

# NATO-Russian Relations In The Post-Cold War Era

A Monograph

by

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## Abstract

NATO-Russian Relations in the Post-Cold War Era, Colonel George A. Maund, British Army, 53 pages.

This monograph examines relations between NATO and Russia since the end of the Cold War. It examines the institutional NATO-Russia relationship, as well as member states' bilateral relations with Russia. The monograph highlights Russia's perspective of the West in terms of its perceptions of its own security. It concludes that, in between short periods of rapprochement, Western actions, particularly those of the United States and US-led military operations, have played a significant role in contributing to the deterioration of the relationship. It determines that these actions were based on: unrealistically high expectations of what Russia could achieve through economic and political reforms during the 1990s; a persistent underestimation of Russia's ambition to restore its great power status; fundamental differences of opinion in foreign policy aims and the importance that the West attaches to its values; and the pursuit of Western aims, particularly through the use of military force, when Russia was too weak to prevent them. It also shows that Russian actions under Vladimir Putin have had an adverse influence, particularly his adoption of authoritarian methods to restore state control in Russia and coercive measures to achieve foreign policy objectives abroad.

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## Acknowledgement

My interest in Russia stems from my time studying its language and from three visits to the country, the first of which occurred during the era of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in 1988. In professional terms, I renewed my interest while working at NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Power Europe during 2016-2017. When I began researching this monograph, I realized that I did not know as much of the post-Cold War era as I probably should, even though I had lived through the entire period as an adult. Therefore, if nothing else, this monograph has at least filled some of my knowledge gaps.

I am very grateful to a number of people for helping me in the research and writing of this work. I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience of working with Dr Robert T. Davis II as my monograph director. He has provided much patient counsel and wisdom over the last six months, and he has been a constant source of advice for research material. Tim Thomas, Les Grau, and Chuck Bartles at Fort Leavenworth's Foreign Military Studies Office were extremely accommodating as I began the process of narrowing the scope of my question. Jon Giullian, Head of International Collections in Watson Library's Slavic and Eurasian Studies at the University of Kansas, also deserves a special mention. He was a huge help and provided me with much of the most useful research material for the monograph. I am also grateful to Brigadier Andrew Roe, himself a SAMS graduate; as always, his eye for detail and incisiveness proved most helpful in informing my early draft work. My thanks go to my brother David too. A much better student of Russian than me, his comments on my drafts have undoubtedly helped me produce a more polished piece of work. Likewise, I am grateful to my long-time friend Wayne Hennessy-Barrett for his keen eye and perceptive comments. Finally, I must thank my wife Rocío for her patience and understanding. She has endured many sacrifices during my career and has always supported me magnificently; this year at Fort Leavenworth has been no exception.

## Acronyms

ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile
CFE	Conventional Forces in Europe
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EU	European Union
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PfP	Partnership for Peace
PJC	Permanent Joint Council
SORT	Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Talks
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution

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## Introduction

Nearly thirty years after the end of the Cold War relations between NATO and Russia are at a new low point. During the last fifteen years Russia, under Vladimir Putin's leadership, has become increasingly bellicose. A return to the initial post-Cold War optimism of the early 1990s now appears a very remote possibility, despite common strategic threats such as Islamist terrorism, weapons proliferation, and China's growing power. This monograph examines the relationship between NATO and Russia since the end of the Cold War in order to identify the causes of tension throughout that period. It also identifies measures that might improve the current relationship or inform future relations.

Before examining the relationship, it is important to clarify the nature of NATO relations with Russia. In particular, it is essential to understand the distinction between the relationship that the Alliance has as a collective organization and that which individual NATO member states, especially the United States, have with Russia, both bilaterally and in terms of their membership of other organizations such as the European Union (EU). The monograph therefore examines three aspects of relations with Russia—that which relates specifically to NATO, that which relates to the wider West (including NATO member states but not the Alliance as a collective organization), and that which relates to the West including the Alliance.

The monograph demonstrates that a combination of these three aspects has influenced the NATO-Russia relationship, generally more negatively than positively. It is Russia's bilateral relationship with the United States that has, generally, set the tone for the NATO-Russia institutional relationship. After the immediate post-Cold War optimism of the 1990s, periods of US-Russian rapprochement have broadly coincided with changes of US and Russian presidential leaders, in 2000-2001 and 2008-2009. However, in between these periods, the US, NATO, and Western relationships with Russia have experienced setbacks. The aim of this monograph is to identify the causes of these setbacks in an objective manner, avoiding the temptation to view the relationship with any sense of bias, either pro-Western or pro-Russian.

The monograph concludes that there is little likelihood of another rapprochement in the near future, unless either Putin alters his current style of leadership or he is replaced by a more moderate leader. That is not to say that he is exclusively to blame for the current state of the relationship. The monograph highlights actions by Russia as well as by Western states and institutions that have contributed to the downturn in relations since the end of the Cold War. It also recommends changes in Western foreign policy approaches that could contribute to improved relations or, if not, at least improve the chances of avoiding any further deterioration.

The reality of the current geostrategic situation is that Russia occupies more attention among Western leaders than it should, particularly bearing in mind the strategic consequences of the challenges of Islamist terrorism, weapons proliferation, and China's growing power. Russia could be an important partner with the West in dealing with the challenges of these areas of common ground. Addressing them together would provide potential opportunities for meaningful cooperation and could contribute to improved relations. Because of the magnitude of these challenges and their consequences, as well as the implications of further deterioration in relations with Russia, the monograph concludes that it is essential for NATO to maintain institutional links with Russia. Confidence building measures and bilateral links to Russia by individual member states must support this approach.

In researching this monograph, Martin Malia's *Russia Under Western Eyes* was an excellent starting point for understanding how Russia's history and culture influenced the West's perception of it over time.<sup>1</sup> Among the many books on post-Cold War Russian foreign policy, three stood out for the objectivity of their views. Andrei Tsygankov's analysis of foreign policy from 1985 to 2015 provided a comprehensive examination of events during that period.<sup>2</sup> His

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<sup>1</sup> Martin E. Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in Foreign Identity*, Fourth Edition (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

argument focused on the role played by different Russian leaders in shaping national identity and how that identity influenced foreign policy. Jeffrey Mankoff examined the 1991-2012 post-Cold War period, arguing that the desire to be recognized internationally as a great power has been a persistent theme in Russia's actions, even during the crises of the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Finally, David Cadier and Margot Light provided a more contemporary examination of the drivers of Russia's foreign policy in the Putin era, concluding that a desire to strengthen his grip on domestic power was the principal driver behind Putin's behavior in terms of foreign relations.<sup>4</sup> This monograph incorporates aspects of all three arguments in its findings. In terms of material specific to NATO, Gülnur Aybet and Rebecca E. Moore's *NATO In Search of a Vision* provided a comprehensive study on particular aspects of NATO's institutional relationship with Russia during the post-Cold War era.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, Second Edition (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> David Cadier and Margot Light, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Gülnur Aybet and Rebecca R. Moore, *NATO: In Search of a Vision* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

## Historical Context: Russia's Position in the European and World Orders

A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

—Winston Churchill, October 1939

Churchill's description dates back nearly eighty years, but it still captures a sense of the enduring difficulty that the West experiences in trying to define Russia. To understand Russia's foreign policy in the modern era, and specifically its relationship with NATO and Alliance member states, an appreciation of its national identity is essential. Russia's geopolitical and socioeconomic histories have both played a significant role in shaping this identity and they provide the context of Russia's current position in the European and world orders.

Russia's vast size and multiple land borders with other countries and regions mean that, throughout its history, many different nations and cultures have influenced its identity—Europe and Asia, West and East, capitalism and communism, democracy and autocracy. Martin Malia charted the fluctuations of Russia's relationship with Europe over the last 300 years as societies, geopolitics, and history changed. In seeking to answer the question “is the antithesis of Russia and the West a given of history?” he provided a narrative of a relationship that has often been uneasy, rarely close, and at times hostile, literally and figuratively.<sup>6</sup>

One enduring theme in Russia's history is military conflict. Russia has been subject to several invasions, including: the Mongols in the thirteenth century; the Crimean Tatars in 1571; the Swedes in the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; Napoleon's *Grande Armée* in 1812; Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire during World War I; and Nazi Germany during World War II. In addition, several countries intervened militarily during the 1918-1921 Russian Civil War in support of Russia's White Army, including France, Great Britain, Japan, Poland, and

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<sup>6</sup> Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 7.

the United States.<sup>7</sup> These military interventions have left a profound impression on the Russian psyche of the country's vulnerability to outside powers.

As a result, foreign invasions have contributed to another enduring theme of Russia's history—the use of military force to expand the territory over which it has political control. Russia has achieved this through a combination of extending its own national borders and creating a sphere of influence to provide strategic depth. Russian-initiated campaigns on other states' soil include, but are not limited to: a series of wars with the Ottomans from the late seventeenth century until the late 1870s; the Great Northern War with Sweden in the early 1700s, where territorial gains provided a direct maritime link between Russia and other European powers; Poland in the 1790s, and again in 1831 and 1863; the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where Russia's occupation of Danubian principalities in 1853 led to the Crimean War; Japan, where Russia's occupation of Manchuria in 1900 preceded defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905; Finland in 1939; Hungary in 1956; Czechoslovakia in 1968; and Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Twice during the course of major military campaigns Russian forces have advanced to the heart of Europe, reaching Paris in 1814 following Tsar Alexander I's participation in the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte's armies, and Berlin in 1945 as the Soviet Union contributed to the Allied defeat of Nazi Germany. Both of these advances occurred following invasions of Russia by foreign powers. Viewed in the context of Russia's enduring sense of vulnerability to invasion, Stalin's reluctance to relinquish Soviet influence over Eastern and Central European countries at the end of World War II is easier to understand. They provided an effective buffer against potential threats, physical or ideological, from the West, as the Cold War subsequently showed. Recent military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria are an indication of Russia's

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<sup>7</sup> Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1997), 928-932.

continued willingness to use military force when it believes that it is in its interests to do so.

Many observers have linked such use of force to a so-called “Gerasimov doctrine.”<sup>8</sup>

A historical imbalance in political ideological terms is another contributing factor to Russia’s uneasy relationship with Europe. Russia’s system of government has generally followed an autocratic path, therefore political ideas such as liberalism, democracy, and pluralism have originated elsewhere in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Even when political reforms have taken place in Russia they have done so several decades later, if not more, than in the rest of Europe and the Western Hemisphere.<sup>10</sup> This lag has stemmed from Russia’s tendency to perceive progressive ideas as a potential threat to its political stability. As a result, when reforms have occurred they have done so through a process of top-down enforcement, driven by a perceived requirement to enhance Russia’s security and raise its standing to that of other European powers, rather than through any sense of civic duty to improve political and societal conditions.<sup>11</sup>

This long history of military conflict and political friction between Russia and the rest of Europe helps explain the contemporary setting. As Alexander Sergunin observed in his examination of Russian foreign policy behavior, “Europe takes a unique position in [the] Russian mentality and particularly in security thinking. For centuries Europe was a source of both cultural inspiration and security threat, advanced technologies and innovations which destroyed Russia[n] traditions and values.”<sup>12</sup> He also described how “Russia was always eager to be a part of Europe not only in [a] geographic sense but also in terms of civilization. However, Europe with rare exception was reluctant to acknowledge Russia’s ‘Europeanness.’ Russia’s century-dated efforts

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” *Military Review* (January-February 2016), 30-38.

<sup>9</sup> Ironically, even Marxism did not stem from Russia.

<sup>10</sup> For example, during the rule of Tsars Peter the Great, Catherine, Alexander I, and Alexander II. Tsar Alexander II’s emancipation of the serfs in 1861, two years before US President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, is a notable exception.

<sup>11</sup> Davies, *Europe: A History*, 652-54 and Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 31-34.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Sergunin, *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior: Theory and Practice* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2016), 14.

to form a system of European alliances where Moscow could act on the equal footing with other great powers were a story of failure.”<sup>13</sup>

Martin Malia described Europe’s perception of Russia as a despotic state during the seventeenth century and first half of the eighteenth century. Initially, Russia’s domestic reforms tempered this perception by giving the impression of a state that sought a European identity, if not in substance than at least in appearance. Russia’s role as one of the principal actors on the European stage elevated its status and promoted the establishment of constructive international relations. Malia therefore qualified his description of Russia during the period 1700-1815 as an “enlightened despotism,” reflecting its general adherence to a recognizably European style of foreign and domestic policies.<sup>14</sup> However, Russia’s behavior, and Europe’s perception of it, changed in the years after the defeat of Napoleon. Between 1815 and 1855 Russia demonstrated an increasing appetite for intervention in other European states’ affairs. During this period, threatened by Russia’s military prowess and aggressive foreign policy, Europe’s view of Russia shifted from that of an “enlightened despotism” to an “oriental”—that is not westward-looking—one. Subsequently, defeat in the Crimean War and Tsar Alexander II’s domestic reforms helped to reset Europe’s geopolitical balance. After this, Europe came to see Russia again as a member of the European order, albeit hardly an idealized one.<sup>15</sup> This perception lasted until 1917.

After the Russian Revolution and Lenin’s rise to power, Soviet Russia’s relationship with Europe, and the West more broadly, descended into one of mutual distrust. The existential threat of fascism during World War II prompted a brief period of cooperation as military allies in the defeat of the Axis powers. Then the outcome of World War II restored Russia’s great power status and the struggle between communism and capitalism defined the bipolar world of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>14</sup> Davies, *Europe: A History*, 652-54 explains the nature of the reforms; Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 31-34 provides a narrative of Europe’s perception of Russia during the period.

<sup>15</sup> Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, *passim*.

second half of the twentieth century. Yet despite its size and economic and military strength, in the last hundred years Russia has twice collapsed and lost its great power status. Both times, in 1917 and 1991, this did not occur because of external intervention but, as Thomas Graham suggested, because of Russia's "failure to cope with the challenges of modernization."<sup>16</sup>

The collapses of 1917 and 1991 had profound effects on the country. The first led to the ascendancy of Bolshevism and a form of autocracy that was, at times, even more brutal than that which had existed prior to the 1917 Revolution. The second collapse led to a period of economic and political turmoil that endured for the remainder of the 1990s. The rapid demise of the Soviet Union resulted in an acute sense of national humiliation for Russia. The speed of its collapse and the stark, geopolitical contrast with its previous superpower status heightened this sense.<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Putin described it as "a major geopolitical disaster of the [twentieth] century."<sup>18</sup>

Although Russia has since gone some way to re-establishing its economic power it has not been able to restore the extent of its Cold War-era political influence over the former Soviet republics or former Warsaw Pact nations of Central and Eastern Europe. Several of these have eschewed Russia in favor of the EU and NATO. Since gaining power nearly twenty years ago Vladimir Putin has sought to reverse the outcome of the immediate post-Cold War period and restore Russia's former great power status. Such policy goals should not have caused the West much surprise. After all, despite the loss of the other Soviet republics, Russia is still a vast country. Its natural resources, especially oil and gas, have helped revitalize its economy and made it a leading regional energy provider. What Russia still lacks though is the status of a great power in global political terms, beyond that which it gains as one of the permanent members of the

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Graham, "The Sources of Russia's Insecurity," *Survival* 52, no. 1 (February-March 2010): 61.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation," April 25, 2005, Kremlin website, accessed November 23, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.



United Nations Security Council. The desire to create a multi-polar world order, with Russia as one of the poles, has been both an element of foreign policy and a key feature of the relationship with NATO since 1991.

Russia is inextricably linked to Europe by its shared land borders, and to the wider West through mutual interaction and influence in the spheres of political ideologies, foreign policy, trade, and culture. But, despite these links, differences in perspectives and positions have been a more frequent feature of its relations with Europe and the West than common ground. Unease has been the most consistent feature of the relationship and this has continued to be the case in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.

## The NATO-Russia Relationship During the 1990s: Optimism to Mistrust and Suspicion

We have before us the opportunity to forge for ourselves and for future generations a new world order.

President George Bush Address to the Nation, January 16, 1991

US President George H. W. Bush's many references to a new world order during the early 1990s gave hope of a fresh start in the East-West post-Cold War relationship. As Russia began to engage in open relations with the West these expectations seemed realistic. Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed a series of trade agreements with the United States, European nations, and the EU in return for economic assistance and support for domestic reforms. Russia's relationship with NATO also seemed to progress well. By 1995 Russia had signed two Strategic Arms Reduction Talks treaties (START I and II) with the US and agreed to join NATO's new Partnership for Peace (PfP) program.<sup>19</sup> In 1996, a Russian contingent formed part of the NATO-led Implementation Force in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Then, a year later, Yeltsin and Alliance leaders signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security and established the Permanent Joint Council (PJC). Yet by the end of the decade the relationship had soured. On hearing of NATO's bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in March 1999, Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov turned around in mid-flight and cancelled talks with US leaders and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Three principal factors account for this reversal in the NATO-Russia relationship during the 1990s.

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<sup>19</sup> START I reduced the number of strategic warheads and delivery vehicles in both states' inventories. Originally negotiated during the 1980s, President George H. W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev signed it in August 1991. The break-up of the Soviet Union delayed its implementation and it was finally ratified in 1994 after work to incorporate Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine in the agreement. START II sought further reductions in the number of US and Russian warheads on inter-continental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Although signed in December 1993, the late implementation of START I delayed START II. In the end, START II was never implemented due to subsequent disagreements between the United States and Russia. For more detail see the Arms Control Association website at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/USRussiaNuclearAgreementsMarch2010>, accessed February 25, 2018.

The first factor was Russia's perception that the West was not willing to engage with it as an equal partner. This manifested itself in both the economic and security spheres. During negotiations for Partnership and Cooperation Agreements in the early-mid 1990s, the EU afforded developed nation status to Eastern European states' economies. In contrast, it considered Russia's economy as developing nation status. This infuriated Yeltsin and slowed the process of negotiating the EU-Russia agreement.<sup>20</sup> Then, EU disapproval of Russian military action in Chechnya from 1994 to 1996 delayed ratification of the agreement until 1997, even though it had been signed in 1994.<sup>21</sup> This gave an early indication of the continued importance that Western institutions and states would attach to values when dealing with Russia.<sup>22</sup>

In the security sphere, NATO's primacy in Europe's post-Cold War security architecture had a much more profound effect. Following the demise of the Warsaw Pact, Russia wanted a different structure to NATO to form the basis of Europe's post-Cold War security. The 1993 Foreign Policy Concept called for this to be based on the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).<sup>23</sup> Then Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev spoke of the CSCE as playing "the key role in matters concerning European security and cooperation" and

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<sup>20</sup> Alastair Kocho-Williams. *Russia's International Relations in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2013), 158-59. Kocho-Williams explained that the EU did not recognize Russia as having market economy status until 2002. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement provided the general framework for EU-Russia political and economic relations, including the promotion of trade and investment. See the EU website at [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/35939/european-union-and-russian-federation\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/35939/european-union-and-russian-federation_en), accessed February 25, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Maxine David and Tatiana Romanova, "Modernisation in EU-Russia Relations: Past, Present, and Future," *European Politics and Society* 16, 1 (January 2015), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Western values include equality, human rights, freedom of speech, press, and religion, and the rule of law. All European states (less Albania), the United States, and Canada had already agreed to adhere to several of these values in signing the 1975 Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Soviet Union was also a signatory of the Act. For further information see <https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act?download=true>, accessed February 26, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Martin A. Smith and Graham Timmins, "Russia, NATO and the EU in an Era of Enlargement: Vulnerability or Opportunity?" *Geopolitics* 6, 1 (2001): 74; and Elena Kropatcheva, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Realm of European Security Through the Lens of Neoclassical Realism," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* No. 3 (2012): 33. The CSCE changed its name in 1995 to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), at Russia's suggestion.

suggested that NATO should “dovetail its activities with those of the CSCE.”<sup>24</sup> From a Russian perspective this was understandable—NATO’s *raison d’être* no longer existed and it therefore made no sense for Western nations to maintain it, and still less for Russia to join it. When NATO began to develop its PfP program, Russia was hesitant to join, instead preferring to give the CSCE path the opportunity to mature.<sup>25</sup> However, in 1995, when it became clear that this would not happen, Yeltsin decided to join the PfP program. This was a pragmatic decision, as rejecting NATO at this stage would have compromised Russia’s bilateral economic reform arrangements with member states and the West in general, in particular the United States and the IMF.

Despite joining the PfP program, Yeltsin did not relinquish his desire for an alternative security forum to NATO. Nor did he wish to signal an end to Russia’s ambition to restore great power status. Yeltsin sought an outcome from Russia’s formal engagement with NATO that would allow Russia to exert influence over the Alliance. Ideally this was to include the power of veto in order to prevent the Alliance from making decisions against Russia’s wishes or interests.<sup>26</sup> Hence, engagement continued and, in May 1997, Yeltsin and Alliance leaders signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act and established the Permanent Joint Council (PJC). The PJC allowed Russia to participate as one of seventeen members of the NATO council, giving it a unique status among non-member states.<sup>27</sup> From a NATO perspective this met Russia’s desire for a special

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<sup>24</sup> Andrei Kozyrev, “Russia and NATO: A Partnership for a United and Peaceful Europe,” *NATO Review* 42, 4 (August 1994), 3-6.

<sup>25</sup> NATO, “North Atlantic Cooperation Council (Archived),” last updated January 30, 2017, accessed November 1, 2017, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_69344.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69344.htm?selectedLocale=en). NATO initiated this program in 1994. It enabled countries to establish more formal bilateral relationships with the Alliance than the previous North Atlantic Cooperation Council structure, based on practical cooperation of individual nations’ choosing. NATO extended invitations to all countries in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council as well as others already in the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, including Russia.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed explanation see Martin A. Smith, “NATO-Russia Relations: Will the Future Resemble the Past?” in *NATO: In Search of a Vision*, edited by Gülnur Aybet and Rebecca R. Moore (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 100-104.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101. Smith explained that, previously, Russia’s dialogue with NATO had been on an unequal ‘16+1’ basis. This allowed member states to reach an agreed Alliance position prior to Russia’s

relationship, but it fell short of allowing Russia the power of veto in NATO decisions. Yeltsin therefore took this as an early signal that NATO had been disingenuous in suggesting that the PJC would give Russia equal partner status.

The second factor for the downturn in relations was post-Cold War NATO enlargement.<sup>28</sup> This had provoked much debate during the early 1990s. A number of prominent Russian experts in the West had argued against it, including: George Kennan, the former US diplomat and historian, acclaimed for his advocacy of containment during the Cold War; Michael Mandelbaum, Professor Emeritus at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies; and Jack Matlock, the last US Ambassador to the Soviet Union. The basis of their argument was that enlargement might risk the open relationship that Yeltsin had established with the West, including Russia's obligations to arms control treaties, and provoke a return to nationalism in Russian politics. They questioned the requirement to expand a Cold War-era defence alliance rather than establishing a new security structure. They also argued that, if the aim of enlargement was to preserve democracy in unstable parts of Europe, Russia should be prioritized over other countries whose relative political stability posed less of a threat to the region. On the other side of the argument advocates for enlargement included former US National Security Advisors Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, and William Odom, a retired US Army general and former Director of the National Security Agency during the Reagan administration. They had emphasized the importance of capitalizing on Russia's post-Soviet weakness to incorporate

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involvement in discussions. Russia's inclusion as a full council member would prevent this and enhance its status.

<sup>28</sup> In the post-Cold War era, the process began with an Alliance study on enlargement during 1995. This recommended pursuing enlargement and, in December 1996, the Alliance announced its intention to invite partner nations to accession talks. The first invitations—to the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland—followed at the Madrid Summit in July 1997 and all three nations were formally admitted in 1999, the Alliance's fiftieth anniversary year.

former Warsaw Pact countries in the Alliance before Russia might recover and seek to restore a regional sphere of influence.<sup>29</sup>

Some observers have suggested that President Clinton's initial position was to oppose NATO enlargement in order to ensure the best chance of establishing a strong relationship with Russia, a view shared by other NATO member states including France.<sup>30</sup> Such a position would have been understandable at the time, bearing in mind the magnitude of post-Cold War tasks such as negotiating the withdrawal of Russian troops from former Soviet republics and transferring obligations on nuclear weapons treaties to non-signatory former Soviet republics. However, Clinton's Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, wrote in his memoir that, after lengthy consideration by the administration in late 1993, Clinton decided to support enlargement, despite opposition from some officials and on Capitol Hill.<sup>31</sup> Clinton's statement in Prague in early 1994, that "Now the question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members but when and how," was therefore carefully crafted to manage expectations on both sides of the argument.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Charles-Philippe David, "Fountain of Youth or Cure Worse than Disease? NATO Enlargement: A Conceptual Deadlock," 15-16, and Sergei Plekhanov, "NATO Enlargement as an Issue in Russian Politics," in *The Future of NATO: Enlargement, Russia, and European Security*, edited by Charles-Philippe David and Jacques Lévesque (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 168.

<sup>30</sup> On Clinton's position see Stephen A. Cambone, "The Strategic Implications of NATO Enlargement" in *From Madrid to Brussels: Perspectives on NATO Enlargement*, edited by Stephen J. Blank (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College: 1997), 2, and Smith and Timmins, "Russia, NATO and the EU in an Era of Enlargement: Vulnerability or Opportunity?" 76. On France's position see Marie-Claude Plantin, "NATO Enlargement as an Obstacle to France's European Designs," in *The Future of NATO: Enlargement, Russia, and European Security*, 95-107.

<sup>31</sup> Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand* (New York: Random House, 2002), 92-146. Talbott explained that Clinton's policy decision aimed to balance the conflicting interests of Central European states, who sought early NATO membership, and Russia, that opposed NATO enlargement. Although Clinton was a firm supporter of Yeltsin, he was also in favor of enlargement. He believed that the PfP program would provide the best compromise by establishing a gradual process towards enlargement. This would assuage immediate Russian apprehension about NATO expansion and buy time to delay an Alliance decision on enlargement until after Russia's 1996 presidential election, thus reducing the impact of Russian nationalist campaigning against Yeltsin and not adversely affecting his chances of winning re-election.

<sup>32</sup> William J. Clinton, "The President's News Conference with Visegrad Leaders in Prague," January 12, 1994, accessed November 25, 2017, online by Gerhard Peter and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=49832>.

Other observers have commented that Russian mistrust of NATO grew as a result of the Alliance breaking a promise to Soviet leaders that it would not expand eastwards. They stated that, in 1990 during the ‘Two Plus Four’ German reunification talks, Mikhail Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze received assurances from NATO member states, including the United States, that the Alliance would not expand eastwards. These were never recorded formally in writing at the time and, when they became public knowledge in the mid-1990s, US diplomats dismissed them as no longer relevant because they had been discussed with a state which by then no longer existed.<sup>33</sup>

The historical context of Russia’s relationship with the West, Russia’s desire to see an alternative structure at the heart of post-Cold War European security, and its weak economic and military state in the 1990s meant that NATO’s decision to enlarge did not sit well in Moscow. Russia’s inability to prevent enlargement served as an acute reminder of its loss of power and increased the sense of humiliation brought about by the end of the Cold War.<sup>34</sup> Without the leverage to alter NATO’s path to expansion, Yeltsin had little choice but to accept the accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland in 1999. He did so reluctantly but pragmatically, prioritizing continued access to financial assistance to support economic reforms and recovery, in spite of nationalist opposition in Russia.<sup>35</sup>

The Balkans, long a source of friction between Russia and Western Europe, acted as one once more in the late 1990s. The Alliance’s military campaign against Serb forces in 1999,

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Eisenhower, “Perils of Victory,” 110-14 and Stanley Kober, “Russia’s Search for Identity,” in *NATO Enlargement: Illusions and Reality*, edited by Ted Galen Carpenter and Barbara Conry (Washington DC: CATO Institute, 1998), 130-32. Mark Kramer subsequently argued against this position after analyzing declassified US, Russian, and German primary source documents. He commented that the discussions only dealt with NATO enlargement in the context of a reunified Germany, and that Western assurances not to expand eastwards related purely to Germany. See “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” *The Washington Quarterly* (April 2009), 39-61.

<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting that the Soviet Union had also been unable to prevent the addition of Greece, Turkey, and West Germany to the Alliance in the 1950s.

<sup>35</sup> Sergei Plekhanov, “NATO Enlargement as an Issue in Russian Politics,” in *The Future of NATO: Enlargement, Russia, and European Security*, 178-79.

following their actions against the ethnic Albanian population in the then Serbian province of Kosovo, became the third factor in the deterioration of NATO's relationship with Russia. Russia's dissatisfaction over this action was based on three significant issues. Firstly, NATO had not consulted Moscow at all prior to launching its air strikes. Secondly, the Alliance's action, based on a unilateral decision without the support of a UN Security Council resolution, had gone against the provisions of the NATO-Russia Founding Act.<sup>36</sup> Thirdly, NATO's air campaign touched an emotive Russian nerve by targeting fellow Slavs and Orthodox Christians. The cumulative effect of these issues signalled that NATO was not taking Russia seriously and, knowing that Russia lacked power and leverage, the Alliance was prepared to go back on its word if it was in its interests to do so. Having made so many significant concessions to NATO and the West—withdrawal of its forces from many of the former Soviet republics, rapid and profound economic and political reforms, and arms reductions—Yeltsin's decision to withdraw Russia from the PJC was not surprising from a Russian perspective.

Thus, Russia and NATO approached the end of the 1990s with relations at a low point for the decade, the optimism of the immediate post-Cold War period having given way to mistrust and suspicion. With hindsight, it is easy to say that both sides missed opportunities to forge a more balanced, constructive, and longer-lasting relationship. Clinton and the United States could have delayed the PfP program and the decision to enlarge NATO. However, this would very likely have risked the relationship with Central and Eastern European states who, after nearly fifty involuntary years spent under Soviet control, if not part of the Soviet Union itself, were keen to prevent a re-establishment of the *status quo ante*. In this context, it is important to remember

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<sup>36</sup> NATO, "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris, France", last updated October 12, 2009, accessed December 12, 2017, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm). The Act committed NATO and Russia to respect "the primary responsibility of the UN Security Council for maintaining international peace and security" based on the principle of "refraining from the threat or use of force against each other as well as against any other state, its sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence in any manner inconsistent with the UN Charter."



how keen such countries were to join the Alliance.<sup>37</sup> It is also important to recall that NATO was the only organisation willing to expand at the time and accept the accession of former Warsaw Pact states to enable their strategic realignment towards the West. Perhaps Russia might not have perceived EU enlargement in the same way that it did NATO's. However, the EU was not ready for enlargement and did not admit any states from Eastern and Central Europe until 2004.

Whatever the case, NATO member states and the Alliance as a whole understood the nature of the strategic choice between reaching out to Central and Eastern Europe and compromising the relationship with Russia. At the time, Russia's weakness made it appear that any consequences of choosing the latter option would be insignificant. However, in reality, it merely delayed any manifestation of them until Russia was able to restore its power and sense of pride. With Putin's rise to power this would occur much more quickly than Western states might have imagined.

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<sup>37</sup> See for example Vaclav Havel's views expressed in "A Call for Sacrifice," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (March-April 1994): 2-7.

## Putin's First Presidency: Missed Opportunities?

A new phase began in the Russia-NATO relationship with Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 1999. Initial signs were positive, as they had been ten years earlier. In fact, in July 1999, a month before Yeltsin appointed Putin as his acting prime minister, Russia had agreed to reconvene the PJC with NATO.<sup>38</sup> The two sides took early steps to overcome the serious disagreement that had occurred over NATO's Kosovo campaign four months earlier. Then in 2000, in a television interview with British journalist David Frost, Putin even suggested that Russia might join NATO. A year later, George W. Bush became US president and the events of 9/11 ushered in a period of unprecedented cooperation. As both countries dealt with the consequences of Islamist terrorism and Russia joined the US-led anti-terrorist coalition. Another sign of mutual respect and cooperation came when the United States sought, and gained, Russia's approval to establish military bases in the former Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to support its operations in Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> In May 2002, Russia and the US signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT).<sup>40</sup> The same month, Russia and NATO had agreed on a new, more effective forum for dialogue to replace the PJC. The NATO-Russia Council offered the opportunity of improved and, from the Russian point of view, more substantive discussions. Russia was to be included as an "equal partner in consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decisions and joint action on a wide spectrum of security issues in the Euro-Atlantic region."<sup>41</sup> The NATO-Russia Council also led to a series of Russian agreements with NATO:

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<sup>38</sup> Albeit without having first resolved the underlying disagreements over that forum's functions.

<sup>39</sup> Russia experienced a series of terrorist attacks in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These included bombings of apartment blocks, passenger planes, and trains, and suicide bombings at a military hospital in North Ossetia and an underground train in Moscow. Western media widely reported two other incidents—Chechen rebels' seizures of hostages at a Moscow theater in October 2002 and at a school in Beslan in September 2004. Both ended in bloodshed and large numbers of fatalities when Russian troops intervened.

<sup>40</sup> SORT reduced the number of strategic warheads in both nations' inventories. For more information see <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/sort-glance>, accessed February 26, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> NATO, "NATO-Russia Council," accessed 14 December 2017, <https://www.nato.int/nrc-website/en/about/index.html>.

transit rights through Russia that allowed the transportation of materiel for the Alliance's International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan; cooperation in providing counter-narcotics training to Afghan and Central Asian personnel; and participation by the Russian Navy in Operation Active Endeavour, NATO's counter-terrorism patrols in the Mediterranean that began following the Alliance's invocation of Article 5 after 9/11.<sup>42</sup> Equally positive, and perhaps unexpected from a US/NATO perspective, was Putin's tacit acceptance of a second round of NATO enlargement in 2002.<sup>43</sup> Although the 2001 Foreign Policy Concept maintained official opposition to enlargement, Putin's reaction to the prospect of another seven states joining the Alliance was muted.<sup>44</sup> Collectively, this all pointed to Putin prioritizing a constructive relationship with NATO and its member states, particularly the United States. From his perspective, an alignment with Western nations in the fight against Islamist terrorism would be very beneficial, as it might lead to support for his campaign in Chechnya—if not for the methods themselves then at least for the importance of addressing the problem. Yet by 2007, Putin's view had changed to the extent that he was extremely critical of US and NATO policies at the Munich Security Conference.<sup>45</sup> A year later, after mounting tension between Georgia and its separatist

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<sup>42</sup> Martin A. Smith, "NATO-Russia Relations: Will the Future Resemble the Past?" in *NATO: In Search of a Vision*, 112. Transit rights through Russia continue today for NATO's current mission in Afghanistan, Resolute Support. Operation Active Endeavour became Operation Sea Guardian in 2016.

<sup>43</sup> At the Prague Summit in November that year the Alliance invited seven nations to join. Four of these, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, represented an extension of the Alliance's first round of expansion into Central Europe. The other three—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—were former Soviet republics that shared borders with Russia and had significant ethnic Russian populations.

<sup>44</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," June 28, 2001, accessed December 14, 2017. <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm>. The Concept stated that "Russia retains its negative attitude towards the expansion of NATO."

<sup>45</sup> Putin's comments focused on several themes. On respect for international law: "We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law" and "I am convinced that the only mechanism that can make decisions about using military force as a last resort is the Charter of the United Nations." On NATO: "I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust." On US foreign policy: "One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations." Kremlin website,

regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian forces intervened and fought a brief war there. Closer examination of events during Putin's two presidential terms reveals several factors that contributed to this change in policy. Direct NATO-Russia interaction was one, but the most significant issues were in relation to policy decisions taken by individual NATO member states, most prominently the United States.

The first major issue of disagreement between the George W. Bush administration and Putin was missile defense. In December 2001, the United States gave notice of its decision to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty after six months.<sup>46</sup> The rationale was to enable the United States to develop a means of defending its national territory against terrorist or rogue state missile attacks. This was not purely a response to 9/11, as Bush had previously indicated his intention to build a global missile defense system in May 2001.<sup>47</sup> At the time, he had noted potential Russian concerns, proposing that both states "work together to develop a new foundation for world peace and security in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>48</sup> Putin's response to the decision was measured but clear, describing the decision as a mistake and highlighting that Russia had "done all it could to preserve the treaty...from a concern for the preservation and strengthening of international legal foundations."<sup>49</sup> These comments were significant as they

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"Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia," accessed 14 December 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>46</sup> The ABM Treaty was a Cold War-era arms control treaty that aimed to stop one aspect of an arms race by preventing the US and the Soviet Union from deploying missile defense systems to defend against strategic ballistic missiles. For more detail see the Arms Control Association website at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/abmtreaty>, accessed December 16, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Doing so would, by definition, breach the terms of the ABM Treaty, hence the requirement to withdraw.

<sup>48</sup> George W. Bush, "Remarks at the National Defense University," May 1, 2001, accessed 14 December, 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=45568&st=&st1=>.

<sup>49</sup> "Russian President Vladimir Putin's Response to the US Decision to Withdraw from the ABM Treaty, December 13, 2001," [atomicarchive.com](http://atomicarchive.com), accessed December 14 2017, [www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Missile/PutinRemarks.shtml](http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Missile/PutinRemarks.shtml). Putin's concerns were an extension of Russia's Cold War opposition to Western defense technological advancements such as the US Strategic Defense Initiative. See Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (London: Bantam, 1997), 407.

underscored the importance of international institutions and legal obligations as a consistent theme in Putin's view of the world order. Six months after Bush's announcement, Putin withdrew Russia from START II, the day after the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty.<sup>50</sup>

The event that triggered a change in Putin's relationship with the United States was the US-led coalition's decision to carry out military action in 2003 against Saddam Hussein without the support of a UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR). This was an ad hoc coalition campaign rather than a NATO one, therefore the disagreement did not have a direct impact on Russia's relationship with NATO and the NATO-Russia Council continued to function. However, the coalition's intervention in Iraq provided another example of the West's tendency to neglect Russia's objections when conducting military action in another sovereign state, only four years after NATO's Kosovo campaign. The course of diplomatic events in early 2003 denied Putin the opportunity to exercise his power of veto against military action in the UN Security Council.<sup>51</sup> In a sense it was beneficial for Putin that certain NATO member states, notably France and Germany, shared his opposition to military action in Iraq. However, coming so soon after Kosovo, for Putin the Iraq War was another clear demonstration of arrogant US (and UK) unilateralism and another stark reminder of his inability to prevent US actions, no matter how vigorously he opposed them. Shortly after it began, Putin described the war as "the most serious crisis the world has faced since the Cold War" and "shaking the foundations of global stability and international law."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For more detail see the Arms Control Association website at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/start2>, accessed February 15, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> France and Russia both stated publicly in early March 2003 that they would veto a resolution that sought to legitimize military action. Germany, which was presiding over the Security Council at the time, declared the same position. Knowing this, the US and UK governments chose not to propose such a resolution in order to prevent it being vetoed by other Security Council members.

<sup>52</sup> "Putin Warns on Iraq War," CNN, March 28, 2003, accessed 15 December 2017, [www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/europe/03/28/sprj.irq.putin/](http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/europe/03/28/sprj.irq.putin/)

The context of Russia's domestic and foreign policies, especially in its near abroad, also contributed to the deterioration of its relationship with the West during this period.<sup>53</sup> Putin had described the demise of the Soviet Union as a catastrophe. However, Russia's economic crisis of 1998 had also contributed to a sense of shame in Russia, as well as anger at the liberalizing, shock-therapy policies of the Yeltsin era that many Russians believed had caused the crisis. Putin was determined to reverse the damage that he believed these had caused—loss of centralized state power to Russia's regions, the rise of the oligarchs and the growth of their political and economic power, widespread corruption, and the threat to state territorial integrity posed by autonomous regions and republics, especially the situation in Chechnya. His first priority was therefore to restore order to Russia and he did so through a program of domestic reforms that recentralized state power and greatly reduced the influence and power of the regions and oligarchs.<sup>54</sup> These measures, combined with the suppression of independent Russian media gained him domestic popularity and contributed to his re-election in 2004. Some of his methods attracted adverse attention in the West, however. In particular, the arrest and imprisonment of former Yukos CEO, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in October 2003 and the deaths of journalist Anna Politkovskaya in October 2006 and former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko in November 2006 troubled many observers.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> The term “near abroad” refers to the former Soviet republics. It includes the Baltic States even though they have realigned themselves away from Russia's direct sphere of influence.

<sup>54</sup> Alex Pravda's “Introduction: Putin in Perspective” provides an excellent summary of Putin's first presidential term in *Leading Russia*, edited by Alex Pravda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23-36.

<sup>55</sup> A Russian court convicted Khodorkovsky of embezzlement and tax evasion. The White House expressed “serious concerns” over his arrest—see Andrei Grachev, “Putin's Foreign Policy Choices,” in *Leading Russia*, 268. Western media provided widespread coverage of the case, suggesting that Khodorkovsky's interest in more open, democratic policies had led to Putin's decision to remove him as a potential threat. Politkovskaya was found shot in her apartment block in Moscow. A Russian court convicted five men of her murder in 2014, including three who had been acquitted in a previous trial. No official connection between the Russian government and her death has been made. Litvinenko was poisoned in London and, in the public inquiry into his death, Sir Robert Owen concluded that Putin probably approved it—see “The Litvinenko Inquiry: Report into the Death of Alexander Litvinenko” at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-litvinenko-inquiry-report-into-the-death-of-alexander-litvinenko>, accessed January 18, 2018.

The recovery of Russia's economy, fueled by rising global hydrocarbon prices, also enabled Putin to exert control and influence internationally, particularly in Russia's near abroad. He was able to apply political leverage through other countries' reliance on Russian gas and oil supplies, subsidizing energy prices in return for political alignment. During the early 2000s, Armenia handed over control of state assets, including an atomic power plant, in exchange for reduced debt. Russia also obtained control of the supply of electricity to Georgia and provided energy to Abkhazia and South Ossetia at extremely favorable rates. In 2003, Belarus experienced the first of several energy crises when Gazprom, Russia's principal state oil company, shut off supply following a dispute over a financial deal for control of an oil pipeline that ran through the country.<sup>56</sup> During this period Putin also sought to reinvigorate the Russian-led security alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), with a focus on fighting terrorism.<sup>57</sup>

The so-called "color revolutions" in Russia's near abroad also sowed the seeds of future Russian-Western friction. Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 all experienced changes of government following large-scale demonstrations that occurred over perceptions of electoral fraud. Western governments, in particular the United States, welcomed these as spontaneous expressions of a popular desire for democracy. Bush, in particular, was quick to reach out to Georgia and Ukraine, hosting the new presidents on official visits to the United States and suggesting that NATO membership for both would be a positive step.<sup>58</sup> Putin viewed events very differently. For him the rapid demise of three governments in Russia's near

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<sup>56</sup> For a summary of Russia's policies in its near abroad see Andrei Grachev's "Putin's Foreign Policy Choices" in *Leading Russia*, 263-67, and Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 154-61.

<sup>57</sup> Russia originally established the CSTO in 1992 to promote peace and to strengthen regional stability in Russia and Central Asia. See "Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization" at [www.odkb-csto.org/documents/detail.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=1896](http://www.odkb-csto.org/documents/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=1896), accessed January 18, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> George W. Bush, "Remarks Following Discussions with President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia and an Exchange with Reporters," February 25, 2004, accessed December 14, 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=62702> and "The President's News Conference with President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine," April 4, 2005, accessed December 14, 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=73794>.

abroad, the failure of his overt support to Ukraine's pro-Russian candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, and the financial support provided to pro-democracy candidates by Western non-governmental organizations were indicators of Western attempts to undermine Russia's influence in its near abroad.<sup>59</sup> He perceived the West's public embrace of the new leaders as a sign of triumphalism, although he did not speak out publicly at the time. His support for the violent suppression of a fourth uprising in pro-Russian Uzbekistan was therefore not a great surprise in May 2005.<sup>60</sup> Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also signaled Russia's opposition to Georgia's and Ukraine's NATO membership in 2006 by stating that such a move would "mean a colossal geopolitical shift."<sup>61</sup>

Against this backdrop of increasing friction, it was a positive sign that the NATO-Russia Council was never suspended during this period, even when another serious disagreement between Russia and the Alliance occurred. This grew out of differences of opinion over each side's interpretation of how to implement arms control obligations under the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty.<sup>62</sup> Signatory states had adapted the original 1990 CFE Treaty in 1999 to take account of the break-up of the Warsaw Pact and NATO enlargement. Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine had ratified the amendment. However, NATO signatories refused to do so due to the Russian government's failure to comply with its agreement to withdraw military bases from the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Moldova's Trans-Dniestrian region.<sup>63</sup> For its part, the Russian government objected to the fact that the second

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<sup>59</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 110.

<sup>60</sup> Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 165.

<sup>61</sup> "Russia Tells Ukraine to Stay Out of NATO," *Guardian (London)*, June 7, 2006, accessed January 5, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jun/08/russia.nickpatonwalsh>.

<sup>62</sup> The CFE Treaty was originally signed in 1990 and limited the quantity of conventional forces that NATO and the former Warsaw Pact countries, including Russia, could hold. For more detail see the Arms Control Association website at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheet/cfe>.

<sup>63</sup> This had been one of several agreements reached at the OSCE's Istanbul Summit in November 1999. For more detail see the OSCE's Istanbul Document 1999, page 50 concerning Moldova and page 252 concerning Georgia, at <http://www.osce.org/mc/39569?download=true>.



round of NATO enlargement had resulted in the Alliance gaining four new member states that were not signatories to the CFE Treaty and, therefore, not subject to arms limitations.<sup>64</sup> Failure to resolve this impasse led to Russia suspending its implementation of the CFE Treaty in December 2007.<sup>65</sup>

During Putin's final few months as president in 2008, a number of other events occurred that had a direct impact on the NATO-Russia relationship. The first of these was Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008. NATO did not actively encourage this move, but the Kosovar Albanians felt sufficiently emboldened by Western nations' support, particularly NATO member states, to make the declaration.<sup>66</sup> The move exacerbated Putin's sense of frustration with the Alliance over what he had seen as its unauthorized military action against the Serbs in 1999. In a press conference at the Kremlin days before Pristina's declaration, Putin described the planned move as "illegal, ill-conceived and immoral."<sup>67</sup>

In April 2008, at its Bucharest Summit, NATO reopened the issue of Alliance enlargement, declaring its agreement that Georgia and Ukraine "will become members."<sup>68</sup> For Putin this was confirmation of the desire by NATO and NATO member states to extend their

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<sup>64</sup> The Baltic States and Slovenia. See the Arms Control Association website at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheet/cfe>.

<sup>65</sup> A statement by Russia's Foreign Ministry suggested several steps that could end its suspension, including resolution of NATO enlargement involving non-CFE Treaty signatory states and the stationing of military forces in other states. For more detail see [http://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/spokesman/official\\_statement/-/asset\\_publisher/t2GCdmD8RNlr/content/id/354334](http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/-/asset_publisher/t2GCdmD8RNlr/content/id/354334). Over ten years later sufficient progress has still not been made to enable this suspension to be lifted.

<sup>66</sup> By the end of 2008, fifty three nations had recognized Kosovo's independence, including twenty two of the then twenty six NATO member states. Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain, all of which have regions populated by different ethnic groups, did not recognize it. To date a total of 116 nations have recognized independence. See "Kosovo Thanks You" at <https://kosovothanksyou.com>.

<sup>67</sup> "Kosovo Breakaway Illegal, Says Putin," *Guardian (London)*, February 15, 2008, accessed January 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/feb/15/russia.kosovo>.

<sup>68</sup> NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration, April 3, 2008," accessed January 14, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm). Although this wording suggested a formal commitment to membership, in fact France and Germany opposed Bush's desire to offer Membership Action Plans in Bucharest. The Summit therefore deferred the decision to the Foreign Ministers' meeting later that year, but events before then meant that a decision was never made.

strategic interests into Russia's sphere of influence. His statement in Bucharest, where he had attended a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, could not have been clearer—"We [Russia] view the appearance of a powerful military bloc on our borders...as a direct threat to the security of our country. The claim that this process is not directed against Russia will not suffice. National security is not based on promises."<sup>69</sup> This was consistent with the new January 2008 version of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept that stated "Russia maintains its negative attitude towards the expansion of NATO, notably to the plans of admitting Ukraine and Georgia to the membership in the alliance, as well as to bringing the NATO military infrastructure closer to the Russian border."<sup>70</sup> Tensions between Russia and Georgia increased during mid-2008 and Georgian forces entered South Ossetia in force in August following clashes with Russian-backed rebels. Russia then intervened militarily, overwhelming Georgian forces in a week-long war. Under a peace agreement brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Russia withdrew its forces from Georgia, less South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where they have remained since. By using military force in this way, Russia signaled to NATO and its member states, especially the United States, that it would not accept the loss of its near abroad to Western influence as it had previously done with the Baltic States. Russia also combined diplomacy with its military action by recognizing Abkhazian and South Ossetian declarations of independence, a reciprocal action over events in Kosovo.<sup>71</sup>

The relationship between Russia and NATO from mid-1999 to 2008 was thus marked more by Russia's interaction with NATO member states than with the Alliance as a whole,

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<sup>69</sup> Kremlin website, "Press Statement and Answers to Journalists' Questions Following a Meeting of the NATO-Russia Council," April 4, 2008, accessed January 14, 2018, <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24903>.

<sup>70</sup> The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, accessed January 14, 2018, <https://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>. The Concept was written during Putin's presidency in January 2008 but signed into effect in July after Medvedev became president.

<sup>71</sup> By maintaining a military presence in both regions, Russia has effectively blocked Georgia from joining the Alliance, preventing it from meeting the pre-requisite condition of territorial integrity. As a result, NATO has not been able to offer Membership Action Plans to either Georgia or Ukraine.

although it ended with a very clear statement of intent by both sides on strategic interests in Russia's near abroad. During this period, Russia, NATO, and its member states failed to consolidate their initial cooperation in addressing the common strategic ground of global Islamist terrorism. In responding to this threat, the United States in particular, supported by the United Kingdom, pursued unilateral policies that continued to show insufficient regard for Russia's views. These served to highlight the imbalance in the US-Russia relationship. Although Putin had offered significant assistance to both the US and NATO in its counter-terrorism operations, he was unable to prevent US and UK military action in Iraq, even when he was aligned in opposition to the Iraq War with certain NATO member states. As Putin worked to restore state power at home and re-establish Russia's influence abroad, his methods drew criticism from Western states and institutions for being at odds with Western values. Russia's stalling tactics on withdrawing from bases in Georgia and Moldova also led to Western suspicion over its commitment to international treaties. The deterioration in Russia's relationship with the West, at state and institutional level, played out most clearly in Russia's near abroad. Strategic friction over the color revolutions and the possibility of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine made it clear that both side's interests in that area were mutually incompatible. The legacy of this period was therefore one of missed opportunities and increasing mistrust and suspicion that would carry forward and greatly influence relations in the future.

## Medvedev and Putin's Second Presidency: Great Power Politics Are The New Norm

The relationship between Russia and NATO during the last ten years has followed a similar trajectory to the previous two periods. Following the 2008 Georgian crisis, relations continued to be strained during the rest of the year. The presidential election victories of Barack Obama in the US and Dmitry Medvedev in Russia appeared to provide some room for optimism. However, after a period of rapprochement between Russia and the West, disagreements began to recur and tensions mounted again. In Europe, these tensions culminated in Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the use of military force in Eastern Ukraine the following month. Since then Russian forces have continued to be involved in the struggle between the Western-backed Ukrainian government and the Russian-backed rebels. Outside Europe, Russia has also used military force in Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad since 2015. Analysis of events during this period demonstrates that the relationship has entered a dangerous phase with a significant risk of miscalculation on either side, as each views the other's actions and rhetoric as the cause of increasing animosity.

Missile defense, a standing issue of contention with Russia, caused further friction in 2008 as the Bush administration entered its last few months. After the Alliance's agreement to "the deployment of European-based United States missile defense architecture" at the Bucharest Summit, the Bush administration concluded bilateral agreements that summer with the Czech Republic and Poland to host a radar system and interceptor missiles, respectively.<sup>72</sup> Russian President Medvedev stated that Russia would respond by deploying its own missile system close

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<sup>72</sup> NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," April 3, 2008; DW, "US, Czech Republic Seal Anti-Missile Radar System Deal", accessed January 15, 2018, [www.dw.com/en/us-czech-republic-seal-anti-missile-radar-system-deal/a-346915](http://www.dw.com/en/us-czech-republic-seal-anti-missile-radar-system-deal/a-346915); and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Poland and US Sign Missile-Defence Pact", accessed January 15, 2018, [https://www.rferl.org/a/Poland\\_And\\_US\\_Sign\\_Missile\\_Defence\\_Pact/1192539.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Poland_And_US_Sign_Missile_Defence_Pact/1192539.html).

to Poland.<sup>73</sup> He also referred to US rejection of Russia's proposal for cooperation, namely Putin's suggestion a year earlier of a joint venture at an existing Russian radar system in Azerbaijan.<sup>74</sup> Rejection of each other's offers entrenched both sides' positions of mutual suspicion. For its part, Russia refused to accept US and NATO assurances that its system would not be used offensively against Russia; the fact that the proposed locations in Poland and the Czech Republic would be unable to defend that part of the Alliance's territory closest to Iran increased Russian scepticism. The United States saw Putin's offer as nothing more than a political ploy to prevent the deployment of its planned capability.<sup>75</sup>

The change in Russian and US leadership in 2008-09 gave both countries the opportunity to reassess the situation. Presidents Medvedev and Obama met twice in 2009 and agreed to take steps to reduce tensions in their bilateral relationship. Obama made a significant compromise on missile defense in September 2009, announcing that interceptor missiles would be deployed on ships rather than in Poland and the radar system somewhere closer to Iran instead of the Czech Republic. Medvedev reciprocated by agreeing to consider alternative options for a joint venture. This led to progress between Russia and NATO too—at the 2010 NATO-Russia Summit in Lisbon, Russia approved a joint ballistic missile threat assessment and agreed to discuss further missile defense cooperation. Obama and Medvedev also agreed a new arms control treaty (New START) to replace START I, albeit with certain Russian caveats included on US missile defense.<sup>76</sup> Economic ties were another feature of what the United States termed as the reset

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<sup>73</sup> "Russia Gives Obama Brisk Warning," *Washington Post*, November 6, 2008, accessed January 15, 2018, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/05/AR2008110502987.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/05/AR2008110502987.html).

<sup>74</sup> Sean Kay, "Missile Defenses and the European Security Dilemma," in *NATO: In Search of a Vision*, 144. Putin's suggestion had followed his own rejection of an earlier US proposal to collocate radar systems and conduct joint threat assessments.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 144f.

<sup>76</sup> New START reduced the number of strategic warheads, strategic delivery systems, and launchers. For more detail see the Arms Control Association website at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/USRussiaNuclearAgreementsMarch2010>, accessed February 17, 2018.

strategy. Agreements on bilateral trade and investment deals deepened institutional financial links and established areas of mutual interest. Russia had a particular vested interest in these arrangements as its economy was suffering from a combination of reduced foreign investment in response to its military intervention in Georgia, a significant loss of revenue caused by reduced global oil prices, and the collapse of its stock exchange. Increased US investment would therefore enable much-needed modernization. Other agreements included cooperation to limit Iran and North Korea's nuclear programs, US use of Russian airspace to support its operations in Afghanistan, and steps required to enable Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization. Russia also cancelled planned sales of missiles to Iran in 2010. Then, when Victor Yanukovych defeated Victor Yushchenko in Ukraine's 2010 presidential election, Obama accepted the result, signalling to Medvedev that the US would not pursue strategic interests in Russia's near abroad as aggressively as under Bush.<sup>77</sup> As a result, Russia reduced its calls for Kyrgyzstan to cease support for the US military base on its territory. By 2011, friction in the strategic relationship had diminished to the extent that, when NATO member states tabled a resolution for military action to protect civilians in Libya, Russia chose to abstain rather than veto it. Echoing the positive steps taken at the start of the previous two decades, the reset policy appeared to be paying dividends. But only three years later, Russia, where Putin had been re-elected as president, had annexed Crimea, intervened militarily in Eastern Ukraine, and incensed Western leaders over its military support for the Assad regime in Syria. The key factor behind this downturn was a trend towards disagreements between Russia and the West in general, at state and institutional level, including NATO and the EU.

The West's responses to the Arab Spring in general, and specifically NATO's prosecution of the military campaign in Libya, were the latest source of friction with Russia, or to be more precise with Putin. Although Russia, under Medvedev's presidency, had abstained rather

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<sup>77</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 128-29.

than vetoed the UNSCR, Putin had voiced his opposition from the outset, describing it as resembling “medieval calls for crusades.”<sup>78</sup> A month later, the targeting of one of Gaddafi’s own compounds by NATO aircraft incensed him.<sup>79</sup> For Putin, this was yet another example of Western military intervention in another sovereign state’s affairs, just like Kosovo and Iraq previously. As the Arab Spring progressed, he could not comprehend the West’s apparent delight at the fall of leaders in Tunisia and Egypt, or Gaddafi’s death in October 2011. Viewed in this context, Russia’s decision to veto a UNSCR on military action against the Assad regime in Syria shortly after was more in line with Putin’s first presidency and suggested a return to the diplomatic *status quo ante*, even before Putin had returned to the presidency.

In December 2011, still four months prior to his re-election as president, Putin turned his anger on the United States when Russia itself experienced widespread civil unrest. Large-scale demonstrations, the first in Russia since the chaos of Yeltsin’s early years, took place in protest at alleged fraud in parliamentary elections. Coming just two months after his confirmation as a candidate for the presidential election, they represented a direct threat to Putin, who was still mindful of Western leaders’ encouragement of the color revolutions during the previous decade. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for irregularities in the election to be investigated at an OSCE meeting.<sup>80</sup> Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who was also attending the meeting, responded by saying “I consider such statements absolutely irresponsible, deceitful and even provocative.”<sup>81</sup> Putin accused Clinton of fomenting unrest in Russia, then, during his election

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<sup>78</sup> “Putin Likens U.N. Libya Resolution to Crusades,” *Reuters*, March 21, 2011, accessed January 16, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-russia/putin-likens-u-n-libya-resolution-to-crusades-idUSTRE72K3JR20110321>.

<sup>79</sup> “Putin: Libya Coalition Has No Right to Kill Gaddafi,” *Reuters*, April 26, 2011, accessed January 17, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-libya/putin-libya-coalition-has-no-right-to-kill-gaddafi-idUSTRE73P4L920110426>.

<sup>80</sup> “Clinton Cites ‘Serious Concerns’ About Russian Election,” *CNN*, December 6, 2011, accessed January 17, 2018, [www.cnn.com/2011/12/06/world/europe/russia-elections-clinton/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/06/world/europe/russia-elections-clinton/index.html).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

campaign, made allegations that the State Department had colluded with Russia's opposition leaders.<sup>82</sup>

In an extension of this US-Russian animosity prior to the election, relations with the United States continued to deteriorate after Putin's re-election in March 2012. In December that year the US government approved a piece of legislation known as the Magnitsky Act. The Act authorized sanctions against Russian government officials and businessmen in protest at human rights abuses in Russia.<sup>83</sup> Putin responded with legislation banning the adoption of Russian children by US citizens. The following summer he granted asylum to Edward Snowden, the former CIA and National Security Agency contractor, when he landed in Moscow after leaking details of US and UK national surveillance programs to the media.

During this period, Russian and Western differences of opinion over how to deal with Syria's civil war also contributed to the deterioration in relations. During the early stages of the conflict, Russia had adopted a measured approach. In 2011, Medvedev had suggested that President Assad would have to implement reforms if he wished to continue in power and had called for the world to urge both sides to refrain from violence.<sup>84</sup> However, even during his presidency, Russia vetoed a UNSCR that called for just that because it also singled out Assad for

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<sup>82</sup> "Vladimir Putin Accuses Hillary Clinton of Encouraging Russian Protests," *Guardian (London)*, December 8, 2011, accessed January 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/08/vladimir-putin-hillary-clinton-russia>.

<sup>83</sup> The Act was named after Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian lawyer who had exposed large-scale tax fraud linked to the Kremlin and officials with connections to the Russian government. He died in Russian custody before his trial. See "The Magnitsky Act Explained," *Washington Post*, July 14, 2017, accessed January 14, 2018 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/07/14/the-magnitsky-act-explained/?utm\\_term=.d2bcd4b51e78](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/07/14/the-magnitsky-act-explained/?utm_term=.d2bcd4b51e78).

<sup>84</sup> "Syria: Dmitry Medvedev Warns Bashar al-Assad to Prepare For "Sad Fate"," *Telegraph (London)*, August 5, 2011, accessed January 18, 2018, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8684255/Syria\\_Dmitry-Medvedev-warns-Bashar-al-Assad-to-prepare-for-sad-fate.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8684255/Syria_Dmitry-Medvedev-warns-Bashar-al-Assad-to-prepare-for-sad-fate.html), and "Some Syrian Protesters Are "Terrorist", Says Dmitry Medvedev," *Telegraph (London)*, September 8, 2011, accessed January 18, 2018, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8751292/Some-Syrian-protestors-are-terrorist-says-Dmitry-Medvedev.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8751292/Some-Syrian-protestors-are-terrorist-says-Dmitry-Medvedev.html).



condemnation over human rights violations.<sup>85</sup> After his re-election Putin solidified his support for the Assad regime, and Russia vetoed further resolutions on Syria.<sup>86</sup> Although this led to frequent international condemnation, his actions highlighted the deteriorating Russia-Western relationship. Putin's opposition was based once again on a deep resentment of Western interference in other sovereign states' affairs. In September 2015, Russia deployed military forces to Syria. Since then, they have, according to Russia, carried out operations against the Islamic State in support of Syria's legitimate government.<sup>87</sup> Western sources indicate that their operations have targeted Western-backed rebel groups in order to disrupt their operations against the Assad regime.<sup>88</sup>

In late 2013, Putin faced the challenge of further Western intervention in Russia's near abroad, this time as Ukraine prepared to sign an agreement with the EU that would make it Ukraine's largest trade partner, ahead of Russia. Using a more sophisticated approach than in his response in Georgia five years earlier, Putin intervened with soft power, offering reduced energy prices and a large financial aid package. These were sufficient to induce a change of heart from President Yanukovich. Yanukovich's decision, however, led to mass demonstrations. After several weeks of protests, he fled to Moscow in February 2014. In the context of Putin's actions in Georgia 2008 and the significant deterioration in Russia's relations with the West since his return to the presidency in 2012, Putin's actions in Ukraine were a categorical statement of his determination not to cede influence to the West in Russia's near abroad. In 2008, the issue had been over hard influence, with both Georgia and Ukraine courting NATO membership. Five years later, the threat came from soft Western influence, in the form of an EU trade agreement.

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<sup>85</sup> To date Russia has vetoed a total of nine UNSCRs on Syria. See United Nations, "Security Council – Veto List," accessed January 18, 2018, <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> "Syria Conflict: Putin Defends Russia's Air Strikes," *BBC*, October 12, 2015, accessed January 19, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34502286>.

<sup>88</sup> Maks Czuperski, Eliot Higgins, Frederic Hof, Ben Nimmo, and John E. Herbst, "Distract, Deceive, Destroy: Putin at War in Syria," *Atlantic Council*, accessed January 19, 2018, <http://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/distract-deceive-destroy/>.

Putin's coercive actions demonstrated in both cases that he saw the threats on equal terms. Following Crimea's annexation, the Alliance suspended all practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia in April 2014, and NATO member states have not recognized the results of the Crimean referendum.<sup>89</sup>

The NATO-Russia relationship has undergone substantial change since 2008. This period has been marked by friction between Russia and the West at both state and institutional levels. In contrast to the two previous periods, Russian actions have featured the use of a broader range of levers, including hard power, whereas Western actions have used predominantly, though not exclusively, soft power.<sup>90</sup> This change has coincided with significant financial investment to modernize Russia's armed forces, enabled by the country's continued economic recovery following the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, in particular revenues from the supply of oil and gas to foreign markets in Europe and China.<sup>91</sup> Although Russia's military power projection capability remains relatively limited, Putin's increasing ability to draw on a combination of economic, military, and information power has emboldened him to act more assertively when he feels it necessary. It is also noteworthy that Western actions have continued to trigger adverse responses from Russia, in particular encouragement for democratization in Russia and during the Arab Spring, and the EU's attempt to sign a trade agreement with Ukraine. This period has led to a collective response from NATO that has placed the Alliance back at the forefront of Western

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<sup>89</sup> NATO, "Relations With Russia," June 16, 2017, accessed January 18, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_50090.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm). The first NATO-Russia Council meeting since the crisis took place in April 2016.

<sup>90</sup> These included US and EU economic sanctions on Russian businesses and key officials in Putin's government.

<sup>91</sup> "Russia's Military Modernisation: Putin's New Model Army," *The Economist*, accessed February 2, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21602743-money-and-reform-have-given-russia-armed-forces-it-can-use-putins-new-model-army>.

foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia and a strategic situation more volatile than at any point since the end of the Cold War.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> At the Wales Summit in 2014, NATO announced the Readiness Action Plan. This is the most significant reinforcement of collective defense since the end of the Cold War and has increased the size and capability of the Alliance's response forces. For more information see [https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics/\\_119353.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics/_119353.htm), accessed March 1, 2018. At the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO announced measures to enhance its forward presence, including the deployment of multinational battle groups to Poland and the Baltic States, and increased capabilities in the Black Sea area. For more information see [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf2017\\_02/20170206\\_1702-factsheet-warsaw-summit-key-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf2017_02/20170206_1702-factsheet-warsaw-summit-key-en.pdf), accessed March 1, 2018.

## Where Next For The NATO-Russia Relationship?

From this examination of the three post-Cold War periods, it is possible to identify themes—issues that have frequently generated friction—draw conclusions from them and identify some enduring realities. This analysis suggests actions that could improve current relations or point to lessons for the future. Seen from the Russian perspective, there are three themes in the relationship—those relating either directly to the Alliance, more broadly to the West (including NATO member states but not the Alliance itself), or to the West including the Alliance.

Two themes relate specifically to NATO: the Alliance’s series of enlargements and its Article 10-based “Open Door” policy, which it maintains today; and the Alliance’s development of missile defense plans and capability for Europe despite Russia’s consistent opposition.<sup>93</sup> Three themes relate more broadly to the West: the decision not to act on Russia’s proposal for the OSCE to become the basis of post-Cold War European security architecture and instead to maintain the Cold War Alliance structure; Russia’s perception of Western states’ inconsistency and arrogance regarding their positions on the independence claims of aspiring states in Europe; and the consistent application of a Western, US-led, foreign policy approach of encouraging democratization, even when instability has occurred as a result. Finally, two themes relate to both NATO and the West: military action on other sovereign states’ territory without UN authorization; and the extension of Western and NATO strategic interests into Russia’s near abroad during the last two decades.

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<sup>93</sup> The full text of the North Atlantic Treaty is at [https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm), accessed March 2, 2018. Three states currently aspire to membership—Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Ukraine was an aspiring state until 2010 when it stopped pursuing membership. At the 2010 Lisbon Summit, the Alliance agreed to expand its ballistic missile defense capability to territorial defense. NATO declared initial operational capability at the 2016 Warsaw Summit following deployments of US capability, known as the European Phased Adaptive Approach, to Turkey, Romania, Poland, and Spain, and national contributions from Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK. See NATO, “Ballistic Missile Defence,” last updated July 25, 2016, accessed January 20, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49635.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49635.htm).

From a NATO and Western perspective, it is possible to identify two themes from Russia's behavior: first, Russia's increasing proclivity for using coercive methods to achieve its foreign policy aims; and, second, the return to the tradition of Russian authoritarianism under Putin. The table below summarizes these themes:

**Table 1. Themes in the Sources of Friction in the NATO-Russia Relationship**

Western Themes			Russian Themes
NATO	The West, Including NATO States But Not The Alliance As A Whole	The West Including NATO	
Enlargement	Maintenance of NATO as the principal body in post-Cold War European security architecture	Military action on other sovereign states' territory without UN authorization	Coercive foreign policy methods
Missile defense	Perceived foreign policy arrogance, and inconsistency over independence claims by aspiring states in Europe	Pursuit of strategic interests in Russia's near abroad	Authoritarianism and lack of common values
	Encouragement of democratization, despite resultant instability		

The first conclusion to draw from these themes is that the post-Cold War relationship began with a quite profound misalignment in expectations and perspectives. Russia's view of events was not that Russia had lost the Cold War, but that it had actively contributed to ending it through the Soviet Union's implementation of fundamental reforms. NATO's continued post-Cold War existence and its expansion, both in terms of size and focus, therefore did not meet Russian expectations at all.<sup>94</sup> Russia had expected to hold equal status in the relationship with its former adversaries, hence its repeated desire for a new security architecture. NATO's first expansion, despite Yeltsin's opposition, served to magnify Russia's sense of powerlessness at not having the means to influence change. This misalignment also translated more broadly into

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<sup>94</sup> In its 1991 Strategic Concept, NATO stated its intention to improve and expand security in Europe through partnership and cooperation with former adversaries. It expanded its remit through its operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s and, in its 1999 Strategic Concept, added the task of crisis management. See NATO, "Strategic Concepts," [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_56626.htm?selectedLocale=en#top](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm?selectedLocale=en#top), accessed February 15, 2018.

economic and diplomatic relations. During the 1990s, Western expectations of what Yeltsin could achieve through his economic and political reform program were unrealistically high. Russia faced an array of enormously difficult tasks in attempting to recover from the effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly modernizing the centralized Soviet command economy. A comparison with China's economic transformation since the implementation of its reforms in the late 1970s gives some idea of the length of time required to make such changes.<sup>95</sup> In addition to attempting to implement major political reforms, Yeltsin simultaneously had to manage the military drawdown from the former Soviet republics, including ensuring the security of large numbers of nuclear warheads. He also faced the challenge of maintaining Russia's territorial integrity as Chechen separatists sought to break away. In the space of just under a decade, Western hopes of Russia becoming a functioning liberal, capitalist democracy failed to materialize. By the time of the economic crisis of the late 1990s, Russia associated the state of its economy, and the rise of the oligarchs, not with its own inability to manage economic reform but with the West for having imposed impossible reforms.

Building on this foundation of a lack of mutual understanding, the second conclusion is that certain actions carried out by NATO and/or Western states established significant precedents that would have future ramifications. NATO's Kosovo campaign in 1999 and the US-led coalition's invasion of Iraq in 2003 established the precedent of Western military action on other sovereign states' territory without UN authorization and despite objections from the Kremlin. Kosovo also provided the source of a second precedent, namely widespread Western recognition of its declaration of independence in 2008. Western and NATO willingness to use military force

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<sup>95</sup> China's GDP doubled from US\$ 150 billion to US\$ 312 billion in the ten years from 1978 to 1988. It has more than trebled during each subsequent ten-year period. During Yeltsin's presidency (1991-99) Russia's GDP fell from US\$ 517 billion to US\$ 196 billion. Subsequently it grew to US\$ 1.2 trillion in the period 1999-2009. Figures from the World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org>, accessed January 19, 2018. It is also important to note that China implemented economic reforms during a period of domestic political stability, in contrast to Russia which implemented its reforms while concurrently making the transition to a post-communist political system.

to bring about regime change—in Iraq by design and in Libya by supporting indigenous forces—established a third precedent.

Thirdly, in the context of these precedents, Western and NATO responses to Russian actions—viewed by Russians as no more than comparable actions—created a perception in Russia that Western states operated within an exclusive set of rules. Only a few months after widespread Western recognition of Kosovo’s independence, the opposite response to Abkhazian and South Ossetian claims of independence appeared at best inconsistent to Russia, at worst arrogant. In this respect, it is telling that those Western states that did not recognize Kosovo’s independence—based on a desire not to encourage separatist movements in their own territory—acknowledged the precedent that doing so would set. Romania’s parliament declared that “The decision in Pristina and the potential recognition by other states of the unilaterally declared independence cannot be interpreted as a precedent for other areas.”<sup>96</sup> Spain held a similar view. Similarly, the vociferous Western response to Russia’s military intervention in Georgia in 2008 reinforced Putin’s sense of Western and NATO hypocrisy; Western and NATO military action in Iraq and Libya respectively exacerbated this.

Fourthly, the misalignment of perspectives and expectations, established during the 1990s, has continued into the twenty first century. This has manifested itself in NATO and the West either underestimating, or dismissing, Russia’s ambition for great power status. Even during the 1990s, when Russia lacked the economic leverage and control over its domestic affairs to be able to restore this status, Yeltsin did not abandon the aspiration. What provided Putin with the tools to be able to wield Russia’s power again was a combination of the recovery of the Russian economy and his exertion of control over the functions of state in the 2000s. Under Putin, the “sanctification of Russia’s great power status” has been a constant theme in his approach to

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<sup>96</sup> “Romania Will Not Recognize Kosovo Independence,” *Reuters*, February 18, 2008, accessed January 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-romania/romania-will-not-recognize-kosovo-independence-idUSL18447620080218>.

foreign policy and has confirmed Russia's continued ambition for such status.<sup>97</sup> With an understanding of this context, it is easier to make sense of Russia's foreign policy aims and actions.

A final conclusion is that pragmatism has, at times, featured in the relationship—generally, though not exclusively, on the part of Russia. This is an indication of both Russia's awareness of changes in the geopolitical situation and its relative status in the relationship with NATO and the West. Yeltsin's reluctant acceptance of NATO's first round of enlargement as a *fait accompli* while seeking a means of influencing subsequent Alliance decisions is one example of Russian pragmatism. Putin's decision not to oppose the second round in the early 2000s in favor of preserving the strategic bond that he sought to create with the United States provides another. The period of rapprochement during Obama and Medvedev's early years marked a period of reciprocal pragmatism.

The failure of this rapprochement has, however, highlighted several enduring realities. Firstly, the appetite for pragmatism on both sides is, not surprisingly, finite. Secondly, Russia, particularly under Putin's leadership, feels threatened by certain Western and NATO actions, for example the presence of NATO missile defense capability in Europe. It has therefore dismissed Alliance assurances that it is not technically capable of targeting Russian strategic ballistic missiles, and responded by establishing an anti-access/area denial network in Western border regions, including the deployment of missile capability to Kaliningrad. Russia also perceives that further NATO enlargement has undermined its great power status and continues to threaten it. This explains its actions in Georgia in 2008 and Putin's opposition to Montenegro's accession in 2017.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> David Cadier and Margot Light, "Conclusion: Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means," in *Russia's Foreign Policy*, edited by Cadier and Light, 207.

<sup>98</sup> "Why is Russia Opposed to Montenegro Joining NATO?" *Russia Beyond*, December 15, 2015, accessed January 19, 2018, [https://www.rbth.com/international/2015/12/15/why-is-russia-opposed-to-montenegro-joining-nato\\_551179](https://www.rbth.com/international/2015/12/15/why-is-russia-opposed-to-montenegro-joining-nato_551179).



In addition, Putin fears the consequences of democracy taking root anywhere in Russia's sphere of influence. Abroad, they threaten Russia's ability to maintain its strategic interests and, at home, they pose an existential threat to Putin and his method of governing. Western encouragement of democratization therefore represents a significant threat, even though attempts at democratic governance have not been as successful as the West would have hoped. However, from Putin's perspective, the fact that the West has persevered with a foreign policy that strongly favors the promotion of democracy, despite its lack of success, is revealing and has reinforced Putin's perception of Western arrogance and exceptionalism. That institutions like the EU have been involved in some of these cases, for example in Georgia and Ukraine, has strengthened Putin's view. It has also shaped his conclusion that, to compete in the international system and achieve his strategic objectives, Russia must be a major actor. His policies in Europe, the Caucasus, East Asia, and even Syria, have demonstrated his willingness to employ a variety of levers of power, up to and including military force, to protect Russia's strategic interests and to prevent NATO and the West from achieving the full extent of their strategic aims. From a Western perspective, Russia's actions and rhetoric have placed it firmly at odds with Western values.

Finally, in terms of the specific NATO-Russian relationship, the sequence of repeated periods of deterioration has highlighted the inability of both sides to resolve their differences through institutional links. Although the PJC and the NATO-Russia Council have been of some benefit, ultimately neither has provided the right mechanism or structure to enable meaningful dialog and cooperation.

Considering the seriousness of the relationship, it is neither in NATO's nor the West's interests for it to continue indefinitely in its current state. The same principle does not apply from a Russian perspective however. Putin benefits from a Western adversary because it enables him to justify his policy decisions; it may also mask a need to strengthen Russia as a deterrent to China without undue provocation. In view of this asymmetry, any future rapprochement is highly

unlikely to occur while Putin continues to govern with his current style of leadership. It may therefore be several more years before an opportunity presents itself for Russia to alter its strategic direction vis-à-vis the West. In the meantime, the implications of a strategic miscalculation mean that it is vital for NATO to maintain its institutional relationship with Russia through the NATO-Russia Council. Confidence building measures and the bilateral links that NATO member states have with Russia should support this wherever opportunities arise. An enduring principle for Western, and Russian, leaders in managing the relationship should be to bear in mind the existence of common ground, such as the serious consequences to both sides of the threat of Islamist terrorism, weapons proliferation, and China's growing power.

Options also exist to prevent historical sources of friction from repeating themselves. NATO member states, particularly the United States, should consider refining their foreign policy promotion of democratization. Numerous historical examples point to how difficult the process of democratization has been for states emerging from a period of authoritarian rule. Indeed, Western and NATO actions over the last twenty years have contributed to an increase in the statistics. An acceptance that local circumstances may result in a lengthy transition to democracy—or that democracy is simply not an achievable form of government in certain states—would be a better solution than the recent binary approach. A greater appreciation of the implications of increased regional instability that Western involvement might cause would be even better. This approach would not necessarily mean ceding the strategic initiative—soft levers such as trade enable other methods of leveraging influence—and would almost certainly reduce one persistent source of friction with Russia.

NATO member states should also consider the strategic implications of future foreign policy actions, such as recognizing independence claims. In the cases of Kosovo, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, those Western and NATO member states that recognized Kosovo's but dismissed the other two did so because of the dual influence of interests and values on their foreign policy. Western leaders should therefore consider carefully the geostrategic implications of certain policy

decisions and not allow the short-term influence of Western values to cause precipitate action. When values shape policy decisions more than, or instead of, interests, they should also think carefully about how strategic messaging can complement values-based policy decisions. Similarly, Western and NATO member states should also consider carefully the implications of carrying out military action without UN authorization.

Given the extent of NATO's enlargement since 1999, the very small current number of aspiring states, and the impasse that has existed over Georgia since 2008, it is unlikely that future enlargements will cause much tension for Russia. NATO therefore has very little to lose by maintaining its "Open Door" policy, as well its existing relations with partner nations and the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative nations.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> NATO, "Partnerships: Projecting Stability Through Cooperation," last updated February 23, 2018, accessed March 1, 2108, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_84336.htm#](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_84336.htm#).

## Conclusion

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Warsaw Pact enabled many Eastern and Central European nations to engage in much warmer relations with Western Europe and institutions such as NATO and the EU. Russia, however, has still not taken that step and has appeared either unable, or unwilling, to overcome its long history of conflict and adversarial relations with European and Western states. Since the end of the Cold War, a cycle of periods of optimism and cooperation followed by tension and mutual distrust has marked Russia's relationship with NATO and the West.

During the 1990s, Western leaders were optimistic that Russia, under President Yeltsin, might embark on a new strategic direction. Keen to implement political reforms and to introduce a capitalist, free-market economy to Russia, he received substantial economic support in return for pledging reform. He also signed strategic arms reduction agreements with the United States and trade agreements with the United States, European nations, and the EU. However, he faced significant challenges, such as withdrawing Russian forces from the former Soviet republics, ensuring the security of nuclear weapons, dealing with the separatist Chechen movement, and rising domestic nationalist sentiment by Russians opposed to his Western-backed reform program. Tensions with NATO began to surface as his calls for a new European security architecture were ignored and NATO proceeded with its first round of expansion, despite his opposition. Although he joined the PfP program and signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act, NATO did not consult him before bombing Yugoslavia in 1999 without the authorization of a UNSCR.

Friendlier relations were restored in the early 2000s when Putin succeeded Yeltsin and sought a strategic partnership with the United States and NATO following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Putin prioritized this even above NATO's second round of enlargement in 2002, which included the Baltic States. However, he disagreed with US proposals to base missile defense capability in Europe and strongly opposed the US-led coalition's unilateral approach to regime

change in Iraq, although he was powerless to prevent it. At home, he reversed several of Yeltsin's reforms and implemented a more authoritarian, centralized approach to governance in Russia. Under his leadership, the Russian economy recovered and he was able to reestablish influence in Russia's near abroad, using a variety of soft power levers, in particular the supply of Russian energy. He was concerned at the encroachment of Western interests and a series of disagreements occurred as both sides vied for influence in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, where so-called "color revolutions" took place in 2003, 2004, and 2005 respectively. Further disagreements followed over the CFE Treaty and Russia suspended its implementation in 2007. Then, in 2008, he was enraged at widespread Western recognition of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and NATO's courting of Georgian and Ukrainian membership. Tensions between Georgia and Russia grew in the summer of 2008, culminating in a week-long war after Russia intervened militarily to support Russian-backed rebels in South Ossetia. Russia then recognized South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's declarations of independence and, by maintaining a military presence there, effectively blocked Georgia from meeting one of the basic NATO membership pre-requisites.

Changes in leadership in the United States and Russia in 2008-2009 enabled a second strategic rapprochement and Presidents Obama and Medvedev compromised on previous positions regarding missile defense. Both countries agreed trade deals and agreed a new strategic arms reduction treaty, as well as a unified approach to limit Iran and North Korea's nuclear programs. Obama's muted response to the victory of the Russian-backed candidate, Yanukovich, in the Ukrainian election also signaled an end to the Bush-era's aggressive pursuit of strategic interests in Russia's near abroad. However, the West's encouragement of democratization during the Arab Spring and US encouragement of Russians who were protesting at alleged election fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections provoked a furious response from Putin, who was re-elected president in 2012. The United States implemented punitive policies over Russia's human rights record and Putin retaliated by granting asylum to Edward Snowden when he landed in Moscow

after leaking sensitive information to the Western media about US and UK national surveillance programs. Relations continued to deteriorate as Putin, by now convinced that there was nothing to be gained from a strategic partnership with the West, supported Assad in Syria's civil war. Then, in 2013, Ukraine became the focus of renewed Western-Russian animosity as Putin employed coercive foreign policy measures to reverse Ukraine's decision to sign a huge trade deal with the EU. This led to Russia's annexation of Crimea and involvement in Ukraine's civil war. In the face of such hostile action, NATO responded by enhancing its response forces through the Readiness Action Plan, by deploying battle groups to the Baltic States and Poland, and by enhancing its forward presence in the Black Sea.

Several themes have emerged which account for the friction in NATO's post-Cold War relationship with Russia. Some of these, such as NATO's continued existence, Alliance enlargement and missile defense, are specific to NATO. However, some aspects of wider Western foreign policy have also had a significant impact on the Alliance's relationship, such as persistent encouragement of democratization, military action without UN authorization, and the encroachment of strategic interests into Russia's near abroad. Meanwhile, Russia's coercive foreign policy methods, authoritarianism, and a lack of shared values with the West have contributed on its part.

Despite the current state of the relationship, indeed because of it, it is vital that NATO maintains institutional links with Russia. Rapprochement is unlikely to occur so long as Putin has a leadership role in Russia, but certain measures may have a positive effect. The West should reconsider its approach to encouraging democratization and consider the strategic implications of policies such as military action without UN authorization and recognition of certain aspiring states' independence claims. NATO should maintain its "Open Door" policy and relations with current partner nations.

Whenever Russia does experience a change in posture towards a less authoritarian form of governance, NATO and the West should look closely at the history of the 1990s. It will be

most helpful if future leaders were to show that they have learnt from the experience of the last thirty years. An acknowledgement of past mistakes, being prepared to show strategic patience, and acting by placing a greater emphasis on common strategic ground and less on ideologically-driven power politics are all likely to be well received in Moscow and reciprocated to some extent. Ultimately, a more mature approach may enable the West to play a positive role in Russia entering the European community of states as an equal member.

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