, Luke Harding, *A Very Expensive Poison: The Assassination of Alexander Litvinenko and Putin's War with the West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017); Shaun Walker, “Russia Blamed for Attack on Chechen Pair Who Fought with Ukrainians,” *Guardian*, October 31, 2017; Michael Schwartz, “Russia Ordered a Killing That Made No Sense. Then the Assassin Started Talking,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2019; Bellingcat, “‘V’ For ‘Vympel’: FSB's Secretive Department ‘V’ Behind Assassination of Georgian Asylum Seeker in Germany,” February 17, 2020; and Vladimir Esipov and Markian Ostapchuk, “Austria: Chechen Dissident Murdered in Vienna,” *DW*, July 10, 2020.

¹⁸¹ CRS In Focus IF10962, *Russia, the Skripal Poisoning, and U.S. Sanctions*, by Dianne E. Rennack and Cory Welt; and Michael Schwartz, “How a Poisoning in Bulgaria Exposed Russian Assassins in Europe,” *New York Times*, December 22, 2019.

¹⁸² Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Schwartz, “Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2020.

¹⁸³ Gordon Lubold and Warren P. Strobel, “NSA Differed from CIA, Others on Russia Bounty Intelligence,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2020; and Charlie Savage et al., “New Administration Memo Seeks to Foster Doubts About Suspected Russian Bounties,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2020.

¹⁸⁴ Sarah E. Garding, Analyst in European Affairs, contributed to this section. Also see CRS In Focus IF10771, *Defense Primer: Information Operations*, by Catherine A. Theohary; and CRS Report R45142, *Information Warfare: Issues for Congress*, by Catherine A. Theohary.

Election Interference,” below). Many states have grappled for years with Russian (or, in Cold War times, Soviet) influence operations designed to interfere in their domestic politics.¹⁸⁵ Some observers contend Russia views influence operations, including disinformation and propaganda, as an important tool in foreign policy and as part of Russia’s broader competition with its perceived rivals.¹⁸⁶ Some assert that Russian authorities believe Russia itself is the target of domestic meddling by democratic foreign powers and hence seeks to interfere with political processes in those countries.¹⁸⁷ The goals of Russian influence operations may include undermining social cohesion, sowing distrust in democracy and Western institutions, and boosting political parties and politicians who support closer ties with Russia or promote policies that align with Russian interests.¹⁸⁸

Influence operations often are produced or disseminated by Russian news sources and on social media.¹⁸⁹ Russian government-funded television and online news outlets *RT* and *Sputnik* are considered to be among the key vectors aimed at foreign audiences and have a local-language presence in dozens of countries.¹⁹⁰ Russia also relies on private actors, such as the Internet Research Agency, to conduct influence operations.¹⁹¹

At the same time, observers have noted that increasingly prevalent “homegrown” disinformation campaigns sometimes can promote narratives that serve Russia’s interest or propagate Russian narratives or disinformation.¹⁹² In some cases, it may be difficult to trace the origins of narratives;

¹⁸⁵ See, for example, U.S. Department of State, *Active Measures: A Report on the Substance and Process of Anti-U.S. Disinformation and Propaganda Campaigns*, August 1986; and Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

¹⁸⁶ Michael Connell and Sarah Vogler, “Russia’s Approach to Cyber Warfare,” CNA, March 2017; Roland Heickero, *Emerging Cyber Threats and Russian Views on Information Warfare and Information Operations*, Swedish Defense Research Agency, March 2020; and Ofer Fridman, “‘Information War’ as the Russian Conceptualization of Strategic Communications,” *RUSI Journal*, vol. 165, no. 1 (2020), pp. 44-53.

¹⁸⁷ Clint Watts, “Russia’s Active Measures Architecture: Task and Purpose,” Alliance for Securing Democracy, May 22, 2018; and Tracey German, “Harnessing Protest Potential: Russian Strategic Culture and the Colored Revolutions,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2020), pp. 541-563.

¹⁸⁸ See, for example, Alina Polyakova and Spencer P. Boyer, *The Future of Political Warfare: Russia, the West, and the Coming Age of Global Digital Competition*, Brookings Institution, March 2018; Todd C. Helmus et al., *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, RAND Corporation, April 2018; Erik Brattberg and Tim Maurer, *Russian Election Interference: Europe’s Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks*, Carnegie Endowment, May 2018; Luke Harding and Jason Burke, “Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa,” *Guardian*, June 11, 2019; and Michael Weiss and Pierre Vaux, “Russia Is Using Undercover Racists to Exploit Africa’s Anti-racist Political Revolt,” *Daily Beast*, September 8, 2020.

¹⁸⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, August 2020. On pertinent U.S. regulations, see CRS In Focus IF11759, *Foreign Government-Sponsored Broadcast Programming*, by Dana A. Scherer.

¹⁹⁰ Jim Rutenberg, “*RT*, *Sputnik*, and Russia’s New Theory of War,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 2017; Elizabeth Flock, “After a Week of Russian Propaganda, I Was Questioning Everything,” *PBS Newshour*, May 2, 2018; Robert W. Orttung and Elizabeth Nelson, “*Russia Today*’s Strategy and Effectiveness on YouTube,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* vol. 35, no. 2 (2019), pp. 77-92; Gordon Ramsay and Sam Robertshaw, *Weaponising News: RT, Sputnik, and Targeted Disinformation*, King’s College London, 2019; and Mona Elswah and Philip N. Howard, “‘Anything That Causes Chaos’: The Organizational Behavior of *Russia Today* (*RT*),” *Journal of Communication* 70 (2020), pp. 623-645.

¹⁹¹ Adrian Chen, “The Agency,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015; Neil MacFarquhar, “Inside the Russian Troll Factory: Zombies and a Breakneck Pace,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2018; Nicholas Thompson, “How Russian Trolls Used Meme Warfare to Divide Americans,” *Wired*, December 17, 2018; Mary Ilyushina, “Russia’s ‘Troll Factory’ Is Alive and Well in Africa,” *CNN*, November 1, 2019; and Davey Alba, “How Russia’s Troll Farm Is Changing Tactics Before the Fall Election,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2020.

¹⁹² Matt Apuzzo and Adam Satariano, “Russia Is Targeting Europe’s Elections. So Are Far-Right Copycats,” *New York*

untangle the interplay between Russian-backed and homegrown disinformation; and identify actors involved in amplifying these narratives through social media, blogs, and messaging services.

Russian influence operations often appear during electoral cycles in targeted countries, but they also occur on an ongoing basis. For example, various Russian media accounts attributed the 2019 fire at France's Notre Dame Cathedral to an arson attack by Islamists, the Yellow Vest protesters, Ukraine, and the French government itself (French officials said the fire accidentally broke out during construction).¹⁹³ Another frequently cited example is a 2016 report, promoted by Russian media, that a 13-year-old Russian-German girl had been raped by migrants in Germany. Before being proven untrue, the story provoked demonstrations in Germany against migrants and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's migration policies.¹⁹⁴

U.S. government and media reports have linked Russia to influence operations related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Goals of such operations appear to include undermining confidence in Western vaccines and, possibly, boosting the profile of Russia's own vaccine, Sputnik V.¹⁹⁵

Cyberespionage and Cyberattacks

Russia maintains a robust cyber capability, with units spread across multiple security and intelligence agencies.¹⁹⁶ GRU units and officers have been identified as responsible for numerous operations, including interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election (see "U.S. Election Interference," below). The SVR and the FSB also have cyber capabilities, although reporting suggests these agencies generally operate more clandestinely than the GRU.¹⁹⁷ Russia reportedly also uses civilian hackers, allowing them to conduct their own self-interested cyber activities in addition to supporting Russian government operations.¹⁹⁸

Times, May 12, 2019; Seva Gunitzky, "Democracies Can't Blame Putin for Their Disinformation Problem," *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2020; Matthew Rosenberg and Julian E. Barnes, "A Bible Burning, a Russian News Agency and a Story Too Good to Check Out," *New York Times*, August 12, 2020; and Jessica Brandt and Amber Frankland, *Leaks, Lies, and Altered Tape: Russia's Maturing Information Manipulation Playbook*, Alliance for Securing Democracy, October 14, 2020.

¹⁹³ EU East Stratcom Task Force, "Building Blocks of Disinformation: Case of Notre Dame," April 18, 2019.

¹⁹⁴ Adam Taylor, "An Alleged Rape Sparked Tensions Between Russia and Germany. Now Police Say It Was Fabricated," *Washington Post*, January 29, 2016; and Ben Nimmo and Nika Aleksejeva, "Lisa 2.0: How Pro-Kremlin Media in Germany Have Been Using a New Fake to Justify an Old One," Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council, March 11, 2017.

¹⁹⁵ Zach Dorfman, "How Countries Amplify COVID Disinformation," *Axios*, February 17, 2021; Bret Schafer et al., "Influence-enza: How Russia, China, and Iran Have Shaped and Manipulated Coronavirus Vaccine Narratives," Alliance for Securing Democracy, March 6, 2021; and Michael R. Gordon and Dustin Volz, "Russian Disinformation Campaign Aims to Undermine Confidence in Pfizer, Other Covid-19 Vaccines, U.S. Officials Say," *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2021.

¹⁹⁶ For more, see CRS In Focus IF11718, *Russian Cyber Units*, by Andrew S. Bowen; Andy Greenberg, *Sandworm: A New Era of Cyberwar and the Hunt for the Kremlin's Most Dangerous Hackers* (New York: Doubleday, 2019), hereinafter, Greenberg, *Sandworm*; and Bilyana Lilly and Joe Cheravitch, "The Past, Present, and Future of Russia's Cyber Strategy and Forces," in *12th International Conference on Cyber Conflict*, eds. T. Jančárková et al. (Tallinn: NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, 2020).

¹⁹⁷ CRS Report R46616, *Russian Military Intelligence: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Andrew S. Bowen; and Mike Eckel, "The Return of Cozy Bear: Russian Hackers in the Crosshairs of Western Intelligence Agencies—Again," *RFE/RL*, July 18, 2020.

¹⁹⁸ Andrew E. Kramer, "How Russia Recruited Elite Hackers for Its Cyberwar," *New York Times*, December 29, 2016; U.S. Department of Justice, "U.S. Charges Russian FSB Officers and Their Criminal Conspirators for Hacking Yahoo and Millions of Email Accounts," press release, March 15, 2017; and Liliya Yapparova, "The FSB's Personal

Russia uses cyber operations to conduct espionage and influence operations and for other purposes. In the United States, Russian cyber operations reportedly have targeted a wide range of critical infrastructure networks, government entities, and nongovernmental organizations, as well as political parties, figures, and organizations.¹⁹⁹ In addition to the United States, national targets of prominent attacks have included Estonia,²⁰⁰ France,²⁰¹ Georgia,²⁰² Germany,²⁰³ Ukraine,²⁰⁴ and the UK.²⁰⁵ Other operations have occurred in countries such as Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Norway.²⁰⁶

Cyber operations targeting government institutions, political parties, politicians, international organizations, and think tanks often are designed to access and retrieve private information (e.g., email communications, campaign documents), which then can be used, possibly in conjunction with false information, in influence campaigns to discredit or undermine political targets. Politically motivated cyber operations also can seek to restrict access to government-related computer networks or to alter information within those networks.

Additional prominent cyber operations attributed to Russia include the following:

- a 2017 malware attack, commonly known as *NotPetya*, which infected computers globally and caused an estimated \$10 billion in damage;²⁰⁷
- a multiyear operation uncovered in 2018 that inserted malware into hundreds of thousands of home and office routers and network devices worldwide;²⁰⁸
- cyberattacks on the opening ceremony of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics in South Korea;²⁰⁹

Hackers,” *Meduza*, December 12, 2019.

¹⁹⁹ See, for example, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), “Russian Government Cyber Activity Targeting Energy and Other Critical Infrastructure Sectors,” March 15, 2018; and CISA, “Russian State-Sponsored Advanced Persistent Threat Actor Compromises U.S. Government Targets,” October 22, 2020.

²⁰⁰ Joshua Davis, “Hackers Take Down the Most Wired Country in Europe,” *Wired*, August 21, 2007.

²⁰¹ Rick Noack, “Cyberattack on French Presidential Front-Runner Bears Russian ‘Fingerprints,’ Research Group Says,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 2017; and Kim Willsher and Jon Henley, “Emmanuel Macron’s Campaign Hacked on Eve of French Election,” *Guardian*, May 6, 2017.

²⁰² Andy Greenberg, “The U.S. Blames Russia’s GRU for Sweeping Cyberattacks in Georgia,” *Wired*, February 20, 2020.

²⁰³ *Der Spiegel*, “The Breach from the East,” March 5, 2018; and Katrin Bennhold, “Merkel Is ‘Outraged’ by Russian Hack but Struggling to Respond,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2020.

²⁰⁴ Margaret Coker and Paul Sonne, “Ukraine: Cyberwar’s Hottest Front,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 2015; Kim Zetter, “Inside the Cunning, Unprecedented Hack of Ukraine’s Power Grid,” *Wired*, March 3, 2016; and Laurens Cerulus, “How Ukraine Became a Test Bed for Cyberweaponry,” *Politico*, February 14, 2019.

²⁰⁵ David D. Kirkpatrick, “British Cybersecurity Chief Warns of Russian Hacking,” *New York Times*, November 14, 2017; and Kevin Collier, “It Looks Like Russian Hackers Are Still at It in 2019,” *BuzzFeed News*, January 23, 2019.

²⁰⁶ Georgi Gotev, “At EU Summit, Borissov Deplores ‘Terrible’ Russian Cyberattacks on Bulgaria,” *Euractiv*, October 18, 2018; Chris Bing, “APT28 Targeted Montenegro’s Government Before It Joined NATO, Researchers Say,” *Cyberscoop*, June 6, 2017; Eduard Kovacs and Maja Zivanovic, “Russia’s Fancy Bear Hacks Its Way into Montenegro,” *Balkan Insight*, March 5, 2018; Doug G. Ware, “Norway Says Russians Hacked Defense, Security Agencies,” UPI, February 3, 2017; and *BBC News*, “Norway Blames Russia for Cyber-Attack on Parliament,” October 13, 2020.

²⁰⁷ Andy Greenberg, “The Untold Story of NotPetya, the Most Devastating Cyberattack in History,” *Wired*, August 22, 2018.

²⁰⁸ CISA, “Russian State-Sponsored Cyber Actors Targeting Network Infrastructure Devices,” April 16, 2018; and CISA, “Cyber Actors Target Home and Office Routers and Networked Devices Worldwide,” May 25, 2018.

²⁰⁹ Andy Greenberg, “The Untold Story of the 2018 Olympics Cyberattack, the Most Deceptive Hack in History,”

- a 2018 hacking campaign against investigations by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the UK into the nerve agent attack against Sergei Skripal and his daughter;²¹⁰
- hacking attempts against World Anti-Doping Agency officials from 2014 to 2018 and again in 2019;²¹¹
- attempts in 2020 to steal COVID-19 vaccine research in Canada, the UK, and the United States;²¹² and
- a broad cyberespionage campaign, commonly referred to as Solarwinds, that gained access starting in 2020 to numerous U.S. business and government networks.²¹³

U.S. Election Interference²¹⁴

2016 U.S. Presidential Election²¹⁵

On January 6, 2017, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a declassified intelligence community (IC) assessment of Russian activities and intentions related to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The report stated that the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the National Security Agency had “high confidence” that President Putin “ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election” to “undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate [Hillary] Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency.”²¹⁶ The report also contended that the Russian government

Wired, October 17, 2019; and Tariq Panja, “After Doping Scandal, Russia Hacked the Olympics, U.S. and Britain Say,” *New York Times*, October 20, 2020.

²¹⁰ Ellen Nakashima, Michael Birnbaum, and William Booth, “U.S. and Its Allies Target Russian Cyber Spies with Indictments, Public Shaming,” *Washington Post*, October 4, 2018.

²¹¹ U.S. Department of Justice, “U.S. Charges Russian GRU Officers with International Hacking and Related Influence and Disinformation Operations,” press release, October 4, 2018; and Nicole Perlroth and Tariq Panja, “Microsoft Says Russians Hacked Antidoping Agency Computers,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2019.

²¹² National Cyber Security Centre, “Advisory: APT29 Targets COVID-19 Vaccine Development,” July 16, 2020; and National Security Agency, “NSA Teams with NCSC, CSE, DHS CISA to Expose Russian Intelligence Services Targeting COVID-19 Researchers,” press release, July 16, 2020.

²¹³ CRS Insight IN11559, *SolarWinds Attack—No Easy Fix*, by Chris Jaikaran; Ellen Nakashima and Craig Timberg, “Russian Government Hackers Are Behind a Broad Espionage Campaign That Has Compromised U.S. Agencies, Including Treasury and Commerce,” *Washington Post*, December 14, 2020; and CISA, “Advanced Persistent Threat Compromise of Government Agencies, Critical Infrastructure, and Private Sector Organizations,” December 17, 2020.

²¹⁴ On U.S. campaign finance and election security policy, see CRS Report R41542, *The State of Campaign Finance Policy: Recent Developments and Issues for Congress*, by R. Sam Garrett; and CRS Report R46146, *Campaign and Election Security Policy: Overview and Recent Developments for Congress*, coordinated by R. Sam Garrett.

²¹⁵ This section draws on CRS Insight IN10635, *Russia and the U.S. Presidential Election*, by Catherine A. Theohary and Cory Welt, available to congressional clients on request. For comprehensive redacted investigations of Russian activities discussed in this section, see U.S. Congress, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Russian Active Measures, Together with Minority Views*, 115th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Rept. 115-1110 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2019); U.S. Department of Justice, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, vol. 1, Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III, March 2019; and U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Together with Additional Views*, 5 vols., 116th Cong., 2nd sess., S.Rept. 116-290 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2020), hereinafter cited as Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Russian Active Measures Campaigns*.

²¹⁶ Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*, January 6, 2017 (hereinafter, ODNI, *Assessing Russian Activities*).

“aspired to help President-elect Trump’s election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to him.”

Allegations of Russian interference first appeared around June 2016.²¹⁷ As the U.S. intelligence community later stated, the Russian government illicitly collected and authorized the release of emails and documents of the Democratic National Committee and emails of Clinton’s campaign chairperson, John Podesta. The majority of released emails were disclosed by WikiLeaks, which allegedly received emails from Russian intelligence-connected sources. Other emails and materials were released by online personas allegedly linked to Russian intelligence.²¹⁸ These operations were alleged to be part of broader collection efforts against the Democratic Party.²¹⁹

Collection efforts also included Republican targets. However, then-FBI Director James Comey stated in a 2017 hearing that Russian hackers breached and exfiltrated data from “old domains” of the Republican National Committee (RNC) and investigators found no evidence that the current RNC or the Trump campaign were “successfully hacked.”²²⁰ No emails connected to either the RNC or the Trump campaign were released. The 2017 IC assessment stated that although Russia pursued Republican-affiliated targets, it “did not conduct a comparable disclosure campaign.”²²¹

A second element of Russia’s election interference was the targeting of state election systems. The IC assessment asserted that “Russian intelligence accessed elements of multiple state or local electoral boards.”²²² In 2017, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that “election-related networks, including websites, in 21 states were potentially targeted by Russian government cyber actors,” including “a small number [that] were successfully compromised.”²²³ Eventually, the Department of Justice, DHS, and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded that Russia had conducted reconnaissance operations against all 50 states’ election networks before the 2016 election.²²⁴ Although some state-level voter registration systems appear to have been breached, the IC

²¹⁷ Ellen Nakashima, “Russian Government Hackers Penetrated DNC, Stole Opposition Research on Trump,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 2016. Also see Greenberg, *Sandworm*, pp. 115-122; Ben Buchanan, *The Hacker and the State: Cyber Attacks and the New Normal of Geopolitics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), pp. 211-239; and David Shimer, *Rigged: America, Russia, and One Hundred Years of Electoral Interference* (New York: Knopf, 2020).

²¹⁸ Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Counterintelligence Threats and Vulnerabilities*, vol. 5 of *Russian Active Measures Campaigns*, pp. 172-173, 183-199, 207-215. Also see Thomas Rid, “How Russia Pulled Off the Biggest Election Hack in U.S. History,” *Esquire*, October 20, 2016; and *United States v. Netyksho et al.*, No. 18-cr-215, July 13, 2018.

²¹⁹ Other targets included other Clinton campaign staffers and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. On early reports, see SecureWorks Counter Threat Unit Intelligence, “Threat Group-4127 Targets Hillary Clinton Presidential Campaign,” June 16, 2016; and Joseph Menn, Dustin Volz, and Mark Hosenball, “Exclusive: FBI Probes Hacking of Democratic Congressional Group—Sources,” Reuters, July 29, 2016.

²²⁰ Elias Groll, “Russian Hacking Campaign Hits Republicans, Too,” *Foreign Policy*, August 12, 2016; and testimony of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director James Comey, in U.S. Congress, Senate Select Intelligence Committee, *Russian Intelligence Activities*, hearings, 115th Cong., 1st sess., January 10, 2017. Transcript available at <http://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-5017431>.

²²¹ ODNI, *Assessing Russian Activities*, p. 3.

²²² ODNI, *Assessing Russian Activities*, p. 3. For details, see Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure, with Additional Views*, vol. 1 of *Russian Active Measures Campaigns*.

²²³ Testimony of Jeanette Manfra and Dr. Samuel Liles, U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in U.S. Congress, Senate Select Intelligence Committee, *Addressing Threats to Election Infrastructure*, hearings, 115th Cong., 1st sess., June 21, 2017.

²²⁴ David E. Sanger and Katie Edmondson, “Russia Targeted Election Systems in All 50 States, Report Finds,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2019.

assessment said there was no evidence of tampering with vote tallies. No cases of access to voting tabulation systems have been reported.

A third element of the election interference campaign was social media-based propaganda. The IC assessment noted that the Russian government engaged in international influence efforts through state-run media and social media “trolls” for the purposes of promoting Trump and denigrating Clinton.²²⁵ Subsequent media, corporate, congressional, and Department of Justice investigations have stated that Russia’s influence operations, which extended past the presidential election, included social media campaigns that were issue-based and appeared “to focus on amplifying divisive social and political messages across the ideological spectrum—touching on topics from LGBT matters to race issues to immigration to gun rights.”²²⁶ Investigations also have concluded that Russian operations included efforts to organize political demonstrations in the United States, some of which allegedly were held.²²⁷

2018 U.S. Midterm and 2020 Presidential Elections

In advance of the 2018 U.S. midterm elections, the IC reported that Russia (as well as other foreign actors) “continue[d] to try to influence public sentiment and voter perceptions ... by spreading false information about political processes and candidates, lying about their own interference activities, disseminating propaganda on social media, and through other tactics.”²²⁸ The IC did not identify “any compromise of [U.S.] election infrastructure that would have prevented voting, changed vote counts, or disrupted the ability to tally votes.”²²⁹

In the run-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, reporting indicated Russia was continuing its election interference, primarily through influence operations.²³⁰ In September 2020, FBI Director Christopher Wray, supported by DHS and IC assessments, said Russia had “very active efforts” to interfere in the 2020 elections.²³¹ Subsequently, then-Director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency Christopher Krebs and various election infrastructure bodies issued a joint statement asserting there was no evidence that foreign interference had penetrated, altered, or interfered with voting systems and “the November 3rd election was the most secure in American history.”²³²

²²⁵ ODNI, *Assessing Russian Activities*, p. 2. For details, see Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Russia’s Use of Social Media, with Additional Views*, vol. 2 of *Russian Active Measures Campaigns*.

²²⁶ Alex Stamos, “An Update on Information Operations on Facebook,” Facebook Newsroom, September 6, 2017. Also see *United States v. Internet Research Agency et al.*, No. 18-cr-32, February 16, 2018; *United States v. Khusyaynova*, No. 18-mj-464, September 28, 2018; and Renee Diresta and Shelby Grossman, “Potemkin Pages and Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014-2019,” Stanford Internet Observatory Cyber Policy Center, 2019.

²²⁷ Ben Collins et al., “Exclusive: Russians Appear to Use Facebook to Push Trump Rallies in 17 U.S. Cities,” *Daily Beast*, September 20, 2017.

²²⁸ ODNI, “Joint Statement on Election Day Preparations,” November 5, 2018.

²²⁹ ODNI, “DNI Coats Statement on the Intelligence Community’s Response to Executive Order 13848 on Imposing Certain Sanctions in the Event of Foreign Interference in a United States Election,” December 21, 2018.

²³⁰ Andy Greenberg, “Russia’s Fancy Bear Hackers Are Hitting U.S. Campaign Targets Again,” *Wired*, September 10, 2020; and Raphael Satter, Christopher Bing, and Joel Schectman, “Russian Hackers Targeted California, Indiana Democratic Parties,” Reuters, October 30, 2020.

²³¹ ODNI, “Statement by NCSC Director William Evanina: Election Threat Update for the American Public,” August 7, 2020; DHS, “Russia Likely to Continue Seeking to Undermine Faith in U.S. Electoral Process,” September 3, 2020; and Kyle Cheney, “Wray Says Russia Engaged in ‘Very Active Efforts’ to Interfere in Election, Damage Biden,” *Politico*, September 17, 2020.

²³² CISA, “Joint Statement from Elections Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council and the Election

In March 2021, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a declassified IC assessment of foreign threats to the 2020 U.S. elections. The assessment stated the IC had high confidence that President Putin “authorized, and a range of Russian government organizations conducted, influence operations” to interfere with U.S. elections. The assessment also stated that Russia used proxies to “launder influence narratives” of “misleading or unsubstantiated allegations” to undermine public confidence in the elections and exacerbate sociopolitical divisions.²³³

Energy and Arms Sales

Energy exports, primarily oil and natural gas, are a pillar of Russian foreign policy. Energy resources are central to the Russian economy, help fund military modernization, and give Russia leverage over energy-importing countries. Russia’s arms exports, behind only the United States in monetary value, also are an important source of hard currency and fulfill key foreign policy objectives.

Energy²³⁴

Russia is a leading producer, consumer, and exporter of energy, especially oil and natural gas (see **Table 1**). The Russian government uses the country’s vast energy resources to acquire foreign currency, secure government revenues, maintain domestic subsidies, and exert geopolitical influence.

Table 1. Selected World Rankings of Russia’s Energy Portfolio, 2019

	Reserves	Production	Consumption	Exports
Oil	6 th	3 rd	5 th	2 nd
Natural Gas	1 st	2 nd	2 nd	1 st
Coal	2 nd	6 th	6 th	3 rd
Electric Generation	NA	4 th	4 th	14 th

Sources: BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2020; CIA World Handbook, 2020.

Note: NA = not applicable.

Russia’s largest oil and gas companies are state-owned enterprises. Russia’s main natural gas company is Gazprom, which is majority owned by the Russian government. Gazprom is Russia’s largest company, the largest natural gas company in the world by revenue, and the world’s largest exporter of natural gas. Gazprom is responsible for about two-thirds of Russia’s natural gas production.²³⁵ Russia’s largest oil company, Rosneft, is 40% owned by the Russian government,

Infrastructure Sector Coordinating Executive Committees,” November 12, 2020.

²³³ The assessment responds to a reporting requirement in the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA; P.L. 116-92, §5304). ODNI, *Foreign Threats to the 2020 U.S. Federal Elections*, March 10, 2021, pp. i, 2-3.

²³⁴ This section draws on CRS Report R42405, *European Energy Security: Options for EU Natural Gas Diversification*, coordinated by Michael Ratner; and CRS Report R46518, *Russia: Domestic Politics and Economy*, by Cory Welt and Rebecca M. Nelson.

²³⁵ Gazpromexport, “Our Activity,” at <http://www.gazpromexport.ru/en/about/activity/>.

which effectively controls the company. Rosneft is responsible for about 35% of Russian oil production.²³⁶

Russia enjoys considerable market power in the export of natural gas.²³⁷ Many observers believe Moscow uses this power to achieve foreign policy aims, especially in Europe, the destination for most of Russia's natural gas exports. Since at least 2006, the EU and European countries have weighed the implications of Europe's heavy reliance on Russian natural gas imports. The main impetus for concern were two temporary disruptions in Russian natural gas supplies via Ukraine in 2006 and 2009.²³⁸ Subsequently, the EU and European states began to more seriously assess the need to diversify their energy sources away from Russia.

To maintain its leverage and position as Europe's dominant gas supplier, Russia has sought to develop multiple pipeline routes that can reduce dependence on transit states such as Ukraine and satisfy regional markets. With the financial support of European energy companies, Russia is seeking to complete the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would increase the amount of Russian natural gas exported directly to Germany and on to other European countries.²³⁹ Successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress have opposed Nord Stream 2, reflecting concerns about European dependence on Russian energy and the threat Russia poses to Ukraine. The late 2019 passage of U.S. sanctions legislation targeting Nord Stream 2 delayed pipeline construction for a year, and in January 2021 the Trump Administration imposed related sanctions on a Russian pipe-laying vessel and its owner.²⁴⁰ Whether the pipeline will be completed and certified remains unclear.

Russia also has constructed new gas pipelines to Turkey and China.²⁴¹ In addition to supplying natural gas to Turkey, the TurkStream pipeline delivers Russian gas to some southeastern European markets through a combination of new and existing infrastructure; additional connectors are under construction. Many analysts view the TurkStream pipeline as an additional means for Russia to bypass Ukraine and other transit states and as a counter to the Southern Gas Corridor, a pipeline system that has begun to transport natural gas to Europe from Azerbaijan. Another natural gas pipeline, the Power of Siberia, began operations at the end of 2019 and is the first pipeline to bring Russian gas directly to China.

Russia's involvement in global energy markets goes beyond its role as an energy supplier. Russia has engaged in agreements with members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and other countries to adjust global oil production. Russia also is a founding member of

²³⁶ British oil company BP and a subsidiary of the Qatar Investment Authority each own about 20% of Rosneft. Russia's next-largest oil companies, the privately owned Lukoil and Surgutneftegaz, are responsible for about 14% and 11%, respectively, of Russian oil production. RBC, "Oil Production in Russia Dropped to Almost a Ten-Year Low" (in Russian), January 2, 2021, at <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/02/01/2021/5ff01e859a794777a8796392>.

²³⁷ Natural gas is more a regional commodity than oil, since natural gas requires expensive infrastructure for transport. Oil is a global market in which Russia does not have the same type of leverage it has with natural gas exports.

²³⁸ Jonathan Stern, *The Russian-Ukrainian Gas Crisis of January 2006*, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, January 16, 2006; Simon Pirani, Jonathan Stern, and Katja Yafimava, *The Russo-Ukrainian Gas Dispute of January 2009: A Comprehensive Assessment*, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, February 2009; and Kirsten Westphal, *Russian Gas, Ukrainian Pipelines, and European Supply Security: Lessons of the 2009 Controversies*, SWP, September 2009.

²³⁹ CRS In Focus IF11138, *Russia's Nord Stream 2 Pipeline: Continued Uncertainty*, by Paul Belkin, Michael Ratner, and Cory Welt.

²⁴⁰ 22 U.S.C. §9526 note; and U.S. Department of State, "Sanctions on Russian Entity and a Vessel Engaging in the Construction of NordStream 2," January 19, 2021.

²⁴¹ CRS In Focus IF11177, *TurkStream: Russia's Newest Gas Pipeline to Europe*, by Sarah E. Garding et al.; and CRS In Focus IF11514, *Power of Siberia: A Natural Gas Pipeline Brings Russia and China Closer*, by Michael Ratner and Heather L. Greenley.

the Gas Exporting Countries Forum, a cartel-like organization of natural gas producing countries.²⁴² Russian companies also participate in and pursue energy investment projects around the world. Russian energy companies and their subsidiaries have significant ownership stakes in European energy infrastructure, including pipelines, distribution, and storage facilities.²⁴³ Russia also is a major exporter of nuclear power reactors, fuel, and related services and a key developer of next-generation nuclear technology.²⁴⁴

Defense Industry and Arms Sales

Arms sales and the defense industry play an important role in Russian domestic and foreign policy. In 2012, President Putin stated, “Effective military and technical cooperation is a potent instrument of promoting our national interests, political as well as economic.”²⁴⁵ Domestically, Russia’s defense industry comprises over 1,400 firms and employs several million workers, making it a key political constituency.²⁴⁶ In foreign policy, arms sales are a policy tool to advance Russia’s interests, including developing defense relationships and enhancing Russia’s regional and global influence. In recent years, Russia has been one of the top five arms exporters in dollar-value terms (often behind only the United States), averaging \$13-\$15 billion in reported annual sales, according to official statistics.²⁴⁷

Over the last decade, Russia has consolidated its defense industry into a few large holding companies, with most incorporated into a state-controlled corporation, Rostec, run by longtime Putin colleague Sergei Chemezov. Russia conducts foreign arms sales through Rosoboronexport, a state-controlled intermediary and subsidiary of Rostec; these sales are overseen by the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation.²⁴⁸

Russia has an advanced defense industry capable of producing firearms, aircraft, tanks and armored vehicles, artillery, air defense, missiles, and ships. Russia’s military modernization program has benefitted the defense industry, allowing it to upgrade, design, and test numerous improvements and new systems.²⁴⁹ Many of these systems are combat tested, including in Syria.

²⁴² See CRS Insight IN11286, *Low Oil Prices: Prospects for Global Oil Market Balance*, by Phillip Brown; and CRS In Focus IF10939, *Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF): Cartel Lite?*, by Michael Ratner.

²⁴³ See, for example, Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung, *European Natural Gas Infrastructure: The Role of Gazprom in European Natural Gas Supplies*, 2014.

²⁴⁴ *Economist*, “Russia Leads the World at Nuclear-Reactor Exports,” August 7, 2018; and Ben Aris, “Russia’s Nuclear Power Exports Are Booming,” *bne IntelliNews*, May 8, 2019.

²⁴⁵ President of Russia, “Meeting of the Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation with Foreign States,” July 2, 2012.

²⁴⁶ Pavel Luzin, *Russia’s Defense Industry: Between Political Significance and Economic Inefficiency*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020, p. 3.

²⁴⁷ In 2020, state-owned arms exporter Rosoboronexport stated it had sold \$180 billion worth of arms to foreign customers over the last 20 years. It announced sales of \$15 billion in 2019 and \$13 billion in 2020. TASS, “Russia’s Portfolio of Arms Orders Exceeds \$55 Bln as of Early 2020,” July 22, 2020; TASS, “Russia’s Rosoboronexport to Deliver Armaments Worth \$13 Bln in 2020,” August 23, 2020; and TASS, “Russia’s State Arms Exporter Delivers Military Hardware Worth \$180 Bln over 20 Years,” November 2, 2020.

²⁴⁸ Selected firms can export military-related products directly but still are overseen by the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation. Mathieu Boulegue, “Russia’s Shifting Defense Establishment,” *National Interest*, July 24, 2018; and Pavel Luzin, “The Inner Workings of Russia’s Military Industrial Behemoth,” *Riddle*, March 27, 2019.

²⁴⁹ Richard Connolly and Cecilie Sendstad, “Russian Rearmament: An Assessment of Defense-Industrial Performance,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 65, no. 3 (2018), pp. 143-160.

Russia has sold arms to more than 120 countries since 2000, according to official sources.²⁵⁰ A majority of recent Russian arms exports have gone to five countries: Algeria, China, Egypt, India, and Vietnam. China and India account for over half of Russia's arms exports. Sales to China and India have included S-300 and S-400 air-defense systems (the latter to China), Su-30MKI and Su-35S fighters, Kilo-class submarines (to China), and Talwar-class frigates (to India).²⁵¹ In contrast to the U.S. Total Package Approach to arms sales, which ensures foreign military sales customers have access to comprehensive training, technical, and support expertise, Russia traditionally does not provide these services in its arms sales packages.

Many Russian arms sales are upgraded versions of Soviet-era or early Russian systems. Many systems were under development for decades and in recent years received the necessary financial and technological support for completion. For more advanced systems, Russia traditionally has prioritized selling "second-best" systems for fear of reverse engineering and technology transfer, keeping its most advanced weaponry for the Russian military.²⁵² Increased competition and pressure for local production have made these second-best systems less attractive in recent years.

As countries such as India and China have developed their own defense industries, Russia has had to offer more advanced and frontline systems (including systems still under development). Russia also is pursuing possible joint development and technology licensing strategies, including with both India and China.²⁵³ In some regions, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, Russia continues to aggressively market and sell arms, including some of its latest designs.²⁵⁴

Russia's defense industry suffers from numerous structural, financial, and technological constraints that have affected its ability to develop and deploy new and advanced systems.²⁵⁵ Russia's increasing isolation from Western technology and financing in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine severely affected its defense industry and highlighted its lack of a modern and precision manufacturing base. In addition, Russia's domestic arms purchases are set to decrease over the next decade, diminishing revenue sources and exacerbating outstanding debts.²⁵⁶ As a result, the defense industry increasingly relies on foreign arms sales for revenue and to support faltering firms and production lines.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁰ TASS, "Russia's State Arms Exporter Delivers Military Hardware Worth \$180 Bln over 20 Years," November 2, 2020.

²⁵¹ SIPRI, *Arms Transfers Database*, 2021.

²⁵² Siemon T. Wezeman, "China, Russia and the Shifting Landscape of Arms Sales," SIPRI, July 5, 2017.

²⁵³ Kofman, "Emperors League"; and Amie Ferris-Rotman, "Russia, India Agree to More Military Cooperation," *Washington Post*, September 4, 2019.

²⁵⁴ Weapons systems and equipment offered include air-defense systems, tanks, fighters, patrol and missile ships, drones, and helicopters. TASS, "Rosoboronexport Signs Contracts with African States Worth \$1.5 Billion," February 21, 2020; and TASS, "Russia's Military Exports to Middle East and North Africa Hit \$6 Billion," February 21, 2020.

²⁵⁵ In 2012, Russia established an Advanced Research Foundation to fund and develop breakthrough technologies. Tor Bukkvoll, Tomas Malmlof, and Konstantin Makienko, "The Defence Industry as a Locomotive for Technological Renewal in Russia: Are the Conditions in Place?," *Post-Communist Economies*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2017), pp. 232-249; and Maria Shagina and Mathieu Boulegue, "Russia Wants Its Civil and Military Sectors to Cooperate. So Far, Not So Much," *Defense One*, July 9, 2020.

²⁵⁶ Andrey Frolov, "Defence Technologies and Industrial Base," in *Defence Industries in Russia and China: Players and Strategies*, eds. Richard Bitzinger and Nicu Popescu (EUISS, 2017), pp. 13-16; Andrey Biryukov and Evgenia Pismennaya, "Putin's Huge Military Buildup Leaves Industry with Debt Hangover," *Bloomberg*, July 16, 2019; Gustav Gressel, "The Sanctions Straightjacket on Russia's Defense Sector," European Council on Foreign Relations, February 13, 2020; and Pavel Luzin, "Russia's Arms Manufacturers Are a Financial Black Hole," *Riddle*, January 30, 2020.

²⁵⁷ Russia previously offered credit to countries such as Armenia and Venezuela to purchase arms, but the defense industry's precarious financial situation suggests loans are less likely to be offered in the future. Matthew Bodner,

Although global demand for Russian arms sales appears to remain high, U.S. sanctions targeting significant transactions with the Russian defense and intelligence sectors may impact some major sales. The United States has imposed sanctions on Chinese and Turkish defense agencies and officials for procuring Russian S-400 missile systems (and, in China's case, Su-35S combat aircraft).²⁵⁸ In December 2020, State Department officials stated that “billions of dollars in announced or expected Russian arms transactions ... have quietly been abandoned as a result of our diplomatic outreach.”²⁵⁹

U.S.-Russia Relations

Since Vladimir Putin's return to the Russian presidency in 2012 (after serving as prime minister since 2008), successive U.S. Administrations and Congress have focused increasingly on countering aggressive Russian actions abroad and addressing Russia's worsening human rights abuses. Many U.S. officials and observers have decried what they see as Russia's lack of respect for fundamental international norms and have warned about the threats Russia may pose to the security and interests of the United States and its allies and partners.

Official U.S. responses to malign Russian activities have included the imposition of a wide array of sanctions for human rights abuses, the invasion of Ukraine, election interference, malicious cyber activities, use of a chemical weapon, weapons proliferation, illicit trade with North Korea, and support to the governments of Syria and Venezuela, among other activities.²⁶⁰ U.S. Administrations also have responded to election interference, cyberattacks, and other clandestine Russian activities with indictments and public exposure. The United States has expressed support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine and Russia's other neighbors, and it has provided security assistance, including lethal weaponry, to Ukraine and Georgia, both subject to Russian invasion and territorial occupation. The United States has led NATO in developing a new military posture in Central and Eastern Europe intended to reassure allies and deter further Russian aggression.

Despite tensions and the generally poor state of bilateral relations, U.S. and Russian authorities have stated the importance of continued engagement on certain issues of common interest. Many past efforts to engage with Russia have met with failure or limited success, leading some observers to countenance against further efforts.²⁶¹ Others argue that issues of mutual interest allow for limited reengagement.²⁶²

“Influence or Profit? Russia's Defense Industry Is at a Crossroads,” *Defense News*, July 22, 2019.

²⁵⁸ U.S. Department of State, “Sanctions Under Section 231 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017 (CAATSA),” September 20, 2018; and U.S. Department of State, “CAATSA Section 231 “Imposition of Sanctions on Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries,” December 14, 2020.

²⁵⁹ U.S. Department of State, “Assistant Secretary for International Security and Nonproliferation Dr. Christopher Ford and Deputy Assistant Secretary for European Affairs Matthew Palmer on the Imposition of Sanctions on Turkey Under CAATSA 231,” December 14, 2020.

²⁶⁰ For more, see CRS Report R45415, *U.S. Sanctions on Russia*, coordinated by Cory Welt; and CRS In Focus IF10779, *U.S. Sanctions on Russia: An Overview*, by Dianne E. Rennack and Cory Welt.

²⁶¹ Mikhail Zygar, “The Russian Reset That Never Was,” *Foreign Policy*, December 9, 2016; Nina Arshankuni, Angelina Flood, and Natasha Yefimova-Trilling, “Why the ‘Reset’ Didn't Last,” *Russia Matters*, March 8, 2019; Nicu Popescu, “Why Attempts to Reset Relations with Russia Fail,” European Council on Foreign Relations, February 3, 2021; and Carl Bildt, “Why the West's Attempts to Reset Relations with Russia Have Failed Again and Again,” *Washington Post*, February 18, 2021.

²⁶² Emma Ashford, “How Reflexive Hostility to Russia Harms U.S. Interests,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 20, 2018; Dmitry Trenin, “Russia-U.S.: No Reset, Just Guardrails,” Carnegie Moscow Center, July 8, 2020; and Ralph Clem, “Risky Encounters with Russia: Time to Talk About Real Deconfliction,” *War on the Rocks*, February 18, 2021.

Historical Overview

For almost 30 years, the United States and Russia have struggled to develop a constructive bilateral relationship.²⁶³ In the early 1990s, a spirit of U.S.-Russia “strategic partnership” and hopes for Russia’s integration with the West were gradually overtaken by increasing tension and mutual recrimination, largely as a consequence of disagreements over Russian efforts to reestablish a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region, U.S. promotion of NATO enlargement, and NATO’s military intervention in the former Yugoslavia.²⁶⁴

Particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, then-President George W. Bush and President Putin sought to restore U.S.-Russia relations. The United States aimed to reshape its relationship with Russia on the basis of cooperation against terrorism and the economic integration of Russia with the West. Tensions arose around a number of issues, however, including the Iraq War; so-called color revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan; Russian energy and security pressure on its neighbors; and U.S. and NATO plans to deploy missile defenses in Europe. Cooperation continued in some areas, but the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict caused bilateral ties to deteriorate further.²⁶⁵

Upon entering office in 2009, President Barack Obama sought to “reset” relations with Russia’s then-president, Dmitry Medvedev. The United States and Russia cooperated in a number of areas, including nuclear arms control, Afghanistan, the Iran nuclear agreement, sanctions on North Korea, and the removal of chemical weapons from Syria. Despite such cooperation, tensions increased with the U.S. arrest of 10 long-term undercover Russian spies in 2010.²⁶⁶ Tensions further increased with the NATO-led military intervention in Libya that resulted in the toppling and killing of Libyan leader Muammar al Qadhafi in 2011. Russian authorities claimed the intervention was evidence the United States and its allies were willing to pursue regime change under the guise of protecting civilians.²⁶⁷

U.S.-Russia relations worsened with Russia’s disputed 2011 parliamentary elections and Putin’s 2012 return to the presidency. After the U.S. government criticized the conduct of the 2011 elections, Putin accused the State Department of interfering in Russia’s internal affairs and, ultimately, seeking to promote regime change.²⁶⁸ Relations continued to decline with the passage in the United States of the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012, which established sanctions in response to certain Russian human rights abuses.²⁶⁹ Relations

²⁶³ See, for example, Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, updated ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

²⁶⁴ James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy Toward Russia After the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

²⁶⁵ Thomas Ambrosio, *Challenging America’s Global Preeminence: Russia’s Quest for Multipolarity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Peter Baker, “The Seduction of George W. Bush,” *Foreign Policy*, November 6, 2013; and Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010).

²⁶⁶ FBI, “Operation Ghost Stories: Inside the Russian Spy Case,” October 31, 2011; and Gordon Corera, *Russians Among Us: Sleeper Cells, Ghost Stories, and the Hunt for Putin’s Spies* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020).

²⁶⁷ Ellen Barry, “Putin Criticizes West for Libya Incursion,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2011; Stephen Blank and Carol R. Saivetz, “Playing to Lose? Russia and the ‘Arab Spring,’” *Problems of Post-Communism* vol. 59, no. 1 (2012), pp. 3-14; and Samuel Charap, “Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention,” *Survival* vol. 55, no. 1 (2013), pp. 35-41.

²⁶⁸ David M. Herszenhorn and Ellen Barry, “Putin Contends Clinton Incited Unrest over Vote,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2011.

²⁶⁹ The act was enacted as Title IV of the Russia and Moldova Jackson-Vanik Repeal and Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-208). For more, see CRS Report R46518, *Russia: Domestic Politics and*

deteriorated further after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, 2015 intervention in Syria, and interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

U.S. Policy During the Trump Administration

During the Trump Administration, U.S. relations with Russia were conducted under the shadow of Russia's 2016 election interference and the U.S. Department of Justice Special Counsel investigation that followed (see "U.S. Election Interference," above). Nonetheless, President Trump followed the U.S. Presidents before him in calling for improved relations with Moscow. The Trump Administration asserted that its policies to counter Russian malign activities would remain strong.

In January 2017, the White House called an initial phone call between President Trump and President Putin "a significant start to improving the relationship between the United States and Russia that is in need of repair."²⁷⁰ President Trump and President Putin held periodic bilateral meetings, including in July 2018 in Helsinki, Finland, where many observers believed President Trump publicly equivocated between the IC's conclusion of Russian election interference and Putin's denial of the same.²⁷¹ President Trump also called for including Russia in a reconstituted Group of Eight (G8).²⁷²

At the same time, President Trump claimed he was "tougher on Russia" than past Administrations.²⁷³ Observers and Members of Congress expressed concern that President Trump would remove sanctions on Russia, but the Trump Administration did not seek to waive existing sanctions.²⁷⁴ On the contrary, in part due to congressional pressure, the Trump Administration expanded sanctions on Russia for a variety of malign activities. The Trump Administration also increased funding to bolster the security of European allies via the European Deterrence Initiative (see "Countering Russian Aggression," below), provided lethal weaponry to Ukraine and Georgia, discouraged global Russian arms sales, and sought to halt the construction of Russia's Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline to Europe (see "Energy and Arms Sales," above).²⁷⁵

Some observers argue that a gap persisted between the relatively "tough" policies of the Trump Administration and the more accommodating rhetoric and signaling by President Trump, or that the Trump Administration could have used a fuller range of tools, including more extensive

Economy, by Cory Welt and Rebecca M. Nelson.

²⁷⁰ White House, "Readout of the President's Call with Russian President Vladimir Putin," January 28, 2017.

²⁷¹ White House, "Remarks by President Trump and President Putin of the Russian Federation in Joint Press Conference," July 16, 2018; and CRS Insight IN10933, *The Trump-Putin Summit*, by Cory Welt.

²⁷² After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia was removed from the Group of Eight (G8), which returned to its original status as the G7, a group of seven major advanced industrial democracies. Allie Malloy and Nicole Gaouette, "Trump Says Russia Should Be Reinstated in Group of Leading Industrialized Nations," *CNN*, June 8, 2018; and Ryan Heath, "G7 Members Reject Trump's Bid to Bring Russia in from the Cold," *Politico*, June 2, 2020.

²⁷³ Dan Merica, "Trump Declares 'Nobody Has Been Tougher on Russia' in Meeting with Baltic Leaders," *CNN*, April 3, 2018; and White House, "Remarks by President Trump in Press Briefing," September 4, 2020. Also see Everett Rosenfeld, "It's 'Crazy Talk' to Say the U.S. Isn't Tough on Russia: Mike Pompeo," *CNBC*, May 11, 2019.

²⁷⁴ Peter Nicholas, Paul Beckett, and Gerald F. Seib, "Trump Open to Shift on Russia Sanctions, 'One China' Policy," *Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2017; Karen DeYoung and David Filipov, "Trump Says It Is 'Very Early' to Discuss Lifting Sanctions on Russia," January 27, 2017; and Lynn Berry, "Day After Putin Call, GOP Warns Trump on Lifting Sanctions," *Associated Press*, January 29, 2017.

²⁷⁵ White House, "President Donald J. Trump Is Protecting Our Elections and Standing Up to Russia's Malign Activities," July 17, 2018; and Alina Polyakova and Filippos Letsas, "On the Record: The U.S. Administration's Actions on Russia," *Brookings Institution*, December 31, 2019.

sanctions, in response to Russian malign activities.²⁷⁶ Some Members of Congress debated the pace and scope of Administration efforts to implement congressionally authorized sanctions and other policies intended to counter Russian malign activities, especially as provided for in the Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017 (CRIIEA).²⁷⁷

During the Trump Administration, U.S. cabinet members and senior military and diplomatic officials conducted meetings and dialogues with Russian counterparts on a range of issues. Areas of dialogue included Syria (see “Deconfliction in Syria,” below), Afghanistan, North Korea, Iran, Venezuela, energy, counterterrorism, and strategic security (see “Arms Control,” below).²⁷⁸

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, observers noted frequent communications between President Trump and President Putin. Discussions reportedly focused on oil supply and price issues and on the pandemic.²⁷⁹ In April 2020, the Russian government delivered a shipment of ventilators and personal protection equipment to the United States that turned controversial as questions arose about the nature of the transaction, regulatory procedures, and safety and compatibility issues. The United States reciprocated with a donation of ventilators to Russia.²⁸⁰

U.S. Policy During the Biden Administration

In the first months of the Biden Administration, U.S. officials said the Administration would adopt a firm response to a range of Russian malign activities in coordination with U.S. allies and partners, while seeking cooperation in areas the Administration deems to be in the U.S. interest, such as nuclear arms control.²⁸¹ In March 2021, the Administration released an *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, which stated that Russia is “determined to enhance its global influence and play a disruptive role on the world stage.” However, the interim guidance referred

²⁷⁶ Scott Horsley, “Is Trump the Toughest Ever on Russia?” NPR, July 20, 2018; Michael McFaul, “Sorry, But Trump Is Not ‘Tough on Russia,’” *Washington Post*, January 16, 2019; and Noah Weiland, “5 Times the Trump Administration Has Been Tougher Than Trump on Russia,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2019.

²⁷⁷ Title II of the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA; P.L. 115-44). Olivia Beavers, “Senate Dems Call for Probe into Why Trump Has Not Issued Russia Sanctions,” *Hill*, May 18, 2018; and William Ford, “The Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s Conflicting Views on the Role of Sanctions in America’s Strategy Toward Russia,” *Lawfare*, December 10, 2019;

²⁷⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Readout of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dunford’s Meeting with Russian Chief of the General Staff Gen. Gerasimov,” March 4, 2019; U.S. Department of State, “Deputy Secretary Sullivan’s Participation in Second U.S.-Russia High-Level Counterterrorism Dialogue with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Syromolotov,” September 9, 2019; and U.S. Department of State, “U.S.-Russia Strategic Security Dialogue,” January 16, 2020.

²⁷⁹ Official readouts reported that the two presidents also discussed arms control and strategic stability, space cooperation, and the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. Mike Eckel, “A Trump-Putin ‘Reset’? Flurry of Communication Points to Behind-the-Scenes Diplomacy,” *RFE/RL*, April 23, 2020; White House, “Joint Statement by President Donald J. Trump and President Vladimir Putin of Russia Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Meeting on the Elbe,” April 25, 2020; and Javier Blas and Bloomberg, “Trump’s Oil Deal: The Inside Story of How the Saudi-Russia Price War Ended,” *Fortune*, April 14, 2020.

²⁸⁰ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Purchase of Needed Supplies from Russia,” April 1, 2020; Mike Eckel, “The Strange Story of a Russian Ventilator Shipment to the U.S. Just Got Stranger,” *RFE/RL*, May 13, 2020; U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Russia, “Delivery of U.S. Ventilators to Russia,” May 21, 2020; Reuters, “Russia Gets More U.S. Ventilators as Coronavirus Cases Climb,” June 4, 2020; and Christopher Miller, “FEMA Threw Out the Faulty Ventilators Russia Gave the U.S. Without Ever Using Them,” *BuzzFeed News*, October 19, 2020.

²⁸¹ See, for example, U.S. Department of State, “On the Extension of the New START Treaty with the Russian Federation,” February 3, 2021.

to China, not Russia, as “the only competitor potentially capable of [mounting] a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”²⁸²

In April 2021, President Biden declared a formal national emergency in response to “harmful foreign activities” of the Russian government that “constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States.” The Administration also stated that the United States “desires a relationship with Russia that is stable and predictable. We do not think that we need to continue on a negative trajectory.”²⁸³

On President Biden’s first full day in office, the White House confirmed the Administration would agree to a five-year extension of the New START nuclear arms treaty with Russia without further negotiations (see “Arms Control,” below).²⁸⁴

At the same time, President Biden directed the IC to provide a “full assessment” of four issues in U.S.-Russia relations:

- the SolarWinds cyber breach of U.S. government agencies and private companies identified in late 2020;²⁸⁵
- Russian interference in the 2020 U.S. presidential election (see “2018 U.S. Midterm and 2020 Presidential Elections,” above);
- the August 2020 nerve agent attack against Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny (see below); and
- alleged Russian payments, or “bounties,” to Taliban-related forces for attacks on U.S. and allied forces (see “Targeted Overseas Attacks,” above).

On January 26, 2021, President Biden held a telephone call with President Putin. According to the White House, the two leaders addressed the issues above, as well as U.S. support for the sovereignty of Ukraine. President Biden “made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies.”²⁸⁶ In addition to extending New START, the presidents agreed “to explore strategic stability discussions on a range of arms control and emerging security issues” and “to maintain transparent and consistent communication going forward.”

The Russian readout of the phone call addressed additional issues, including the potential for cooperation on the COVID-19 pandemic and trade and economic affairs. It stated that President Biden and President Putin discussed the U.S. withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty (see “Arms Control,” below), the preservation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal), and a Russian proposal to convene a summit for permanent members of the U.N. Security

²⁸² White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021.

²⁸³ White House, “Fact Sheet: Imposing Costs for Harmful Foreign Activities by the Russian Government,” April 15, 2021 (hereinafter, White House, “Imposing Costs for Harmful Foreign Activities”); and Executive Order of April 15, 2021, “Blocking Property with Respect to Specified Harmful Foreign Activities of the Government of the Russian Federation,” at https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/russian_harmful_for_act_eo.pdf.

²⁸⁴ John Hudson, “Biden Administration to Seek Five-Year Extension on Key Nuclear Arms Treaty in First Foray with Russia,” *Washington Post*, January 21, 2021; and U.S. Department of State, “On the Extension of the New START Treaty with the Russian Federation,” February 3, 2021.

²⁸⁵ CRS Insight IN11559, *SolarWinds Attack—No Easy Fix*, by Chris Jaikaran; and CRS In Focus IF11718, *Russian Cyber Units*, by Andrew S. Bowen.

²⁸⁶ White House, “Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia,” January 26, 2021.

Council.²⁸⁷ Russia's presidential spokesperson also said, "The presidents took note of a rather large number of serious disagreements and emphasized the need to maintain dialogue."²⁸⁸

On March 2, 2021, the Biden Administration said Russian government agents were responsible for the nerve agent attack on Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny.²⁸⁹ The Department of State called the attack an "attempted assassination" and determined Russia had used a chemical weapon in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention.²⁹⁰ The White House stated that the IC "assesses with 'high confidence' that officers" of Russia's FSB were responsible for the attack.²⁹¹ The Administration announced sanctions in response, as well as for Navalny's subsequent arrest and imprisonment, in coordination with the EU. Secretary of State Blinken said the United States, together with the EU and others, seeks "to send a clear signal that Russia's use of chemical weapons and abuse of human rights have severe consequences."²⁹²

In April 2021, the Biden Administration imposed new sanctions on Russia or Russian persons for 2020 U.S. election interference, the so-called SolarWinds cyberattack, and other harmful foreign activities. With regard to the alleged Russian "bounties" to the Taliban, the Administration said it is responding to the reports via nonpublic channels, given the sensitivity of the matter.²⁹³

The Biden Administration has called Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline a "bad deal."²⁹⁴ On February 22, 2021, the Administration identified a Russian pipe-laying vessel and its owner, both previously subject to sanctions related to construction of the pipeline, as also subject to sanctions under the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act of 2019, as amended.²⁹⁵ In addition, the Administration provided Congress a list of more than 15 entities that had suspended their work related to Nord Stream 2.²⁹⁶ The State Department indicated an evaluation of other potential sanctions designations would be ongoing in consultation with European partners. Some Members of Congress urged the Administration to impose additional sanctions to prevent Russia from completing construction of the pipeline.²⁹⁷

²⁸⁷ President of Russia, "Telephone Conversation with U.S. President Joseph Biden," January 26, 2021.

²⁸⁸ David Brennan, "Russia Gives Frosty Review of First Joe Biden-Vladimir Putin Call," *Newsweek*, January 27, 2021.

²⁸⁹ CRS Insight IN11596, *Russia: Poisoning of Alexei Navalny and U.S. Policy*, by Cory Welt.

²⁹⁰ U.S. Department of State, "Imposing Sanctions on Russia for the Poisoning and Imprisonment of Aleksey Navalny," March 2, 2021.

²⁹¹ White House, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki," March 2, 2021.

²⁹² U.S. Department of State, "Imposing Sanctions on Russia for the Poisoning and Imprisonment of Aleksey Navalny," March 2, 2021.

²⁹³ White House, "Imposing Costs for Harmful Foreign Activities"; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Russia with Sweeping New Sanctions Authority," April 15, 2021; and U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Escalates Sanctions Against the Russian Government's Attempts to Influence U.S. Elections," April 15, 2021.

²⁹⁴ White House, "Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki," February 16, 2021.

²⁹⁵ 22 U.S.C. §9526 note.

²⁹⁶ U.S. Department of State, "Department Press Briefing," February 22, 2021.

²⁹⁷ Dan De Luce, "Lawmakers Urge Biden Administration to Update Congress on Sanctions Against Russian Gas Pipeline," *NBC News*, February 17, 2021; *RFE/RL*, "Biden Administration's Additional Sanctions over Nord Stream 2 'Inadequate,' Republicans Say," February 20, 2021; and Brett Forrest, "U.S. Report Allows Russian Pipeline Project to Proceed, for Now," *Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 2021.

Congressional Action in the 116th Congress

During the 116th Congress (2019-2020), legislative action and oversight related to Russia focused on assessing and countering the challenges and threats Russia poses to the United States and U.S. allies and partners. Congressional hearings addressed U.S.-Russia relations, countering Russia in Europe, Russian foreign and security policy and tools, human rights issues, regional conflicts, and arms control.

The 116th Congress approved legislation establishing sanctions on Russian persons for participating in or facilitating the subsea construction of Russia's Nord Stream 2 and other natural gas export pipelines, as well as for participating in the crackdown against opposition and protesters in Belarus and for being officials of the Russia-Belarus "Union State" (a supranational institution).²⁹⁸ Congress also passed legislation requiring the President to impose sanctions on persons in Turkey for acquiring a Russian S-400 air defense system, pursuant to CRIIEA.²⁹⁹ In addition, Congress approved legislation to help reduce European energy dependence on Russia and Russian influence in the Eastern Mediterranean.³⁰⁰

During the 116th Congress, Russia-related resolutions agreed to in the House or Senate

- condemned continued Russian aggression against Ukraine and efforts to weaponize energy exports to Europe (S.Res. 74, H.Res. 672);
- expressed the sense of Congress that the activities of Yevgeniy Prigozhin and affiliated entities (including PMCs) pose a threat to national security interests (H.Res. 996);
- condemned the poisoning of Alexei Navalny and the detention of political prisoners in Russia (H.Res. 1145, H.Res. 958);
- called for accountability and justice for the 2015 murder of opposition figure Boris Nemtsov (H.Res. 156, S.Res. 81);
- called for the release from Russian prison of U.S. citizens Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed (H.Res. 552, H.Res. 1115); and
- opposed the inclusion of Russia in future G7 summits (H.Res. 546).

Congress also enacted legislation requiring the executive branch to submit to Congress reports or assessments on Russian-linked threat finance activities (e.g., financing of transnational threats, money laundering, or sanctions evasion), corruption, and Putin's assets; election-related cyber threats; influence operations and campaigns targeting the United States or foreign elections; Russian military and security developments, defense spending, strategic intentions, and Arctic military activities; support for violent extremists abroad; malign influence in Belarus, Venezuela, and the Eastern Mediterranean; and arms control issues.³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ Sanctions provisions are in the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act of 2019 (22 U.S.C. §9526 note, as amended by P.L. 116-283, §1242) and the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Title III, Subtitle C).

²⁹⁹ P.L. 116-283, §1241.

³⁰⁰ See the European Energy Security and Diversification Act of 2019 (22 U.S.C. §§9561 et seq.) and the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019 (22 U.S.C. §2373 note).

³⁰¹ Reporting requirements are in the FY2020 NDAA (P.L. 116-92); the FY2021 NDAA (P.L. 116-283); the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-94); and the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (P.L. 116-260).

As in past years, in FY2021 foreign aid appropriations legislation, Congress maintained restrictions on foreign assistance to Russia’s central government, although funds continued to be made available “to support democracy programs ... including to promote Internet freedom.” Congress also continued restrictions on defense appropriations.³⁰²

Also as in past years, the FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) restricted funds from being used for bilateral military-to-military cooperation with Russia until the executive branch certifies that Russia “has ceased its occupation of Ukrainian territory and its aggressive activities that threaten” Ukraine and NATO members and “is abiding by the terms of and taking steps in support of the Minsk Protocols regarding a ceasefire in eastern Ukraine.”³⁰³

Selected Issues in U.S.-Russia Relations

Countering Russian Aggression

In addition to using sanctions, the United States has sought to counter Russian aggression via an enhanced military presence in Europe, as well as increased security aid and other foreign assistance to countries in Europe and Central Asia.

The United States is a key architect of and contributor to NATO’s enhanced deterrence initiatives (see “NATO,” above), and it has sought to bolster U.S. force posture in Europe in response to Russian actions. The FY2019 NDAA states that “it is the policy of the United States to pursue, in full coordination with [NATO], an integrated approach to strengthening the defense of allies and partners in Europe as part of a broader, long-term strategy backed by all elements of United States national power to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russian aggression.”³⁰⁴

The Department of Defense’s European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) seeks to “enhance the U.S. deterrence posture, increase the readiness and responsiveness of U.S. forces in Europe, support the collective defense and security of NATO allies, and bolster the security and capacity of U.S. allies and partners.”³⁰⁵ EDI began as the European Reassurance Initiative in 2014, as an effort to reassure U.S. allies in Europe of the continued U.S. commitment to their security in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The enhanced U.S. military presence in Central and Eastern Europe primarily consists of increased rotational deployments of air, ground, and naval assets and a significant increase in military exercises. The United States currently has a rotational military presence in Poland of approximately 4,500 personnel, including those involved in Operation Atlantic Resolve and NATO Missile Defense efforts, and forces assigned to one of four NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Groups. In 2020, the United States and Poland concluded an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement to support a larger U.S. military presence.³⁰⁶ The United States also has

³⁰² P.L. 116-260, Division C, §8102(a), and Division K, §7047.

³⁰³ P.L. 116-283, §1231; P.L. 114-328, §1232.

³⁰⁴ P.L. 115-232, §1248. Also see P.L. 115-91, §1233.

³⁰⁵ U.S. European Command, “FY2020 European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) Fact Sheet.” Also see CRS In Focus IF10946, *The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview*, by Paul Belkin and Hibbah Kaileh.

³⁰⁶ CRS In Focus IF11280, *U.S. Military Presence in Poland*, by Andrew Feickert, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Derek E. Mix; and U.S. Department of State, “U.S.-Poland Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement,” August 15, 2020.

increased its military presence in Norway, with U.S. Marines conducting year-round cold weather training exercises and pre-positioning equipment for use in the event of a crisis.³⁰⁷

EDI began in FY2015 with \$985 million in funding. Between FY2016 and FY2019, Congress authorized significant annual increases in EDI funding, as requested by the Administration. Funding for the effort peaked at \$6.5 billion in FY2019 and was \$5.9 billion in FY2020. The Trump Administration requested \$4.5 billion for FY2021. Among other funds, EDI includes assistance to Ukraine and other European allies and partners to help strengthen their capacity for self-defense and improve interoperability with U.S. forces.

Since FY2017, Congress also has appropriated more than \$1.3 billion in designated funding to assist countries in Europe and Central Asia “to counter Russian influence and aggression.”³⁰⁸ Most appropriations have been designated for the Countering Russian Influence Fund (CRIF), a funding directive by which the Department of State provides bilateral and regional aid that is in addition to country-specific and regional non-CRIF allocations.³⁰⁹ CRIF funds have been allocated for security aid, as well as for governance, civil society, and economic assistance.

U.S. Policy Toward Russia’s Conflicts³¹⁰

Successive U.S. Administrations and Members of Congress on a bipartisan basis have condemned Russia’s occupation of territory in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The United States supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of these states within their internationally recognized borders. CRIIEA states that the United States “does not recognize territorial changes effected by force, including the illegal invasions and occupations of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, and Transnistria.”³¹¹

Ukraine

After Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, the United States, in coordination with the EU and others, promised to impose increasing costs on Russia until it “abides by its international obligations and returns its military forces to their original bases and respects Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.”³¹² The United States imposed sanctions on Russia and suspended discussions on trade and investment and military-to-military contacts.³¹³

In July 2018, then-Secretary of State Pompeo issued the “Crimea Declaration,” which “reaffirms as policy [the United States’] refusal to recognize the Kremlin’s claims of sovereignty over territory seized by force in contravention of international law. In concert with allies, partners, and

³⁰⁷ Shawn Snow, “The Corps Plans to Boost Number of Marines in Norway,” *Marine Corps Times*, June 12, 2018; and *Stars and Stripes*, “1,000 U.S. Marines Arrive in Norway for Cold-Weather Training,” January 8, 2021.

³⁰⁸ P.L. 115-31, §7070(d).

³⁰⁹ Prior to creating the Countering Russian Influence Fund (CRIF) in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017 (P.L. 115-31, §7070(d)), Congress designated some appropriations for countering Russian influence in the Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations Act, 2017 (P.L. 114-254, Title II). The Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017 (CRIIEA, P.L. 115-44, Title II, §254) formally authorized the CRIF.

³¹⁰ For more, see CRS Report R45008, *Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy*, by Cory Welt; CRS Report R45307, *Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Cory Welt; CRS In Focus IF10894, *Moldova: An Overview*, by Cory Welt; and CRS Report R45415, *U.S. Sanctions on Russia*, coordinated by Cory Welt.

³¹¹ P.L. 115-44, Title II, §253.

³¹² White House, “Fact Sheet: Ukraine-Related Sanctions,” March 17, 2014.

³¹³ Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Eric Rubin, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Ukraine*, hearings, 114th Cong., 1st sess., March 6, 2014.

the international community, the United States rejects Russia's attempted annexation of Crimea and pledges to maintain this policy until Ukraine's territorial integrity is restored."³¹⁴ In addition, CRIIEEA states that it is the policy of the United States "to never recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Government of the Russian Federation or the separation of any portion of Ukrainian territory through the use of military force."³¹⁵

With regard to Russian-controlled areas in eastern Ukraine, the U.S. government has supported Ukraine's efforts to pursue a diplomatic solution to the conflict and has called on Russia to fulfill its commitments under the Minsk agreements. In April 2021, President Biden spoke with President Putin and "voiced [U.S.] concerns over the sudden Russian military build-up in occupied Crimea and on Ukraine's borders, and called on Russia to de-escalate tensions."³¹⁶

U.S. officials have called attention to, and imposed sanctions for, Russia's human rights abuses in occupied regions of Ukraine. The United States supports Ukraine against Russia's efforts to tighten control over the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov. The United States also has supported Ukraine against Russian efforts to reduce Ukraine's role as a transit state for natural gas exports to Europe, including by imposing sanctions related to the construction of Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

From 2017 to 2019, U.S. policy on the Ukraine conflict was directed mainly through the Office of the U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations. The U.S. Department of State established this position in 2017 to advance "U.S. efforts to achieve the objectives set out in the Minsk agreements."³¹⁷ Ambassador Kurt Volker resigned from the position prior to the start of the 2019 U.S. presidential impeachment inquiry in the House of Representatives; a successor has not been appointed.

Since FY2015, foreign operations appropriations have prohibited foreign assistance to governments that take "affirmative steps" to support Russia's annexation of Crimea. Appropriations also have restricted funds from implementing policies and actions that would recognize Russian sovereignty over Crimea or other territory in Ukraine or would provide assistance to Crimea or "other territory in Ukraine under the control of Russian-backed separatists," if such assistance includes the participation of Russian government officials or Russian-controlled entities.³¹⁸

Georgia and Moldova

The United States calls on Russia to comply with the terms of the cease-fire agreement that ended its 2008 war against Georgia, including withdrawal of its forces to prewar positions, and reverse its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. U.S. officials have criticized Russian efforts at hardening and extending the boundary lines of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

³¹⁴ The Crimea Declaration explicitly links U.S. policy to the Welles Declaration of 1940, which marked the start of a U.S. policy not to recognize the Soviet Union's annexation of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). U.S. Department of State, "Crimea Declaration," July 25, 2018; and U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Press Release Issued by the Department of State on July 23, 1940."

³¹⁵ P.L. 115-44, Title II, §257.

³¹⁶ White House, "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia," April 13, 2021.

³¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Tillerson Appoints Ambassador Kurt Volker Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations," July 7, 2017.

³¹⁸ P.L. 116-260, §7047(b).

The U.S. government has expressed support for Georgia's "commitment to dialogue and to a peaceful resolution to the conflict."³¹⁹

Since FY2017, foreign operations appropriations prohibit foreign assistance to governments that recognize the independence of Abkhazia or South Ossetia and restrict funds from supporting Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³²⁰

In Moldova, the United States "supports the OSCE-led 5+2 negotiations to find a comprehensive settlement that will provide a special status for the separatist region of Transnistria within a territorially whole and sovereign Moldova."³²¹

Deconfliction in Syria³²²

Efforts to de-escalate conflict and deconflict military operations in Syria were a central area of U.S.-Russia dialogue during the Trump Administration. In 2017, the United States and Russia renewed a senior-level military dialogue that largely had been suspended since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In 2017, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joe Dunford held two initial meetings with his Russian counterpart, General Valery Gerasimov, mainly to discuss the "deconfliction of Russian and coalition operations in Syria."³²³

Also in 2017, the United States and Russia worked with Jordan to establish a de-escalation agreement in the southwestern part of Syria. According to then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the agreement was the "first indication of the U.S. and Russia being able to work together in Syria."³²⁴ The southwest de-escalation area was recaptured by Syrian military forces in 2018; Russian officials stated the area was intended to be temporary and the Syrian army had a legitimate right to fight "terrorists."³²⁵

Parallel U.S. and Russian ground operations in eastern Syria to defeat the Islamic State led to expanded deconfliction efforts.³²⁶ These efforts "dramatically accelerated ISIS's losses on the battlefield," according to a November 2017 joint statement by President Trump and President Putin. The statement confirmed the intention of the United States and Russia to maintain deconfliction efforts and "open military channels of communication" until ISIS was defeated.³²⁷

³¹⁹ U.S. Department of State, "United States Welcomes Georgia Peace Initiative," April 4, 2018.

³²⁰ P.L. 116-260, §7047(c).

³²¹ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Moldova," January 7, 2020.

³²² Carla E. Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs, and Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, contributed to this section.

³²³ U.S. Department of Defense, "Dunford to Discuss Deconfliction with Russian Counterpart in Helsinki," June 7, 2018. Also see Michael R. Gordon, "Joint Chiefs Chairman to Meet with Russian Counterpart in Azerbaijan," *New York Times*, February 15, 2017.

³²⁴ White House, "Press Briefing by Secretary of State Tillerson and Secretary of Treasury Mnuchin on the President's Meetings at the G20," July 7, 2017.

³²⁵ Ellen Francis, "Syrian Army Makes Advances in Southwest Offensive," Reuters, June 28, 2018.

³²⁶ Robert E. Hamilton, *Russian and American De-Confliction Efforts in Syria: What's the Endgame in the Civil War?*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 2018; and Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, *Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria*, Carnegie Endowment, March 2019.

³²⁷ Near the start of Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia and the United States also had established initial air safety protocols to deconflict air operations. U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S., Russia Sign Memorandum on Air Safety in Syria," October 20, 2015; and U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement by the President of the United States and the President of the Russian Federation," November 11, 2017.

The United States frequently accused Russian forces of breaching air and ground deconfliction arrangements, and U.S. and Russian forces occasionally entered into direct confrontation.³²⁸ In one exceptional clash in 2018, U.S.-led coalition forces in Syria defended a team of U.S. Special Forces and local partner forces against an attack on their outpost by pro-Asad fighters who were joined by members of a Russian PMC. Dozens of Russian fighters reportedly were killed in the attack.³²⁹ Testifying about the clash, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated, “The Russian high command in Syria assured us it was not their people, and my direction to the Chairman was the force then was to be annihilated. And it was.”³³⁰

Incidents also occurred after the 2019 drawdown and redistribution of U.S. forces in Syria. U.S. military officials noted that Russia continued to violate established deconfliction protocols and that Russian ground and air incursions into areas in which U.S. forces operated occurred on a “regular but often sporadic basis.”³³¹ In August 2020, seven U.S. service members were injured after a Russian vehicle collided with a U.S. patrol in northeastern Syria.³³²

As of late 2020, Russia continued to conduct operations against the Islamic State in government-held areas of Syria. Russian and Syrian airstrikes along transportation routes also posed risks to humanitarian and stabilization activities by U.S. aid partners in Syria.³³³

Diplomatic Reductions³³⁴

In the last five years, U.S. and Russian diplomatic missions were reduced substantially in size through a series of tit-for-tat reductions. In December 2016, the Obama Administration imposed sanctions on Russian persons for election-related malicious cyber activity. The Administration also declared 35 Russian diplomatic personnel *personae non grata* in response to what Obama Administration officials characterized as increased harassment of U.S. diplomatic personnel in Russia. The White House maintained that those declared *personae non grata* were intelligence operatives acting in a manner inconsistent with their diplomatic status.³³⁵ The Administration also announced it would deny Russian officials access to two Russian government-owned compounds,

³²⁸ Eric Schmitt, “In Syria’s Skies, Close Calls with Russian Warplanes,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2017; and Eric Schmitt, “Russians Pressure U.S. Forces in Northeast Syria,” *New York Times*, February 14, 2020.

³²⁹ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2018.

³³⁰ Testimony of Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, in U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Department of Defense Budget Posture*, hearings, 115th Cong., 2nd sess., April 26, 2018. Transcript available at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/18-04-26-department-of-defense-budget-posture>.

³³¹ Offices of Inspector General of the Department of Defense, Department of State, and U.S. Agency for International Development, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, April 1, 2020-June 30, 2020, August 4, 2020, p. 51.

³³² U.S. Department of Defense, “Statement on Russian Forces’ Breach of Deconfliction Arrangement in Syria,” August 27, 2020; and Dan Lamothe, “U.S. Troops Injured in Altercation with Russian Military Patrol in Syria,” *Washington Post*, August 27, 2020.

³³³ Offices of Inspector General of the Department of Defense, Department of State, and U.S. Agency for International Development, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, October 1, 2020-December 31, 2020, February 9, 2021.

³³⁴ Cory R. Gill, Analyst in Foreign Affairs, contributed to this section.

³³⁵ White House, “Fact Sheet: Actions in Response to Russian Malicious Cyber Activity and Harassment,” December 29, 2016; and White House, “Statement by the President on Actions in Response to Russian Malicious Cyber Activity and Harassment,” December 29, 2016.

located in Maryland and New York, which President Obama said Russia was using for intelligence-related purposes.

During the Trump Administration, Russia responded to the Obama Administration's 2016 expulsions only after the passage of new U.S. sanctions legislation in August 2017. The Russian government ordered the United States to reduce its total diplomatic and technical personnel in Russia to no more than 455, which it said was the size of Russia's diplomatic presence in the United States.³³⁶ It also took control of U.S. storage and resort facilities in Moscow. In response, the Trump Administration announced Russia would be required to close its consulate general in San Francisco, a chancery annex in Washington, DC, and a consular annex in New York City.³³⁷

In 2018, in response to a nerve agent attack in the UK (see "Targeted Overseas Attacks," above), the United States expelled 48 Russian officials serving at the Russian Embassy, required the Russian government to close its consulate general in Seattle, and arranged to expel 12 officials from the Russian Mission to the United Nations. The White House noted that those being expelled were intelligence officers accredited as diplomats.³³⁸ In response, Russia expelled 60 U.S. diplomats and ordered the closure of the U.S. consulate general in St. Petersburg.

Subsequently, the Russian government reportedly refused to provide visas to U.S. diplomatic personnel. In 2019, then-Ambassador-designate to Russia John Sullivan noted the total number of U.S. personnel in Russia was "substantially below 400," due to visa restrictions.³³⁹ In March 2020, the State Department temporarily suspended operations at the U.S. consulate general in Vladivostok, citing COVID-19 health concerns.³⁴⁰ In December 2020, State Department officials said staffing problems contributed to a decision to close the consulate general in Vladivostok, where operations remain suspended, and to suspend operations at the other remaining U.S. consulate general in Russia, located in Yekaterinburg.³⁴¹ In April 2021, the State Department said the consulate general in Yekaterinburg would remain open, although visa and U.S. citizen services would be suspended.³⁴²

Also in April 2021, the Biden Administration announced it was expelling from the United States 10 Russian diplomatic personnel, including representatives of Russian intelligence services, as part of its response to Russia's harmful foreign activities.³⁴³

³³⁶ Russian officials said this would mean a reduction of around 755 mission personnel (including Russian nationals). Neil MacFarquhar, "Russia Seizes 2 U.S. Properties and Orders Embassy to Cut Staff," *New York Times*, July 28, 2017; and Andrew Roth, "Putin Orders Cut of 755 Personnel at U.S. Missions," *Washington Post*, July 30, 2017.

³³⁷ U.S. Department of State, "Achieving Parity in Diplomatic Missions," August 31, 2017; and Mark Lander and Gardiner Harris, "In Retaliation, U.S. Orders Russia to Close Consulate in San Francisco," *New York Times*, August 31, 2017.

³³⁸ White House, "Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on the Expulsion of Russian Intelligence Officers," March 26, 2018.

³³⁹ Testimony of Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan, in U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nominations*, hearings, 116th Cong., 1st sess., October 31, 2019. Transcript available at <https://plus.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-5759976?0>.

³⁴⁰ U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Russia, "Temporary Suspension of Operations at the U.S. Consulate General in Vladivostok," March 18, 2020.

³⁴¹ Mike Eckel, "Interview: Russia Blocking Visas for U.S. Diplomatic Staff, Forcing Closure of Consulates, U.S. Ambassador Says," *RFE/RL*, December 23, 2020; and Carol Morello, "How Bad Are U.S. Relations with Russia? Just Try Getting a Visa for a Repairman," *Washington Post*, December 25, 2020.

³⁴² U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Russia, "Statement from U.S. Ambassador John J. Sullivan," April 1, 2021.

³⁴³ White House, "Imposing Costs for Harmful Foreign Activities."

Detention of U.S. Citizens in Russia

Successive U.S. Administrations have broached the plight of U.S. citizens imprisoned in Russia. In 2018 and 2019, Russia arrested at least three U.S. citizens on what U.S. officials and many observers consider to be trumped-up charges, possibly to effect an exchange for Russian nationals imprisoned in the United States. These cases include the December 2018 detention of former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan, who in June 2020 was sentenced to 16 years imprisonment, allegedly for espionage; the August 2019 arrest of former U.S. Marine Trevor Reed, who in July 2020 was sentenced to 9 years imprisonment, allegedly for assaulting police officers; and the February 2019 detention of private equity firm founder Michael Calvey, who was released from house arrest in November 2020 but is undergoing trial proceedings for alleged embezzlement. In addition, the State Department's travel advisory for Russia reports that Russian authorities "arbitrarily enforce the law against U.S. citizen religious workers and open questionable criminal investigations against U.S. citizens engaged in religious activity."

Sources: U.S. Department of State, "The Conviction of U.S. Citizen Paul Whelan in Russia," June 15, 2020; Ivan Nechepurenko and Andrew Higgins, "Russian Court Sentences American, Paul Whelan, to 16 Years on Spy Charges," *New York Times*, June 15, 2020; RFE/RL, "Former U.S. Marine Trevor Reed Handed Nine-Year Prison Sentence by Moscow Court," July 30, 2020; U.S. Department of State, "Russia Travel Advisory," August 6, 2020; and RFE/RL, "As His Trial Resumes, U.S. Investor Says He Wants to Continue Working in Russia," February 17, 2021.

Arms Control³⁴⁴

During the Cold War, arms control negotiations and treaties played a key role in the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. Arms control negotiations were often one of the few channels for formal communication. Talks provided the United States and the Soviet Union with a forum to air security concerns and raise questions about plans and programs. They also led to two major arms control treaties: the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the 1991 Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (START). During the 1990s, as the relationship between the United States and Russia improved, arms control did not play as central a role in fostering cooperation. Nonetheless, the two countries negotiated three follow-on nuclear arms control treaties, of which two ultimately entered into force: the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty and the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

In 2019, the Trump Administration withdrew from the INF Treaty after assessing that Russia was in violation of the Treaty and would not return into compliance. The United States first determined that Russia had developed an intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile in 2014. Russian authorities denied Russia had violated the treaty and responded to the U.S. withdrawal by suspending Russia's participation. They also announced Russia would not deploy INF-range missiles unless the United States did so but would respond in kind to U.S. deployments. NATO officials have stated that NATO has no intention of deploying new land-based nuclear missiles in Europe.³⁴⁵ Many analysts criticized the U.S. withdrawal for undermining a treaty that had supported security and stability in Europe over the last 30 years, claiming the withdrawal could further undermine NATO cohesion.³⁴⁶ Other analysts argued the

³⁴⁴ Amy F. Woolf, Specialist in Nuclear Weapons Policy, contributed to this section. For more, see CRS Report R43832, *Russian Compliance with the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Amy F. Woolf; CRS In Focus IF11051, *U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty: What's Next?*, by Amy F. Woolf; CRS Insight IN11520, *Status of U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Talks*, by Amy F. Woolf; and CRS Report R41219, *The New START Treaty: Central Limits and Key Provisions*, by Amy F. Woolf.

³⁴⁵ NATO, "NATO and the INF Treaty," updated on August 2, 2019.

³⁴⁶ Ulrich Kuhn, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Europe in a Post-INF World," *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 26, no. 1-2 (2019), pp.155-166; Steven Pifer, "The Trump Administration Is Preparing a Major Mistake on the INF Treaty," Brookings Institution, October 29, 2019; and Tom Countryman and Kingston Reif, "Intermediate-Range Missiles Are the Wrong Weapon for Today's Security Challenges," *War on the Rocks*, August 13, 2019.

INF treaty was outdated and unduly limited U.S. military posture toward not only Russia but also China.³⁴⁷

The New START Treaty was set to expire on February 5, 2021. In 2020, Trump Administration officials held several meetings with Russian counterparts to discuss New START extension and a framework for a future treaty but did not reach an agreement. On January 21, 2021, the Biden Administration announced it would seek a five-year extension of the treaty, which occurred on February 3, 2021. The State Department noted the extension was a first step that would provide “the stability and predictability [needed] to enhance and expand discussions with Russia and China” on further nuclear arms reductions.³⁴⁸ In April 2021, President Biden and President Putin discussed their “intent to pursue a strategic stability dialogue on a range of arms control and emerging security issues, building on the extension of the New START Treaty.”³⁴⁹

In 2020, the Trump Administration withdrew from another arms control treaty, the Treaty on Open Skies.³⁵⁰ The United States, Canada, and European states (including Russia) signed the treaty in 1992, and it entered into force in 2002. Parties to the treaty agreed to permit unarmed observation aircraft to fly over their territories to observe military forces and activities. Prior to withdrawal, U.S. officials had raised questions about Russian compliance. According to the U.S. State Department, Russia restricted access for Open Skies flights over Moscow, the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, and along Russia’s border with Georgia, adjacent to the Russian-occupied regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.³⁵¹ After the U.S. withdrawal, Russia announced plans to withdraw from the treaty.

Outlook

The 117th Congress is continuing to play an active role in shaping U.S. policy toward Russia through the consideration of legislative initiatives and resolutions and through oversight assessing the challenges Russia presents to the United States and U.S. allies and partners. Potential questions that Members of Congress may consider in seeking to understand and respond to Russian foreign policy actions and malign activities include the following:

- Who besides Putin are the key foreign policy decisionmakers in Russia? Are there ways, through coercion or potential cooperation, to encourage a less aggressive Russian foreign policy that is more in line with U.S. interests?
- How can sanctions and other policy tools be made more effective in getting Russia to change its policies with regard to Ukraine, malicious cyber operations, human rights abuses (including the persecution of Alexei Navalny), and other activities? To what extent do sanctions complicate the Administration’s efforts to cooperate with U.S. allies and partners, or with Russia, on certain issues?

³⁴⁷ Chris Miller, “The INF Treaty Is Dead, and Russia Is the Biggest Loser,” *Foreign Policy*, August 2, 2019; Luis Simon and Alexander Lanoszka, “The Post-INF European Missile Balance: Thinking About NATO’s Deterrence Strategy,” *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2020), pp. 13-30; and Thomas G. Mahnken, “Countering Missiles with Missiles: U.S. Military Posture After the INF Treaty,” *War on the Rocks*, July 16, 2019.

³⁴⁸ See @StateDeptSpok, Twitter, February 3, 2021. Also see footnote 284.

³⁴⁹ White House, “Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia,” April 13, 2021.

³⁵⁰ CRS Insight IN10502, *The Open Skies Treaty: Background and Issues*, by Amy F. Woolf.

³⁵¹ U.S. Department of State, *2019 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments (Compliance Report)*, April 2019.

- What further steps could, or should, be taken to reassure allies against Russian aggression?
- Should the United States consider further nuclear arms reductions with Russia? If so, should these reductions cover a wider range of weapons and countries?
- What areas of policy cooperation between the United States and Russia exist today or might be possible to explore?
- Can the United States do more to deter Russian influence operations and cyber operations? What types of Russia-led disinformation efforts, influence operations, and cyberattacks pose the greatest threat to the United States and its allies and partners?
- Do Russia and China have common strategic and geopolitical objectives, especially vis-à-vis the United States and the West? To what extent does their cooperation pose a threat to U.S. interests?
- What are the prospects for halting completion of Russia's Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline to Germany? What are the consequences for U.S. policy if the pipeline is completed?
- Can and should the United States do more to promote the resolution of conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova and the withdrawal of Russian forces? How might the U.S. role evolve in conflict settlement efforts between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh?
- To what extent do Russian military, economic, and diplomatic activities worldwide, including in the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa, pose challenges to U.S. interests?
- Are there common characteristics among victims of alleged Russian state-sponsored attacks abroad? Are there countries that are particularly vulnerable to targeted acts of violence?
- What is known about the role of illicit financial schemes in supporting Russian malign activities abroad?

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Acknowledgments

Portions of this report benefited from contributions by CRS colleagues or draw on other CRS products, as cited in the text. Amber Wilhelm, Hannah Fischer, and Jamie Hutchinson helped create the graphics in this report.

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