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Russia's Military Interventions

Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts



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Preface

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project entitled *Anticipating Adversary Interventions and Aggression*, sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, U.S. Army. The purpose of the project was to identify characteristics and signposts of adversary military interventions to better inform Army planning, operations, and force posture.

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Contents

Preface iii

Figures vii

Tables ix

Summary xi

Acknowledgments xvii

Abbreviations xix

CHAPTER ONE

Anticipating Russian Military Interventions..... 1

Research Questions 3

Methodology 3

CHAPTER TWO

Identifying Drivers of Military Interventions..... 7

Geopolitical Factors..... 9

Domestic Factors..... 14

Ideational Factors 21

Enablers: Capabilities..... 25

Identifying Drivers of Russia’s Military Interventions..... 26

Possible Factors 49

CHAPTER THREE

Patterns in Russia’s Military Interventions..... 53

Identifying Military Interventions 53

Descriptive Statistics and Graphs 61

CHAPTER FOUR

Case Study: 2008 Russia-Georgia War 75

Factors to Be Assessed 84

Factor 1: External Threat to Sovereignty..... 87

Factor 2: Regional Power Balance..... 89

Factor 3: National Status Concerns..... 92

Factor 4: Partnership with Separatists 93

Summary..... 95

CHAPTER FIVE

Case Study: Russia’s Intervention in Syria 99

Drivers of the Intervention..... 106

Factor 1: External Threats to Sovereignty..... 111

Factor 2: Regional Power Balance..... 119

Factor 3: National Status Concerns..... 121

Factor 4: Military Capabilities 123

Summary..... 127

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion 131

Signposts of Russian Military Interventions..... 137

Implications for the Army..... 138

APPENDIX

List of Soviet Military Interventions..... 141

References 145

Figures

- S.1. Number of Ongoing Russian Military Interventions, by
Year (1992–2018) xii
- S.2. Number of Russian Military Interventions, by Activity
Type and Geographic Region (1992–2018)..... xiv
- 3.1. Number of Ongoing Soviet and Russian Military
Interventions, by Year (1946–2018) 65
- 3.2. Number of Troops Involved in Soviet and Russian
Military Interventions, by Year (1946–2018)..... 66
- 3.3. Number of Soviet and Russian Military Interventions, by
Region (1946–2018)..... 67
- 3.4. Number of Soviet and Russian Military Interventions, by
Activity Type (1946–2018) 68
- 3.5. Number of Ongoing Russian Military Interventions, by
Year (1992–2018) 68
- 3.6. Number of Russian Troops Involved in Military
Interventions, by Year (1992–2018)..... 69
- 3.7. Number of Russia’s Military Interventions over Time, by
Activity Type (1992–2018) 70
- 3.8. Number of Russian Troops Involved in Military
Interventions, by Activity Type (1992–2018)..... 71
- 3.9. Russian Military Interventions, by Region (1992–2018) 72
- 3.10. Number of Russian Military Interventions, by Activity
Type and Geographic Region (1992–2018)..... 73

Tables

2.1. Third-Party Intervention Framework 8

2.2. Drivers of Military Interventions 27

2.3. Potential Factors in Russia’s Military Interventions 51

3.1. Russia’s Military Interventions, 1992–2018 62

4.1. Summary of Analysis of Factors for Russia-Georgia War
Case Study..... 96

5.1. Russian Military Aircraft Procurement 126

5.2. Summary of Analysis of Factors for Syria Intervention
Case Study..... 128

6.1. Summary of Evidence for Factors Driving Russian
Military Interventions..... 132

A.1. Soviet Military Interventions, 1946–1991 142

Summary

The research reported here was completed in July 2020, followed by security review by the sponsor and the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, with final sign-off in July 2021.

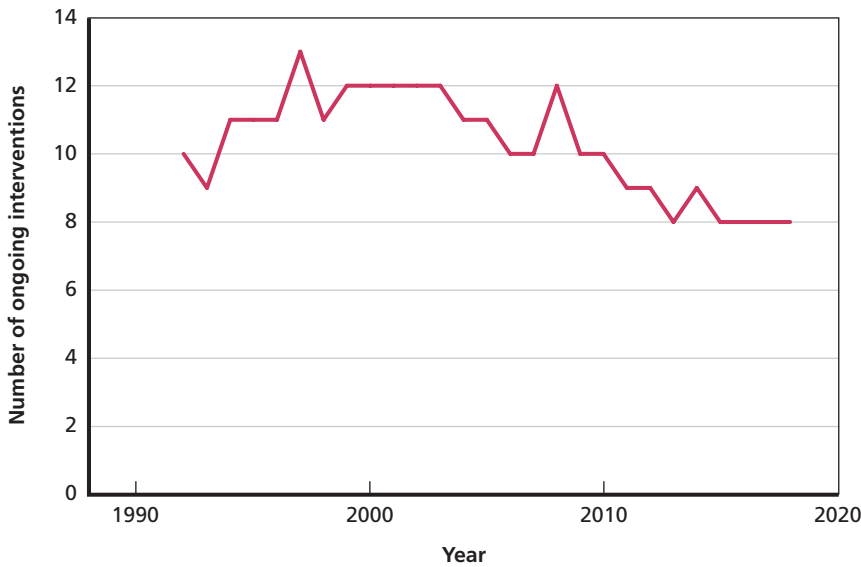
Moscow's use of its military abroad in recent years has radically reshaped perceptions of Russia as an international actor. With the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the invasion of eastern Ukraine and sustainment of an insurgency there, and (in particular) the 2015 intervention in Syria, Russia repeatedly surprised U.S. policymakers with its willingness and ability to use its military to achieve its foreign policy objectives. This behavior has understandably raised concerns about a new Russian willingness to use force, particularly following Syria, Moscow's first major military operation outside the former Soviet region since Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Understanding the drivers of Russia's military interventions is thus critical for U.S. policy. Russia's interventions occur in regions of central importance to the United States, often near U.S. allies and partners. Moreover, several of these actions have occurred in relative proximity to ongoing U.S. interventions. Given the potential for a bilateral clash to escalate quickly, perhaps even to nuclear war, it is all the more important for U.S. decisionmakers to gain better insight into how Russia approaches its interventions. There is no reason to assume that Moscow will be less likely to use its military in pursuit of its security interests in the years to come. The United States must understand when, where, why, and how Russia is most likely to intervene in order to formulate a coherent strategy to either deter or respond to its actions.

Despite Russia's relatively small global economic footprint, it has engaged in more interventions (as defined in this report) than any

other U.S. competitor since the end of the Cold War.¹ Since the Soviet breakup in 1991, Moscow has been involved in 25 interventions, eight of which are ongoing as of this writing. Figure S.1 shows the number of Russian interventions ongoing for the years 1992–2018. This figure demonstrates that, despite current concerns over Russian actions, Russia’s overall number of interventions is at a post-Soviet low as of 2018. It is a powerful reminder of the array of interventions that were ongoing in the 1990s, particularly in Russia’s neighborhood. This trend was also a function of the rise and subsequent decline of Russia’s support to international peacekeeping operations beyond post-Soviet Eurasia, the last of which ended in 2012.

Figure S.1
Number of Ongoing Russian Military Interventions, by Year (1992–2018)



¹ We define an *intervention* as any deployment of military forces outside a state’s borders that meets a threshold of 100 person-years for ground forces (or an equivalent threshold for air and naval forces) and that engages in a qualifying activity, including combat, deterrence, humanitarian response, stabilization, train and assist, and security, among others.

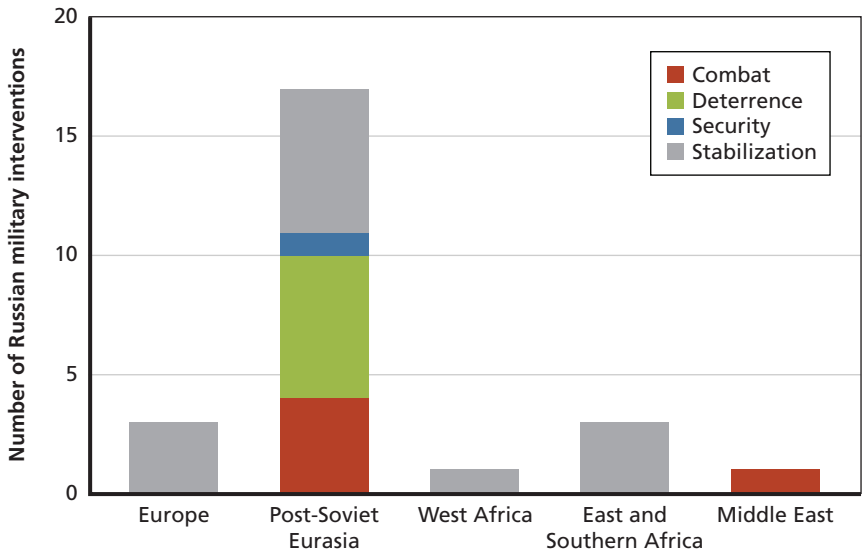
Research Approach

In this report, we assess when, where, and why Russia conducts military interventions. We begin by identifying several factors from the general political science literature on interventions most likely to shape Moscow's decisionmaking. We also reviewed Russia-specific literature about how those factors have or have not been relevant for Moscow. Drawing on an original methodology to code interventions, we then conducted a quantitative assessment of the 25 Russian military interventions to find patterns. Additionally, we carried out two detailed case studies, analyzing the 2008 Russia-Georgia War and Moscow's involvement in the ongoing Syrian civil war. Using these tools, we draw conclusions about the drivers of Russia's behavior and suggest signposts of potential future interventions.

Results of Analysis

Several insights emerge from a closer examination of the evidence. The quantitative data show that, since 1992, Russia has been continuously engaged in multiple military interventions. However, in terms of the number of ongoing missions and troop numbers involved, 2018 represents an all-time low from the post-1991 period. However, conducting two combat operations at once, as Russia has done since 2014, is unprecedented: There had only been five days of combat interventions in the 15 years prior to 2014. Further, Russia's interventions are predominantly concentrated in post-Soviet Eurasia. Beyond its neighborhood, until the Syria intervention in 2015, Moscow's interventions were stabilization (i.e., peacekeeping) operations (although there have been none since 2012). The Syria case is an outlier both geographically (the only Middle East intervention) and in terms of the activity type beyond bordering areas (the only nonstabilization mission beyond post-Soviet Eurasia). Figure S.2 shows Russia's interventions broken down by region and activity type and highlights the exceptional nature of the Russian intervention in Syria.

Figure S.2
Number of Russian Military Interventions, by Activity Type and Geographic Region (1992–2018)



The quantitative analysis, case studies, and literature review suggest several general conclusions. The first is perhaps unsurprising for close observers of Russian foreign policy: Moscow has demonstrated a persistent willingness to intervene in post-Soviet Eurasia since 1992. There have always been multiple interventions ongoing in that region during this period. The majority of Russia's 25 interventions have taken place in post-Soviet Eurasia. Moscow's great-power status is directly linked to its role as regional hegemon. Its concern for regional power balances is far and away most acute in this region; the Kremlin seems to assume that a favorable power balance in post-Soviet Eurasia is vital for Russian security. Furthermore, Russia sees many of the acute external threats to its security as stemming from post-Soviet Eurasia, such as instability, regime change, terrorism, or immediate threats to its forces stationed in the region.

The second implication stemming from this analysis is that concerns about national status and the regional power balance appear to be persistent factors in Russia's decisionmaking on military interventions.

The persistence of these drivers for Russia's interventions matches their important role in its foreign policy generally. This is an important insight for understanding the potential future drivers of Russia's interventions: We should expect these two factors to play important roles, and we should expect Russia to be willing to use military interventions to respond to events that place these interests at risk.

A third observation is that Russia's combat interventions in Georgia and Syria, while resulting from a variety of factors, were immediately triggered by a perceived urgent external threat. Russia engaged in combat only when it felt the necessity to respond to a development on the ground that posed a pressing threat. Moscow sought to achieve its objectives using coercive measures short of military intervention: It undertook combat missions, judging from the two case studies, only when it felt forced by circumstances. The other two combat missions undertaken within the past 15 years—Crimea and the Donbas—do not fit this pattern. There was no plausible imminent external security threat in either case. Furthermore, Moscow acted preemptively, particularly in Crimea. This divergence could be explained by the extremely high importance of Ukraine for Russia. It is possible, however, that other circumstances that are similarly exceptional to Ukraine might materialize in the future. In short, although Russia generally seems more reactive in its decisionmaking about combat interventions unless its vital interests are directly threatened, Moscow might decide to be proactive in special circumstances (particularly relating to events in its neighborhood).

Fourth, the one combat intervention beyond post-Soviet Eurasia (Syria) does not appear to be setting the stage for a series of such interventions. The drivers of that intervention—the combination of external threat, status concerns, and regional power balance—are not commonly encountered. Although the Syria operation has demonstrated to the world and proven to the skeptics within Russia that the military is capable of conducting limited (at least by U.S. standards) out-of-area operations, there were several factors specific to Syria (e.g., air access to the theater, access to local bases) that made the intervention possible.

Signposts

These results point to several signposts that could allow policymakers and planners to identify and anticipate Russian military interventions.

The first are region-specific developments. Changes on the ground in post-Soviet Eurasia, particularly in Ukraine, that create an external threat or the perception of a rapid change in the regional balance or Russia's status in ways that contradict Russian interests should be seen as potential triggers for Russian military action. Moscow will not hesitate to act, including with force, in its immediate neighborhood.

Second, Russia does seem to act in ways consistent with a desire to avoid losses when it comes to regional power balances. Moscow has intervened when it perceived regional balances to be shifting away from a status quo that was favorable to Russian interests. In Syria, for example, Russia's intervention was intended, in part, to prevent the loss of Russian influence in the region, not to shift existing regional balances in its favor. In Georgia, Moscow moved to block Tbilisi's assertion of control over South Ossetia; it was preventing a potential change to the status quo (i.e., the breakaway province's *de facto* autonomy). In short, prevention of imminent loss could push Russia to act. Therefore, U.S. planners should view potential future significant (perceived) *losses* for Russia as signposts for possible military action.

Third, although Russia intervenes in response to exogenous shocks in some cases, it often openly signals its interests and even its redlines. In the Georgian case, Moscow made clear that it anticipated the need to act following the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) 2008 Bucharest Summit. With Ukraine, Russia had for years made clear that it would react to perceived Western encroachment. Although Russian leaders have frequently uttered untruths about their country's actions and interests, there are genuine signals within the noise.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank MG Bradley Gericke and MG Christopher McPadden (Ret.) and the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, U.S. Army, for sponsoring the project. We are grateful to Melissa Shostak and Jalen Zeman at the RAND Corporation for research assistance. We also thank Dara Massicot of RAND and Alexander Cooley of Barnard College for their helpful reviews of the manuscript.

Abbreviations

C4ISR	command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
COW	Correlates of War
EU	European Union
IIFFM	Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (Georgia)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VKS	Russian Aerospace Forces

Anticipating Russian Military Interventions

Moscow's use of its military abroad in recent years has radically reshaped perceptions of Russia as an international actor. With the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the invasion of the Donbas region and sustainment of an insurgency there, and (in particular) the 2015 intervention in Syria, Russia repeatedly surprised U.S. policymakers with its willingness and ability to use its military to achieve its foreign policy objectives. This behavior has understandably raised concerns about a new Russian willingness to use force, particularly following Syria, Moscow's first major military operation outside the former Soviet region since Afghanistan. Indeed, the 2017 National Security Strategy identifies Russia as a "revisionist power" and notes that "the combination of Russian ambition and growing military capabilities creates an unstable frontier in Eurasia."¹

Despite Russia's relatively small global economic footprint, it has engaged in more interventions (as defined in this report) in recent years than any other U.S. competitor. Since the Soviet breakup in 1991, Moscow has been involved in 25 interventions, eight of which are ongoing as of 2018. During the same period, China has engaged in nine interventions. Moscow's relative military activism long predates 2014: Only three of the 25 interventions began since then. By comparison either to the Soviet Union or to the United States, Russia's military interventions have been modest in scale and number and limited in geographical scope.

¹ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., December 2017, p. 26.

Understanding the drivers of Russia's military interventions is thus critical for U.S. policy. Russia's interventions occur in regions of central importance to the United States, often near U.S. allies and partners. Moreover, several of these actions have occurred in relative proximity to ongoing U.S. interventions. Given the potential for a bilateral clash to escalate quickly, perhaps even to nuclear war, it is all the more important for U.S. decisionmakers to gain better insight into how Russia approaches its interventions. There is no reason to assume that Moscow will be less likely to use its military in pursuit of its security interests in the years to come. The United States must therefore understand when, where, why, and how Moscow is most likely to intervene in order to formulate a coherent strategy to either deter or respond to its actions.

In this report, we examine the entire post-Soviet period holistically to gain greater analytical purchase on the drivers of Russia's military interventions. We define an *intervention* as any deployment of military forces outside of Russia's borders that meets a threshold of 100 person-years for ground forces (or an equivalent threshold for air and naval forces) and that engages in a qualifying activity, including combat, deterrence, humanitarian response, stabilization (i.e., peacekeeping), train and assist, and security, among others. Russia has been engaged in a variety of types of interventions since 1991. The majority stem from the various conflicts that broke out as the Soviet Union collapsed. Nearly all interventions were related to the circumstances of the Soviet breakup or took place in the states of post-Soviet Eurasia.² As of 2018, Russia has intervened in seven of the 11 non-Baltic former Soviet republics. There were two exceptions to this neighborhood-centric pattern: participation in multilateral peacekeeping missions (largely in Africa and the Balkans in the 1990s) and, most prominently, the recent intervention in Syria.

We begin this report by describing the study's methodology before reviewing the existing literature on the factors that drive Russian military interventions (Chapter Two). In Chapter Three, we provide an

² We use the term *post-Soviet Eurasia* in this report to refer to the 11 non-Baltic former Soviet republics besides Russia.

overview of post-1991 patterns in Russian military interventions. In Chapters Four and Five, we present in-depth case studies of two interventions. We examine the 2008 Russia-Georgia War in Chapter Four and analyze the intervention in the Syrian civil war (2015 to the present) in Chapter Five. We begin both chapters by describing the contours of the intervention before assessing the factors that drove Russia's intervention. We conclude the report by summarizing our findings, identifying signposts of Russian military interventions, and exploring the implications of our research for the United States and the U.S. Army in particular (Chapter Six).

Research Questions

This report considers the following key research questions:

- What are the primary drivers of Russia's military interventions?
- Under what circumstances, where, when, and how is Russia likely to undertake a military intervention?
- Are there trends or patterns in Russian military interventions?

Methodology

This report is part of a series focused on the military interventions of U.S. adversaries. Separate reports cover Iran's and China's interventions. Additionally, the project team produced a summary report that captures overall trends and compares the intervention activities of the three adversaries, along with the intervention activities of several smaller rivals.³ Several of the methodological decisions were made

³ See Timothy R. Heath, Christian Curriden, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *China's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-4, 2021; Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Samuel Charap, Timothy R. Heath, Ariane M. Tabatabai, Edward Geist, and Christian Curriden, *Anticipating Adversary Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-1, 2021; and Ariane M. Tabatabai, Nathan Chandler,

with this cross-country comparative approach in mind. Through a review of the political science literature on interventions, we developed a common framework of ten factors that may influence any country's decision to deploy its military forces outside its borders. This framework provides a shared vocabulary across the studies of the intervention behavior of Russia and other adversaries but could apply to any state. We then reviewed the literature specific to Russian military interventions to determine which of these factors appear to be most salient with respect to Russia.

Our analysis is focused on Russia's interventions in the post-Soviet period. We chose to focus on Moscow's actions post-1991 because analysis of this period is far more relevant to understanding Russia's behavior today and anticipating its behavior in the future. The Soviet Union was a global superpower engaged in an ideological struggle that drove its leaders to intervene militarily on a frequent basis. Post-Soviet Russia defines its interests differently and has far fewer resources to devote to military interventions. Nonetheless, because of Russia's significant legal, political, and military inheritance from the Soviet Union and the frequent conflation of the two states in the popular imagination, we include some comparative statistics in this report. This comparison serves to underscore the extent to which Russia's military activities beyond its borders differ fundamentally from those of the Soviet Union.

We identified our case universe of interventions both by consulting existing data sets of military interventions and by conducting detailed historical investigations. A discussion of the data collection and coding process can be found in Chapter Three.

For the case studies in this report, we reviewed the specific literature on Russian foreign policy to derive the key factors identified as drivers of interventions. There is a rich literature on Russian foreign policy generally, and several studies specifically address one or more of the interventions under consideration here. Many of these works put forth implicit or explicit claims about the drivers of Russian actions.

Additionally, we used a range of primary Russian sources to derive information about the interventions. These include doctrinal and other official documents, statements and speeches of senior Russian officials, interviews with and memoirs of Russian officials and their Western interlocutors, Russian think-tank and academic analyses, and local press reporting. Although we recognize the biases that are inherent to such sources, they are nonetheless critically important for understanding Russian thinking and decisionmaking. We also relied on official U.S. government reports, documents from relevant international bodies (such as the international fact-finding mission on the Russia-Georgia War), and accounts by respected international nongovernmental organizations that study conflict.

We used these sources to produce case studies of two Russian interventions that assess the key factors in Moscow's decision to intervene. We chose these cases to capture important variation in the geography of Russia's interventions. Because the majority of these interventions have taken place in post-Soviet Eurasia, a case from the region was necessary. Among the regional interventions, we decided to exclude those that occurred in the first years of the post-Soviet period. The early 1990s was a period of unusual turbulence, both inside Russia and in the region as a whole, because of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Because the Soviet collapse was a one-off event that cannot be repeated, the interventions of this period are less relevant to understanding Moscow's behavior today than those that occurred after Russian government decisionmaking became somewhat more institutionalized and the *sui generis* processes associated with the collapse (e.g., ethnic and other intergroup conflicts) had stabilized. Of the three later regional interventions involving combat (Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbas), the Georgia case helps control for two important factors: military capabilities and, to a lesser extent, personality. Russia's military was far more capable when it intervened in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014 than it was during the Georgia war in 2008, so it is reasonable to assume that the Kremlin had less confidence in the military's abilities in the Georgia case, and thus the decision to intervene was riskier. Additionally, Dmitry Medvedev was president at the time of the Russia-Georgia War, and although he was never fully independent

from then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in his decisionmaking, it is likely that Medvedev was more centrally involved in the decision than other figures were in 2014. The Syria case was chosen because it is the only Russian intervention involving combat beyond post-Soviet Eurasia and therefore is of greater policy significance for the United States. Few expected Russia to engage in combat missions beyond its immediate neighborhood before Syria. Understanding the Russian thinking that drove this intervention is therefore crucial to anticipating potential future interventions beyond post-Soviet Eurasia.

We conclude by synthesizing our findings to identify a set of signposts that U.S. decisionmakers could use to identify circumstances that present a heightened risk of a Russian military intervention in the future.

Identifying Drivers of Military Interventions

The first half of this chapter provides a slightly modified version of the literature review and framework discussion in Chapter Two of the summary report in this series, *Anticipating Adversary Military Interventions*.¹

To identify potential factors that may have influenced Russian interventions, we developed a generalized framework of factors that are likely to influence intervention decisions across states. We started our review of existing literature by considering past research on U.S. military interventions, documented in previous RAND reports, and then expanded our focus to include research on factors that determine third-party intervention decisions across interveners. We searched major journal databases, such as the Online Computer Library Center First Search and Social Science Abstracts, Google Scholar, and the archives of leading journals in military strategy, political science, international relations, and public affairs. We also reviewed regionally focused journals (e.g., on the Middle East or Eurasia) and used the citations in articles we collected to expand the search further. We included both quantitative analysis and qualitative case studies in the review. Finally, although we included relevant foundational literature in our review, we also searched for new research to capture findings and analysis relevant to today's geopolitics and that reflected the most up-to-date understanding of intervention decisions across interveners. After collecting articles, we reviewed each for relevance and content, keeping notes on

¹ Kavanagh, Frederick, Chandler, et al., 2021.

the key factors that each article identified as relevant to intervention decisionmaking.

Our identification of categories for the framework combined inductive and deductive approaches. At the most fundamental level, countries undertake interventions when they assess that intervening is more likely to accomplish their political goals than not intervening. Intervention is a policy tool like any other, and so the decision to intervene reflects the assessment that, all things considered, the expected tangible and intangible benefits of an intervention are likely to exceed the tangible and intangible costs. This assessment is unlikely to only be about financial benefits and costs and may include an assessment of additional domestic, geopolitical, and other factors. Using our past work and this understanding of military intervention decisions, we started with four main categories of intervention drivers: geopolitical, domestic, ideational, and enablers.

Based on our review of the literature, we grouped key factors into each of these four categories, giving us ten key factors of interest that appeared consistently across past research as relevant to intervention decisions. Our framework is shown in Table 2.1. In the rest of this

Table 2.1
Third-Party Intervention Framework

Category	Factors Affecting the Likelihood of Adversary Military Interventions
Geopolitics	External threat to sovereignty
	Regional power balance
	Alliance or partnership with host
	National status
Domestic	Domestic politics and legitimacy
	Coidentity group populations in host
	Economic interests
Ideational	Leadership and personality
	Ideology
Enablers	Capabilities

chapter, we discuss evidence for and against the relevance of these factors to the decisions that states make about intervening militarily outside their borders. In addition to defining the key factors and what we know about them, we seek to identify metrics that can be used to measure or assess these different factors, as well as to clarify the definition of each factor. These potential metrics will be discussed again when we highlight signposts of future interventions in Chapter Six. Importantly, the ten factors identified here appear to contribute to intervention decisions, according to a review of existing qualitative and quantitative research, but they do not guarantee an intervention. State decisionmaking on the use of military force is complex, and single factors in isolation are rarely sufficient to guarantee a particular intervention decision. Instead, these factors should be viewed as potentially increasing or decreasing the risk of an intervention. As an example, the existence of a partnership between two states may encourage one to intervene to defend the other, but it does not necessitate such an intervention. The state may still choose to abstain from intervening, assessing that other factors outweigh its commitment to the partnership, although the partnership makes the intervention more likely than it otherwise would have been.

Geopolitical Factors

The first set of key intervention drivers is geopolitical. Geopolitical factors are any that relate to the international system or relationships between countries that can drive the decision to intervene at a more macro level.

External Threat to Sovereignty

The logic for why external threats to sovereignty may drive states to initiate a military intervention is straightforward: States that perceive a direct threat to their sovereignty, their armed forces, their citizens, their territory, or their resources might choose to deploy forces abroad

to counter or reduce that threat.² We include only actual or threatened attacks, territorial claims, or concerns over regime security for this factor. The clearest indicators of this factor are the existence or threat of an armed attack on territory, forces, citizens, or resources; the existence of a territorial claim or challenge to the territorial integrity of the intervening nation; the perception or fear of such a claim at some point in the future; or the threat or fear of a forced regime change or concerns about regime security. Past research suggests that the risk of conflict between two neighboring states is significantly higher when there is a dispute about the location of a shared border or when one state has made a claim to territory the other also claims. In such instances, states might launch an intervention to defend or reclaim the disputed territory.³ Interventions might also respond to a direct attack on a nation's homeland or even the threat of such an attack. Even potential threats can trigger interventions by states seeking to protect their interests or forestall the development and emergence of new threats. RAND research has shown, for instance, that U.S. decisions to initiate an intervention and even the number of forces deployed for such a mission are directly linked to the severity of the perceived threat.⁴

We also include threats to regime security in this category. *Regime* refers to the ruling elite who control the commanding heights of power and the coercive machinery of the state. *Regime security* is defined as "the condition where governing elites are secure from violent challenges to their rule."⁵ The distinction between regime security and national security acknowledges that the interests of the regime may diverge from those of the country as a whole; when they diverge, the

² Hans J. Morgenthau, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 45, No. 3, April 1967.

³ Stephen A. Kocs, "Territorial Disputes and Interstate War, 1945–1987," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 1, February 1995.

⁴ Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Angela O'Mahony, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, John Speed Meyers, and Eugeniu Han, *The Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Ground Interventions: Identifying Trends, Characteristics, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1831-A, 2017.

⁵ Richard Jackson, "Regime Security," in Alan Collins, ed., *Contemporary Security Studies*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 148.

regime can sometimes prioritize its security in ways that are not necessarily consistent with the nation's well-being. This factor is used to refer to *external* threats to regime security versus purely domestic challenges to existing power structures.

Alliances and Partnerships

The second geopolitical factor shown to drive intervention decisions has to do with relationships among countries. States will often intervene to protect or support allies and partners. Past research is clear that the existence of an alliance or partnership is one of the strongest factors shaping intervention decisions.⁶ This relationship seems obvious in the case of treaty allies that have made a commitment to defend each other, but it is also true for countries with other types of partnerships, even informal. Relevant partnerships, then, may be identified by looking first at states with formal treaties and agreements (defense-oriented and otherwise) and then looking at states with other types of close partnerships, developed through, for example, military or economic aid or past instances of cooperation. Countries may be more likely to intervene to protect allies and partners for many reasons. The most obvious is to respond to a shared external threat or adversary (e.g., an intervention by a rival power, an internal guerilla movement), but the decision to intervene can also be driven by a set of shared interests or goals, historical ties, or the explicit terms of the alliance.⁷ Finally, states may intervene not only to protect an ally but also to support an ally that is intervening elsewhere. Research suggests that such interventions may be more common when there are divergences in the interests and objectives of intervening powers, since this gives each state a greater and more enduring incentive to participate in order to influence

⁶ Kavanagh, Frederick, Povlock, et al., 2017; Michael G. Findley and Tze Kwang Teo, "Rethinking Third-Party Interventions into Civil Wars: An Actor-Centric Approach," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 4, November 2006; and Mi Yung Yoon, "Explaining U.S. Intervention in Third World Internal Wars, 1945–1989," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 4, August 1997.

⁷ Yoon, 1997; Findley and Teo, 2006.

the outcome.⁸ However, alliances and (especially) partnerships do not guarantee an intervention. There are numerous examples of states violating established partnerships in favor of other interests or choosing one partner over another.

Regional Balance of Power

States may also intervene into an ongoing crisis or conflict to ensure a favorable balance of power in the region where they are intervening or in regard to the international system, whether this means maintaining the current balance of power or creating a more favorable balance of power.⁹ Past research demonstrates that states consider possible intervention by rivals when deciding to intervene.¹⁰ More generally, scholarship suggests that states may use intervention to protect the integrity of their sphere of influence and to head off any threats to the existing international balance of power from a major adversary or a regional challenger.¹¹ Similarly, states may use interventions to maintain the balance of power within a specific region. This may include efforts to shore up weak states, reduce instability that is affecting the balance of power, or prevent regime or policy changes that would alter regional partnerships or allegiances.¹²

The *regional balance of power* factor is related to the *external threat to sovereignty* factor, but the two are distinct. Certainly, a threat to one state's sovereignty by another state in the region has the poten-

⁸ Findley and Teo, 2006.

⁹ Stephen E. Gent, "External Threats and Military Intervention: The United States and the Caribbean Basin," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2010.

¹⁰ Yoon, 1997.

¹¹ Gent, 2010; Yoon, 1997; and Mark P. Lagon, "The International System and the Reagan Doctrine: Can Realism Explain Aid to 'Freedom Fighters'?" *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 22, No. 1, January 1992.

¹² Dursun Peksen and Marie Olson Lounsbury, "Beyond the Target State: Foreign Military Intervention and Neighboring State Stability," *International Interactions*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2012; Jacob D. Kathman, "Civil War Diffusion and Regional Motivations for Intervention," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 55, No. 6, 2011; and Roy Allison, "The Russian Case for Military Intervention in Georgia: International Law, Norms and Political Calculation," *European Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2009.

tial to challenge the regional balance of power. However, shifts in the regional balance of power occur even more often in the absence of direct threats or territorial claims. Anything from the expanding economic influence of an adversary, to civil war in a neighboring state, to the development of new military technologies can shift the regional balance of power in ways that have the potential to trigger some sort of military intervention.

Shifts in the regional balance of power can be hard to measure quantitatively. The National Military Capabilities index is one possible metric that can be used to study changes in the balance of power. An index of relative economic size is another option, among others. RAND researchers have also developed a metric useful for studying changes in balance of power regionally.¹³

National Status

The fourth geopolitical driver of intervention is national status. States may use interventions to underscore their capabilities, as a statement of national power or of military strength. Although again related to other geopolitical factors, national status is also distinct. National status is largely about reputation. States may use interventions to maintain or build their reputation. National status can drive an intervention even when there is no external threat and no change in the balance of power. States concerned with national status may use interventions to demonstrate military strength or relevance or their relative place or rank in either the global or the regional order.¹⁴ States may intervene to exercise their abilities to influence policy outcomes: in other words, to get a seat

¹³ Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Jennifer Kavanagh, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Matthew Lane, Alexander Stephenson, and Colin P. Clarke, *A More Peaceful World? Regional Conflict Trends and U.S. Defense Planning*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1177-A, 2017.

¹⁴ Karen A. Feste, *Expanding the Frontiers: Superpower Intervention in the Cold War*, New York: Praeger, 1992; Timothy R. Heath, "Developments in China's Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities," testimony presented before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission on January 21, 2016, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-450, 2016; Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2423-OSD, 2018; and Lagon, 1992.

at the table.¹⁵ States may intervene to protect interests and assets that are core to their national status, or at least to their perception of their national status.¹⁶ Even participation in multinational humanitarian or other interventions may be influenced by pursuit of national status. Specifically, states may see their ability to participate in international operations as a sign of relevance on the international stage.¹⁷

Domestic Factors

States may also be motivated to intervene because of internal drivers: political, economic, or sociocultural factors that make interventions advantageous or desirable. There is some work that finds that the impact of domestic factors overwhelms that of geopolitical factors when explaining why states intervene.¹⁸

Domestic Politics and Legitimacy

The most commonly proposed domestic drivers of interventions are those having to do with domestic politics and legitimacy. According to this family of arguments, political leaders might use interventions and their timing for political purposes, to build support among their constituency, or to enhance their domestic political legitimacy. The “diversionary theory of war” suggests that leaders might use interventions to increase their chances of reelection, distract from economic or other problems at home, or shore up their support through a “rally around

¹⁵ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia in the Middle East: Moscow’s Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers,” New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Task Force on U.S. Policy Toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, 2016; Lagon, 1992; Findley and Teo, 2006.

¹⁶ Trenin, 2016.

¹⁷ Justin Massie and Benjamin Zyla, “Alliance Value and Status Enhancement: Canada’s Disproportionate Military Burden Sharing in Afghanistan,” *Politics and Policy*, Vol. 46, No. 2, April 2018.

¹⁸ Patrick James and John R. Oneal, “The Influence of Domestic and International Politics on the President’s Use of Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 35, No. 2, June 1991; and Charles W. Ostrom and Brian L. Job, “The President and the Political Use of Force,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2, June 1986.

the flag” effect. Although these explanations are appealing in theory and seem to describe some individual cases fairly well, they have mixed empirical support.¹⁹ Some research suggests that leaders can successfully use intervention to bolster their chances for reelection, but this relationship seems to exist under a narrow set of circumstances. Where it does work, intervention seems to allow leaders who launch successful interventions to rebuild their popular support. Losing interventions, however, can end political careers.²⁰ Empirical work is clear that although rally effects can occur following a new intervention, those effects are not guaranteed and are smaller and more short-lived than many might expect.²¹

Aside from using interventions to win elections, leaders might use interventions to shape their public image (e.g., to demonstrate their toughness in the face of the adversary, which could increase political support in some contexts).²² Or leaders might base their intervention decisions on public support, intervening when public support is high

¹⁹ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival*, paperback ed., Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005; Amber Aubone, “Explaining US Unilateral Military Intervention in Civil Conflicts: A Review of the Literature,” *International Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2013; and Brett Ashley Leeds and David R. Davis, “Domestic Political Vulnerability and International Disputes,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 6, December 1997.

²⁰ Karl DeRouen, Jr., and Jeffrey Peake, “The Dynamics of Diversion: The Domestic Implications of Presidential Use of Force,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2002; Ostrom and Job, 1986; Kyle Haynes, “Diversionary Conflict: Demonizing Enemies or Demonstrating Competence?” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2017; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005; and Stephen E. Gent, “Scapegoating Strategically: Reselection, Strategic Interaction, and the Diversionary Theory of War,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2009.

²¹ Aubone, 2013; Tim Groeling and Matthew A. Baum, “Crossing the Water’s Edge: Elite Rhetoric, Media Coverage, and the Rally-Round-The-Flag Phenomenon,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 70, No. 4, October 2008.

²² James Meernik, “Domestic Politics and the Political Use of Military Force by the United States,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 4, December 2001.

(typically, when the stakes are high and perceived costs low) and not when the public is opposed to the intervention.²³

There is also a body of work focused on the role played by the institutional characteristics of the domestic polity: the political party of the leader, the regime type, the timing of elections, and even the type of democracy. Empirical evidence on the relevance of these factors is mixed. First, the type of democracy and, specifically, the decision-making process used by a country's leaders to make intervention decisions can have an effect on whether the intervention occurs. Parliamentary and presidential democracies, for example, may be differentially influenced by domestic politics, because the constraints placed on the executive are different in each context.²⁴ The relevance of regime type extends even to authoritarian leaders, who may be accountable to their inner core of supporters for continued loyalty but who have much greater flexibility when launching interventions and may have different priorities when weighing the costs and benefits of an intervention decision.²⁵ Evidence for a relationship between interventions and the executive political party or other related institutional factors seems weaker.

²³ There is also an extensive body of literature on the topic of what drives public support for military operations and interventions. Past research has identified (1) what is at stake, (2) the expressed consensus of elites, and (3) the perceived costs as key variables. Some work also suggests that public support may also be influenced by media coverage. See, for example, Eric V. Larson and Bogdan Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-231-A, 2005; Adam J. Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, No. 4, November 2007; Louis Klarevas, "The 'Essential Domino' of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 4, November 2002; and James Golby, Peter Feaver, and Kyle Dropp, "Elite Military Cues and Public Opinion About the Use of Military Force," *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2018.

²⁴ Juliet Kaarbo, "Prime Minister Leadership Style and the Role of Parliament in Security Policy," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2018; and Wolfgang Wagner, "Is There a Parliamentary Peace? Parliamentary Veto Power and Military Interventions from Kosovo to Daesh," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2018.

²⁵ Jessica L. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2, May 2012; and Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005.

Past research does not find a consistent relationship between political party and intervention behavior or between election timing and intervention decisions, although there are differences across individual leaders, discussed in more detail later in this chapter.²⁶

Finally, there are arguments about bureaucratic politics and the role it can play in driving states into interventions. These arguments suggest that government decisions, including those to intervene militarily, are the result of processes and interactions that occur within the government and of negotiations and trades made by government actors. Under this argument, a “decision” to intervene is really just the end result of dozens of smaller interactions and choices made by political actors, including the chief executive, acting in the name of a variety of interests.²⁷

Coidentity Populations

Past research also suggests that countries may be more likely to intervene to protect coethnic or coreligious group populations living elsewhere.²⁸ The rationale for this seems straightforward: States are motivated to protect those with whom they share common cultural and other ties. Existing research consistently finds that a strong transnational link across kinship groups can increase the risk of conflict and military intervention, as well as the intensity of that conflict or intervention.²⁹ This effect can be significant. For some states, particu-

²⁶ Michael T. Koch and Patricia Sullivan, “Should I Stay or Should I Go Now? Partisanship, Approval, and the Duration of Major Power Democratic Military Interventions,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 3, July 2010; and Meernik, 2001.

²⁷ Graham T. Allison and Morton H. Halperin, “Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications,” *World Politics*, Vol. 24, Supp. 1, Spring 1972.

²⁸ David Carment and Patrick James, “Third-Party States in Ethnic Conflict: Identifying the Domestic Determinants of Intervention,” in Steven E. Lobell and Philip Mauceri, eds., *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics: Explaining Diffusion and Escalation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

²⁹ Lars-Erik Cederman, Luc Girardin, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Ethnonationalist Triads: Assessing the Influence of Kin Groups on Civil Wars,” *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 3, July 2009; and Mehmet Gurses, “Transnational Ethnic Kin and Civil War Outcomes,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2015.

larly those with high ethnic fractionalization and a dominant ethnic group, ethnic kinship is one of the most significant and determinative factors driving intervention decisions.³⁰ The influence of ethnic and religious ties in explaining intervention decisions extends across types of interventions. Existing work finds that ethnic and religious kinship networks can shape the decision to intervene in civil wars and can influence the side with which the intervening state aligns itself.³¹ Other research explores the willingness of states to take on peacekeeping interventions on their own (outside a multilateral framework) and finds that ethnic ties are one of the most influential factors.³² Research also underscores that religious ties can be as influential as ethnic ones in shaping intervention decisions.³³ The mechanism for this relationship appears to operate both through ties between elites in the intervening and host states and through public pressure in the intervening state. Specifically, a survey experiment that assessed the willingness of respondents to support a military intervention found that, when respondents shared religious ties with the potential intervention hosts, they were more willing to intervene.³⁴ The most straightforward way to operationalize this factor would be to consider the percentage of various coidentity group members in various target countries. In regard to the United States, this might mean considering the percentage of U.S. citizens who come from or have relatives in a given country, the argument being that the United States could be more likely to intervene in states from which there is a larger diaspora in the United States.

³⁰ Ada Huibregtse, "External Intervention in Ethnic Conflict," *International Interactions*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2010.

³¹ Martin Austvoll Nome, "Transnational Ethnic Ties and Military Intervention: Taking Sides in Civil Conflicts in Europe, Asia and North Africa, 1944–99," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2013.

³² Nicolas Rost and J. Michael Greig, "Taking Matters into Their Own Hands: An Analysis of the Determinants of State-Conducted Peacekeeping in Civil Wars," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2011.

³³ Joshua Su-Ya Wu and Austin J. Knappe, "My Brother's Keeper? Religious Cues and Support for Foreign Military Intervention," *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 3, November 2016.

³⁴ Wu and Knappe, 2016.

Economic Interests

The final domestic consideration focuses on economic interests. We consider economic interests as a domestic consideration because a state's focus on economic pursuits, even those outside its borders, is to advance its domestic economy. There are several possible ways in which economic interests could factor into state intervention decisionmaking. First, states might use military interventions to protect their economic interests, especially when access to resources or national property overseas is threatened.³⁵ U.S. interventions to protect economic interests in Central and South America in the early part of the 20th century are examples of this type of intervention. Second, states might intervene to secure new economic assets or access, including access to natural resources, ports, or markets. Some research has found that economic gain (specifically, in the form of access to oil reserves) can be a strong motivation for interventions, particularly for states with high demand for oil.³⁶ Related work finds a similar relationship for other lootable natural resources.³⁷ Other research asserts that access to ports and markets can be similarly powerful motivators.³⁸ Importantly, however, there is research on the opposite side of this argument that finds little or no relationship between economic gain and intervention decisions. A 2017 RAND study did not find that access to oil markets was a significant predictor of U.S. intervention decisions, for example.³⁹ Third,

³⁵ Benjamin O. Fordham, "Power or Plenty? Economic Interests, Security Concerns, and American Intervention," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4, December 2008; Yoon, 1997.

³⁶ Vincenzo Bove, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Petros G. Sekeris, "'Oil Above Water': Economic Interdependence and Third-Party Intervention," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 60, No. 7, 2016.

³⁷ Michael G. Findley and Josiah F. Marineau, "Lootable Resources and Third-Party Intervention into Civil Wars," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 5, 2015.

³⁸ Fordham, 2008; Trenin, 2016.

³⁹ Kavanagh, Frederick, Povlock, et al., 2017; also see Frederic S. Pearson and Robert Baumann, "Foreign Military Intervention and Changes in United States Business Activity," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1977; and Karl R. DeRouen, Jr., "The Indirect Link: Politics, the Economy, and the Use of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 39, No. 4, December 1995.

domestic leaders might seek to use interventions abroad explicitly to boost economic growth. Specifically, states might launch interventions to spur their domestic manufacturing or other industries, using military intervention as a sort of economic stimulus aimed at improving the approval or popularity of the executive.⁴⁰ The economic basis for this strategy is weak, however. There is some empirical evidence that military intervention can help certain industries, but it is often hard to attribute any economic gains to the intervention *per se*.⁴¹ Finally, it is worth noting that the relative importance of domestic economic factors in intervention decisions has consistently been shown to be less than that of domestic political or geopolitical drivers.⁴²

Although interventions can bring economic gains, they can also have significant economic costs, not the least of which is the potential for serious disruptions to international trade or loss of access to international markets, either because of trade restrictions or because of other disruptions to supply chains and economic integration. When making decisions about whether to intervene, states are likely to weigh the possible economic gains from access to new markets and resources against possible losses from such disruptions. In other words, economic interests can serve as an inducement to interventions, but they can also serve to limit or prevent an intervention, depending on the context.

There are several potential ways to measure economic interests as they relate to intervention decisions. First, one can look specifically at access to key strategic resources, such as warm water ports, oil, or other key resources. Second, one can use measures of economic growth and trade, especially over time, to understand how economic resources may relate to intervention decisionmaking. Notably, we distinguish between economic interests as defined here and such factors as regional power balance. Although changes in economic fortunes can shift the international balance of power, such an interpretation considers economics as

⁴⁰ This final motivation bleeds into the domestic arena, but we keep it in this section so as not to split up economic interests in many places.

⁴¹ Pearson and Baumann, 1977.

⁴² Yoon, 1997; DeRouen, 1995; Fordham, 2008.

one factor among many and in relative terms. Here, we focus specifically on a particular state's economic condition and opportunities.

Ideational Factors

The third category of factors that emerged from our review is ideational factors: factors that emerge not from politics or economics, but from ideas, personality, and other more abstract, intangible phenomena.

Ideology

Ideology may shape or determine intervention decisions, with states intervening to uphold or advance (or counter) a set of principles, beliefs, or norms. In the U.S. context, the most commonly cited ideological driver of military intervention is that of democracy promotion. The United States has used the cause of democracy as the rationale for intervention since its earliest days and as recently as the 2003 intervention in Iraq. However, although democracy seems to be a relevant ideological driver of intervention, evidence that authoritarianism serves a similar purpose is more mixed.⁴³ Humanitarian interventions may similarly be driven by ideological factors: specifically, the emerging norm of “responsibility to protect.” Evans, Thakur, and Pape describe responsibility to protect as “the normative instrument of choice for converting shocked international conscience about mass atrocity crimes into decisive collective action.”⁴⁴ In other words, the concept serves as an ideological driver of humanitarian interventions that is not transactional or political.⁴⁵ For non-Western states, ideology may serve to favor restraint rather than interventions.

⁴³ Lucan A. Way, “The Limits of Autocracy Promotion: The Case of Russia in the ‘Near Abroad,’” *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 54, No. 4, November 2015.

⁴⁴ Gareth Evans, Ramesh Thakur, and Robert A. Pape, “Correspondence: Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4, Spring 2013.

⁴⁵ Charles E. Ziegler, “Contesting the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 1, February 2016.

Literature on third party intervention also identifies efforts to *counter* specific ideologies (e.g., communism, jihadism) as strong motivators for intervention. Some past research finds that preventing the spread of communism during the Cold War years was, perhaps, the most significant and consistent driver of U.S. military interventions. For U.S. interventions in civil conflicts in developing countries, for instance, one of the strongest drivers of intervention was whether the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was involved and whether there was a risk of communist victory.⁴⁶ Since the September 11, 2001, attacks, countering transnational terrorism has similarly provided an ideological motivation for interventions by the United States and others.⁴⁷

Nationalism is a final relevant ideology that may drive interventions. Here, we consider nationalism as an ideology focused on the creation of a nation state and a national myth. Unlike the national status factor, nationalism as defined here is focused inwardly, not on national position on the international stage. Van Evera argues that when a state believes that portions of its diaspora or pieces of territory that are rightly part of an imagined “homeland” exist outside the state’s borders, the state might choose to use military force to incorporate them.⁴⁸ In other words, “unattained nationalisms” may drive conflict as a state seeks to unify its territory and build its national narrative. This may be especially true if the land or diaspora to which the state lays claim is contiguous to the state’s borders.⁴⁹

It is, of course, worth noting that ideological motivations can often be used as covers for a country’s true intentions. For example, some Cold War interventions (e.g., intervention in the Dominican

⁴⁶ Yoon, 1997.

⁴⁷ Tim Dunne, “Liberalism, International Terrorism, and Democratic Wars,” *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2009.

⁴⁸ Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Spring 1994.

⁴⁹ Van Evera, 1994; and Barry R. Posen, “Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Fall 1993.

Republic) executed in the name of efforts to counter communism were often undertaken for more self-interested reasons.⁵⁰

Developing metrics to operationalize and assess the presence or strength of ideology is outside the scope of this report. One option could be to develop a taxonomy of relevant ideologies and assess their presence and absence across a variety of intervention cases (and potential cases) and states.

Leadership and Personality

In addition to ideology, the personality of the leader making the intervention decisions has also been shown in past research to shape a state's intervention behavior.⁵¹ Most theories that focus on the role played by individual leaders start from the premise that leaders generally act in self-interested ways to retain power when faced with domestic or international challenges to their regime. However, even given this baseline, different leaders may have different tolerances for risk, different attitudes toward the use of force as a political tool, and general preferences about involvement in conflict more generally.⁵² One set of arguments focuses on the aggressiveness of a leader's posture towards other states. In the U.S. case, Meernik argues that a president's reputation for aggressive use of force in the past is a strong predictor of that president's willingness to intervene in the future. According to this argument, leaders' decisions about use of force are generally consistent and even influenced by their past behavior or reputation for use of force.⁵³

Saunders offers a more nuanced perspective on the role of personality, arguing that leaders across countries and political systems develop

⁵⁰ Kavanagh, Frederick, Povlock, et al., 2017.

⁵¹ Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011.

⁵² Michael C. Horowitz and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Studying Leaders and Military Conflict: Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 10, 2018; and Ulrich Pilster, Tobias Böhmelt, and Atsushi Tago, "Political Leadership Changes and the Withdrawal from Military Coalition Operations, 1946–2001," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 16, No. 4, November 2015.

⁵³ James Meernik, "Presidential Decision Making and the Political Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1, March 1994.

worldviews that are either internally oriented (focused on domestic threats and outcomes at home and in other states) or externally focused (emphasizing external, international outcomes and threats) prior to assuming office. This worldview then influences each leader's cost-benefit calculations and decisions about when to use force and when to exercise restraint. Leaders, under this view, differ in the types of crises and events that they will respond to rather than in their fundamental propensity to intervene.⁵⁴ Leader personality may also affect a leader's decisionmaking process in ways that affect intervention outcomes. Past research has indicated that leaders differ in how much they involve advisers, parliamentary bodies, and other experts in foreign policy decisions and that their approach to the decisionmaking process can affect the outcomes of those decisions.⁵⁵

A final body of research considers the role of the leader's background and personal experience. This work suggests that a leader's life experience prior to their position of political power is likely to shape their subsequent decisions about the use of force. For instance, a 2014 study found that leaders with prior military experience but no combat experience or those who have been members of rebel groups are most likely to initiate new wars and interventions. The authors suggest it is the leader's past experience with use of force that guides his or her decisions about future military action.⁵⁶

Although the body of research on the role of leadership in military intervention has been growing, it is difficult to identify a single metric or set of metrics to measure and operationalize this factor. Attempts to use leader personality as an explanation for a state's intervention choices will be only as successful as the quality of information available for a specific case.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Fall 2009.

⁵⁵ Kaarbo, 2018.

⁵⁶ Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Summer 2014.

Enablers: Capabilities

The final factor that emerged from our literature review did not have to do with state motivations at all, but instead relates to capabilities, primarily military and economic resources that allow a state to launch and sustain a military intervention. Here, we refer to capabilities as *enablers*, meaning that they are resources that enable or allow a state to engage in a military intervention. Without sufficient economic resources to fund an intervention and to support the associated costs, and without the needed military technology and capabilities, states will not be able to undertake interventions regardless of their preferences. In particular, we focus on changes in capabilities: new economic resources or military capabilities that may provide states with a new ability to launch interventions. As with many of the factors discussed earlier, such enablers are unlikely to drive an intervention decision on their own. For example, a state is not likely to decide to intervene simply because it has the economic or military capacity to do so. A state would also likely need a motivation, such as those discussed earlier. However, given persistent motivations to intervene, changes in enabling capabilities can help to explain why a state intervenes at one point in time and not at another.

Military and economic capabilities might shape intervention decisions in a few key ways. First, military capabilities might shape intervention feasibility. A state might have the desire to intervene but ultimately decide not to do so because it lacks the military capabilities or the economic resources required to launch the intervention or because decisionmakers assess that they do not have the military or economic capability to achieve desired objectives.⁵⁷ Second, past research suggests that, for the most part, states only pursue interventions where they expect to be able to achieve the desired outcome at a reasonable cost. This understanding of military interventions as based, in part, on military and economic capabilities is consistent with realist arguments

⁵⁷ Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, *Inquiry, Logic, and International Politics*, Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

that focus first on military power and state self-interest.⁵⁸ However, it is worth noting that states might choose to intervene even in cases in which they are overmatched and unprepared if other factors (such as those described earlier) demand such an intervention and overwhelm concerns about possible constraints.

In terms of metrics used to assess these capabilities, there are many options. One approach would be to focus on changes in capabilities. Significant increases or decreases in economic resources or military technology could be identified and recorded as a marker of states that might suddenly be more able to conduct military interventions than in the past. Another approach would be to focus on absolutes. For example, military spending, military size, gross domestic product per capita, or variables that denote possession of key technologies (e.g., nuclear weapons) are all ways to measure capabilities as they pertain to the ability of a state to launch an intervention.

Table 2.2 summarizes these factors and the metrics that could be used to assess or measure them in different contexts.

Identifying Drivers of Russia's Military Interventions

Russia's military interventions (particularly those since 2014) have generated a rich literature that seeks to explain Moscow's behavior. Although the existing studies have much to offer, several caveats are in order. First, we have a relative paucity of firsthand information and a lack of archival sources in particular about Russian decisionmaking, so all analytical conclusions (including those in this report) must be somewhat tentative. Second, the vast majority of the existing works treat one or, in some cases, up to three interventions; none covers all or even most of the 25 cases addressed here (see Table 3.1 for a full list). And the only book-length treatment of Russia's interventions focuses on the normative justifications for the actions, not their drivers.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Rost and Greig, 2011; Paul K. Huth, "Major Power Intervention in International Crises, 1918–1988," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 6, December 1998.

⁵⁹ Roy Allison, *Russia, the West and Military Intervention*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2013. Other work has focused more narrowly on Russia's interven-

Table 2.2
Drivers of Military Interventions

Category	Factor Affecting the Likelihood of Adversary Military Interventions	Definition
Geopolitics	External threat to sovereignty	Actual or threatened attack, territorial claim, or forced regime change
	Regional power balance	Assessment of the impact on the regional balance of power of a potential intervention
	Alliance/partnership	Formal or informal relationship that encourages a state to support another through intervention
	National status	Opportunity to preserve or increase international standing through a potential intervention
Domestic	Domestic politics and legitimacy	Domestic political dynamics that can drive interventions: • Leader popularity and survival • Bureaucratic politics • Regime type • Party politics and elections
	Coidentity group populations in host	Presence of coidentity group populations in intervention target, especially if threatened
	Economic interests	Protection of economic assets, access to resources, pursuit of economic opportunities and trade
Ideational	Leadership and personality	Leadership type and propensity to launch intervention or use military force
	Ideology	Set of beliefs or worldview that drives intervention to advance or counter that ideology
Enablers	Capabilities	Military and economic resources required to support an intervention

Of the ten factors identified from the general literature review as possible drivers of interventions, all but two have been highlighted in the literature on Russia. The two that have not been highlighted are

tions in post-Soviet Eurasia. See, for example, Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest for Ukraine and the Caucasus*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2017.

economic security and ideology. Economic factors seem not to have been relevant to any of Russia's intervention decisions. Moscow has not used its military specifically to secure access to markets or raw materials or to protect its assets. If at all, economic factors have figured in Russia's calculus through minimizing the negative economic consequences of interventions taken for other reasons. Most, if not all, of Russia's interventions have come at some degree of economic cost, be it directly through sustaining troop presence or indirectly through sanctions imposed on Russia as a result of the intervention or disrupted trade.

As noted previously, we treat ideology in the context of interventions as a desire to spread or support political systems, religions, or other sets of ideas or as a nationalist desire to incorporate territories or populations. By the first measure, Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet period has been largely free of ideological drivers. The Kremlin does not seek to export its political system and instead prides itself on what it considers to be ruthless pragmatism in its dealings with other countries. Russia is happy to do business with regimes of all stripes, and its doctrinal documents call for a nonideological approach to international affairs. Indeed, if ideology in this sense plays any substantial role in Russia's foreign policy, it is as a foil: Moscow is critical of what it sees as a highly ideological Western foreign policy and has pushed back against democracy promotion. But countering an ideology is not necessarily an ideology in itself.

There is a substantial literature that focuses on Russian elites' national identities and the role of nationalism therein.⁶⁰ For example, Russia's pursuit of great-power status and its assertion of hegemony in post-Soviet Eurasia have been portrayed as ideological predispositions

⁶⁰ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, 5th ed., Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019; Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies*, Moscow, 1955 and 1999, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002; Igor Zevelev, *Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2016; and Andrew C. Kuchins and Igor Zevelev, "Russia's Contested National Identity and Foreign Policy," in Henry R. Nau and Deepa M. Ollapally, eds., *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan, and Russia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

resulting from either neo- or post-imperialist urges.⁶¹ According to Andrew Wilson, “Russia’s addiction to dangerous myths,” among them “that the former USSR was the ‘lost territory’ of historical Russia,” can explain the interventions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.⁶² It is certainly true that nationalism was relevant to the decision to annex Crimea; Russians’ attachment to the peninsula has been well documented. It is less clear that the decision to intervene there (or in the Donbas) was driven by nationalism. The trigger for the intervention was the Maidan Revolution, which represented a geopolitical setback for the Kremlin. And there was a clear distinction between the initial invasion and the eventual annexation; these were evidently not taken simultaneously.⁶³ Although national identity doubtless plays a role in foreign policy, it is less useful as an analytical tool in explaining the motives behind particular decisions in the Russian case. As Andrej Krickovic notes, “focusing on the uniqueness of Russia’s identity may . . . obscure other, more objective, reasons for why Russia pursues the policies and national objectives that it does.”⁶⁴ This is particularly true regarding military interventions. Nationalism did not appear to be a significant driver in any of the 25 interventions in our data set. Therefore, we did not include ideology as a key factor to assess more extensively.

The exclusion of these two factors left us with eight remaining factors, each of which will be discussed in detail here.

⁶¹ See Dmitri Trenin, *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011; and Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire*, Hartford, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016.

⁶² Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014, p. vii.

⁶³ Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*, London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 127–129.

⁶⁴ Andrej Krickovic, “Imperial Nostalgia or Prudent Geopolitics? Russia’s Efforts to Reintegrate the Post-Soviet Space in Geopolitical Perspective,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 6, 2014, p. 511.

National Status Concerns

Pursuit and reinforcement of great-power status is widely acknowledged as a central driver of Russia's foreign policy.⁶⁵ Vladimir Putin has said, "Our entire historical experience tells us that a country like Russia can only survive . . . if it is a great power."⁶⁶ The challenge for post-Soviet Russia has been attaining the recognition of the status it believes it deserves. Moscow believes it is one of the major centers of power in the world and should be acknowledged as such by having its interests respected by other major powers and by the United States in particular. The Kremlin argues that Russia should have a say in any major international process or negotiation. Russia seeks to consolidate its "status as a leading world power," according to its 2015 National Security Strategy.⁶⁷ The country's permanent membership on the United Nations (UN) Security Council (UNSC) and its nuclear-capable military should ensure that Moscow takes part in forming the international agenda.

A major component of being a great power, in Moscow's view, is being the leader of a region (specifically, its immediate neighborhood). Moscow thus has sought some degree of regional hegemony throughout the post-1991 period. Status concerns are therefore one of the key drivers of Russia's involvement (including military involvement) in its so-called near abroad. This driver has manifested itself particularly in Russia's assertion of its leading role in addressing conflicts in the region. As early as March 1993, then Russian President Boris Yeltsin called for "international organizations" to grant Russia "special authority as guarantor of peace and stability on the territory of the former

⁶⁵ Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Catherine Yusupov, *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-768-AF, 2009; Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective," Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2019; and Dmitri Trenin, "Demands on Russian Foreign Policy and Its Drivers: Looking Out Five Years," Carnegie Moscow Center, August 10, 2017.

⁶⁶ President of Russia, "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiiskoi Federatsii," May 16, 2003.

⁶⁷ President of Russia, "O Strategii natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii," December 31, 2015d.

USSR.”⁶⁸ In his decree on Russian policy toward its neighbors issued in 1995, Yeltsin allowed for cooperation with international organizations, such as the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, in regulating regional conflicts but underscored the need “to get them to understand that this region is first of all Russia’s zone of influence.”⁶⁹ As these statements demonstrate, this element of Russian status concerns long predates Vladimir Putin’s rise to power.

Ted Hopf notes that the emphasis on Russia’s great-power responsibilities explains, in part, Russia’s peacekeeping operation in Georgia’s semiautonomous region of Abkhazia that began in 1994.⁷⁰ Following its haphazard, unacknowledged, and contradictory intervention in the civil war between Georgians and Abkhaz that broke out as the Soviet Union collapsed, Moscow sought the status associated with leading a peacekeeping operation. The operation was formally conducted under the aegis of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS; the umbrella organization established for the former Soviet republics), providing a symbolic degree of multilateral endorsement of the peacekeepers, even though all the peacekeepers were Russian soldiers. Russia even sought UN endorsement of the CIS peacekeeping operation and eventually received acknowledgment, if not formal recognition.⁷¹ The peacekeeping operation gave Russian involvement the guise of regional arbiter, consistent with its vision for great-power behavior, as opposed to outwardly taking sides in the conflict.

Russia’s great-power status concerns also have had implications for its interventions beyond post-Soviet Eurasia. Its involvement in the Balkans in the 1990s—three peacekeeping missions—was, in many

⁶⁸ Quoted in “Chto bylo na needle [What happened in the week],” *Kommersant*, March 6, 1993.

⁶⁹ President of Russia, “Strategicheskii kurs Rossii s gosudarstvami – uchastnikami Sodruzhestva Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv,” September 14, 1995.

⁷⁰ Ted Hopf, “Identity, Legitimacy, and the Use of Military Force: Russia’s Great Power Identities and Military Intervention in Abkhazia,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31, December 2005.

⁷¹ UNSC, Resolution 937, Expansion of the Mandate of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia and Its Cooperation with the CIS Peace-Keeping Force, S/RES/937, July 12, 1994.

ways, driven by Moscow's sense that it should be part of any international efforts to address major crises. During that period, when the discrepancy between U.S. and Russian power was at its greatest, Moscow could achieve status largely by being included as an equal (or almost equal) with Washington in peacekeeping operations. Even though Russian involvement in the Balkans had periods of confrontation with the West, most notably in the so-called dash to Pristina, when Russian troops temporarily blocked North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces from the Pristina airport following the NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo in 1999, Moscow still reached an accord with NATO to allow for its participation in the NATO-led international peacekeeping force in Kosovo (KFOR). As Allen Lynch notes, "after the melodramatic dash of the Russian paratroopers to Pristina . . . Russian peacekeepers assumed the roles that NATO had assigned to them, without their own sector and reporting to a NATO commander."⁷²

There is broad consensus in the literature that great-power status was a key factor in the Russian intervention in Syria. As we discuss in greater detail in Chapter Five, there are several partially overlapping interpretations of how status concerns played into Russian decision-making. Partly, the move was seen as a response to Russia's geopolitical circumstances at the time: Western sanctions and attempted diplomatic isolation following Moscow's annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine. Additionally, the Syria intervention provided a platform for potential great-power cooperation on the shared threat of terrorism.⁷³ In any case, both the expected status benefits accrued from intervening and the expected status costs from not doing so factored into Russian decisionmaking on Syria, as discussed later in this report. In the event, the intervention reinforced Russia's agenda-setting clout both in the region and globally.

⁷² Allen C. Lynch, "The Realism of Russia's Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1, January 2001, p. 21.

⁷³ Dmitry Adamsky, "Putin's Syria Strategy: Russian Airstrikes and What Comes Next," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1, 2015.

Regional Power Balance

Closely related to the regional leadership role associated with Russia's great-power status aspirations are Moscow's concerns about the balance of power in post-Soviet Eurasia. In other words, both status and traditional geopolitics drive Russia's activism in its immediate neighborhood. In the 1990s, Russia's quest for influence was mostly related to ensuring pliant governments in the region. The initial interventions after the Soviet collapse were not primarily driven by regional power balance concerns but later became instrumentalized for that purpose. By the turn of the century, Russian influence in the region was increasingly contested by the European Union (EU) and NATO. As the Western role in the region increased in the mid-2000s, regional power balance became more central to Moscow's interventions.

Early in the post-Soviet period, Moscow used its armed interventions in its neighborhood to secure levers of influence over the often reluctant hosts. With Russia engulfed in a deep economic crisis and the severing of the Soviet-era ties that bound the republics to Moscow, the military tool proved important in ensuring Russia's regional clout. As Dov Lynch notes in his study of three Russian peacekeeping operations during this period, "At the heart of Russian policy towards the 'near abroad' resides the desire to have friendly regimes in neighboring states that are accommodating to Russian interests, and minimally influenced by foreign powers."⁷⁴ He calls Russia's peacekeeping interventions "a strategy of armed suasion" designed as much to protect Russian interests as to stabilize conflict zones.⁷⁵ Jeffrey Mankoff goes further, claiming, "Russia intervened when it felt its influence was threatened."⁷⁶ This might be somewhat of an overstatement, since there were few competitors for influence in the region in the 1990s. Russia remained regionally dominant when compared with outside powers. But the governments of the countries of the region were increasingly

⁷⁴ Dov Lynch, *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 173.

⁷⁵ Lynch, 2000, p. 179.

⁷⁶ Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia's Latest Land Grab: How Putin Won Crimea and Lost Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014.

disinclined to follow Moscow's orders, and the interventions offered a means of affecting their calculus.

From 1998 to 2008, there were no new Russian interventions in post-Soviet Eurasia that met the thresholds used in this report. We then saw three major interventions from 2008 to 2014, all of which involved combat. From 1998 to 2008, a genuine contest for influence emerged in the region, with Russia's leading role coming under challenge. Following NATO's 2004 enlargement, the organization bordered several post-Soviet Eurasian states. NATO's Bucharest Summit Declaration in April 2008 stated that Georgia and Ukraine "will become" members of the alliance at some unspecified point in the future.⁷⁷ As an organization, NATO began to develop far more comprehensive partnerships with both Tbilisi and Kyiv than it had in the 1990s. As of 2009, the EU also began pursuing closer ties with a broader array of regional states through its Eastern Partnership.⁷⁸

Many scholars have pointed to the potential of Georgia's and Ukraine's deeper integration or membership with NATO as a primary driver of the interventions. John Mearsheimer has written that "Washington may not like Moscow's position" on the Crimea annexation and war in the Donbas, "but it should understand the logic behind it. This is Geopolitics 101: great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory."⁷⁹ In this case, the threat was a Western intention to bring Ukraine into NATO and weaken Russia's influence there. Elias Götz has written that Russia's interventions in Ukraine were a "response to geopolitical imperatives," in that no major power would

want to have client states of foreign military alliances or geopolitical blocs in its immediate vicinity. Russia is no exception to that rule. It has a genuine national interest in preventing outside

⁷⁷ NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," April 3, 2008.

⁷⁸ Charap and Colton, 2017, pp. 95–101.

⁷⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5, September/October 2014, p. 84.

powers from acquiring a foothold on the territory of [post-Soviet Eurasia].⁸⁰

External Threat to Sovereignty

The literature either implicitly or explicitly acknowledges the importance of external threats to sovereignty in driving Russia's interventions. This factor is somewhat difficult to differentiate from regional power balance concerns, since Moscow considers NATO's increased influence in the neighborhood as a threat to regime security and even territorial integrity. For the purposes of this report, we consider *external threat* to mean a more short-term, concrete threat rather than these more-generalized concerns. Such threats could include a planned or actual military attack on Russia, its forces, or its allies and partners; armed conflict along Russia's periphery that could entail security consequences for Russia's territory; or transnational terrorism, insofar as the threat is linked to Moscow's domestic terrorism and extremism problems.

Empirically, the first of these three is doubtless relevant to at least the Russia-Georgia War. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's decision to launch an assault on Tskhinvali, the regional capital, clearly constituted a threat to the Russian peacekeepers stationed there and to the civilian population, many of whom were Russian citizens. Although other factors also played a role, Russia's intervention became inevitable when it had to respond to this action.

The literature, as well as Russian official discourse, considers the terrorist threat to be a key driver of Moscow's foreign policy. As Bobo Lo wrote in 2003, "There is no doubt that for Putin the number one threat facing Russia is terrorism."⁸¹ Today, Russian leaders may not continue to view terrorism as the number one threat, but it continues to rank highly. Over the course of the post-Soviet period, the terror-

⁸⁰ Elias Götz, "It's Geopolitics, Stupid: Explaining Russia's Ukraine Policy," *Global Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2015, p. 5.

⁸¹ Bobo Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Chatham House/Blackwell, 2003, p. 84.

ist threat has mostly been domestic in nature, driven by the two wars Russia fought to subdue an insurgency in Chechnya and the persistent and, at times, horrific terrorist acts committed by extremists from the North Caucasus. For Russia (in contrast to the United States or France), terrorism has been defined by direct threats to the country's territorial integrity. Russian officials have long alleged that domestic extremists have international links: Putin has spoken of a "terrorist international" since his first years in office.⁸² Multilateral counterterrorist efforts have been at the core of Russia's institution-building in post-Soviet Eurasia, as seen in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's focus on this issue and in Moscow's outreach to the West, most vividly captured in Putin's call to President George W. Bush on 9/11. In terms of Russia's military interventions, only one has been linked to the external terrorist threat: the 2015 operation in Syria. As discussed in detail in later chapters, some have expressed doubts about the sincerity of Russia's counterterrorist motive, but the literature, on the whole, acknowledges the links between extremists in Syria and those in Russia and neighboring states as a key factor in the intervention.

Moscow also sees external threats from instability along its periphery. According to Andrew Radin et al., "Russia . . . seeks stability externally, most of all on its borders, because of a perceived direct link between events there and stability inside Russia."⁸³ Russia's definition of stability is far more all-encompassing than traditional Western definitions, but it is important to note, for the purposes of this report, that the elite is concerned about political, economic, and social turmoil—particularly armed conflict—spilling over from neighboring countries into Russia. Therefore, any conflict or potential conflict, domestic unrest, or extremist elements on its periphery are seen as potential threats to Russian sovereignty that demand a response, including (at times) a military one. The threat of regional instability

⁸² President of Russia, "Interv'yu frantsuzkomu ezhenedel'niku 'Pari-match,'" July 6, 2000.

⁸³ Andrew Radin, Lynn E. Davis, Edward Geist, Eugeniu Han, Dara Massicot, Matthew Povlock, Clint Reach, Scott Boston, Samuel Charap, William Mackenzie, Katya Migacheva, Trevor Johnston, and Austin Long, *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3099-A, 2019.

was certainly a key driver of Moscow's interventions in the wars that broke out in several former Soviet republics as the USSR collapsed. The first new base built abroad in Kyrgyzstan in 2003 was driven, at least in part, by the view that instability in Central Asia represented a threat to Russia.

Additionally, the literature identifies two primary perceived threats to regime security that drive Moscow's behavior. First, the Russian elite is convinced that the United States has adopted a global policy of regime change to remove sitting governments that do not do its bidding and replace them with pliant leaders. This threat perception began with the bombing of Kosovo. As Oksana Antonenko writes, "Kosovo is genuinely feared as a precedent," noting that a Russian parliamentarian at the time asked, "Who can guarantee that, if not Russia, then somebody else close to Russia will not be punished in the same way?"⁸⁴ This view only crystallized with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the NATO intervention in Libya. In addition to military interventions, the Russian elite has come to view popular uprisings as U.S. policy tools to achieve the same objective.⁸⁵

The second threat to regime security discussed in the literature as a potential driver of intervention is the transnational diffusion of democratic norms: specifically, that Russia's leaders, particularly following their autocratic turn in the 2000s, fear the consequences of the example of successful democratic movements or governments on the country's borders. Several scholars have argued that Russian decision-makers view democratic success in neighboring states as a potential source of inspiration for Russian citizens to rise up against the ruling elite and even the political system as a whole. Accordingly, transnational diffusion of democratic norms would pose a threat to the elites' rule.⁸⁶ In terms of explaining Russia's military interventions, this factor

⁸⁴ Oksana Antonenko, "Russia, NATO and European Security After Kosovo," *Survival*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1999, p. 133.

⁸⁵ See Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, *Conference Proceedings*, Moscow: III Moscow Conference on International Security, May 23–24, 2014.

⁸⁶ Karrie J. Koesel and Valerie J. Bunce, "Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations Against Authoritarian Rulers," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3, September 2013.

is most often cited in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in eastern Ukraine. The Maidan Revolution, which immediately preceded these events, saw the democratically elected but increasingly autocratic Viktor Yanukovich ousted because of pressure generated by massive street protests in the capital. According to Olga Oliker et al.,

If such protests could happen in Ukraine, which was so culturally similar to Russia (and viewed in Russia as an auxiliary nation), they might happen in Russia as well . . . Putin took action not simply to counter what he saw as Western activity on Russia's border and to maintain influence in Ukraine. Rather, Russia has annexed Crimea and helped maintain a conflict in eastern Ukraine to prevent this overthrow of the existing order from leading to a successful, functioning government—or even a semi-successful, but still functioning, one.⁸⁷

If it were a success, such a government might inspire the Russian people to overthrow Putin's regime.

This framing of the diffusion threat suffers from an evidentiary problem: It is unclear whether the Russian elite thinks in these terms. We certainly do not have examples of Russian leaders speaking of their fear of the demonstration effects of Ukrainian democratic success on the Russian populace. Moreover, we know that Russian elites have a very low opinion of their Ukrainian counterparts; it is difficult for them to conceive of the possibility that Ukraine can survive without Western assistance, let alone become a thriving democracy.⁸⁸ It could

⁸⁷ Olga Oliker, Christopher S. Chivvis, Keith Crane, Olesya Tkacheva, and Scott Boston, *Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context: A Reassessment*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-144-A, 2015.

⁸⁸ As Putin put it recently,

[The Ukrainian elite are] people who put their personal success and their personal gain at the forefront of everything they did for their whole lives, along with the preservation of the fortune they amassed at the expense of the Ukrainian people and kept somewhere abroad. This is where their love for the West comes from, I suppose (President of Russia, "Interv'yu Vladimira Putina Mezhdgosudarstvennoi teleradiokompanii 'Mir'," June 13, 2019).

be said that the Kremlin fears geopolitical diffusion rather than democratic diffusion. Because many Russian elites view popular revolutions, particularly in post-Soviet Eurasia, as a tool of U.S. foreign policy to undermine Russia's regional influence, stopping those revolutions is more of a geopolitical imperative than a normative one.

Alliance or Partnership with Host

Russia has treaty allies, the members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.⁸⁹ However, its alliance obligations have never been truly tested: None of the interventions under examination here were launched to protect an ally. Moreover, Russia's allies have not formally requested Russia's military assistance, at least not in response to an external military threat. Russia has, however, developed a variety of partnerships with nonstate groups and entities in the region that have played a role in its regional interventions. Nearly all of the separatist movements on whose behalf Moscow intervened in the 1990s had important ties with powerful individuals or groups in Russia.⁹⁰ Russia is the main patron of separatist entities in Georgia and Moldova, and its backing of the South Ossetians seems to have been a factor in its decision to intervene in 2008. But these patron-client relationships have often been contentious. Moreover, Moscow has taken a rather bloody-minded attitude toward its regional clients; there is little discussion in the literature of its partnerships with them as a primary driver of its interventions. A partial exception to this rule is the bases that Russia maintains on the territory of its allies, including in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and the Georgian separatist regions. One of the rationales for maintaining these facilities, with the possible exception of Kyrgyzstan, is protection of the host country or entity. In this case, however, concerns regarding Russia's regional clout are difficult to disaggregate from the importance of Russia's relationship with and desire to support the host. Beyond post-Soviet Eurasia, Moscow's partner-

⁸⁹ See Richard Weitz, *Assessing the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Capabilities and Vulnerabilities*, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, October 2018.

⁹⁰ Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition? The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russia Military Interventionism, 1973–1996*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, pp. 302–305.

ships with such countries as Syria and Serbia seemed to factor in some way in its decisionmaking. However, these partnerships were not crucial factors in driving Russian decisions to intervene in those locations.

Domestic Politics and Legitimacy

The literature highlights several domestic factors that have influenced Russia's interventions. First, bureaucratic politics are seen to have played an outsize role in the interventions of the early 1990s. At the time, an array of *sui generis* factors led to unprecedented chaos in policymaking: the collapse of the Soviet governance system and its institutions, the economic implosion following the move from command to market systems, unclear chains of command for the Russian military stationed in newly independent states, and the political confrontation between the executive and the legislature that culminated in the 1993 shelling of the parliament building. As the editors of a RAND study on Russian interventions of the time wrote,

The Russian process is highly underregulated and underinstitutionalized. It fragments control of decisionmaking and obfuscates accountability. It further suffers many of the pathologies of a new and semi-developed democracy . . . and weak governmental capacity. As a result, parochial interests are often able to seize control of the intervention policy agenda and to dictate the actions of deployed military forces.⁹¹

The case in point was the intervention in the Tajik Civil War, when junior officers made decisions regarding the use of force and when guidance from Moscow was inconsistent or nonexistent.⁹² This period of domestic chaos was relatively short-lived, although remnants of the extreme bureaucratic infighting on issues of war and peace persisted

⁹¹ Jeremy R. Azrael, Benjamin S. Lambeth, Emil A. Payin, and Arkady A. Popov, "Russian and American Intervention Policy in Comparative Perspectives," in Jeremy R. Azrael and Emil A. Payin, eds., *U.S. and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CF-129-CRES, 1996, p. 208.

⁹² Arkady Yu. Dubnov, "Tadjikistan," in Jeremy R. Azrael and Emil A. Payin, eds., *U.S. and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CF-129-CRES, 1996.

until the late 1990s. During the so-called dash to Pristina, it became clear to U.S. officials that their Russian interlocutors, including from the Ministry of Defense, were not fully aware or in control of the troops on the ground in the region.⁹³ In at least the past 15 years, particularly on questions of military intervention, bureaucratic politics were far less relevant as the state became more coherent and clearer chains of command were established.

Another domestic political factor discussed in the literature is essentially a country-specific application of the diversionary war theory.⁹⁴ Specifically, the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine are said to be a function of the Kremlin's reaction to its weakening support domestically. As Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss write, "Russia's foreign policy, including specifically the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine, . . . changed in large measure as a result of Putin's response to new domestic political and economic challenges inside Russia." They refer to the drop in Putin's approval ratings following the 2011–2012 election cycle, which was marred by fraud and sparked large street protests in Russian cities, and the slowing of the country's economic growth, which undermined the primary source of Putin's legitimacy. In this context, the Kremlin forged a new basis for its rule: protecting the Russian people from external threats. As McFaul and Stoner-Weiss write, "To maintain his argument for legitimacy at home, Putin needs perpetual conflict with external enemies."⁹⁵

It is without question that the Ukraine crisis provided an immediate domestic political windfall for Putin: His approval rating rose to nearly 90 percent following the annexation of Crimea. However,

⁹³ John Norris, *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005, pp. 269–289.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Diana Richards, T. Clifton Morgan, Rick K. Wilson, Valerie L. Schwabach, and Garry D. Young, "Good Times, Bad Times, and the Diversionary Use of Force: A Tale of Some Not-So-Free Agents," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 37, No. 3, September 1993.

⁹⁵ Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, "Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Summer 2015, p. 175. See also Tobias Theiler, "The Microfoundations of Diversionary Conflict," *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2018.

this tells us little about his motives. Moreover, there is scant evidence that Putin faced true threats to his rule when the Maidan Revolution occurred. Following the 2011–2012 protests, he had weakened the opposition through targeted repression, while creating new release valves for discontent through selective liberalizing moves, such as a return to elected governors. He also reinforced the loyalty of key power brokers through a program of “nationalization of the elite” that sought to attenuate ties with the West. In short, when the events in Kyiv were unfolding in early 2014, Putin faced no serious challenges to his rule. It seems highly unlikely that he would have taken such extreme measures primarily to bolster his domestic legitimacy under these circumstances.⁹⁶

Indeed, there is scant evidence to suggest that Putin has ever felt that his popular support, the bedrock of his power, was under serious threat. This appears to have been true even when, following the introduction of unpopular pension reforms in 2019, his approval rating dropped to the mid-60s, an all-time low. Further, as Nathan Reynolds notes, it is not clear that such relative dips in popularity would spur foreign interventions.⁹⁷ Polina Beliakova’s close reading of public opinion data shows that Russia’s recent interventions have not occurred during those periods when popular support for the government was relatively lower. As she writes, “aggressive foreign policy does not correlate with public support for the government in a way consistent with the diversionary war argument.” She concludes that “Russia does not go to war when domestic support is at its lowest.”⁹⁸ The lack of historical correlation between low support and interventions suggests that there is not solid empirical evidence for domestic politics driving Russia’s military interventions.

Two scholars reviewing work on the role of domestic politics generally in determining Moscow’s international behavior reach

⁹⁶ Charap and Colton, 2017, p. x.

⁹⁷ Nate Reynolds, “Putin Doesn’t Sweat His Unpopularity,” *Foreign Policy*, November 28, 2018.

⁹⁸ Polina Beliakova, “How Does the Kremlin Kick When It’s Down,” *War on the Rocks*, August 13, 2019.

the conclusion that domestic factors do not have a decisive impact on Russian foreign policy. They are important on the margins, either by reinforcing existing policies or determining outcomes on matters of secondary import. But none are the central driver of Russian foreign policy.⁹⁹

This conclusion is in keeping with broader international relations scholarship on other states. If this is true of foreign policy as a whole, it is likely even more true of questions of war and peace. In any case, there has not been compelling evidence that fears about legitimacy have motivated Russian interventions.

Coidentity Group Populations in Host

Russia's ties with ethnic Russians living beyond the state's post-1991 borders and with those who are called "compatriots" have been among the most contested elements of its foreign policy. Moscow has partly justified at least two of its recent interventions—the Crimea annexation and the invasion of eastern Ukraine—on the grounds of protecting coidentity groups. After the events of 2014, some even spoke of a "Putin Doctrine": "a blanket assertion that Moscow has the right and the obligation to protect Russians anywhere in the world."¹⁰⁰ However, on closer inspection, this factor appears to be more of an *ex post facto* justification for Russia's interventions rather than a driver of them.

For the purposes of this report, we differentiate between Russian citizens and the broader categories of ethnic Russians and compatriots. The Russian policy of "passportization" in the mid-2000s—providing Russian passports to residents of neighboring states' separatist regions—led to significant percentages of the population of such regions in Georgia and Moldova becoming citizens of Russia (up to 90 percent in the case of South Ossetia).¹⁰¹ Russia justified its 2008

⁹⁹ Samuel Charap and Cory Welt, "Making Sense of Russian Foreign Policy: Guest Editors' Introduction," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Coalson, "Putin Pledges to Protect All Ethnic Russians Anywhere. So, Where Are They?" *RFE/RL*, April 10, 2014.

¹⁰¹ Toru Nagashima, "Russia's Passportization Policy Toward Unrecognized Republics," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 66, No. 3, 2019.

intervention on the basis of protecting its citizens in South Ossetia and changed its law governing the use of its military abroad in 2009 to authorize explicitly the use of force to protect its citizens.¹⁰² Protection of citizens abroad would be considered here to be a national status concern, not a function of group-based bonds with the population. South Ossetia is an example of such a concern, since the ethnic Ossetian population would not be considered a coidentity group for most Russian citizens, who are approximately 80 percent ethnically Russian. As Marlene Laruelle, the preeminent scholar of Russian nationalist movements, notes, “Neither the Abkhaz nor the Ossetians can be considered Russian minorities or even Russian-speaking.”¹⁰³ Moreover, the leadership was motivated as much by the consequences for its great-power status as by any kinship bonds: “Once Russia’s ‘citizens’ were threatened by an unfriendly power, the Kremlin used this as an excuse to lash out, defending [them] more as a matter of state pride than from a genuine wish to protect Abkhazians and South Ossetians,” as one study concludes.¹⁰⁴

Russian leaders have deliberately sought to create the impression that they will intervene on behalf of *compatriots*, a broader term encompassing Russian-speakers and those who are equally or more tied to Russia than they are to their home countries. As Putin said,

I would like to make it clear to all: our country will continue to actively defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire range of available means—from political and

¹⁰² See Allison, 2013, Ch. 7; and “Federal’nyi zakon ot 9 noyabrya 2009 g. N 252-F3 ‘O vnesenii izmenenii v Federal’nyi zakon ‘Ob oborone’ [Federal Law of November 9, 2009 N 252-FZ ‘On Amendments to the Federal Law “On Defense”],” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, No. 214, November 13, 2009.

¹⁰³ Marlene Laruelle, “Why No Kazakh Novorossiia? Kazakhstan’s Russian Minority in a Post-Crimea World,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 65, No. 1, 2018, p. 67.

¹⁰⁴ Scott Littlefield, “Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy: The Contradictions and Consequences of Russia’s Passport Distribution in the Separatist Regions of Georgia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 8, 2009.

economic to operations under international humanitarian law and the right of self-defense.¹⁰⁵

However, close examination of Russian behavior suggests that, as Lincoln Pigman writes, Moscow has “subordinated the needs of its compatriots to the broader national interest and adopted a policy of using its compatriots to achieve its wider foreign policy objectives.”¹⁰⁶ In certain cases, such as Turkmenistan, Moscow has been content to sit on the sidelines as the ethnic Russian community was essentially repressed. In the cases when Moscow intervened and claimed that care for compatriots was driving its actions, other motives were dominant. As Pigman concludes, “to use force in the name of its compatriots,” Moscow must see an opportunity “to achieve broader foreign policy objectives, not the possibility of alleviating its compatriots’ difficulties.”¹⁰⁷ Laurelle echoes that assessment: “Russia may use a nationalist *post hoc explanation* but does not advance a nationalist *agenda*.”¹⁰⁸

Leadership and Personality

The centrality of Vladimir Putin to Russian foreign policy over the course of more than 20 years makes an examination of his role in Moscow’s interventions necessary. Many books have been devoted to analyzing Putin’s predispositions, personality traits, and preferences.¹⁰⁹ Several of them either implicitly or explicitly make the case that

¹⁰⁵ President of Russia, “Conference of Russian Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives,” July 1, 2014. Putin repeated similar rhetoric in late 2018: “We will protect your rights and interests decisively, using all available bilateral and multilateral mechanisms” (Stepan Kravchenko, “Putin Promises ‘Decisive’ Protection for Ethnic Russians Abroad,” *Bloomberg*, October 31, 2018).

¹⁰⁶ Lincoln Pigman, “Russia’s Compatriots: Instrument or Responsibility?” *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 164, No. 2, 2019, p. 25.

¹⁰⁷ Pigman, 2019, p. 35.

¹⁰⁸ Emphasis in original; Marlene Laruelle, “Russia as a ‘Divided Nation,’ from Compatriots to Crimea: A Contribution to the Discussion on Nationalism and Foreign Policy,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2015, p. 88.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, revised ed., Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015; and Fiona Hill, “Mr.

Putin's personal beliefs about Russia's interests and how they should be realized drive foreign policy generally and military interventions specifically. One scholar, for example, stresses the importance of Putin's judo training to understanding Russian behavior in Ukraine because "[j]udo has played a crucial role in shaping Putin's worldview."¹¹⁰ The logical extrapolation is that Russia's actions would have been very different had a different person been in power.

Although Putin's personal views certainly play *some* role in Russia's decisionmaking regarding military interventions, the case for their decisiveness is less convincing. First, if we examine all of Russia's interventions that meet the threshold described in this report, it becomes clear that the majority occurred before Putin's rise to power. Ultimately, his personality can only lend clarity to a portion of the cases. Second, among the subset of cases relating to interventions in post-Soviet Eurasia, there is a strong continuity in terms of Moscow's overall posture of using force to achieve objectives in the region. As Götz notes,

Putin's approach to the post-Soviet space looks like a carbon copy of [1990s] policies . . . similarities between Putin's policies and those adopted under President Yeltsin after the USSR's dissolution are too striking to be ignored or shrugged off as happenstance.¹¹¹

Third, and perhaps most importantly, there is broad consensus today among Russian elites on foreign policy matters (unlike in the 1990s, when there were sharply divergent views within the establishment). For example, a survey of elites conducted in 2016 found overwhelming agreement on issues relating to Russia's recent interventions: 88.4 percent stated that Russia definitely or probably did not violate

Putin and the Art of the Offensive Defense: Approaches to Foreign Policy (Part Two)," Brookings Institution, March 16, 2014.

¹¹⁰ Kimberly Marten, "Putin's Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2015.

¹¹¹ Elias Götz, "Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2, June 2017, p. 232.

international law in its seizure of Crimea.¹¹² Putin's views are largely reflective of the elite consensus on foreign policy matters. He certainly is not an outlier.

Therefore, personality can be considered an important factor in explaining the timing of certain decisions or their form. For example, the decision to annex Crimea (as opposed to merely seizing it and demanding concessions for its return or recognizing it as an independent state) was likely made by Putin alone. As the well-connected journalist Aleksei Venediktov has noted, Putin's personal sense of historical mission drove the decision to annex Crimea. He recounted two conversations with Putin, the first in 2008 and the next in 2015:

[Putin] asked me, "Listen, you're a former high school history teacher. What do you think they'll write in the history textbooks [about my presidency]?" . . . I answered, "To be honest, Vladimir Vladimirovich, maybe the unification of the white and red churches [a reference to the 2007 reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad with the Moscow Patriarchy]." He looked [shocked and asked], "That's it?" . . . A year after Crimea happened, we crossed paths and he asked, "So what will they write in the textbooks now?"¹¹³

But we have little firsthand evidence to suggest that Putin's personal predilections are a primary driver of Russia's interventions.

Russian Military Capabilities

As noted previously, we treat military capabilities as an enabling factor that shapes the feasibility of an intervention and the cost-benefit analysis of the intervener. Russia's military has undergone dramatic shifts in its capabilities over the course of the post-Soviet period. In the 1990s, Russia's generalized disarray and early failures at reforming the rem-

¹¹² Sharon Werning Rivera, James Bryan, Brisa Camacho-Lovell, Carlos Fineman, Nora Klemmer, and Emma Raynor, *The Russian Elite 2016: Perspectives on Foreign and Domestic Policy*, Clinton, N.Y.: Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center, Hamilton College, May 11, 2016.

¹¹³ Dmitry Gordon, interview with Aleksei Venediktov (in Russian), Nash Kanal, August 19, 2019.

nants of the Soviet Red Army limited Moscow's capacity for power projection. Military reform largely failed to proceed until the debacle of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, when its woeful performance against a far weaker adversary convinced the leadership in Moscow that radical steps were required. Under the banner of the "New Look," those steps were eventually taken: By the time Moscow decided to intervene in Syria in 2015, its military bore little resemblance to the barely competent forces on display in such conflicts as Georgia in 2008 and the earlier conflicts in Chechnya.¹¹⁴

However, even when they were at their nadir, Russia's limited military capabilities did not prevent Moscow from undertaking interventions. Of the 25 interventions under consideration in this report, 21 occurred *before* the New Look was implemented (although Syria, the only combat mission beyond post-Soviet Eurasia, took place after the reform). The Russian military's shortcomings limited some of the effectiveness of these interventions.¹¹⁵ But our focus here is on how capabilities enabled the decision to intervene, not how they affected the quality of the intervention.

Syria was the only one of the three post-New Look interventions that likely would have been impossible without the reforms, which are described in detail in Chapter Five. In Crimea, the special forces' increased competence certainly contributed to the professionalism of the operation, but there was no armed resistance from the Ukrainian forces that would have put the Russian military to the test. In the Donbas, Moscow has deliberately limited the capabilities the military has employed to minimize its visibility; direct engagements in combat have been rare. Syria, however, required a range of capabilities that the pre-reform military could not deliver. Even though military capabilities were thus decisive in only one intervention, those capabilities are the same means of power projection that could be deployed for other interventions beyond post-Soviet Eurasia in the future.

¹¹⁴ See, for example, Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2018.

¹¹⁵ For example, the paratroopers involved in the dash to Pristina were unable to sustain themselves for more than a week once they arrived. Norris, 2005, p. 212.

Possible Factors

We divided the eight possible factors assessed in this report into three categories, according to their importance for Russia's interventions. We made these distinctions using the balance of evidence in the literature and our own judgments on the relevance or salience of each in the course of primary source research.

The most significant—or primary—factors are status concerns, regional power balance, and external threat. The first two factors are perhaps the primary drivers of all of Russia's foreign policy. Therefore, it is no surprise that they play a large role in its military interventions, from peacekeeping missions to the invasion of eastern Ukraine. However, there has not been much variation over the course of the post-Soviet period in the importance of these preoccupations of Russian decisionmakers: Great-power status and regional power balances have *always* been important to them. As explanatory variables, these factors cannot account for the timing of particular interventions or be seen as monocausal explanations. Further, it is often difficult to distinguish one from the other analytically in the context of the interventions in Russia's immediate neighborhood. For Moscow, a favorable regional power balance is an element of its great-power status, and thus the two are essentially synonymous.

The regional power balance can also be hard to distinguish from external threats to sovereignty in this context: NATO enlargement in post-Soviet Eurasia is seen as an external threat. More broadly, however, there is strong evidence that Moscow's interventions have often resulted from perceived external threats, be they terrorism, regional instability, or attacks that endanger Russian service members. Threats to regime security as a factor driving interventions—in the sense of resistance to perceived U.S. efforts at regime change—can be deduced from the available evidence (although without direct statements to that effect from official sources), although there is less evidence for the threats driven by “democracy diffusion” fears.

Of secondary importance are leadership and personality and military capabilities. In Russia's hypercentralized and personalistic system, the predilections of Putin are important for determining Russia's inter-

ventions. However, there is strong evidence that Putin's core views on foreign policy are not outliers within Russia's broader foreign policy establishment. He is as much reflective of elite consensus as he is a shaper of it. Military capabilities, or changes in relative capabilities, were clearly an important factor in the Syria case and would be in any future out-of-area intervention. But the vast majority of Russia's interventions occurred before the New Look reforms that provided for those changes.

Tertiary factors are domestic politics and legitimacy, coidentity groups, and alliance or partnership with host. There is little evidence for the former two factors, and the latter has not been tested because none of Russia's allies have called for Moscow's assistance to repel external aggression. In the two case studies, we look into the importance of partnerships with both separatists in post-Soviet Eurasia and non-treaty ally partnerships beyond the region (particularly the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria). Further, it is not implausible that these three factors might become more relevant in the future if circumstances change.

It should be noted that the factors identified in our analysis are associated with the likelihood of military interventions (Table 2.3). But we do not make direct claims of causality. Factors that we identify are those that seem to be associated with a higher likelihood of military intervention, but these factors also could be present in cases of non-intervention. For example, there are cases in which Russia has intervened to protect an ally or partner, but it has also not intervened when an ally was threatened. Future analysis that includes nonintervention cases could provide more-robust results. But data collection is a major challenge for such cases, especially for states in which government decisionmaking is opaque.

Table 2.3
Potential Factors in Russia's Military Interventions

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment from Literature Review
National status concerns	Concern about Russia's great power status—both in terms of being a regional leader and a peer of other major players—clearly is a central driver of the country's foreign policy. Examples include regional and extraregional peacekeeping.	Overlaps with regional power balance. Monocausality is difficult to demonstrate because these concerns do not vary significantly over the period.	Significant driver of Russia's interventions.
Regional power balance	Significant evidence of long-standing Russian threat perceptions regarding NATO enlargement, particularly to post-Soviet Eurasia.	Overlaps with status concerns and external threat. Monocausality is difficult to demonstrate because these concerns do not vary significantly over the period.	Significant driver of Russia's interventions.
External threat to sovereignty	Threats to citizens and forces beyond Russia's borders and the threat of terrorism seem to have prompted several interventions. Helps explain the timing of interventions. Regime security: consistent official statements condemning U.S. efforts to overthrow unfriendly governments.	Overlaps with regional balance. Difficult to demonstrate regime security motive through official statements.	Significant driver of Russia's interventions.
Military capabilities	In the Syria case, the new capabilities obtained through New Look reforms were a necessary precondition.	Vast majority of interventions occurred pre-New Look.	Important factor in enabling out-of-area interventions.

Table 2.3—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment from Literature Review
Leadership and personality	Hypercentralized, personalistic political regime means that the personality of the leader matters.	There is a consensus among the elite on most major foreign policy matters. Any plausible successor is unlikely to differ significantly from Putin.	Important factor but has most direct impact on timing, form, and extent of intervention rather than the decision itself.
Coidentity groups in host	Officials often declare the protection of compatriots as their intervention's objective.	Russia looks the other way regarding treatment of compatriots when expedient for pursuit of other goals.	Despite rhetoric, this is mostly an ex post facto justification rather than a driver.
Domestic politics and legitimacy	Timing of 2014 interventions seemed to coincide with downturn in Putin's popularity.	Scant empirical evidence that intervention decisionmaking is motivated by a desire to boost legitimacy.	Secondary factor at most.
Alliance or partnership with host	Russia has several treaty allies and partnerships with non-state actors in post-Soviet Eurasia. It also maintains partnerships with governments, such as Syria and Serbia.	Russia's alliance obligations have never been tested.	Potentially important factor if one of its allies were to be attacked in the future.
Ideology	Factor not evaluated in detail; initial assessment suggested very limited role.		
Economic interests	Factor not evaluated in detail; initial assessment suggested very limited role.		

Patterns in Russia's Military Interventions

To anticipate future Russian military interventions, it is helpful to first understand where, when, and under what circumstances Russia has intervened in the past. In this chapter, we describe trends and patterns in the data set collected for this report. This data set includes information on every Russian military intervention since 1992.¹ First, we describe how we collected this information, including our definition of a military intervention, which we used across the reports produced for this project, and the variables describing the characteristics of these interventions that we coded. We then present several descriptive statistics and graphs that illustrate key patterns in the data regarding Russia's military interventions.

Identifying Military Interventions

For the purposes of this project, we define a *military intervention* as any deployment of military forces to another country (or international waters or airspace) in which two additional parameters were satisfied regarding (1) the size of the force involved and (2) the activities in which the force was engaged.²

¹ This effort is part of a larger effort to collect all military interventions by U.S. adversaries, detailed in Kavanagh, Frederick, Chandler, et al., 2021. We use the same definitions and thresholds for all reports in the project.

² Implicit in this definition is some ambiguity regarding the sovereign status of disputed territories, which is relevant for any determination of when a country's military can be said

The purpose of the size criterion was to eliminate very small uses of force that are more difficult to track consistently over time and focus attention on those uses of force that are most likely to present a challenge for U.S. forces. This threshold means that we will not capture many smaller activities; for some countries, this is a meaningful portion of their overall activity.

We only considered cases in which the forces involved were engaged in a particular set of activities in order to eliminate cases in which a state might forward-deploy forces as a convenient alternative to basing them at home but those forces were otherwise engaged in the same activities they would have been doing if stationed domestically and were not substantially interacting with or affecting the host state or population. As an additional criterion, the forces involved must have been part of the country's military; interventions by state-aligned paramilitary forces, proxy organizations, and/or intelligence services are excluded. These activities are certainly important, especially for states (such as Russia) that have increasingly relied on private military contractors or proxy forces to carry out key military operations abroad. However, the drivers of their activity are likely to be distinct from those driving the use of a country's uniformed military. It is also difficult to obtain accurate data on these parastatal actors, especially because their activities are shrouded in secrecy.

More details on the size and activity type criteria are included in the following sections.

to have intervened outside its borders. In this study, we consider sovereign countries to be those included in Correlates of War's (COW's) country code list. Additionally, to determine whether individual adversary incursions into disputed territories constituted a foreign intervention per se (versus a deployment of forces within a country's borders), we referred to the Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims data set to determine whether, in disputed territory, the actor was the target of the claim (in which case, it was assumed to have possession of the territory) or the challenger was the target of the claim (in which case, it was assumed not to have possession of the territory, and therefore it was assumed that this territory was a possible location for a military intervention). See Correlates of War Project, "State System Membership (v2016)," undated; and Bryan Frederick, Paul R. Hensel, and Christopher Macaulay, "The Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims Data, 1816–2001," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 2017.

Force Size Threshold

To warrant inclusion, either the ground, naval, and/or air forces deployed of the intervention force had to cross minimum size thresholds, which were designed to be relatively inclusive. The minimum size thresholds included different specifications depending on the domain in which forces were operating: land, sea, or air. To qualify as an intervention on the basis of ground forces, the deployment had to include military personnel from any service branch deployed for at least 100 person-years. This size threshold could include 100 troops deployed for one year or a larger number of troops deployed for a shorter period of time (e.g., 200 troops for six months or 1,200 troops for one month).³ This person-year size threshold needs to be met in each year of the intervention, however. So, a deployment of ten troops for ten years would not qualify for inclusion in our data set.

To qualify as an intervention on the basis of the naval forces involved, the deployment had to involve the presence of a substantial portion of the state's naval forces rather than the isolated deployment of a small number of ships. This relatively higher bar for inclusion (in comparison with ground forces) was adopted because of the inherently more mobile nature of naval forces to avoid coding a large number of naval-only interventions involving the deployment of one or two ships that may not even have been explicitly decided on or authorized by national-level decisionmakers. In the RAND U.S. Military Intervention Dataset, which this effort was modeled on, a U.S. carrier strike group or larger force was required for a naval intervention to be identified.⁴ Given the smaller number of carriers in the navies of non-U.S. states, we did not use this same criterion, but we did attempt to use a

³ In some rare instances, force levels during a multiyear intervention might temporarily have fallen below this threshold for an isolated year (and then again risen above it); as a general rule of thumb, we would nonetheless code it as a continuous mission. However, if there were long periods beneath this threshold either after the withdrawal of major forces or in the run-up to the deployment of major forces, then the intervention would be broken into different cases or would otherwise exclude these years.

⁴ Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Alexandra Stark, Nathan Chandler, Meagan L. Smith, Matthew Povlock, Lynn E. Davis, and Edward Geist, *Characteristics of Successful U.S. Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3062-A, 2019.

standard that represented an approximately equivalent proportion of that state's naval forces.⁵ In the case of Russia, there were no interventions that exceeded this size threshold involving only the navy.⁶ In addition, interventions involving any substantial kinetic naval activity, such as battles, skirmishes, or strikes using naval aircraft or missiles, were included regardless of the number and/or class of naval ships involved, although (again) we did not identify any such cases for Russia that did not occur in conjunction with already identified ground interventions that met the threshold described previously.

We took a similar approach to coding an intervention on the basis of the air forces involved. Whereas for the RAND study of U.S. interventions, a deployment was required to involve either roughly one wing-year of aircraft (about 80 planes employed for one year, 160 planes for six months, etc.), the size threshold was interpreted proportionally when identifying Russia's interventions according to the relative disparity in baseline air force sizes. In addition, substantial instances of air-to-air or air-to-ground combat or strikes were included regardless of whether they met the plane-year size threshold.⁷

Force Activity Type

Beyond meeting these size parameters, the forces involved must have conducted at least one of the following ten activity types to satisfy our definition of a military intervention. Intentionally absent from this activity type taxonomy are categories for noncombatant evacuation operations, as well as general logistics, support, and communi-

⁵ For both Russia and the Soviet Union, we looked for stand-alone naval cases for which Moscow deployed a minimum of roughly 10 percent of its surface fleet, approximately equivalent in percentage terms to U.S. deployments of a carrier strike group.

⁶ For the Soviet Union, we identified only a single case that qualified for inclusion on the basis of the size of the Soviet naval forces involved: the Soviet deployment of naval forces in the context of the 1967 Six-Day War.

⁷ Minor air-to-air incidents, such as the downing of a single fighter in contested airspace, would not meet this threshold. Likewise, in most cases, instances involving limited artillery or mortar fire across international borders at random targets would generally not constitute a foreign intervention absent other conditions.

cations.⁸ Additionally, we do not include in our definition of foreign interventions general forward deployments of troops and/or supplies and weapon depots, unless they also satisfy one of the activity types (e.g., a clear deterrent function). The ten activity types are

1. **Advisory and foreign internal defense.** Interventions involving military advisers or trainers. The focus of these interventions is typically on preparing host-nation personnel to operate on their own.
2. **Counterinsurgency.** Interventions involving counterinsurgency activities, including “comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes.”⁹
3. **Combat and conventional warfare.** Interventions characterized by formations of organized military forces deployed to conduct kinetic operations. The majority of interventions in this category involve the application of violent force by the intervener, but we also include cases in this category in which an intervener enters the territory of another state prepared for such an action but does not meet with armed resistance, and therefore violence does not result.
4. **Deterrence and signaling.** Interventions involving activities intended to send a signal to a potential adversary or other state regarding the intentions or capabilities of the intervener. Most cases in this category involve the deployment of military forces for deterrent purposes, but forces might be deployed in other instances to signal resolve, aggressive intent, intimidation, or coercion.
5. **Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.** Interventions involving humanitarian and relief operations, including responses to natural disasters and conflict.

⁸ Most noncombatant evacuation operations would be excluded because of their small size. Further, data regarding such operations beyond the past 20 years are essentially nonexistent.

⁹ Joint Publication 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 25, 2018, p. iii.

6. **Security.** Interventions involving protection of assets (e.g., embassies, corporations) or civilian personnel during periods of threat or unrest.
7. **Stability operations.** Interventions involving operations to stabilize or maintain peace in postconflict situations. These may include operations following coups or other situations causing unrest among the civilian population.
8. **Interdiction (air and naval only).** Interventions involving operations to interdict foreign military ships or aircraft, trade or arms shipments, or refugees or migrants (e.g., naval blockades, no-fly zones).
9. **Lift and transport (air and naval only).** Interventions involving operations focused on movement of persons and supplies (not applicable to ground interventions).
10. **Intelligence and reconnaissance (air and naval only).** Interventions involving operations focused on intelligence or reconnaissance functions (not applicable to ground interventions).

In some cases, only one or two activity types may have been relevant to a given case; in others, more than three could arguably apply. For each intervention, we coded up to three activity types for each force type involved in the case (ground, naval, air), denoting the dominant or most common activity for each force, followed by the secondary and tertiary activity for each.

Researching Cases of Intervention

To identify the universe of cases satisfying these ten definitions, our research proceeded in three broad phases. First, with the intent of casting a wide initial net, we collected and aggregated case information from a variety of respected data sets on historical military interventions, such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset, the International Crisis Behavior data set, the COW Inter-State Wars data set, the COW Intra-State Wars data set, the Militarized Interstate Dispute data set, the Military Interventions by Powerful States data set, the International Military Intervention data set, and the International Peace Institute Peacekeeping

Database.¹⁰ We further supplemented this preliminary list by crossing it with other secondary reference resources, such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *The Military Balance*, as well as hundreds of declassified U.S. and foreign government documents, academic and think tank reports, and news articles. In general, we found a significant amount of overlap in these sources regarding major conflicts and wars involving Russia.

Second, this preliminary case list was divided among RAND subject-matter experts, who expanded, vetted, and refined it using primary and secondary sources. During this secondary stage of in-depth, case-by-case investigation, many preliminarily identified potential events were deemed not to meet all of the parameters described in the previous section and were ultimately excluded from the case universe. Finally, the refined case universe was subjected to multiple rounds of iterative, case-by-case reviews by different research team members to ensure case inclusion coding standards were applied consistently.

As noted earlier in this chapter, our analysis focused only on interventions. We did not try to build a data set on noninterventions, even though we recognize that such data could have been useful, particularly

¹⁰ See Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand, "Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 5, September 2002; Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, paperback ed., Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2000; Meredith Reid Sarkees and Frank Whelon Wayman, *Resort to War: A Data Guide to Inter-State, Extra-State, Intra-State, and Non-State Wars, 1816–2007*, Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010; Glenn Palmer, Vito D'Orazio, Michael Kenwick, and Matthew Lane, "The MID4 Dataset, 2002–2010: Procedures, Coding Rules and Description," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2015; Faten Ghosn, Glenn Palmer, and Stuart A. Bremer, "The MID3 Data Set, 1993–2001: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Summer 2004; Daniel M. Jones, Stuart A. Bremer, and J. David Singer, " Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1992: Rationale, Coding Rules, and Empirical Patterns," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1996; Patricia L. Sullivan and Michael T. Koch, "Military Intervention by Powerful States, 1945–2003," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 46, No. 5, September 2009; Fredric S. Pearson and Robert A. Baumann, *International Military Intervention, 1946–1988*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Data Collection No. 6035, University of Michigan, 1993; and Emizet F. Kisangani and Jeffrey Pickering, *International Military Intervention, 1989–2005*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Data Collection No. 21282, University of Michigan, 2008.

from a methodological perspective. There are two reasons we chose to limit the scope of the analysis in this way. First, building a database of noninterventions would have exceeded the resources available for this project, which was concerned with interventions. It is also extremely difficult to comprehensively identify all noninterventions, especially for such countries as Russia, where government deliberations are not transparent. Therefore, identifying the case universe of noninterventions becomes an arbitrary exercise, introducing a new methodological challenge. However, we recognize that we have effectively selected on the dependent variable, since this report covers only interventions, an approach which could limit our ability to identify causality.

Key Variables Collected

In the third phase, we collected several additional pieces of information about each case. Some of these variables have already been noted: detailed information about the size of the information and the activities in which the forces were engaged. This information was collected both at the intervention level (including typical or average values) and at the location-year level (i.e., annual figures for each host country of a particular intervention), enabling an understanding of how the size or activities of an intervention force may have changed over time. This also allowed us to specify the forces and activities associated with specific host countries in instances where an intervention might take place in multiple countries.

Beyond the size and activity type variables, we also collected detailed information on the political objectives motivating the intervention and the degree of success that Russia had in achieving them. The data on political objectives and success do not bear directly on the key questions in this report of anticipating when and where Russia is likely to undertake future military interventions, but we aim to pursue the implications of these data in future research.

Descriptive Statistics and Graphs

Identifying Russia's Military Interventions

Using the criteria described previously, we identified 25 military interventions that Russia has undertaken from 1992 to 2018. A complete list of the interventions we identified is shown in Table 3.1.

These cases fall into several broad categories. Russia intervened in several of the regional conflicts that broke out when the Soviet Union collapsed: the separatist regions of Abkhazia (Georgia) and Transnistria (Moldova) and the civil war in Tajikistan. Russia's intervention in the separatist conflict in South Ossetia (Georgia) did not qualify based on the force size criterion. However, Russia's peacekeeping mission there, as well as similar operations in Abkhazia and Transnistria, did qualify. Additionally, Moscow's military facilities in several former Soviet republics also met the thresholds for intervention: the bases in Armenia and Transnistria (Moldova) were established largely to deter future conflict, whereas the base in Tajikistan played a stabilization role in the postconflict environment. The early warning radar in Azerbaijan was a component of Moscow's nuclear deterrent, and the forces on the Tajik-Afghan border were there to provide border security. Of course, Russia assumed control over far more facilities and forces than these in the former Soviet republics when the Soviet Union collapsed and remains in control of many of them. However, all the others were essentially component facilities of the Russian military that did not engage in any of the activity types we consider to constitute an intervention and therefore were not counted here.¹¹ The naval base in Crimea (Ukraine)

¹¹ In our data, as in previous RAND reports on military interventions (see, for example, Kavanagh, Frederick, Povlock, et al., 2017; and Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019), we draw a distinction between military forces deployed to complete a specific, temporary mission (such as providing humanitarian assistance or deterring a specific threat) and those forward-deployed (based) on a more permanent basis, conducting routine daily activities outside a state's borders. As an example, U.S. forces deployed in Europe during the Cold War were counted as deployed on a deterrent intervention, but those same forces were considered to be a forward presence (and therefore not an intervention) during the period from the end of the Cold War until 2014, when they were no longer clearly intended to counter a specific threat. Similarly, in the case of Russia, we include deployed forces conducting a specified mission in one of the activities outlined in this chapter but do not include forward-stationed forces deployed more or less permanently and not conducting one of these activities.

Table 3.1
Russia's Military Interventions, 1992–2018

Intervention Name	Intervention Location	Start Year	End Year
Russian Bases in Armenia	Armenia	1992	Ongoing
Russian Early Warning Radar in Azerbaijan	Azerbaijan	1992	2013
UN Peacekeeping Operations in Croatia (UNPROFOR, UNCRO, UNTAES)	Croatia	1992	1997
Transnistria War	Moldova (Transnistria)	1992	1992
Transnistria Base	Moldova (Transnistria)	1992	Ongoing
Peacekeeping Forces in Transnistria	Moldova (Transnistria)	1992	Ongoing
Tajikistan Border Presence	Tajikistan	1992	2005
Tajik Civil War	Tajikistan	1992	1997
Russian Peacekeeping Forces in South Ossetia	Georgia (South Ossetia)	1992	2008
Abkhazia Separatist Insurgency	Georgia (Abkhazia)	1992	1993
Russian Peacekeeping Forces in Abkhazia	Georgia (Abkhazia)	1993	2008
NATO/UN Peacekeeping Operations in Bosnia (SFOR/IFOR/UNPROFOR)	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1994	2002
UN Peacekeeping Operations in Angola (UNAVEM, MONUA)	Angola	1995	1999
Tajikistan Base	Tajikistan	1997	Ongoing
Black Sea Fleet Base in Crimea	Ukraine	1997 ^a	2014 ^b
NATO Peacekeeping Operations in Kosovo (KFOR)	Kosovo	1999	2003
UN Peacekeeping Operations in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL)	Sierra Leone	2000	2005
Russian Base in Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyzstan	2003	Ongoing
UN Peacekeeping Operations in Sudan/South Sudan (UNMIS, UNMISS)	Sudan, South Sudan	2006	2012
Russia-Georgia War	Georgia	2008	2008

Table 3.1—Continued

Intervention Name	Intervention Location	Start Year	End Year
South Ossetia/Abkhazia Bases	Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia)	2008	Ongoing
UN Peacekeeping Operations in Chad/Central African Republic (MINURCAT)	Chad	2009	2010
Annexation of Crimea	Ukraine	2014	2014 ^b
War in Donbas/Intervention in Eastern Ukraine	Ukraine	2014	Ongoing
Syrian Civil War	Syria	2015	Ongoing

NOTE: IFOR = Implementation Force, the NATO-led international peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina; MINURCAT = UN Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad; MONUA = UN Observer Mission in Angola; SFOR = Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the NATO-led international peacekeeping force; UNAMSIL = UN Mission in Sierra Leone; UNAVEM = UN Angola Verification Mission; UNCRO = UN Confidence Restoration Operation in Croatia; UNMIS = UN Mission in Sudan; UNMISS = UN Mission in South Sudan; UNPROFOR = UN Protection Force (the peacekeeping force in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina); UNTAES = UN Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (Croatia).

^a The Black Sea Fleet base dates from the Soviet period. Because our methodology would exclude any overseas bases that do not involve one or more of our identified activity types, we chose the start year to be 1997, the earliest date evidence exists that the facility served a deterrence purpose.

^b We use 2014 as the end date for Russia's two interventions in Crimea because Moscow no longer treated these as foreign interventions after the annexation.

is a special case. We could not identify any particular function for the facility beyond housing the Black Sea Fleet until 1997, when there is evidence that Russian officials began to consider the base as a deterrent against NATO enlargement to Ukraine.¹² Therefore, we consider the base to be a military intervention from that year until Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, at which point Moscow considered the base to be on Russian territory. The only facility opened since the Soviet collapse that meets our criteria for a military intervention is the base in Kyrgyz-

¹² See James Sherr, "Russia-Ukraine *Rapprochement*?: The Black Sea Fleet Accords," *Survival*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 1997, p. 46.

stan, opened in 2003, which was intended to deter the United States and any extremist spillover from Afghanistan. Additionally, there were six multinational peacekeeping operations in the Balkans and Africa in which Russian forces participated in large enough numbers to meet our threshold. Finally, we count several interventions relating to the Russian wars in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014–present), as well as the intervention in the Syrian civil war.

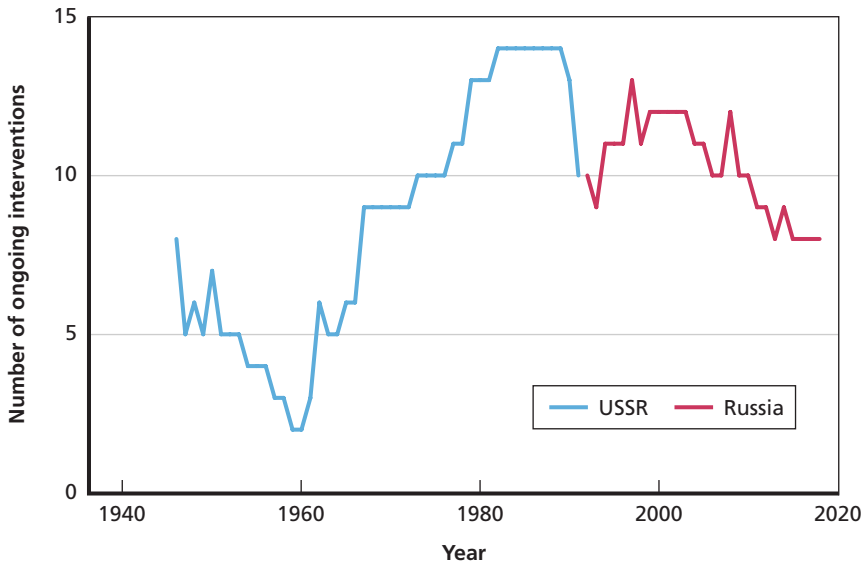
Comparison Between Russian and Soviet Intervention Patterns

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the aggregate statistics regarding how often, where, and how Russia has intervened militarily. We start by comparing Russia's interventions with the Soviet Union's. As noted previously, the drivers of the Soviet Union's international behavior differ significantly from those of Russia, and the Soviet Union had far more military capabilities to devote to interventions. But because Russia is the legal successor-state of the USSR and inherited the Soviet elite, a comparison between the intervention patterns of the two states is not without merit and could provide additional insights. We list the 41 military interventions undertaken by the Soviet Union from 1946 to 1991 in the appendix.

Figure 3.1 shows that the number of interventions undertaken by the Soviet Union and Russia over time did not differ by orders of magnitude. However, Russia's military intervention activity is still well below the peak in Soviet interventions in the 1980s. But these aggregate numbers of ongoing interventions betray the dramatically limited scope of post-Soviet Russia's military interventions when compared with the Soviet Union's.

Figure 3.2 shows the number of troops involved in Moscow's ongoing military interventions over time. Figure 3.2 also demonstrates the fundamental discontinuity in the scale of Soviet and Russian military interventions. Even though Russia has been engaged in a comparable number of interventions, the quantity of forces involved in the Soviet Union's interventions was orders of magnitude higher. The Soviet Union had an estimated 766,000 troops involved in military interventions in 1985, including its large interventions in Eastern

Figure 3.1
Number of Ongoing Soviet and Russian Military Interventions, by Year
(1946–2018)



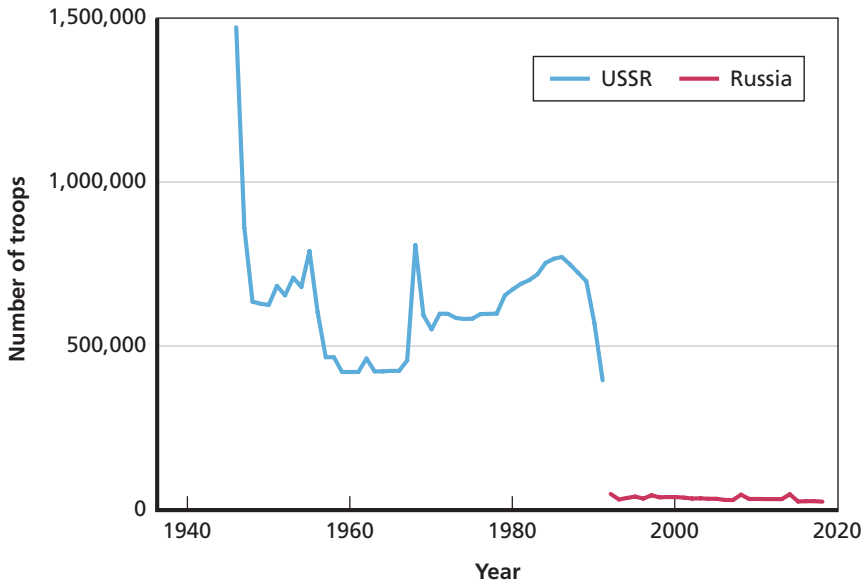
Europe and Afghanistan. By comparison, the United States in 1985 had roughly 283,000 troops involved in its military interventions.¹³ As of 2016, Russia had only an estimated 26,000 troops involved in military interventions, compared with roughly 154,000 U.S. troops involved in military interventions in the same year.¹⁴

Figure 3.3 shows the number of Soviet and Russian military interventions undertaken by geographic region. Although the Soviet Union undertook military interventions across a wide range of regions, including frequent interventions in East and Southeast Asia, Central America, and the Middle East, Russia's military interventions have been concentrated almost exclusively in post-Soviet Eurasia. Russia's interventions outside this region have generally consisted of contribu-

¹³ Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019.

¹⁴ Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019.

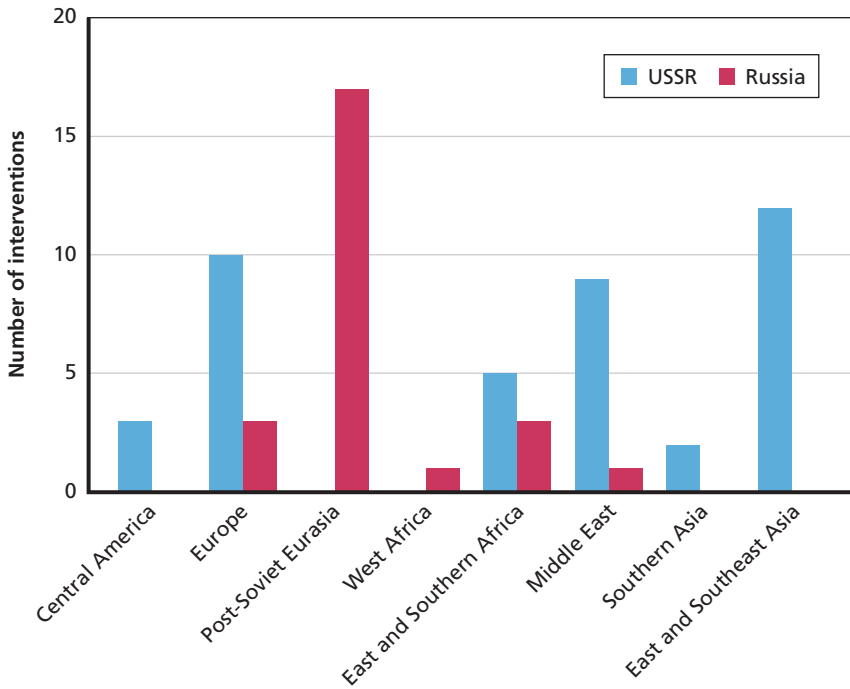
Figure 3.2
Number of Troops Involved in Soviet and Russian Military Interventions, by Year (1946–2018)



tions to peacekeeping missions, with the notable exception of the Russian intervention in Syria, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

Figure 3.4, which shows the number of Soviet and Russian military interventions by their primary activity type, further illustrates the sharply different nature of military interventions of the two states. Although Soviet military interventions largely consisted of a series of advisory and deterrence missions, Russian interventions have most frequently involved stabilization—i.e., peacekeeping operations. Russia still undertakes deterrence missions, and both states undertook some combat missions. However, the shift in primary activities compared with the Soviet period is clear: essentially no advisory missions and a significant increase in stabilization operations. In part, the increase in stabilization operations was likely a function of the end of the Cold War and the proliferation of regional conflicts on Russia's borders and

Figure 3.3
Number of Soviet and Russian Military Interventions, by Region
(1946–2018)



NOTE: For detail on these geographic divisions, see Watts et al., 2017, pp. 38–40.

peacekeeping operations globally. But the lack of advisory missions is striking.

How, When, and Where Russia Has Used Military Intervention

We now turn to an examination of the main data set used in this study, which covers Russia's military interventions from 1992 to 2018. Figure 3.5 shows the number of ongoing Russian interventions for this period. This visualization demonstrates that Russia's overall number of interventions is at a low as of 2018. It is a powerful reminder of the range of interventions that were ongoing in the 1990s, particularly in Russia's neighborhood. This trend was also a function of the rise and

Figure 3.4
Number of Soviet and Russian Military Interventions, by Activity Type (1946–2018)

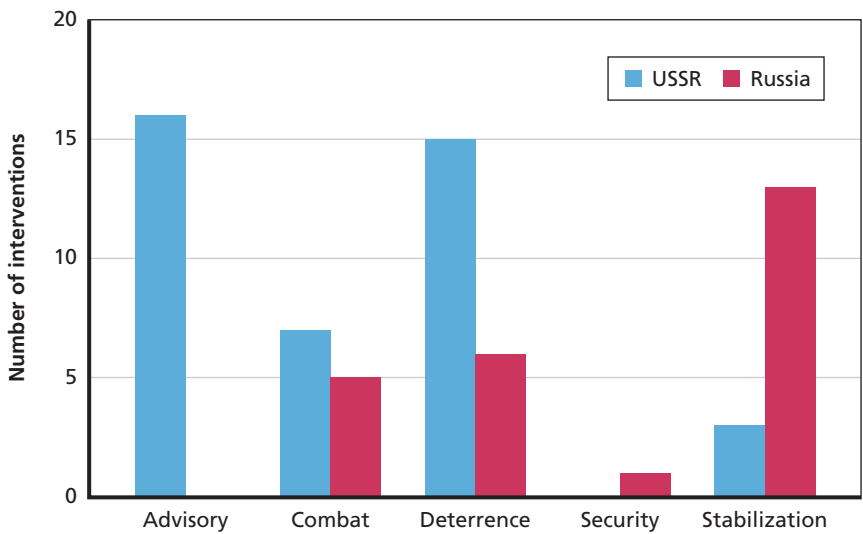
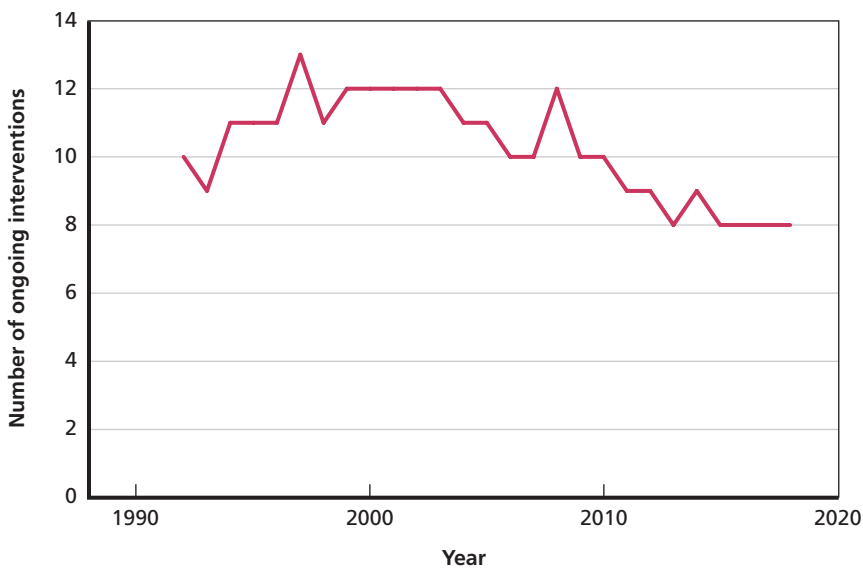


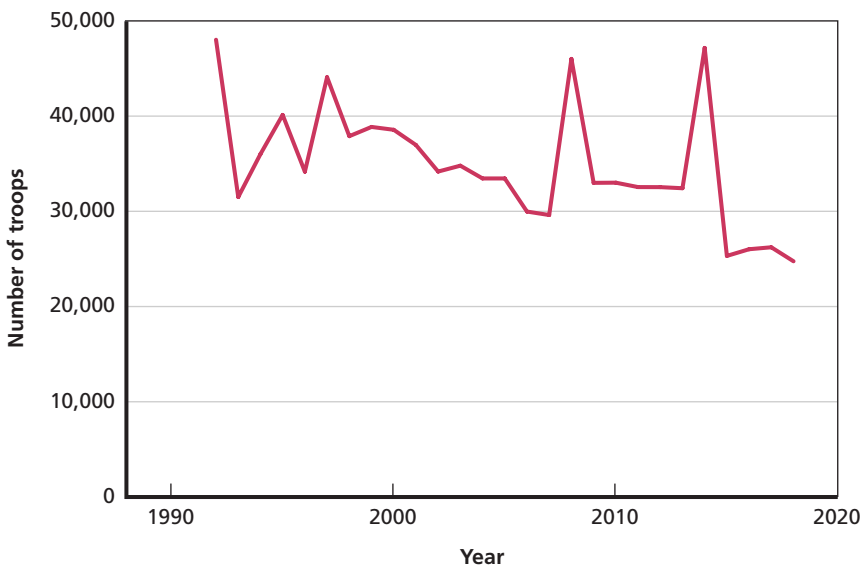
Figure 3.5
Number of Ongoing Russian Military Interventions, by Year (1992–2018)



subsequent decline of Russia's international peacekeeping operations beyond post-Soviet Eurasia, the last of which ended in 2012.

Figure 3.6 shows the number of Russian troops involved in military interventions and provides insight into the scope and size of those interventions. As with the number of interventions, the quantity of troops involved is lower than it has been at any point since 1992. There are two spikes associated with Moscow's war with Georgia in 2008 and interventions in Ukraine in 2014, respectively. However, the baseline today is well below the number of troops involved in interventions in the 1990s. This finding is somewhat counterintuitive, given the intense focus on Russian military activities after 2014.¹⁵ It serves as an important reminder that there was a large number of troops involved in the interventions of the 1990s. Moreover, it demonstrates the discipline of recent Russian military interventions, during which commanders have

Figure 3.6
Number of Russian Troops Involved in Military Interventions, by Year (1992–2018)

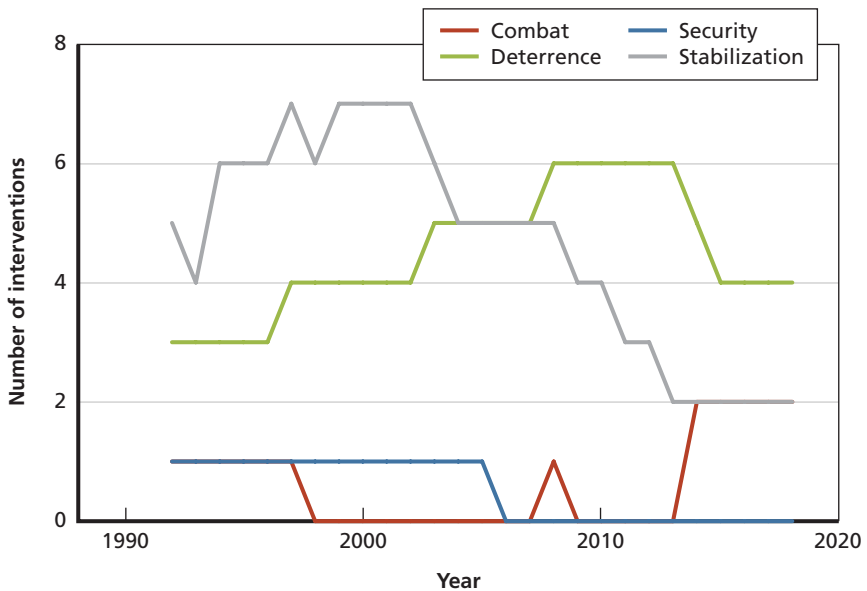


¹⁵ As noted previously, these numbers do not include affiliated private military contractors or proxies, only uniformed official forces.

clearly kept to what has been called the doctrine of minimal sufficiency.¹⁶ In other words, there has been a premium placed on intervening with fewer troops. For example, there were approximately 4,500 troops at any one time involved in the Syria operation, while there was an average of more than twice that amount engaged in Russia's intervention in the Tajik Civil War. In eastern Ukraine, the vast majority of the separatist forces present are reportedly locals; Russian forces are estimated to number only 3,200.

We can say more about how Russia intervenes by looking at trends in the activity types associated with the interventions. The data demonstrate notable shifts in activity types over time, as shown in Figure 3.7. The decline in the number of stabilization missions is clear. Over time, Russia has undertaken more deterrence and signaling mis-

Figure 3.7
Number of Russia's Military Interventions over Time, by Activity Type (1992–2018)

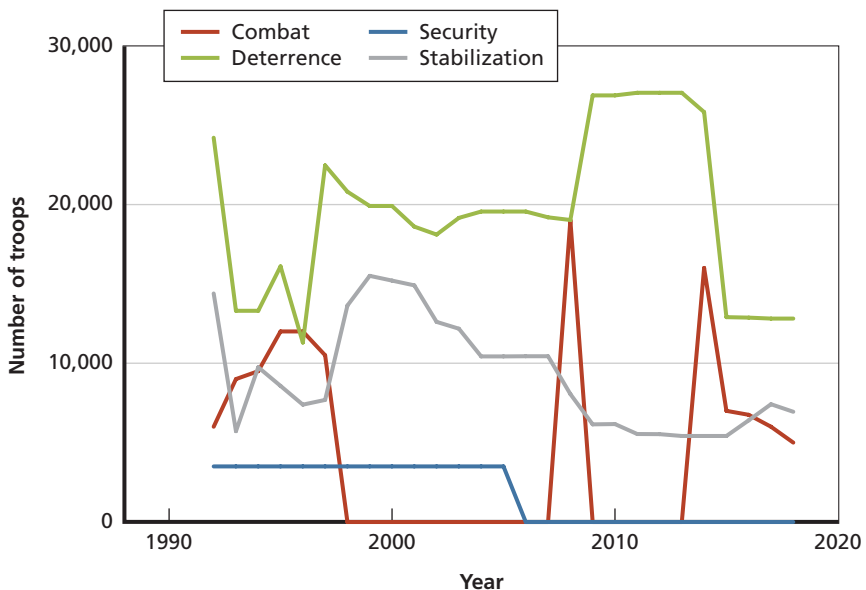


¹⁶ Dmitry Adamsky, "Moscow's Syria Campaign: Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 109, July 2018, p. 11.

sions. Figure 3.7 demonstrates the unusual nature of the period since 2014: Never before has Russia been engaged in two combat missions simultaneously. Moreover, with the exception of the five-day Russia-Georgia War in 2008, the post-2014 combat missions are the first since the 1990s. On the one hand, these missions have provided the Russian military with unprecedented recent combat experience. On the other, it has likely been a distinctly stressful period for the force, although the relatively small numbers involved and the high pace of rotations have likely minimized side effects.

Figure 3.8 shows the changes in the size of forces involved in different activities over time. The patterns in Figure 3.8 are consistent with the patterns in the number of interventions, with short-term increases in troops committed to combat corresponding to the recent wars alongside the aforementioned gradual decline in stabilization missions since the late 1990s. The sharp drop in the number of troops engaged in deterrence and signaling missions in 2015 reflects the

Figure 3.8
Number of Russian Troops Involved in Military Interventions, by Activity Type (1992–2018)



annexation of Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet’s deployment there no longer being counted as an intervention according to our definition. The drop also underscores how large that deployment was relative to similar deployments: Approximately 13,000 Russian troops were stationed in Crimea in the years before 2014, about twice the size of the next largest deterrence mission (the base in Tajikistan). The Black Sea Fleet base also represented about half of the total number of troops engaged in this kind of activity when those numbers were at their peak.

Figure 3.9 shows Russian military interventions by region. Unsurprisingly, post-Soviet Eurasia is by far the dominant locus. Figure 3.10 combines the regional and activity type lenses. This figure also underscores the exceptional nature of the Russian intervention in Syria. That intervention was both the only Russian intervention in the Middle East and the only nonpeacekeeping or stabilization mission outside of post-Soviet Eurasia during that period.

Figure 3.9
Russian Military Interventions, by Region (1992–2018)

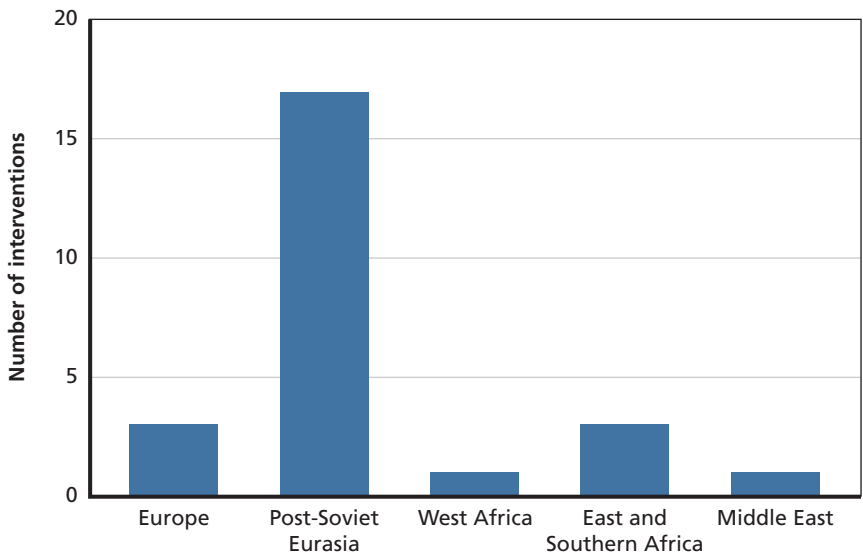
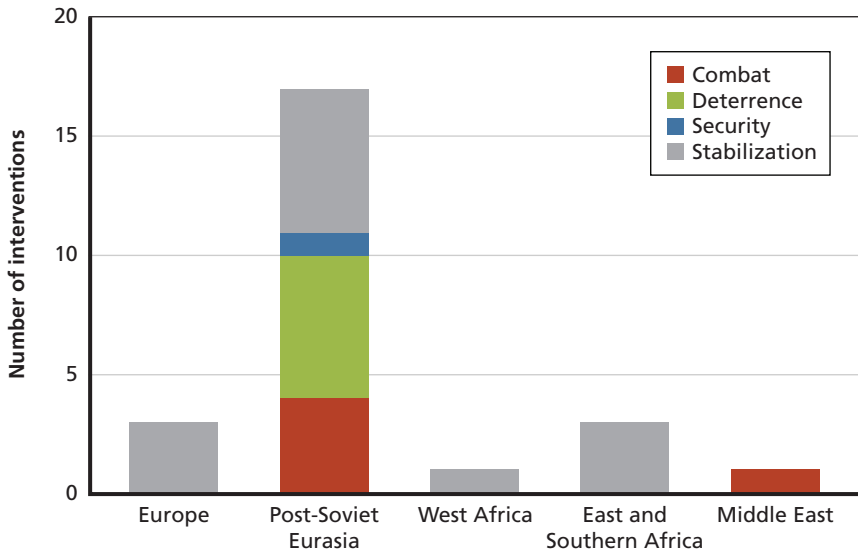


Figure 3.10
Number of Russian Military Interventions, by Activity Type and Geographic Region (1992–2018)



Conclusion

The preceding analysis of the intervention data underscores several points. First, post-Soviet Russian intervention activity bears little resemblance to the Soviet period in terms of the number of interventions, number of forces involved, activity types, and regions. The divergence demonstrates just how different an international actor Moscow became after the Soviet collapse. Second, the number of ongoing missions and the number of troops involved in them were at their lowest point in 2018 in Russia's post-Soviet history. Third, although Russia has been engaged in multiple military interventions every year since 1992, conducting two combat operations at once, as Russia has since 2014, is unprecedented. Moreover, there were only five days of combat interventions in the 15 years prior to 2014. Fourth, Russia's interventions are predominantly focused on post-Soviet Eurasia. Beyond its neighborhood, Moscow's interventions were peacekeeping operations (although there have been none since 2012). The Syria case is an outlier both geographically (the only Middle East intervention) and in

terms of activity type beyond bordering areas (the only nonpeacekeeping mission beyond post-Soviet Eurasia).

In short, the data demonstrate that the post-2014 period differs from the past in a way that is usually overlooked. Russia's conduct of two simultaneous combat missions is unprecedented in its post-Soviet history. However, the period does not represent a significant break from the past in terms of the overall number of interventions or the number of forces involved in them. Russia's interventions are not new. But the patterns have evolved significantly since the 1990s, when troop-heavy operations in response to local conflicts or international peacekeeping were dominant.

Case Study: 2008 Russia-Georgia War

The 2008 Russia-Georgia War was a mass of contradictions. Although the war played out live on television screens across the world, many of the most basic facts about it, such as who started it and when, remain murky. Over the course of five days in August 2008, the Russian military expelled the Georgians from their abortive attempt to assert authority over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, then moved onto Tbilisi-controlled territory from both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Despite rapidly attaining their strategic goals while suffering only modest losses, the Russian military and government's after-action account of their performance in the war was scathing. In their view, the campaign that secured victory over Moscow's small neighbor in less than a week revealed shocking inadequacies in Russia's military that demanded an aggressive program of organizational and technical modernization.¹ Moreover, Russia's aggression against Georgia, which was unthinkable to many before the war and seemed to be an epochal event at the time, soon was overshadowed by the even more dramatic events that began in Ukraine in 2014.

The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (IIFFM) on the Conflict in Georgia, sponsored by the EU, concluded that neither Georgian nor Russian official narratives of the events of August 2008 are reliable. It determined that Georgian claims that Russia invaded Georgia unprovoked and that Tbilisi's attack on the regional capital Tskhinvali was an act of self-defense were post facto rationalizations.

¹ Michael Kofman, "Russian Performance in the Russo-Georgian War Revisited," *War on the Rocks*, September 4, 2018b.

But it also concluded that Moscow's claims that it had to intervene to halt an ongoing genocide of South Ossetians lacked merit.²

The roots of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War were at once ancient and recent. Abkhazia and Alania (Ossetia) both existed as independent states in the early Middle Ages. Despite being adjacent to each other, the Georgians, Abkhaz, and Ossetians/Alans spoke unrelated languages. Georgian is a Kartvelian language, Abkhazian is a North-west Caucasian language, and Ossetian (an Eastern Iranian language) is the only Indo-European language indigenous to the Caucasus.³ During the 19th century, the Russian Empire annexed Georgia and the neighboring parts of the Caucasus. After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks created an autonomous *oblast'* (region) of South Ossetia within Georgia. Abkhazia, meanwhile, became an autonomous republic within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, giving it even greater nominal selfgovernance authorities.⁴ During the twilight years of the USSR, the long-simmering resentments between Georgians and the Abkhazians and South Ossetians escalated into open violence. On December 11, 1990, the regional administration of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast' attempted to secede from Georgia, declaring itself a "Democratic Soviet Republic" within the USSR. This sparked a war between Ossetians and Georgians that concluded with a Russian-negotiated agreement in June 1992.⁵ Total fatalities in the war were about 1,000, while tens of thousands of Georgians and Ossetians were compelled to flee their homes, including most of the Georgian popula-

² Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, *Report*, Vol. 1, September 2009, pp. 26–27. According to the IIFFM's exhaustive report, both sides also misrepresented the chronology of how the conflict proceeded.

³ Alexandros Petersen, "The 1992–93 Georgia-Abkhazia War: A Forgotten Conflict," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2008, p. 12; and B. George Hewitt, *Discordant Neighbours: A Reassessment of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian Conflicts*, Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013, pp. 12–13.

⁴ Alex Marshall, *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*, New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 189. Abkhazia was part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, which also included Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, until its disestablishment in December 1936.

⁵ Hewitt, 2013, pp. 92–97.

tion of South Ossetia.⁶ Abkhazia declared its independence from Georgia on July 23, 1992, after which it became embroiled in a conflict that was characterized by ethnic cleansing and atrocities by both sides.⁷ Some 200,000 to 250,000 residents of Abkhazia fled during the conflict, most of them ethnic Georgians.⁸ Out of the entirety of Abkhazia, Tbilisi only retained control over part of the Kodori Gorge.⁹

After Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili came to power following the 2003 Rose Revolution, he made the reassertion of central authority over Georgia's breakaway regions one of his chief political goals. In summer 2004, Georgian attempts to suppress smuggling in South Ossetia almost spiraled into a war akin to that which broke out in 2008. Tbilisi deployed special forces to the region on May 31, 2004, in response to a perceived Russian threat to its checkpoints, most of which were on indisputably Georgian territory. This action provoked countermoves by Russian and South Ossetian forces, and Moscow signaled explicitly that it might involve itself if a conflict broke out.¹⁰ In July and August, there were exchanges of fire resulting in about two-dozen Georgian and South Ossetian fatalities.¹¹ At the moment in

⁶ International Crisis Group, *Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia*, Brussels, Europe Report No. 159, November 26, 2004, pp. 5–6.

⁷ Hewitt, 2013, pp. 125–131.

⁸ Petersen, 2008, p. 19; U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1993*, Washington, D.C., 1994, p. 881.

⁹ The role and extent of Russian involvement in the 1992–1993 Abkhaz War still are matters of dispute. At the time, the Russians cast themselves as neutral mediators, while Georgian officials accused them of offering clandestine and sometimes not-so-clandestine aid to the separatists. It is conceivable that different parts of the nascent post-Soviet Russian government advocated different policies toward Georgia, resulting in Moscow's inconsistent actions during the war. Then President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze stated this view when rationalizing his sudden decision to join the CIS in 1993: The same “reactionary forces” who backed the Abkhaz rebels had been removed from power by Yeltsin's assault on the Russian parliament in October (Guy Chazan, “Georgia Joins CIS; Kremlin Summit Discuss Caucasus Conflicts,” *United Press International*, October 8, 1993).

¹⁰ Cory Welt, “The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo-Georgian War,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2010.

¹¹ Anton Lavrov, “The Timeline of Russian-Georgian Hostilities in August 2008,” in Ruslan Pukhov, ed., *The Tanks of August*, Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and

mid-August when the conflict seemed imminent, it suddenly and mysteriously deescalated. Saakashvili agreed to transfer the heights around Tskhinvali to the Joint Peacekeeping Force and to withdraw all Georgian troops from South Ossetia, other than the 500 peacekeepers who were part of the Joint Peacekeeping Force. But the conclusion of the abortive conflict was not a return to the earlier status quo: More parts of South Ossetia's nebulously defined territory were under Georgian control, and the Joint Peacekeeping Force even acknowledged those gains.¹²

After the 2004 episode, Saakashvili's government seemed to conclude that Georgia could only overcome Russia's declared willingness to protect the separatist enclaves by greatly increasing its military capabilities. At the beginning of the 2000s, Georgia's military was in a poor state caused by years of corruption, neglect, and inadequate funding. But Russia's military was in a poor state, too, and fighting an extended war with Georgia could have been a forbidding prospect for Moscow given the difficulty it had suppressing the insurgencies in Chechnya. Therefore, Georgia might only need sufficient military capabilities to convince the Kremlin to think twice about intervening.¹³ The geography of South Ossetia reinforced this logic: If Russia hesitated and Georgia could secure the Roki Tunnel (the only line of communication between South Ossetia and Russia) before Moscow could send reinforcements through it, the prospects of a ground intervention could be effectively foreclosed.

Saakashvili's security strategy also emphasized a second thrust: security partnerships with Western powers (particularly the United States) and aspirations for NATO membership. Georgia sent a sizable contingent to participate in the U.S.-led campaign in Iraq to curry favor in Washington. During the second term of the George W. Bush administration, senior officials within the U.S. government were advocating NATO membership for Georgia, sparking alarm among

Technologies, 2010b, p. 38; Hewitt, 2013, p. 218.

¹² Welt, 2010, p. 92.

¹³ Michael Kofman, "The August War, Ten Years On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War," *War on the Rocks*, August 17, 2018a.

increasingly suspicious Moscow officials.¹⁴ But the governments of other NATO states were skeptical even of granting Georgia a Membership Action Plan (a roadmap to joining the alliance). At the April 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO allies tried to split the difference by promising that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually become NATO members but refrained from specifying a timeline or providing a Membership Action Plan.¹⁵ That step set the context for what would come less than four months later.

Tensions were already rising on the ground as well that spring. The Abkhazian and South Ossetian breakaway governments submitted requests for formal recognition to the Russian State Duma. Russian legislators responded on March 21 by approving a resolution supporting recognition, which also called for such concrete steps as opening missions in the breakaway territories.¹⁶ On April 20, a fighter jet shot down a Georgian reconnaissance drone. Moscow disavowed responsibility for the shootdown and condemned Georgia's employment of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) over Abkhazia as a violation of the ceasefire. A May 30 UNSC meeting considered the shootdown but mostly exposed the growing international tensions as Russia and the West exchanged barbs.¹⁷ That month, Russian railway troops were tasked with repairing the railway lines to Abkhazia, which (at that time) appeared to be the likelier point for a conflict to break out.¹⁸ But in July, tensions started boiling over in South Ossetia. On July 3, a South Ossetian militia leader was killed in a bombing, after which an apparent retaliatory attack was made on the Georgian government's

¹⁴ Charap and Colton, 2017, Ch. 1.

¹⁵ Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, Ch. 4.

¹⁶ Radical as this document was in some ways, the separatists and their supporters in the Duma were disappointed that the resolution offered only watered-down support for their cause (Marina Perevozskina, "Duma razocharovala nepriznannyykh," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, March 24, 2008).

¹⁷ "Georgia Suspends Drone Flights over Abkhazia," *New York Times*, May 30, 2008.

¹⁸ Lavrov, 2010b, pp. 41–42.

alternative provisional administrator.¹⁹ Shortly thereafter, South Ossetia ordered a general mobilization. That same month, Russia conducted a military exercise, *Kavkaz 2008*, on its side of the border. Similar to exercises in previous years, this exercise rehearsed an effort to reinforce the peacekeeping operations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²⁰

On August 1, an improvised explosive device attack destroyed a Georgian police vehicle near South Ossetia, after which Georgian Interior Ministry snipers retaliated against South Ossetian checkpoints. Soon there were firefights all along the ill-defined administrative boundary of South Ossetia. The South Ossetian authorities ordered a general evacuation of civilians into Russia. On August 2, the *Kavkaz 2008* exercise concluded, and most units involved returned to their bases. Two motorized rifle regiments, however, remained encamped within 30 kilometers of the northern entrance to the Roki Tunnel, with an artillery unit set up closer.²¹ Russian troop movements between August 2 and the opening of hostilities on August 7 remain unclear.²²

On August 7, heavy fighting broke out between separatists and Georgian government forces, and Tbilisi began directing most available units toward South Ossetia, including the infantry brigade covering the boundary with Abkhazia.²³ Despite Saakashvili's televised announcement of a unilateral ceasefire that evening, Georgian artillery and multiple launch rocket systems began an assault on Tskhinvali just before midnight. A few hours later, units from the Russian 135th and 693rd Motorized Rifle Regiments emerged from the Roki Tunnel to reinforce the Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinvali. Although there are rumors that a Russian company moved through the tunnel before the outbreak of hostilities to secure the southern entrance, there is no hard

¹⁹ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, Vol. II, p. 204.

²⁰ Kofman, 2018a; Lavrov, 2010b, p. 41.

²¹ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 45.

²² Kofman, 2018a.

²³ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 50.

evidence to that effect.²⁴ On the morning of August 8, these units began engaging Georgian forces, while the Russian air force began conducting air raids throughout Georgia.²⁵

At the outset of the Russian intervention in South Ossetia, Russian officials claimed that this dramatic step was essential not only to protect Russian citizens (as a result of Russia's "passportization" policy, more than 90 percent of South Ossetia residents were Russian citizens) in the enclave but also to halt an ongoing genocide of South Ossetians by Georgian forces. Initially, Russian officials asserted that some 2,000 South Ossetian civilians had been killed by the Georgians. But the official tally of South Ossetian civilian deaths in the war was reduced to 162 within a few months.²⁶

Although Georgian forces briefly made advances throughout South Ossetian territory before the Russians arrived, the tide of battle shifted by late afternoon on August 8, when attacks on Georgian positions by Russian aircraft caused a hasty retreat to Tbilisi-controlled territory. Russian and South Ossetian forces accomplished this shift even though Georgian forces still possessed numerical superiority. Georgian commanders decided to attempt a second assault on the city the following day, before additional Russian reinforcements arrived. They benefited from a lull in Russian air sorties that resulted from a sudden spate of losses—most of them friendly fire incidents—that compelled Russian commanders to halt flights until they made sense of the situation.²⁷ Because of inadequate reconnaissance, Russian forces did not detect preparations for the second assault, with the result that advancing Russian and Georgian forces encountered each other by surprise.

²⁴ Kofman, 2018a.

²⁵ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 54.

²⁶ The IIFFM concluded in its report that "allegations of genocide committed by the Georgian side in the context of the August 2008 conflict and its aftermath are neither founded in law nor substantiated by factual evidence" (Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, Vol. I, pp. 26–27).

²⁷ Anton Lavrov, "Russian Air Losses in the Five Day War Against Georgia," in Ruslan Pukhov, ed., *The Tanks of August*, Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2010a, pp. 101–102.

But the second Georgian assault fizzled out as well, and Georgian forces abandoned Tskhinvali again during the evening of August 9.²⁸

On the morning of August 9, Russia expanded the conflict to Abkhazia. Shortly after midnight, SA-21 Tochka-U missiles launched from within Abkhazia struck the Georgian naval base at Poti. The Abkhaz militia launched an assault on the Georgian-controlled Kodori Gorge.²⁹ And Russian reinforcements streamed south into Abkhazia.

By the afternoon of August 10, all Georgian forces had withdrawn from South Ossetia, while reinforcements brought the total Russian force there to more than 10,000—about as many as the number of Georgian troops involved in the initial attack. At 5:50 p.m., Georgia announced that it had ended hostilities and withdrawn its forces, but shelling continued. In their panicked withdrawal, Georgian forces failed to build defensive fortifications to impede the imminent Russian advance. In the early morning of August 11, Russia conducted a belated operation to suppress Georgian air defenses, knocking out military and civilian radars to disable the centralized air defense network. Later that day, Russian forces began advancing into Tbilisi-controlled territory from both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. By the end of August 12, Georgian resistance had essentially collapsed along both fronts. Russian troops captured the city of Gori near South Ossetia on August 13 and were in a position to advance easily to Tbilisi. With the participation of EU mediators, Russia and Georgia negotiated and signed a ceasefire agreement from August 15 to 16.³⁰ On August 18, Russian command announced the beginning of a phased withdrawal from Georgia proper. Before pulling out, Russian forces took the opportunity to seize military trophies and to destroy what they could not confiscate, including buildings and airstrips.³¹

²⁸ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 63.

²⁹ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 65.

³⁰ For the agreements negotiated and signed by the belligerents, see Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, Vol. III, pp. 587–593.

³¹ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 75.

A common narrative both at the time and in retrospect holds that the Russians set a trap that Saakashvili foolishly walked into.³² The fact that the Georgians apparently fired first made it difficult to cast the conflict as a straightforward case of Russian aggression, despite the way in which the Russians used the assault on South Ossetia as a pretext for a much larger campaign, including in other parts of Georgia.³³ However, as Charap and Colton note, the trap narrative “assume[s] premeditation and planning that the facts do not corroborate.”³⁴ Russia’s steps in the months before the conflict and during it suggest that Moscow was preparing for a war against Georgia but a different war than the one it fought. Abkhazia, rather than South Ossetia, was the focus of Russian preparations because there were strong signs that Georgia was on the verge of an assault there earlier in the summer.³⁵ When Saakashvili risked an assault on Tskhinvali in August 2008, Russia took the opening to fight the war it had prepared for in addition to the one Saakashvili launched.

Another possibility is that the 2008 conflict resulted from an escalation spiral stoked by a regional security dilemma.³⁶ According to this view, neither Moscow nor Tbilisi wanted the war they got in South Ossetia, but their attempts to deter each other from intervening there provoked increasingly large counterreactions that exploded into open warfare in August. Circumstantial considerations indicate that the war that transpired in 2008 was not planned by either of the belligerents, bolstering the escalation spiral view. Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov were on vacation when the war broke out, and Prime Minister Putin was in Beijing for the opening of the 2008 Summer Olympics. Absent Saakashvili’s challenge to the status quo ante, Russia would have had no reason to intervene in South Ossetia (as opposed to Abkhazia), particularly with so few

³² Kofman, 2018a.

³³ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 75.

³⁴ Charap and Colton, 2017, p. 92.

³⁵ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 42.

³⁶ Welt, 2010, p. 92; Charap and Colton, 2017, p. 93.

advance preparations. Georgian strategy only made sense if Saakashvili expected to pull off a *fait accompli* and secure South Ossetia before Moscow could mobilize a response, but it seems that the attempt to take Tskhinvali was an impetuous decision by the Georgian president, given the cursory nature of his country's preparations for that conflict.

Factors to Be Assessed

The continuing lack of definitive contemporary sources from the belligerents who took part in the 2008 Russia-Georgia War makes it challenging to select and evaluate critical factors explaining the Russian decision to intervene. Georgian behavior is outside the scope of our analysis except insofar as it shaped the Russian behavior we aim to understand. According to the Georgians, a Russian invasion of South Ossetia was already underway at the time they launched their assault on Tskhinvali, and they acted in self-defense. However, a decade later, definitive evidence has yet to emerge that the Russians began the intervention prior to the beginning of the bombardment of Tskhinvali on the evening of August 7, and even analysts who are unsympathetic to Russia have been hesitant to accept this narrative.³⁷ The Russians, meanwhile, claimed that Georgian forces were undertaking a brutal campaign of genocide in South Ossetia and that they intervened to stop a humanitarian catastrophe. Evidence of these atrocities failed to materialize after the war, however, and Moscow deemphasized this narrative after relations with the West recovered and invoking prospective genocide to justify the intervention proved less necessary.³⁸ As a consequence, we must discount both the Russian and the Georgian narratives and stated rationales for the conflict at face value. Instead, it is necessary to read between the lines and draw inferences.

We considered the ten possible factors described in Chapter Two to explain the 2008 Russian intervention in Georgia and found that

³⁷ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 43; Kofman, 2018a.

³⁸ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, Vol. II, p. 422.

four of them were the most compelling for deeper analysis. These factors are external threat, regional power balance, national status concerns, and the Russian partnership with the separatists. These factors will be discussed in the following sections. We determined that six factors were either less plausible explanations for Russian behavior or were not amenable to substantive analysis. The remainder of this section describes our reasoning for why those six were not selected for deeper analysis.

Although the Kremlin garnered domestic political benefits and bolstered its legitimacy through the intervention, these were not key factors in the decision to intervene.³⁹ Official media narratives cast Russia as the selfless protector of small nations defending themselves against the depredations of brutal Georgian nationalists, and thwarting the designs of NATO (real or imagined) had political benefits, but the presence of North Ossetia in Russia also created a small, but potentially potent, domestic constituency for support to ethnic Ossetians in neighboring Georgia.⁴⁰ Yet the benefits of victory for the Medvedev-Putin government with domestic audiences seem to have been modest, in part because of the effects of the deepening global economic crisis on Russia in the following months.⁴¹ The contrast with the Russian media portrayal of the annexation of Crimea demonstrates what interventions that provide domestic political benefit look like.⁴²

³⁹ Supporters of the March 2008 State Duma resolution justified their support for the separatists in geopolitical terms: Just Russia Party Deputy Semen Bagdasarov explained that the lack of support to the separatists would lead to Russia “losing the region,” after which the United States could use Georgia as a base to commit iniquities, such as an attack on Iran (Perevozkina, 2008).

⁴⁰ Vasilii Kashin, “Conflict in South Ossetia: Political Context,” *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 3, 2008.

⁴¹ Within a few years, polls by the Levada Center regularly found that a plurality of Russians considered the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states as “neither good nor bad for Russia” (Levada Center, “Politicheskii status Abkhazii i Yuzhnoi Osetii,” webpage, undated).

⁴² Tor Bukkvoll, “Why Putin Went to War: Ideology, Interests and Decision-Making in the Russian Use of Force in Crimea and Donbas,” *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2016.

Given that Abkhazia and South Ossetia were arguably more trouble than they were worth economically, it is difficult to construct an economic rationale for Russia's intervention there. In practice, Russia's subsidization of the separatist regimes predictably proved a net drain on Moscow's resources. A negative economic rationale for Moscow to intervene is also sometimes suggested: undermining regional cooperation for the development of infrastructure, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, that would reduce Russian influence over regional energy supplies.⁴³ But during the war, Russia refrained from steps to destroy Georgian economic (as opposed to military) infrastructure, including the pipeline.⁴⁴

Many Abkhazians and South Ossetians were citizens of the Russian Federation by August 2008 thanks to the passportization policy enacted before the conflict. But they are ethnically distinct from Russians, and Russian leaders do not seem to have been motivated by a sense of coidentity. Unlike Crimea, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were hardly "Russian lands" awaiting reunification. Contrary to Western expectations in 2008—and in contrast to the quick annexation of Crimea in 2014—Moscow has refrained from annexing the two territories, instead recognizing them as "independent governments" with close economic and security arrangements with the Russian Federation.⁴⁵

Leadership, by contrast, is a comparatively attractive factor to test thanks to the commonly encountered notion that the conflict was "Putin's War."⁴⁶ The possibility of comparing Russian conduct in 2008 with interventions in the 1990s and 2010s, however, offers some potential clues as to the probable role of leadership and personality in these decisions. Even the comparatively pro-Western Yeltsin-era Rus-

⁴³ Noelle M. Shanahan Cutts, "Enemies Through the Gates: Russian Violations of International Law in the Georgia/Abkhazia Conflict," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2008, p. 287.

⁴⁴ The Georgian government claimed that a Russian missile targeted at the Tbilisi Marnuli Air Base was actually intended to strike the pipeline (Lavrov, 2010b, p. 73).

⁴⁵ Pigman, 2019.

⁴⁶ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2016a, Ch. 9.

sian government was not above trying to secure its interests by force. Its diverse involvement in post-Soviet conflicts in Georgia, Tajikistan, and Moldova attest to a belief that Russia had a right to undertake military interventions in post-Soviet Eurasia.⁴⁷ Nor was Yeltsin-era Russia so intimidated by the West as to refrain from potential armed confrontation. The 1999 incident at Pristina airport proved that, even at its post-Soviet nadir, Russia was willing to employ military force in defiance of foreign powers. In short, there is ample evidence to suggest that Russia would have intervened in Georgia in 2008 even if Putin and Medvedev were not in power. The need to respond to instability on the periphery with force appeared to be a consensus view among the broader Russian elite.

Obviously, Russia enjoyed a significant advantage in military capabilities over Georgia in 2008, as evidenced by its victory over Georgia in just five days. But this has been the case since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia could have undertaken the operation at any time since then, largely because of the size differences between the two countries' militaries. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that Russia's military advantage was not a particularly important factor in explaining the decision to intervene. In the following sections, we review the evidence for the factors that seem relevant in more detail.

Factor 1: External Threat to Sovereignty

For the purposes of this analysis, we define *external threat to sovereignty* as the immediate military threat to Russian peacekeepers posed by Georgian forces. The prospective external threat from Georgia's possible membership in NATO is discussed in the section on regional power balance.

The presence of the 500-strong Russian peacekeeping contingent in South Ossetia posed a nettlesome obstacle to Georgia's aspi-

⁴⁷ In many respects, Russia's involvement in the 1992–1993 war in Abkhazia was far more extreme than its activities in the 2008 war, because of both its longer duration and the possibility of Russian military activity abetting (or, according to Georgian accusations, actively participating in) large-scale atrocities against civilians (Cutts, 2008, pp. 294–298).

rations to assert its sovereignty over the province. Most of the force was based in Tskhinvali, with smaller outposts elsewhere (including in parts of the city's periphery).⁴⁸ So long as the Russian peacekeeper base remained in the South Ossetian capital, capturing the city would require attacking—or at least securing the capitulation of—an outpost of the Russian military. And as Russian officials made clear prior to the conflict, they would consider this step an attack on the Russian military and stage a large-scale intervention to counteract it. Reinforcing the peacekeeping contingents in South Ossetia was part of the scenario of exercises carried out by the Russian military between 2006 and 2008.⁴⁹

Russian accounts assert that around 11:45 p.m. on August 7, 2008, Brigade General Mamuka Kurashvili, commander of peacekeeping operations of the Georgian joint staff, called Major General Marat Kulakhmetov, commander of the Joint Peacekeeping Force in South Ossetia, to inform him of the start of the Georgian military operation. Some reports claim that Kurashvili offered Kulakhmetov security guarantees for the peacekeepers in exchange for their nonintervention in the imminent offensive.⁵⁰ Although Georgian bombardments seem to have avoided targeting Russian peacekeepers at first, some artillery shells began falling on their base and outposts shortly thereafter. On the morning of August 8, Georgian forces entering Tskhinvali came under direct fire from Russian peacekeepers. At 6:30 a.m., Georgian T-72s attacked the Russian peacekeepers' barracks, destroying several of the peacekeepers' armored vehicles and killing six of them.⁵¹

The Georgian air force dispatched Su-25s to bomb and destroy the Gufti bridge, which Russian forces would need to reach the South Ossetian capital. But while en route to this target shortly after the attack on the barracks, these planes encountered the first Russian forces heading south along the Trans-Caucasus Motorway through the

⁴⁸ Timothy L. Thomas, "The Bear Went Through the Mountain: Russia Appraises Its Five-Day War in South Ossetia," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2009, p. 38.

⁴⁹ Lavrov, 2010b, pp. 41–43.

⁵⁰ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 48.

⁵¹ Lavrov, 2010b, p. 51.

Roki Tunnel. The Georgian aircraft, however, failed to damage either the bridge or the Russian convoy: Their unguided bombs missed their targets. The appearance of Russian aircraft over Georgia shortly thereafter compelled the Georgians to stop flying combat missions over South Ossetia, saving the bridge and allowing Russian forces to flow to Tskhinvali.⁵² After this setback, only a miracle could have rescued the Georgian offensive: Moscow could not let armed attacks on the Russian military go unavenged, and Georgian forces could hope to do little more than slow down their advance.

In retrospect, it seems inconceivable that the Russian government would tolerate the death or capture of its peacekeeping forces at the hands of a former Soviet republic. Shortly after the war, Medvedev made clear that the Russian action was both a punishment to the Georgians and a warning to others: “[S]hould somebody encroach against our citizens, our peacekeepers, we shall certainly respond in the same fashion we have done already. One should have no doubts about that.”⁵³

Factor 2: Regional Power Balance

Russian leaders feared that new NATO members along their borders might host outposts of sophisticated Western militaries and would upset the power balance in the region that had long favored Moscow. Russian officials assumed that the United States would not refrain from deploying forces or building military infrastructure in Georgia if Georgia were to join NATO.⁵⁴ During Russia’s long-scheduled withdrawal from Soviet-era bases in Georgia outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2007–2008, some in Moscow openly fretted that NATO might be occupying these facilities as soon as the Russian army relinquished them. In negotiations with Georgia and NATO countries over these base withdrawals during the early 2000s, Russian diplomats sought

⁵² Lavrov, 2010b, p. 52.

⁵³ Thomas, 2009, p. 66.

⁵⁴ Asmus, 2010, pp. 67–68.

explicit reassurances that bases in Georgia would not be turned over to NATO.⁵⁵

Observers, including Ronald Asmus and Andrew T. Wolff, argue that Russia invaded Georgia to block that country's NATO membership and to squelch further enlargement of the alliance into post-Soviet Eurasia.⁵⁶ Russian officials repeatedly signaled their displeasure at the prospect of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine during the months leading up to the 2008 war. At the April 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO issued a promise that Georgia and Ukraine "will become" members of the alliance at some unspecified point in the future. The incorporation of former Soviet republics and, in particular, CIS members into Western multilateral institutions (such as NATO) might deprive Russia of its influence in those countries permanently and establish them as beachheads for U.S. forces. At the conclusion of the Bucharest Summit, Putin warned ominously that "we view the appearance of a powerful military bloc on our borders . . . as a direct threat to the security of our country."⁵⁷ The following month, General Yuri Baluevsky, the Chief of the Russian General Staff, told his NATO counterparts during consultations in Brussels that there could be a war in Georgia that summer unless something was done to prevent it. Unless NATO canceled a planned exercise involving U.S. and NATO troops, cautioned Baluevsky, there was a possibility that they could find themselves caught up in this prospective confrontation and possibly become casualties.⁵⁸

Postwar Russian accounts contend that the invasion succeeded in blocking the prospect of NATO membership for Georgia and preserving Moscow's regional military dominance. Russian strategist Sergei Karaganov commented in 2011 that the threat of NATO enlargement

⁵⁵ Jaba Devdariani, "Georgia and Russia: The Troubled Road to Accommodation," in Robert Legvold and Bruno Coppieters, eds., *Statehood and Security: Georgia After the Rose Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005.

⁵⁶ Asmus, 2010, p. 221; Andrew T. Wolff, "The Future of NATO Enlargement After the Ukraine Crisis," *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 5, 2015, p. 1110.

⁵⁷ Cited in Wolff, 2015, p. 1109.

⁵⁸ Asmus, 2010, pp. 149–150.

“is being kept at bay not through arguments or reason, but by an iron fist.” Before the war, “almost all NATO leaders, including the heads of states that are on friendly terms with Russia, at some point said that the bloc would expand and that it was only a matter of time.” The invasion of Georgia turned further NATO enlargement from inevitable to unthinkable: “The expansion question was only shelved when the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia broke out and Russian tanks neared Tbilisi.”⁵⁹ Medvedev expressed similar logic in a November 2011 speech to soldiers in the North Caucasus Military District: “If you . . . had faltered back in 2008, the geopolitical situation would be different now, and a number of countries which [NATO] tried to deliberately drag into the alliance, would have most likely already been part of it now.”⁶⁰

The 1995 NATO Study on Enlargement stated explicitly that resolution of territorial disputes would be an important criterion for the alliance in judging a country’s suitability for membership.⁶¹ Had Saakashvili succeeded in establishing Tbilisi’s control over one or both of the breakaway regions, he would have eliminated a major obstacle to Georgia’s membership in NATO. Moscow’s intervention raised the stakes, making it clear that NATO enlargement into that region would increase the risk of the alliance being entrapped in a military confrontation with a nuclear-armed Russia. That said, NATO membership per se was not an imminent prospect in August 2008; four months earlier, the alliance declined to offer Tbilisi a Membership Action Plan, let alone actual membership (although NATO did provide a vague promise of eventual membership).

⁵⁹ Sergei Karaganov, “An Iron Fist to Keep NATO Expansion at Bay,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 4, 2011.

⁶⁰ Denis Dyomkin, “Russia Says Georgia War Stopped NATO Expansion,” Reuters, November 21, 2011.

⁶¹ NATO, “Study on NATO Enlargement,” September 3, 1995.

Factor 3: National Status Concerns

To understand the role that national status concerns played in the Russian decision to intervene in Georgia in 2008, it is necessary to consider the conflict's overall context within Russia's relations with both the former Soviet republics and the Western powers. In the early 1990s, Russia involved itself in wars in Moldova and Tajikistan in addition to Georgia, typically casting itself as a neutral arbiter. Diplomatic entreaties to the West proved fruitless in stemming the rising tide of Western incursion into Russia's backyard. Russia was determined to prevent the emergence of hostile powers along its borders and to block challenges to its regional hegemony. Russia's status as a great power was therefore both a means and an end. The inability to control events in the near abroad would be proof of Russia's loss of great-power status.

Had the Georgian gambit succeeded, it would have set an unacceptable precedent of post-Soviet republics asserting their independence from Moscow on the basis of military strength, which would undermine Russia's carefully cultivated role as a mediator in regional disputes and regional hegemon. In the conflict's wake, Medvedev openly asserted that Russia would be guided by the principle that post-Soviet Eurasia is a region "in which Russia has privileged interests."⁶²

The presence of Russian citizens in South Ossetia made Saakashvili's attempt to secure control of the province by force an even more direct assault on Moscow's status. The unavenged deaths of Russian nationals would have been a blow to Moscow's credibility and therefore status. Preventing that outcome, we can assume, certainly factored into Russia's decisionmaking calculus. Many Russian leaders, including then President Medvedev, cited the threat to Russian citizens in justifying the intervention. In an interview less than a month after the war, he emphasized "protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, wherever they may be" as "an unquestionable priority for our country" and one of the principles guiding Russian foreign policy.⁶³ Although

⁶² President of Russia, "Interview Given by Dmitry Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Russia, NTV," August 31, 2008a.

⁶³ President of Russia, 2008a.

Moscow let its citizens' mistreatment go unavenged in other contexts, an armed assault resulting in highly publicized deaths apparently carried too high a status cost in this case.

Making an example of Saakashvili and intervening on behalf of the separatist enclave therefore served the interests of Russian national prestige as Moscow conceived of it. The emergence of a regional military challenge to Russian dominance, however minor, would be snuffed out. Saakashvili's government might be destabilized, and he might even be driven out of power, making way for a more Moscow-oriented successor.⁶⁴ Western leaders would learn firsthand that Russia was willing to resort to war to maintain its "privileges" in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Factor 4: Partnership with Separatists

The significance of the Russian government's partnership with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatists as a factor motivating the intervention is difficult to assess because Moscow never took a clear-cut stance in the separatists' favor until after the 2008 war. Since the breakup of the USSR, Moscow had provided implicit and explicit support to the separatists, which had thwarted Tbilisi's ambitions to assert control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the Georgians had accused the separatists of being Russian puppets. Although the separatist governments were reliant on Moscow for their continued survival, the Russian government withheld the kind of support that the Abkhazians and South Ossetians sought. Officially, Russia was neutral in the two frozen conflicts until the 2008 war, and it took steps to make this claim appear at least somewhat credible. For example, Russia imposed sanctions on trade with Abkhazia.⁶⁵ Russian support for South Ossetian separatism was even more ambiguous. Moscow did demonstrate its willingness to use force to prevent Georgia from securing control over the entire province, but the Russian peacekeeping con-

⁶⁴ Zygur, 2016a, pp. 150, 157–158.

⁶⁵ Hewitt, 2013, p. 222.

tingent allowed the Georgians to consolidate their control over parts of South Ossetia that had previously been disputed during the abortive conflict in 2004, even while they signaled a willingness to go to war to forestall a total South Ossetian defeat.⁶⁶

One source of uncertainty was the ambiguous nature of the separatist governments. Although the Russian government was always sympathetic to the separatists, it hesitated to legitimize their self-portrayal as heroic national liberation movements. A typical charge was that the separatist regimes were mere puppets of Moscow that simply obeyed Russian orders.⁶⁷ But on closer inspection, it seems that the separatists regularly went off script: In the 1990s and 2000s, they instigated firefights with the Georgians that created difficulties for the Russian peacekeepers and embarrassed Moscow.⁶⁸

Two small but significant constituencies in Russia had a substantive partnership with the Abkhaz and South Ossetians: their coethnics in Adygea and North Ossetia, respectively. Writing in the aftermath of the 2008 war, an analyst at Moscow's Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies think tank argued that the need to maintain credibility with the North Ossetians was a major driver of Russia's decision to intervene in South Ossetia. "Russia simply could not afford to lose," he explained, in part because

the loyalty of the North Caucasus republics of North Ossetia and Adygeya, tied by blood relation to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, would be undermined. North Ossetia, moreover, is the largest and most loyal autonomous republic in the [North Caucasus]. Russia would have been shown to be weak before the entire North Caucasus, and this would have marked a return to the situation of the 1990s. . . . The reaction of the international community to Russia's war with Georgia, no matter how harsh, could not compare in significance to the implications of a new war in the

⁶⁶ Welt, 2010, p. 87.

⁶⁷ Former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer expressed the view that Moscow had planned the entire offensive as a provocation shortly after the war (Brian Whitmore, "Scene At Russia-Georgia Border Hinted at Scripted Affair," *RFE/RL*, August 23, 2008).

⁶⁸ For example, see Welt, 2010, p. 74.

North Caucasus. Georgia's attempt to export the ethnic conflict that it created in the early 1990s to Russian territory had to be intercepted at any cost.⁶⁹

In this view, the partnership with the separatists was inseparably linked to Russia's domestic security.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia sought to forestall separatist defeat, then used the separatists' survival as an instrument to perpetuate Moscow's influence in Georgia. As a consequence, it is very difficult to gauge the independent importance of the partnership with the separatists as a factor motivating the Russian intervention. Although long-standing Russian support for the separatists added to the case for intervention, it likely did not motivate the Russian government to act in a way perceptibly different than it would have if the partnership had been an utter sham.

At the same time, Russia's less-than-wholehearted support of the separatists throughout the pre-2008 years actually incentivized the Abkhaz and South Ossetians to engage in escalatory behavior with the aim of pressuring Moscow to provide more-explicit support, such as by endorsing their bid for recognition as independent state. Ironically, the escalation cycle that resulted in the outbreak of war could have happened because of the *weakness* of Russia's support to the separatists.

Summary

Shocking as it seemed to Western observers at the time, the 2008 Russia-Georgia War was not an aberration. Russia conducted broadly similar military interventions under Yeltsin, including armed interventions into neighboring former Soviet republics. What had changed were the circumstances. In the 1990s, Russia could more easily maintain the narrative of being a neutral arbiter in regional disputes, while Western governments demonstrated little inclination or interest in weighing in on these conflicts directly. By the mid-2000s, the same behavior that

⁶⁹ Kashin, 2008.

elicited scant interest or comment from Western observers in the early 1990s struck them in 2008 as a direct assault on Western interests and international norms. Saakashvili’s government also posed a novel challenge to Moscow’s regional authority. Although earlier Georgian leaders had condemned Russian meddling, they lacked plausible means of compelling Russia to abandon its support for the separatist enclaves. Saakashvili, meanwhile, pursued a combination of military development and security cooperation with the West that posed a significant challenge to Russian regional dominance. Allowing Saakashvili’s gambit to succeed would have established an unacceptable precedent and, in the Kremlin’s view, incited further incursions on the Russian Federation’s security interests.

Table 4.1 summarizes the four factors most relevant to Russia’s decision to intervene. Many of the factors affecting the likelihood of military interventions considered in this study appear to have played little to no role in the 2008 Russia-Georgia War. Domestic politics and

Table 4.1
Summary of Analysis of Factors for Russia-Georgia War Case Study

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
External threat	Georgian attack on Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinvali.	Assertions that Russia began intervention prior to assault on Tskhinvali.	Likely proximate trigger of intervention.
Regional power balance	Strong Russian concern over potential Georgian membership in NATO.	NATO membership per se was not an imminent prospect.	Likely significant driver of intervention.
National status concerns	History of Russian emphasis on influence in neighborhood as major element of great-power status; presence of Russian citizens.	Unclear that status concerns demanded an intervention. In other countries, Russian citizens have been poorly treated without significant consequences.	Likely significant driver of intervention.
Partnership with separatists	Long-standing clients; preventing their decimation was linked to keeping the peace in Russia’s North Caucasus.	Previous history of lukewarm support and instrumentalization of the separatist entities.	Uncertain importance in motivating intervention.

legitimacy seem to have played a secondary role at most. Plausible economic rationales for the intervention are difficult to identify. Abkhazia and South Ossetia were net drains on Russian resources. Nor is there an obvious ideological rationale for the intervention.

It would also be a mistake to see the war as a product of leadership and personality. Although Putin was especially blunt in his private and public comments on the matter, it seems plausible that Yeltsin, or Medvedev acting in isolation, likely would have behaved similarly. In other analogous situations before Putin's tenure, Moscow has demonstrated a readiness to intervene.

Obviously, Russia secured victory in a mere five days because it enjoyed superior military capabilities, but the significance of this factor should not be overstated. On the whole, the evidence seems to suggest that relative military capabilities played little role in the Russian decision to intervene. Russia's excoriating official account of its military performance in the war also suggests that Moscow did not take comfort in its swift victory.

Georgia could not assert control over South Ossetia without somehow neutralizing the Russian peacekeeping contingent there. Unfortunately, this necessitated either attacking or securing the capitulation of an outpost of the Russian military and thus posing an external threat to Moscow's national interests. The Russian government could not tolerate the threats to its soldiers, which appears to have triggered the start of the conflict. But Russian motivations were broader than mere reaction to a threat to the troops.

Kremlin officials appear to have feared that the integration of Georgia into Western institutions would radically and permanently tilt the regional power balance in favor of their adversaries. If Georgia hosted NATO bases, that would upend the regional military balance. The "frozen conflicts" in the two breakaway regions posed a useful obstacle to Georgian NATO membership: Allowing Saakashvili to resolve them would remove this obstacle and hasten this threat. Intervention, meanwhile, sent an unmistakable message that Georgian NATO membership would mean a real chance of fighting a war with Russia.

Russian leaders also likely believed that the humiliation of capitulating to Georgia in South Ossetia and/or Abkhazia would cause catastrophic damage to their national prestige. In the years following the collapse of the USSR, post-Soviet Russia had cultivated institutions and practices aimed at perpetuating its role as regional hegemon. Saakashvili aimed to resolve the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in defiance of Moscow; even worse, he attempted to enlist Western support to do so. From the Kremlin's perspective, allowing this gambit to succeed would invite additional regional opposition and further Western meddling in post-Soviet Eurasia.

The importance of Russia's partnership with the separatists as a factor in motivating the intervention is unclear. Moscow was officially a neutral party in the conflicts before 2008, and Russian leaders withheld the unambiguous support sought by the separatists. Although the separatists were Russian proxies, they were not puppets, and they acted independently with the aim of forcing Moscow to drop the pretense of neutrality and resolve the frozen conflict in their favor. With this aim, they sometimes engaged in escalatory behavior, which may have fueled the escalatory process that led to the outbreak of war in August 2008.

Case Study: Russia's Intervention in Syria

The Russian intervention in Syria's civil war that began in 2015 upended a widespread view about Moscow's approach to the use of force beyond its borders. Previously, it was assumed that Russia would not intervene in conflicts beyond its immediate neighborhood in post-Soviet Eurasia. Unlike the Soviet Union, post-Soviet Russia had neither the means, given its drastically attenuated military capabilities, nor the motive, given the shedding of the ideological driver of fomenting global revolution and fighting the Cold War, to intervene in out-of-area regional hot spots. With its bombing campaign that began on September 30, 2015, Russia demonstrated that this was not the case.

Through 2019, the Russian intervention has continued to defy predictions. Despite early assertions that support for the minority Alawite-dominated Assad regime in its brutal civil war against rebels who are largely from the country's Sunni majority population would be disastrous for Moscow's regional ties with Sunni-led states and even expose Russia to increased domestic terrorism from its (largely Sunni) Muslim population, no such backlash has yet materialized. In fact, the intervention led to an unprecedented boost to Russia's regional influence. And Moscow has managed to keep its footprint in Syria small and effectively partnered with allies on the ground, avoiding the quagmire or "second Afghanistan" that many predicted.

When the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, Moscow's relations with Damascus were far from the *de facto* alliance we observe today. Russia had a legacy of Soviet-era military ties to the Assad regime, but the bilateral relationship had largely withered with Moscow's retreat

from the Middle East following the Soviet collapse. The Russian military maintained at least one signals intelligence site in Syria since about 2006, Syria was a relatively significant arms client, and Moscow had a small naval facility at Tartus. But Russia simply was not geopolitically invested in the Middle East. Its relations with Syria were more reflective of historical legacy than material interests.

After the start of the civil war, Russia took steps that either indirectly or directly bolstered the Assad regime. At the level of international diplomacy, Russia vetoed three proposed resolutions authorizing action in Syria under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, in October 2011, February 2012, and July 2012. In June 2012, Russia successfully blocked the United States and others from inserting language that would imply endorsement of international efforts to oust Assad in the Geneva Communiqué, the peace plan for Syria (eventually adopted as a UNSC resolution).

Moscow at the time seemed primarily preoccupied with avoiding a Western military intervention or an externally imposed political outcome rather than with saving the Assad regime per se. As early as summer 2011, then President Medvedev warned that, barring immediate reforms and compromises with the opposition, “a sad fate awaits” the Syrian leader.¹ Moreover, the Geneva Communiqué calls for a “political transition” in Syria and, as an interim measure, the transfer of power to a “transitional governing body [that] would exercise full executive powers, [which] shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.”² By definition, such a body could not include Assad. But Moscow consistently emphasized that the outcome of the political transition could under no circumstances be imposed from outside Syria.

The broader regional and global contexts are key to understanding the Russian focus on avoiding even the appearance of external imposition of an outcome to the Syrian civil war. The civil war in Syria began during the Arab Spring, when several long-serving secular authoritar-

¹ Andrew Osborn, “Syria: Dmitry Medvedev Warns Bashar al-Assad to Prepare for ‘Sad Fate,’” *The Telegraph*, August 5, 2011.

² Action Group for Syria, “Final Communiqué of the Action Group for Syria,” United Nations Security Council, June 30, 2012.

ian regimes were overthrown in popular uprisings, which Moscow suspected had at least some external inspiration. In March 2011, Russia chose not to veto UNSC Resolution 1973, which authorized a NATO mission to protect civilians in Libya during that country's uprising. NATO interpreted its mandate quite broadly, and the bombing campaign eventually facilitated not only regime change but also the killing of Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi. Moscow, as Putin has said repeatedly, did not want a repeat of the "Libya scenario"—the chaos that resulted from regime change—in Syria. More broadly, Russian elites believed that the precedent of the West's picking winners in a civil conflict had direct consequences for regime security in Russia. So, when U.S. President Barack Obama proclaimed that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside" on August 18, 2011, thereby effectively making his removal a goal of U.S. policy, Russia became focused on preventing externally imposed regime change.³

But preventing that outcome did not seem to mean that Moscow was willing to underwrite the Assad regime's survival. In terms of military assistance, Russia began to supply materiel to Damascus as it suffered losses on the battlefield in 2012. According to press reports, initial deliveries were mostly small arms and light weapons, but Moscow eventually began supplying attack helicopters, UAVs, air-defense systems, armored vehicles, electronic warfare systems, and guided bombs.⁴ Until 2014, however, most of the deliveries were arranged under commercial contracts, not direct military assistance.⁵ And Moscow notably was not providing the regime with the key capabilities for the battles it was fighting—mortars, artillery, and tanks—or sending military advisers (which Assad's other patron, Iran, was doing). Russia's eco-

³ Scott Wilson and Joby Warrick, "Assad Must Go, Obama Says," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2011.

⁴ Ian Black and Chris McGreal, "Syria: US Accuses Russia of Sending Attack Helicopters," *The Guardian*, June 12, 2012; and Johnathan Saul, "Exclusive: Russia Steps Up Military Lifeline to Syria's Assad - Sources," Reuters, January 17, 2014.

⁵ Miriam Elder, "Syria Will Receive Attack Helicopters from Russia, Kremlin Confirms," *The Guardian*, June 28, 2012.

nomic support for the regime was modest as well, mostly providing such services as minting and shipping Syrian bank notes.⁶

Assad's massive chemical attack on an opposition stronghold near Damascus in August 2013 changed the dynamic in Western capitals in regard to Syria, leading the United States to contemplate a retaliatory military strike. Putin penned an op-ed in the *New York Times* the next month to appeal directly to the American people to oppose military intervention in Syria.⁷ To head off this outcome, Moscow quickly proposed an arrangement that would have, if it had been fully implemented, deprived Assad of his chemical weapons. The deal was a major concession because Russia had rejected far less ambitious proposals just a few weeks earlier. Moscow clearly believed that the United States was on the verge of launching an attack and recognized that the chemical weapons agreement could prevent such action.

But U.S.-Russia cooperation on removing the majority of Assad's chemical weapons was the high point of such joint efforts. Diplomatic steps to move toward a settlement largely stalled despite a high-level push from then U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in 2014. Meanwhile, the situation on the ground was deteriorating, at least from the perspective of Moscow (and Damascus). The Assad regime's forces had lost control over major swaths of the country, including the economic center of Aleppo. Many of these defeats came at the hands of a variety of rebel groups, some of which were supported by U.S. allies, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. These groups became increasingly linked with extremist elements, including Jabhat al-Nusra, the al Qaeda franchise in Syria, which was among the most effective of the forces fighting the Syrian army.

Meanwhile, the forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) were also making significant inroads. ISIS's spectacular offensive success in summer 2014 in both Syria and Iraq worried many in Moscow. The group's declared objective of establishing a caliphate resonated with some of Russia's disenchanted Muslim population, as well as those

⁶ Dafna Linzer, Jeff Larson, and Michael Grabell, "Flight Records Say Russia Sent Syria Tons of Cash," *ProPublica*, November 26, 2012.

⁷ Vladimir Putin, "A Plea for Caution from Russia," *New York Times*, September 12, 2013.

in neighboring states.⁸ Thousands of Russian-speaking fighters, from Russia as well as post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus, joined the ranks of ISIS and other jihadi groups.⁹ Additionally, some feared that the shared Syrian experience would lead to the linkage of Russian extremists into international terrorist networks, connecting them with radicals in neighboring states who seek to do harm to Russia.

In May 2015, ISIS took control of Palmyra, the strategic and historic city in Syria's south. Simultaneously, a coalition led by Jabhat al-Nusra attacked Assad regime forces in northwest Syria.¹⁰ Moscow saw these developments as portending the decisive defeat of the regime and allied forces.¹¹

As ISIS, al-Nusra, and the more mainstream rebel groups continued to gain ground, the diplomatic process was stuck. UN-led peace efforts had essentially stalled following the Geneva II conference in February 2014, which ended in deadlock.¹² After the UN track collapsed, Russia took the lead in organizing two rounds of negotiations between the regime and the opposition in Moscow in January and April 2015. The rebel groups backed by the United States and its allies boycotted the talks. They insisted on a prior commitment that any negotiation process would lead to Assad's departure, a condition Moscow would not accept. Separately, senior Russian officials, including Putin, regularly engaged with their counterparts on Syria. All of this diplomatic activity had practically no impact on the situation on the ground in Syria, where fighting raged and the regime continued to suffer losses.

⁸ Fiona Hill, "The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad," *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2013.

⁹ Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, New York, December 2015.

¹⁰ John W. Parker, *Putin's Syrian Gambit: Sharper Elbows, Bigger Footprint, Stickier Wicket*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, Strategic Perspectives No. 25, July 2017, pp. 10–12; and M. Yu. Shepovalenko, ed., *Siriiskii rubezh* [Moscow: Tsentr analiza strategii i tekhnologii, 2016, pp. 72–89.

¹¹ For a Russian analysis of the situation, see, for example, Maksim Yusin and Sergei Strokhan, "Ni mira, ni Pal'mira," *Kommersant*, May 22, 2015.

¹² "Syria Peace Talks Break Up as UN Envoy Fails to End Deadlock," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2014.

At some point in spring or early summer 2015, the Kremlin apparently decided it had exhausted alternative means of preventing regime collapse in Syria and began preparations for the intervention. Active coordination with allies on the ground also began at this time. In addition to cooperating with the Syrian army, Moscow worked with the key ground forces backing the regime (specifically, Iranian forces and Iranian-backed Hezbollah). Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps General Qassem Soleimani reportedly visited Moscow on July 24–26, 2015, to arrange coordination between Russian air power and Iranian-led ground forces. Essentially, the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) would serve as the air component of the coalition with these forces on the ground.¹³ Later in the summer, Moscow negotiated a joint intelligence sharing cell with Iraq, Iran, and Syria, based in Baghdad.¹⁴

The formal agreement for the deployment of a Russian air contingent was signed with the Syrian government on August 25, 2015. Over the course of September, many of the fixed-wing aircraft transited through Iran and Iraq to the new Russian base at Khmeimim, near Latakia. By the end of September, the Russian force consisted of 32 fixed-wing aircraft and 17 helicopters.¹⁵

Putin delivered a major speech at the UN General Assembly on September 28 calling for a shared global effort to fight the scourge of terrorism in Syria. Two days later, Assad formally asked Russia for military assistance, and the Federation Council, Russia's upper house of parliament, formally granted permission for the Russian bombing campaign, which began that day.

During the course of the first month of the air campaign, the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian aircraft executed 1,391 sorties, destroying 1,623 of what it called "terrorist targets."¹⁶ Its initial targets were not ISIS, al-Nusra, or other extremist groups.

¹³ Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East?* Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2017, pp. 71–76.

¹⁴ Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iraq Using Info from New Intelligence Center to Bomb Islamic State: Official," Reuters, October 13, 2015.

¹⁵ Shepovalenko, 2016, p. 107.

¹⁶ Shepovalenko, 2016, p. 110.

Instead, the VKS targeted the most immediate threats to the Assad regime, which happened to be the groups that had received backing from the United States and its allies. However, Moscow also targeted ISIS, particularly following the October 31, 2015, downing of a passenger plane carrying Russian holidaymakers from Egypt to St. Petersburg. The terrorist attack, which killed 224 people, was carried out by an ISIS cell. Once that determination was made, Russia focused its air assaults on ISIS strongholds in Raqqa. Russian long-range aviation was employed in the conflict for the first time: Tu-160 and Tu-95MS strategic bombers and Tu-22M3 long-range bombers conducted sorties from their bases in Russia. Since then, Russia's air campaign targeted nearly all antiregime groups at one point or another.¹⁷

The air component has been the central element of the Russian intervention. But some naval and ground assets have been involved as well. There have been periodic sea-launched cruise missile strikes on targets in Syria. For example, in October 2015, four Russian Navy missile ships in the Caspian Sea fired Kalibr cruise missiles at targets in Syria.¹⁸ In December 2015 and May 2017, Russian Navy ships or submarines fired Kalibr missiles at Syrian targets from the Mediterranean.¹⁹ Russia's sole carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, also deployed to the region, and airframes based on the ship participated in the campaign, with mixed results. Russia's ground personnel in Syria served advisory, capacity-building, and force protection functions but were not involved in regular combat. Although the Russian military does not publish such numbers, we can infer from the number of votes cast in elections from the polling places established in Syria that no more

¹⁷ Anton Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria: A Preliminary Analysis*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, June 2018.

¹⁸ "Russian Missiles 'Hit IS in Syria from Caspian Sea,'" *BBC News*, October 7, 2015. See also Douglas Barrie, Joseph Dempsey, and Mark Cazalet, "Russia Pursues Cruise Control in Syria," *Military Balance* blog, International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 24, 2015.

¹⁹ Christopher P. Cavas, "Russian Submarine Hits Targets in Syria," *Defense News*, December 8, 2015; and "Russia Fires Cruise Missiles at Islamic State Targets from Mediterranean," Reuters, May 30, 2017.

than 4,500 personnel were on the ground as of September 2016, with no more than 3,000 by March 2018.²⁰

The Russian intervention has largely proven to be a success. As of July 2019, Assad has reestablished government control over the vast majority of population centers. None of the remaining rebel groups pose a threat to his rule. Besides the Metrojet attack in 2015, Russia has faced no increased terrorist threats. Western-sponsored regime change appears to be essentially off the table. Russia's relationships with all major regional powers, including Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey, have improved significantly. Moscow's regional clout is much greater than what it was before the intervention. Long-term basing agreements have been signed for Tartus and Khememiem, apparently cementing Russia's military presence in the Middle East for decades to come. The military (particularly, the VKS) has received unprecedented combat experience and kept its losses to a manageable rate. However, some of Russia's broader geopolitical goals were not achieved (as discussed later). And there is still no prospect of a political settlement between the government and the opposition that would allow Russia to end its combat operations in Syria. Significant areas of the country remain under the control of either Kurdish forces east of the Euphrates or Turkey-allied groups in Idlib province.

Drivers of the Intervention

The key factors that drove Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria were the presence of an external threat, concerns about the regional power balance, and national status concerns. Military capabilities were a critical enabling factor, as were military factors specific to the Syrian theater.

²⁰ During the 2016 Russian parliamentary election, Central Election Commission data indicated that about 4,500 votes were cast at polling stations in Syria. Because that number includes diplomats and civilians in addition to military personnel, it is likely a high-end estimate of deployed uniformed military (Anton Baev and Elizaveta Surnacheva, "TsIK rasssekretit kolechestvo golosovavshikh v Sirii rossiyan," *RBK*, September 21, 2016). Fewer than 3,000 voted in the 2018 presidential elections ("Vse rossiiskie voennye v Sirii pro-golosovali za Putina," *RIA Novosti*, March 19, 2018).

These factors will be assessed in greater detail in the next section of this chapter. Neither Russia's partnership with the Assad regime nor the domestic or ideational factors in this study's framework were determined to be significant in this case. In this section, we document how we selected the factors.

To a significant extent, our judgments about Russian decision-making in general and the Syria case in particular cannot be conclusive. We do not have access to the key actors involved in the decision or the archival evidence associated with it. Moreover, this decision was reportedly taken by an extraordinarily small group of people. We can, however, evaluate the statements of senior Russian leaders, the writings of the Russian foreign policy establishment, and circumstantial evidence surrounding the decision to draw analytical inferences.

Factors to Be Assessed

We begin with an assessment of those factors that Russian decision-makers pointed to when explaining their decision to intervene. First and foremost, they claimed that the Assad regime was at risk of imminent collapse in summer 2015 and that such a development would pose a direct threat to Russia. This threat would come in the form of transnational terrorism, which would reverberate into the Russian homeland. Of course, we need not accept the Russian leadership at its word. But the terrorist threat as a driver of Russian policy is certainly worth assessing in greater detail. A second possible external threat stemming from the Assad regime's potential imminent collapse was not articulated directly by Russian leaders, but it follows from a variety of other statements that they have made in recent years. The fall of Assad at the hands of rebels backed by the United States and its allies, in Moscow's eyes, would have further legitimized the practice of Western-led regime change, which the Kremlin believes to be a direct threat to the security of Russia's regime. Given the relative importance of Russia's relationship with the Assad regime for Moscow's regional standing, we also decided it would be important to assess the regional power balance factor as a driver of Russian decisionmaking. Another significant driver of Russia's intervention involved national status concerns. Russian foreign policy in general is widely acknowledged in the literature as being

driven by status concerns: specifically, the idea that Russia is a great power and should be acknowledged by others as such. The Syria intervention was seen as a means of allowing Russia to break out of Western efforts to isolate it, forcing the West to engage with Russia as an equal. Finally, the enabler of Russia's improved military capabilities was key to the decision to intervene. The New Look reforms enacted after 2008 significantly enhanced Moscow's ability to conduct air operations. As we will explore in detail later, the pre-reform Russian military likely would not have been able to conduct the Syria operation.

Factors Not Assessed

Russia's partnership with the Assad regime might appear to be an important driver of the intervention at first glance. Although Moscow had no alliance commitments to Damascus, maintaining Assad's control could plausibly have been an end in itself. However, on closer inspection, the importance of the partnership itself—as opposed to, for example, the importance of the relationship for the regional power balance—appears to be less convincing. For more than three years before the intervention, Russia was committed to a “political transition” in Syria, first in the Geneva Communiqué and then in UNSC Resolutions 2042, 2118, and 2254. As noted earlier, those documents called for the eventual transfer of power to a “transitional governing body [that] would exercise full executive powers, [which] shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.”²¹ Such a body would not include Assad, since the majority of opposition groups would never consent to continuing his reign. In other words, had the situation on the ground not evolved as it did (i.e., toward the perceived imminent collapse of the regime), it is entirely plausible that Moscow would have supported Assad's departure, so long as it did not come about as the result of coercive regime change.²² Bilateral ties with Damascus provided geopolitical benefits to Russia (as discussed later), but the bilateral relationship was thin before the intervention, with little political, economic, or

²¹ Action Group for Syria, 2012.

²² Jeremy Shapiro and Samuel Charap, “Winning the Peace by Failing in Geneva,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 9, 2014.

strategic content. One prominent Russian analyst referred to it as “the mythical alliance.”²³ In short, the partnership with Syria played into the decision to intervene not because it had any significant value for Russia in itself but because of the indirect geopolitical consequences of Assad’s fall and the threats it would have posed. It should also be noted that the partnership with Assad was a major factor in facilitating the execution of the intervention and has grown in importance for Russia since the intervention began. However, our analysis is concerned with the initial decision to intervene.

Although several analysts have pointed to the objective of bolstering domestic legitimacy as a driver of Russian interventions in its immediate neighborhood, few (if any) have made similar claims regarding the Syria decision. There has never been overwhelming public support for the Syria intervention.²⁴ Russians are widely in favor of their country’s great-power status (88 percent as of November 2018), but they are not hugely supportive of military operations in far-flung hotspots.²⁵ So the Kremlin probably viewed the Syria intervention through the lens of minimizing the negative domestic political consequences rather than seizing on it to bolster its legitimacy. The Kremlin has controlled the domestic narrative about the war and minimized public disclosure of casualties to prevent any public backlash.

Economically, Russia had relatively little at stake in Syria. Its firms had investments in such sectors as energy and agriculture, but none were strategically significant. Trade ties involving parastatal entities were essentially frozen from 1992 until 2005 because of a dispute

²³ Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia’s Syria Policy*, Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, February 2013.

²⁴ A majority of Russians were never in favor of the operation, and the public has grown less supportive of the intervention over time. In September 2015, only 14 percent of those polled favored Russia’s military involvement; the percentage of those in favor increased to 40 percent by October 2015, after the operation had begun. As time passed, support decreased. In April 2019, 55 percent of those surveyed said Russia should end the Syria operation. See Vladimir Razuvaev, “Chto oznachaet operatsiya v Sirii dlya rossiiskoi politiki,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, November 3, 2015; and “Bol’shinstvo rossiyan vystupili za okonchanie operatsii v Sirii,” *Levada Center*, May 6, 2019.

²⁵ See “Natsional’naya identichnost’ i gordost’,” *Levada Center*, January 17, 2019.

over more than \$13 billion in Soviet-era debt. In 2005, Russia agreed to write off the lion's share of the debt and to allow Syria to use the rest to buy Russian-made weapons. But even the arms trade was not hugely significant for Russia. As one analyst put it, "They [the Syrians] are old customers, but they are very poor."²⁶ Damascus simply could not afford big-ticket systems. By the time Russia was deciding about its intervention in 2015, Moscow was fully aware that the Syrian economy had been decimated by the war and would not become a significant client for years to come, if ever. There was no compelling economic logic to the Russian intervention.

There are some identity groups that bind Russia with Syria. There was a fairly sizable expatriate community of Russians living in Syria before the war.²⁷ The Syrian Christian community, which practices Eastern Orthodoxy, has ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. However, these links were never particularly politically salient for Russia. These ties cannot be considered determinants of the decision to intervene, particularly in comparison with the importance of co-identity groups for Russia in its immediate neighborhood in post-Soviet Eurasia.

In a personalistic political system like Russia's, the character of the leader always plays some role in determining policy. In the Russian case, decisionmaking has become increasingly deinstitutionalized in recent years, only amplifying the centrality of Putin's predispositions. But the decision to intervene in Syria was not Putin's alone. Key decisions on Syria were reportedly taken among a relatively small group, including Secretary of the National Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, Federal Security Service Chief Aleksandr Bortnikov, and Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov. We have no indication that any of the others around the table objected to the decision. Moreover, there was no public questioning of the decision by elites once it had

²⁶ David M. Herszenhorn, "For Syria, Reliant on Russia for Weapons and Food, Old Bonds Run Deep," *New York Times*, February 19, 2012.

²⁷ Ellen Barry, "Russians and Syrians, Allied by History and Related by Marriage," *New York Times*, July 1, 2012.

been taken. Whereas the move to annex Crimea appeared to be taken extemporaneously by Putin himself over a period of approximately two weeks following the initial invasion, it took months for the Russian military to prepare for the Syria intervention by transporting the necessary men and materiel to the theater. A broader segment of the security establishment, and the military in particular, was therefore involved in the process. Generally speaking, Putin's views on matters of war and peace are largely reflective of the broader foreign policy community in Russia. He is certainly not an outlier. We have little direct or indirect evidence to suggest that Putin's personality was central to the decision to intervene in this case.

Factor 1: External Threats to Sovereignty

The perceived external threats relevant to the decision to intervene in Syria stemmed from the nature of the situation on the ground in Syria at the time that the decision was made. As noted earlier, Moscow had been supporting Assad in various ways since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, but the decision to intervene was probably made only in spring or summer 2015. The decision came in the context of the Syrian government's worsening fortunes on the battlefield. Assad's forces had been losing ground since 2013 to a variety of rebel groups, including ISIS, the Kurds, the Free Syrian Army, and Nusra-led groups. But spring 2015 saw two events that seem to have led many in Moscow to conclude that the end for Assad was near. In May 2015, ISIS seized Palmyra. At the same time, a coalition led by al-Nusra attacked Assad's forces in northwest Syria.²⁸ Moscow saw these setbacks as signs that Assad's days were numbered.²⁹ Putin has consistently emphasized that Syrian "statehood" was at risk of collapse when the decision was taken: Barring the intervention, the risk was "the complete Somalization of

²⁸ Parker, 2017, pp. 10–12; Lavrov, 2016.

²⁹ Yusin and Strokan, 2015.

the country, the complete degradation of statehood.”³⁰ At other times, he warned of the “Libya scenario” repeating itself in Syria.³¹

Even if we accept this assessment that the collapse of the Assad regime was inevitable barring Russia's military intervention, that collapse in itself need not constitute an external threat to Russia. After all, to follow Putin's metaphor, regime collapse in Somalia and Libya did not produce immediate threats to Russian sovereignty. As Russia's National Security Strategy makes explicit, Moscow connected the overthrowing of existing regimes to destabilizing proliferation of terrorism and extremism.³² It seems, however, that Moscow's threat perception about the consequences of regime collapse in Syria was much more acute than in other cases.

The Russian political-military leadership saw the forces opposed to the Assad regime as more than a mere terrorist cell or rebel group. Instead, as the then head of Russia's military intelligence put it, ISIS and Nusra were “terrorist organizations of a new formation, pursuing ambitious goals and capable of quickly adapting to changing circumstances.”³³ The capabilities of this force—including armor, UAVs, and even electronic warfare—were comparable to a regular military. The ability of these organizations to undermine the Syrian military through indirect tactics and surprise put it on the constant defensive.³⁴ Moreover, the opposition forces as a whole were considered to be a proxy force for the United States and its allies in a “hybrid war” launched to undermine a government in Damascus that was insuf-

³⁰ Vladimir Smirnov, “‘Zachem nam mir bez Rossii?’: Vladimir Putin o vozmozhnosti primeneniya yadernogo oruzhiya, terrorizme i situatsii v Sirii,” *RT na ruskom*, March 7, 2018; President of Russia, “Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai,’” October 18, 2018.

³¹ “Putin schitaet nedopustimym povtorenie v Sirii ‘liviiskogo’ stsenariya,” *RIA Novosti*, June 2, 2017.

³² See “Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 31 dekabrya 2015 goda N 683 ‘O Strategiya natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii,’” *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, December 31, 2015.

³³ Vladimir Smirnov, “Sil’nyi i opasnyi protivnik’: v Genshtabe rasskazali o sozdanii novoi 25-tysyachnoi terroristicheskoi gruppirovki v Sirii,” *RT na ruskom*, August 25, 2017.

³⁴ Adamsky, 2018, pp. 9–10.

ficiently pliant.³⁵ A battle between religious extremist forces with foreign support and a secular state evoked for many in Moscow Russia's struggle with Chechen separatism and the Soviet Union's war against the mujahideen in Afghanistan.³⁶ Extremists in Russia have long had links to the Middle East, including with Salafi and Wahabi groups. The Chechen rebels received direct support from entities in the Gulf.³⁷

Essentially, Russian officials equated Assad's collapse to a Sunni extremist takeover of Syria. As Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, said, "If we had not intervened in Syria, what would have happened? . . . A month or two more, by the end of 2015, Syria would have been completely under ISIS [rule].³⁸ If that were to have happened, the consequences could not be contained within Syria's borders. In Putin's words, it would have led to the

infiltration from [Syria] of a significant portion of the fighters onto the territory of the Russian Federation and the territory of neighboring states, with which we have essentially open borders. That would have been a real, extremely serious danger for us.³⁹

In short, regime change in Syria would embolden and empower a transnational terror threat to Russian sovereignty.

Putin was referring to the significant number of citizens of Russia and neighboring states in the Caucasus and Central Asia who had joined the ranks of ISIS in Syria. He has stated a number in the range of 2,500 from Russia and 4,500 from Central Asia; independent esti-

³⁵ Aleksandr Bartosh, "Gibridnaya voyna – novyi vyzov natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossii," *Natsional'naya oborona*, No. 10, October 2017.

³⁶ Hill, 2013.

³⁷ Aleksei Malashenko and Akhmed Yarlykapov, "Radicalisation of Russia's Muslim Community," Brighton, United Kingdom: MICROCON, Policy Working Paper No. 9, May 2009, p. 30.

³⁸ Viktor Baranets, "Nachal'nik genshtaba vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerii Gerasimov: 'My perelomili khrebet udarnym silam terrorizma,'" *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, December 26, 2017.

³⁹ Smirnov, 2018.

mates suggest lower, but still significant, numbers.⁴⁰ Russia is home to the largest Muslim population in Europe: around 16 million, or approximately 11 percent of the country's population.⁴¹ Moscow fought two brutal wars to subdue extremist forces in Chechnya. Since the end of the Second Chechen War, the insurgency has persisted both there and (particularly) in other North Caucasus regions, even if at a low level of intensity. Throughout the post-Soviet period, Russians have faced horrific terrorist attacks resulting from these conflicts, including in Moscow and other major cities. As ISIS and other extremist groups grew in strength in Syria, so too did their links to Russian extremist elements. Russian and Russian-speaking fighters joined ISIS's ranks, while ISIS took greater control over extremist networks in Russia.

For example, militants from the Caucasus region took top leadership positions in ISIS. Abu Umar al-Shishani, an ethnic Chechen from Georgia who fought against Russia in both the second war in Chechnya and the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict, became a top military commander.⁴² ISIS reportedly fielded three Russian-speaking battalions.⁴³ Russian-language ISIS propaganda was outpaced only by the group's Arabic- and English-language output.⁴⁴ In 2014, mid-level commanders of the insurgent forces in the North Caucasus began declaring their fealty to ISIS. In June 2015, the leadership of the Caucasus Emirate, the extremist umbrella group in the region, swore loyalty to the leader of ISIS. ISIS subsequently declared a new province of its purported caliphate in the Caucasus (Wilaya Kavkaz).⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Smirnov, 2018; The Soufan Group, 2015.

⁴¹ "Muslim Populations by Country: How Big Will Each Muslim Population Be by 2030?" *The Guardian*, January 28, 2011.

⁴² Bassem Mroue, "Omar al-Shishani, Chechen in Syria, Rising Star in ISIS Leadership," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 3, 2014.

⁴³ Marta Ter, "The Caucasus Emirate, the Other Russian Front," *Notes Internacionais*, No. 129, November 2015.

⁴⁴ Amina Umarova, "'Esli na zemle est' ad, to ya – v etom adu,'" *Radio Svoboda*, October 4, 2015.

⁴⁵ Ter, 2015. See also Maria Galperin Donnelly, Thomas M. Sanderson, Olga Oliker, Maxwell B. Markusen, and Denis Sokolov, *Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*:

Although it has been reported that Russia tacitly permitted some extremists to leave the Russian North Caucasus for Syria, the prospect of their return posed a significant threat.⁴⁶ As Putin said, the intervention was meant to “take the initiative and fight and destroy the terrorists in the territory they have already captured rather than waiting for them to arrive on our soil.”⁴⁷ The same applied to extremists from neighboring Central Asia and the Caucasus, since Russia has essentially no border controls with Kazakhstan and few with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan, all of which have had homegrown extremist violence of varying severity and were the source of foreign fighters in Syria. Perhaps even more threatening than the extremists’ return was the prospect of their victory, since they could use Syria as a base for attacking Russia and their victory could inspire, radicalize, and galvanize the remaining extremist groups in and near Russia. If Russia had not intervened, as Gerasimov put it,

ISIS would have continued to gather momentum and would have spread to adjacent countries We would have had to confront that force on our own territory. They would be operating in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Volga region [of Russia].⁴⁸

Several Western analysts have questioned the sincerity of Russia’s threat perception regarding transnational terrorism because of the VKS’s subsequent bombing of moderate opposition groups.⁴⁹ Florence Gaub, a European scholar, called it “Russia’s non-war on Daesh,” alleging that “Russia’s military campaign in Syria has been a masterpiece in strategic disinformation.” Instead of fighting ISIS,

Assessing the Threat from (and to) Russia and Central Asia, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2017.

⁴⁶ Maria Tsvetkova, “How Russia Allowed Homegrown Radicals to Go and Fight in Syria,” Reuters, May 13, 2016.

⁴⁷ President of Russia, “Meeting with Government Members,” September 30, 2015c.

⁴⁸ Baranets, 2017.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Charles Lister, “Russia’s Intervention in Syria: Protracting an Already Endless Conflict,” Brookings Institution, October 21, 2015.

Moscow was helping the Syrian regime crush the only viable political alternative left . . . reduc[ing] the complexities of the Syrian war to a binary choice between the Assad regime and a takeover by Islamic extremists.⁵⁰

She and others argued that fighting ISIS was merely a cover story for Russia's support to the Assad regime.⁵¹

It is doubtless true that Russia's air campaign, particularly in its initial phases, targeted the groups threatening Syrian government-controlled territory, which were the opposition forces.⁵² (In later phases, as noted earlier, Moscow did target ISIS.) From the Russian perspective, however, these actions were wholly consistent with its declared counter-terror objective. Moscow's theory of victory in Syria held that the only way to defeat terrorism was to restore the functioning of the Syrian government, or what Putin called its statehood (*gosudarstvennost'*).⁵³ As he put it, "There is no other solution to the Syrian crisis other than strengthening the existing legitimate state institutions, supporting them in the fight against terrorism."⁵⁴ This view was partly a function of the Russian establishment's approach to governance generally, which emphasizes a strong state as a prerequisite for all other public goods. But, in the Syria case specifically, it had a battlefield logic. Because Russia was not prepared to commit large numbers of ground forces, it needed to strengthen the Syrian military so that it could lead the ground campaign. Two days before the intervention began, Putin said,

⁵⁰ Florence Gaub, "Russia's Non-War on Daesh," in Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru, eds., *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?* Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, Chaliott Paper No. 146, July 2018.

⁵¹ See, for example, Maksymilian Cziperski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Frederic Hof, and Ben Nimmo, *Distract, Deceive, Destroy: Putin at War in Syria*, Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2016.

⁵² Patrick Wintour, "Russia and US 'Planning Military Coordination Against ISIS in Syria,'" *The Guardian*, March 30, 2016; Lavrov, 2016.

⁵³ As Putin said, "We are not so much defending President Assad as we are Syrian statehood" (President of Russia, "St Petersburg International Economic Forum Plenary Meeting," June 2, 2017).

⁵⁴ President of Russia, "Interv'yu amerikanskomu zhurnalistu Charli Rouzu dlya telekanalov CBS i PBS," September 29, 2015b.

Except for Assad's army, there is no one else at all who is fighting ISIS on the ground . . . Minor airstrikes, including those carried out by the U.S. Air Force, do not address the core of the problem. You would need actions taken on the ground after the strikes; these activities must be tightly coordinated. You need to understand what strikes are needed, where they are needed, and who will advance on the ground after the strikes. In Syria, there is no other force [to do this] except for Assad's army.⁵⁵

Concentrating attacks on those groups that represented the greatest threat to the Assad government was therefore entirely consistent with countering the terrorist threat, from the Russian perspective.⁵⁶ There certainly were alternative approaches to achieving Moscow's counterterrorist objectives, such as focusing on a transition to a more inclusive political system, but Russian strategists have tended to favor counterinsurgency approaches that strengthen secular strongmen.

The collapse of the Assad regime presented more than just the threat of terrorism from Moscow's perspective. Many in the Russian establishment are convinced that the string of U.S.-led interventions that have resulted in regime change since the end of the Cold War—Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya—and what they see as Western-backed popular uprisings that oust sitting leaders (as in the color revolutions) establish dangerous precedents that could be used against Russia. As the Defense Intelligence Agency observed,

Moscow worries that U.S. attempts to dictate a set of acceptable international norms threatens the foundations of Kremlin power by giving license for foreign meddling in Russia's internal affairs. . . . The Kremlin is convinced the United States is laying the groundwork for regime change in Russia.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ President of Russia, 2015b.

⁵⁶ Yuri Barmin, "A Critical Look at Mainstream Analysis of the Russian Operation in Syria," Russian International Affairs Council, April 6, 2016.

⁵⁷ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations*, Washington, D.C., 2017.

Although a Libya-style military intervention to oust Assad was not on the table in 2015, the regime's collapse at the hands of the rebels was almost equally problematic. In Moscow's view, the opposition groups were proxies for the West and its regional allies, which supported the armed groups to depose a regime that was not adequately compliant. The Arab Spring uprisings generally seemed to many in Moscow to be a repeat of the revolutions in its neighborhood that produced political change in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in 2003, 2004, and 2005, respectively, and again in Ukraine in 2014. Moscow came to see these uprisings as a tool of Western (particularly, U.S.) policy. The tool was allegedly deployed to remove sitting governments that pursued policies counter to U.S. interests and replace them with pliable figures or, if all else failed, to sow sheer disorder. The Russian military has a detailed schematic for this purported policy, beginning with Western governments sponsoring efforts to train opposition movements and then delegitimizing sitting governments, sparking protests, and so on until the final act of installing a puppet regime.⁵⁸ In fact, Russian strategists originally used the term "hybrid war" to describe this perceived Western tactic.⁵⁹

Assad's overthrow at the hands of a rebel coalition backed by the United States and its allies would have further legitimized the practice of regime change through such hybrid tactics.⁶⁰ Moscow thus prioritized stopping regime change in Syria as a forward defense of its own regime. Importantly, the Russian establishment does not differentiate between such an external threat to regime security and threats to national security. This conflation is not merely a function of the Kremlin's drive for self-preservation. Because the threat to the regime is con-

⁵⁸ See presentations by Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov at the third annual Moscow Conference on International Security, available at Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, "MCIS: Moskovskaya Konferentsiya po Mezhdunarodnoi bezopasnosti, webpage, undated. For an English-language summary, see Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, 2014.

⁵⁹ See Samuel Charap, "The Ghost of Hybrid War," *Survival*, Vol. 57, No. 6, November 2015.

⁶⁰ Aleksandr Bartosh, "Strategiya i Kontrstrategiya Gibridnoi Voiny [Hybrid War Strategy and Counter-Strategy]," *Voennaya mysl'*, No. 10, October 2018

ceived of as a Western effort to weaken Russia and replace its leadership with one willing to follow orders, Russia does not make a clear distinction between the two. By intervening in Syria, Russia sought to prevent the success (and thus legitimization) of a tactic that could eventually be used against it. Once Assad's fall seemed inevitable, Russia's global pushback against regime change dictated that it take action.

Factor 2: Regional Power Balance

Although the Russian government may have been somewhat flexible about who would rule Syria in a postconflict context, it certainly wanted to avoid a new government in Damascus that was inimical to Moscow and would evict Russia from its only toehold in the Middle East. Moscow only had Damascus as a partner of any significance in the region, aside from its often-fraught relationship with Tehran. No other country in the region hosted Russian military and intelligence facilities. Unlike essentially all of the other major regional powers at the time, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, Syria had an adversarial relationship with the United States and thus was not a close partner for the U.S. military and did not host U.S. bases. There were fairly strong military-to-military links between Moscow and Damascus as well. And recent evidence suggested that Western-led regime change in the region caused damage to Russian interests. After Libya's Gaddafi fell in 2011, Russia lost at least \$4 billion in arms deals and reportedly tens of billions of dollars in other potential contracts.⁶¹

In the Syria case, Moscow clearly assumed that if Assad fell at the hands of the insurgency, the new government would likely cut ties and evict Russian personnel from the country as punishment for Moscow's support of the regime. Although Russia's relationship with Syria was less important than its relationship with partners in other regions, the long history of relations resulted in military facilities that provided lim-

⁶¹ Alexei Anishchuk, "Gaddafi Fall Cost Russia Tens of Blns in Arms Deals," Reuters, November 2, 2011.

ited power projection capabilities in the Middle East. Had the regime fallen, Russia likely would have lost those assets. Prior to the conflict, Russia maintained a small naval facility in Tartus that served primarily as a refueling point; at the time the intervention began, the facility was too small to host large warships. It housed a small contingent of sailors and support personnel.⁶²

As the war dragged on and the calls for Assad to go grew more insistent, Russia began to see geopolitical machinations as the key drivers of Western and regional Sunni-led states' policies. In 2012, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the Syrian conflict revealed a process of "reformatting the geopolitical map of the Middle East, where different players are trying to secure their own geopolitical positions." Specifically, many states supporting the opposition are "openly say[ing] that it is necessary to deprive Iran of its closest ally."⁶³ Because Assad's enemies were attempting to use the conflict to change the regional power balance in their favor, Moscow had incentive to push back to maintain the status quo ante, which meant an Iran- and Russia-friendly regime in Damascus. Although Russia found itself tactically allied with Iran as a result, it has made clear that it does not share Tehran's sectarian agenda and has strengthened dialogue with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states on the Syria crisis.

Brian Lampert invokes prospect theory, which holds that "actors are more risk acceptant when they perceive themselves to be losing, and more risk adverse when they are winning," to help explain the Russian decision to intervene. He argues that Putin, as a revisionist who was unhappy with the way events were unfolding, desired "to return to an acceptable status quo that represents a continued economic partner and Arab ally." Putin was in a "losses frame" and "willing to make risky gambles to improve his position."⁶⁴ The collapse of the Assad regime

⁶² Frank Gardner, "How Vital Is Syria's Tartus Port to Russia?" *BBC News*, June 27, 2012.

⁶³ Vladislav Vorob'ev, "Za i PROtiv: Sergei Lavrov o vneshnepoliticheskikh vragakh, o vozmozhnoi voine mezhdru SShA i Iranom i mnogom drugom," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, October 24, 2012.

⁶⁴ Brian Lampert, "Putin's Prospects: Vladimir Putin's Decision-Making Through the Lens of Prospect Theory," *Small Wars Journal*, February 15, 2016.

also would have been a major drop in Russia's regional clout. However, it does not seem that the regional power balance concerns were enough to produce the intervention by themselves.

Factor 3: National Status Concerns

Reinforcing Russia's great-power status is a central preoccupation of Russian foreign policy. Moscow wants a say on all matters of global importance and wants to be taken seriously as a truly independent player with its own voice. Practically, this means reinforcing the centrality of the UNSC and the UN system generally, given Russia's veto power there.⁶⁵ It also means pioneering Russia-led or heavily Russia-influenced international organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union.⁶⁶ Maintaining nuclear parity with the United States is another manifestation, as is having the ability to project power outside Russia's immediate neighborhood. Moscow believes that great powers should also cooperate with other great powers; Russia should therefore be able to work with the United States, Europe, China, and others on shared challenges.

Russia's status pretensions were under significant strain in 2015. In the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, the United States and the EU imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions on Moscow. The diplomatic efforts, as then President Obama put it, to "isolate" Russia struck at the heart of Moscow's great-power status.⁶⁷ In March 2014, Russia was kicked out of the Group of Eight, the group of industrialized countries that Russia

⁶⁵ Sergei Karaganov, *Strategiya dlya Rossii: rossiiskaya vnesbnyaya politika: konets 2010-kh — nachalo 2020-kh godov*, Moscow: Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, May, 2016, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Ivan Timofeev, *Theses on Russia's Foreign Policy and Global Positioning (2017–2024)*, Moscow: Center for Strategic Research and Russian International Affairs Council, June 2017, pp. 18–21.

⁶⁷ Zeke J. Miller, "Obama: U.S. Working to 'Isolate Russia,'" *Time*, March 3, 2014.

was admitted to in the 1990s, which was seen as a symbol of Russia's global importance and its involvement in major power decisionmaking. The same month, NATO suspended the NATO-Russia Council, the consultative body where Russia and NATO allies designed joint projects and aired mutual grievances. The EU canceled its presidential-level summits with Russia (involving the President of the European Commission, the President of the European Council, and the revolving chair of the Council), which were held twice per year. The United States disbanded the U.S.-Russia bilateral presidential commission, which had over a dozen working groups. Agencies were instructed to cut off contact with Russian counterparts except when absolutely necessary. Even the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) scientists stopped working with Russia's Roscosmos, with the exception of matters concerning the International Space Station.⁶⁸ At the Group of 20 meeting in Australia in November 2014, Putin was shunned by the other leaders and departed early.⁶⁹ Obama even dismissed Russia publicly as a "regional power . . . acting out of weakness."⁷⁰

It was during this period of attempted Western diplomatic isolation that the decision to intervene in Syria was taken. One of the drivers of that decision was that Syria would increase Russia's leverage with the West and return Russia to its rightful place in the international system. Moscow did not want to have its relations with the world defined exclusively by the Ukraine crisis; it would not acquiesce to regional-power status. One motive for the intervention, therefore, as a Russian scholar put it, was "to use the Syria card to force the United States to talk to Russia again on security matters of mutual concern."⁷¹ The day before the Russian operation began in Syria, Putin proposed

⁶⁸ Kenneth Chang and Peter Baker, "NASA Breaks Most Contact with Russia," *New York Times*, April 3, 2014.

⁶⁹ Andrew Stevens, "G20 Leaders Bask in Warm Aussie Spring, but Reception for Russia's Putin Is Chilly," *CNN*, November 14, 2014.

⁷⁰ Scott Wilson, "Obama Dismisses Russia as 'Regional Power' Acting Out of Weakness," *Washington Post*, March 25, 2014.

⁷¹ Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia and Conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalisation and Implications for the West," *International Spectator*, Vol. 53, No. 4, 2018, p. 53.

a counterterrorism coalition with the West at the UN General Assembly, comparing it to the World War II-era alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States against Nazi Germany.⁷² The feeling, according to a well-connected Russian journalist, was that “Russia’s military foray into the Middle East meant it couldn’t be ignored.”⁷³

Factor 4: Military Capabilities

Russia’s ability to carry out the Syria operation took many observers by surprise. Many were dubious that Russia could conduct an out-of-area expeditionary bombing campaign, given the disastrous performance of its air force in the 2008 Georgia war. In the intervening years, however, a variety of reforms were implemented to address the problems that the Georgia conflict laid bare. By the time the Syria campaign began, there had been changes to personnel structure; command and control enhancements amid broader command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) advances; improvements to Russian aerospace forces capabilities; and the introduction of precision-strike weapons. Over the course of the campaign, Russian forces demonstrated the ability to conduct complex operations far from home with minimal casualties. It is unlikely that the Kremlin would have taken the decision to intervene had these reforms and capability enhancements not been implemented.

Following the war with Georgia, Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov introduced the New Look reforms, which would address five major issues:

- bringing units to “permanent readiness”
- refining command and control
- improving training, military education, and military science
- introducing modern, high-tech weaponry

⁷² President of Russia, “70th Session of the UN General Assembly,” September 28, 2015a.

⁷³ Mikhail Zygar, “The Russian Reset That Never Was,” *Foreign Policy*, December 9, 2016b.

- raising the quality of life for service members.⁷⁴

The Russian military in the 1990s and early 2000s relied heavily on conscription, a Soviet-era legacy that produced a force geared toward World War II–style conflicts. Russian strategists in the 21st century foresaw a shift in modern warfare to a “rapidly escalating event” unlike the “slow-building, mass-mobilization” conflicts of the 20th century; this shift toward modern warfare would require “agility and high trained personnel to operate complex equipment and perform sophisticated tasks.”⁷⁵ As part of the New Look reforms, conscripts’ service terms were reduced from two years to one. The subsequent dearth of personnel required an increase in contract service members to fill the gaps; by 2015, contract personnel outnumbered conscripts for the first time in Russian history. In Syria, there have been no deployments of conscripts.⁷⁶ Improved tactical aviation pilot training was also crucial for the campaign. In 2008, average flight time per pilot ranged from ten to 30 hours annually; by the end of 2011, the average had risen to 90 hours per pilot annually, and a new standard was set at 130 hours per pilot annually beginning in 2012.⁷⁷ In addition, the Russian military benefited from training and testing of combat support functions, which were organized in 2010 as a unified logistics office, Material-Technical Support, led by a deputy minister of defense.⁷⁸ Although the new functions were mostly developed to enhance strategic mobility across Russia, they were easily adapted for the purposes of the Syria operation. As Roger McDermott argues, by the time Russia launched

⁷⁴ President of Russia, “Vstupitel’noe slovo na vstreche s komanduyushchimi voennymi okrugami,” September 26, 2008b. For further discussion of the events leading up to the 2008 reforms, see Charles K. Bartles, “Defense Reforms of Russian Defense Minister Anatolii Serdyukov,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2011.

⁷⁵ Dara Massicot, “Appendix D: Military Personnel Policy,” in Radin et al., 2019a.

⁷⁶ Anton Lavrov, *Russian Military Reforms from Georgia to Syria*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2018, p. 3.

⁷⁷ “Novyi god uchebnykh srazhenii,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, December 1, 2011.

⁷⁸ “Perekhod k edinoi sisteme material’no-tekhnicheskogo obespecheniya vooruzhennykh sil,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, December 25, 2010.

its operation in Syria, it had “overcome traditional reliance upon railway infrastructure, geographically impossible in its Syria intervention, and greatly enhanced its use of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and air lines of communication (ALOCs).”⁷⁹ Without these new capacities, it is doubtful that the Russian military could have implemented the Kremlin’s decision to intervene.

Central to the Russian military’s sloppy performance during the 2008 conflict with Georgia were the outdated command and control structures in place. Friendly fire incidents caused approximately half of the losses of Russian aircraft. Anton Lavrov argues that, in effect, the army and air force “were essentially waging two separate wars” because of the lack of proper coordination between the branches.⁸⁰ Pilots received faulty intelligence, forces lacked detailed information about Georgian air defenses, and the army fired on aircraft before attempting to identify them.⁸¹ In some cases, commanders reportedly resorted to using mobile phones—sometimes not even their own—to issue orders.⁸²

Amid a broader C4ISR overhaul, the New Look reforms sought to cut through the overly bureaucratic command and control structure to address these shortcomings. These efforts led to consolidated command relationships, restructured Russian military districts to allow for improved joint operations, and the leveraging of technological improvements to enhance battlespace awareness.⁸³ In addition, a modern, high-tech National Defense Management Center came online in 2014 that provides real-time situational awareness for the entirety of the Russian interagency.⁸⁴ By the time Russian forces arrived in Syria, the military

⁷⁹ Roger McDermott, “Russia’s Strategic Mobility and Its Military Deployment in Syria,” Swedish Defence Research Agency, RUFs Briefing No. 31, November 2015.

⁸⁰ Lavrov, 2010a, p. 105.

⁸¹ Lavrov, 2010a, p. 105.

⁸² Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, “Russia’s War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, June 2009, p. 407.

⁸³ Dara Massicot, “Appendix I: C4ISR,” in Radin et al., 2019b, pp. 157–159.

⁸⁴ “Natsional’nyi tsentr upravleniya oboronoi RF zastupit na boevoe dezhurstvo 1 dekabr’a,” *TASS*, October 26, 2014.

had a suite of new technology at its disposal that could transmit tactical, operational, and strategic information to and from headquarters.⁸⁵ It seems unlikely that the mission could have been conducted without these enhancements.

Russia's operations in Syria relied on an effective aerospace force (the VKS), which has benefited greatly from its own C4ISR enhancements. The New Look reforms combined disparate air assets into the VKS, which had under its command the air force, the Air Defense Forces, missile defense, satellite launch facilities, and the military satellite constellation.⁸⁶ A large increase in funding in the 2010–2020 State Armament Program led to the procurement of high-tech, multipurpose fighters and strategic bombers, as well as new air defense assets and improved space assets (particularly, an upgraded constellation of navigation satellites).⁸⁷ Priority has been placed on multifunctional fighters: The number of advanced aircraft procured increased from one in 2008 to 101 in 2014 and 89 in 2015. Table 5.1 shows annual procurement of aircraft, which includes advanced MiG, Su, and Yak variants. The majority of new procurements occurred in the lead-up to the Syria intervention, augmenting Russia's capabilities well beyond what it had even in 2012.

The capability improvements are demonstrated by the low number of aircraft losses during the campaign. Over the two and a half years from the start of operations to early 2018, Russia lost five

Table 5.1
Russian Military Aircraft Procurement

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Total procurement	1	39	16	19	89	61	101	89

SOURCE: "Postavki boevykh samoletov v Vooruzhennyye Sily Rossii v 2017 godu," *bmpd*, Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies blog, January 5, 2018.

⁸⁵ Lavrov, 2018b, p. 7.

⁸⁶ Lavrov, 2018b, p. 15.

⁸⁷ Lavrov, 2018b, pp. 16–18.

fighters (in addition, one transport aircraft crashed accidentally, and helicopters fared worse, with 11 shot down or crashing and two experiencing accidents).⁸⁸ In contrast, Russia lost six fighters to Georgian fire, friendly fire, and accidents in the five days of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War.⁸⁹ Had Russia lost its initially deployed airframes at that rate during the Syria campaign, all 32 would have been destroyed in approximately one month.

New conventional precision-strike weapons have been used regularly in Syria.⁹⁰ The Russian Navy has launched more than 100 cruise missiles at targets in Syria from ships in the Mediterranean and Caspian Seas (some 1,000 km away from the theater).⁹¹ Although these strikes may not have been the key element of the Syria campaign, they have served as a proof of concept for Russia's long-range, precision-strike capabilities.

Summary

A confluence of factors produced the Russian decision to intervene in Syria (see Table 5.2 for a summary). The implications of the evolving situation on the ground represented the immediate driver. The trend lines in the Syrian civil war were increasingly disconcerting to Moscow in mid-2015. It seems clear that the Kremlin concluded that Assad's days were numbered. Further, Moscow saw significant consequences for Russia's national security that would result from Assad's forced removal from power at the hands of rebels backed by the United States and its regional allies and other armed groups, including extremists (such as ISIS). Given the large number of Russian-speaking extremists in Syria and close links between those groups and ones operating in the Russian North Caucasus, Moscow saw a direct external threat of terrorism. We also know that preventing Assad's forced departure

⁸⁸ Lavrov, 2018a, p. 21.

⁸⁹ Lavrov, 2010a, p. 104.

⁹⁰ Edward Geist, "Appendix G: Long-Range Strike," in Radin et al., 2019, p. 115.

⁹¹ Lavrov, 2018b, p. 20.

Table 5.2
Summary of Analysis of Factors for Syria Intervention Case Study

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
External threat	• Strong Russian concern about terrorist threat. • Counter-regime change effort is consistent with long-standing Russian policy.	• Initial focus of the bombing campaign on non-ISIS groups. • No direct statements by officials.	• Likely a significant factor, certainly key to the timing.
Regional power balance	• Assad regime was Russia's last remaining strategic partner in the region and only host of military facilities.	• The Middle East was not previously seen as crucial for Russia.	• Concern about the regional balance was likely less acute than concern about the external threats.
National status concerns	• Western attempt at isolation immediately preceded the intervention. • Pattern of Russia seeking cooperation with the West in Syria.	• Intervention in Syria was not the only or necessarily the most logical response to the circumstances of summer 2015.	• Significant factor, but likely not as urgent or pressing as the external threat.
Military capabilities	• Several aspects of the Syria campaign would have been essentially impossible without post-2008 reforms.	• Much of the Syria operation did not involve Russia's newest or most sophisticated platforms.	• Necessary facilitator for the intervention.

was consistent with Russia's broader counter-regime change agenda. Russian decisionmakers saw what they perceived to be a U.S. policy of ousting governments that do not do its bidding as a direct threat to the security of their regime. When diplomatic efforts and military assistance proved insufficient to stop such perceived efforts in Syria, Moscow turned to military intervention.

The regional power balance and national status concerns also were important factors. Assad's ouster clearly would have had negative consequences for Russia's regional standing: His regime was one of Moscow's few remaining close partners in the region and the only one willing to host Russian military and intelligence facilities. But given the secondary importance of the Middle East in Russian foreign policy at the time, this loss of clout in itself was unlikely to have been an important factor in driving the risky decision to intervene.

National status concerns also factored into the Russian calculus. The Syria intervention was a tool to break out of the Western attempt to isolate Russia following the annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine. It was likely seen as a way to force Washington and key regional players to take Moscow's interests into account in Syria and to create a basis for a return to what Russian elites see as normal great-power cooperation on regional crises. The drive to reassert great-power status was clearly a factor in Russian decisionmaking on Syria, but there were other ways to address status concerns.

Finally, the change in Russia's military capabilities was a key enabling factor of the intervention. Without the New Look reforms, it would have been practically impossible for Moscow to have intervened in the way that it did.

In this case, it appears that the latter three factors—regional power balance, national status concerns, and military capabilities—were the most important overall drivers, but the external threat was the immediate trigger that determined the timing of the decision to intervene.

Was Syria a One-Off?

Therefore, an unusual confluence of circumstances in the Syria case drove the intervention. But it is not impossible to imagine that such circumstances could be replicated in another country. The emergence

of a violent insurgency that challenges a sitting government in the region (e.g., in Iran) could theoretically pose similar terrorist and/or regime-change threats to Russia, shift power balances in ways contrary to Moscow's interests, and invoke great-power status concerns. And the military capabilities on display in Syria are possible to deploy somewhat further afield, particularly given Russia's new air and naval facilities in Syria. Today, however, there are no signs of such circumstances emerging in any state in the region. Globally, Venezuela might qualify, given the situation as of this writing in which a U.S.-backed opposition is challenging a Russia-backed incumbent. But the opposition there is unarmed, and the location far from Russia creates serious logistical challenges for a full-fledged military intervention as we have defined it. And there is no terrorist threat to Russia emanating from the Venezuela crisis.

Another *sui generis* aspect of the Syria case is the nature of the Syrian theater. Russia could arrange overflight rights with Iran and Iraq to move its airframes to Syria, unlike (for example) in Kosovo in 1999, when European states denied Russia airspace access to move more forces to Pristina to reinforce the small contingent that had "dashed" to the airport there. There were military facilities in Syria—including the naval facility and the airbase—that Russia could use. Russia had partners in the Assad regime and Iran and its proxies that were willing to do the lion's share of the fighting on the ground, allowing the Kremlin to avoid significant casualties. Moscow had significant knowledge of the terrain thanks to its signals intelligence facilities there and had a relatively strong military-to-military relationship with the government. Among states beyond post-Soviet Eurasia, none was so relatively accommodating as Syria for a Russian intervention.

In short, a Syria-like intervention is unlikely to be repeated, barring an exogenous shock and assuming previous patterns of Russian behavior hold. As we have seen in the years since the Syria intervention, Moscow has developed a capacity for other types of interventions beyond those assessed in this study—such as those involving private military contractors—and seems reluctant to stretch its uniformed military further, given ongoing operations in Syria and Ukraine.

Conclusion

In this report, we have closely examined Russia's military interventions through three lenses: a review of the literature on Russia's interventions, organized according to a set of factors derived from the general political science literature on interventions; an analysis of the quantitative data set generated for this project; and two in-depth case studies.

Table 6.1 summarizes the findings of these three approaches. External threats, national status concerns, and regional power balances seem to be the most consistently important drivers of Russian interventions (particularly combat interventions). Several insights emerge from a closer examination of the evidence.

The first is perhaps unsurprising for close observers of Russian foreign policy: Moscow has demonstrated a persistent willingness to intervene in post-Soviet Eurasia since 1992. There have always been multiple interventions ongoing in that region during this period. The majority of Russia's 25 interventions have taken place in post-Soviet Eurasia. The literature review and the case studies demonstrate that the main drivers of Russia's interventions stem from dynamics specific to the region. Moscow's great-power status is directly linked to its role as regional hegemon. Its concern for regional power balances is far and away most acute in this region. The Kremlin seems to assume that a favorable power balance in post-Soviet Eurasia is essential for Russia. And many of the acute external threats to Russia's security are seen to stem from post-Soviet Eurasia, such as instability, regime change, terrorism, or immediate threats to Russian forces stationed in the region. It is telling that these drivers determined Russia's behavior during Yelt-

Table 6.1
Summary of Evidence for Factors Driving Russian Military Interventions

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
National status concerns	Reinforcing great-power status is a central preoccupation in Moscow. That status has been defined in ways—i.e., being a regional hegemon and a core player in global decisionmaking—that have driven interventions.	Limited.	Moscow is willing to intervene militarily to reinforce its great-power status.
Regional power balance	- Preventing perceived NATO/U.S. encroachment in post-Soviet Eurasia has been a key driver of combat and other interventions in the region. - Concerns about the implications of Assad's collapse for Russia's regional stature were also important in that case.	- Limited. - Russia's influence in the Middle East has not previously been seen as a major priority for Moscow.	- Key driver; Russia is willing to devote significant military resources to creating what amounts to a buffer zone on its periphery. - Secondary driver beyond post-Soviet Eurasia.
External threat to sovereignty	- Terrorism, regional instability, and direct attacks on Russian forces seem to have been either immediate triggers for combat interventions or overall drivers for noncombat regional deployments. - Concern about implications of regime change for regime security is consistent over time.	Some cast doubt on the extent to which Russian leaders' stated threat perceptions are genuine.	In the two case studies, responding to external threats was the proximate trigger of the intervention. More broadly, a threat-centric mentality regarding post-Soviet Eurasia ensures that Russia's deterrence interventions there are likely to last for years to come.

Table 6.1—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Military capabilities	In the Syria case, key capabilities that Russia developed after the post-2008 New Look reforms were necessary factors to enable the intervention.	Beyond the Syria case, none of the interventions under consideration here have required capabilities that the Russian military (even at its weakest state) could not muster.	Important enabler of combat interventions beyond post-Soviet Eurasia. Capability enhancements have allowed Russia to have a far longer reach with its military than any time since the Soviet era.
Leadership and personality	The hypercentralized and personalized nature of the Russian system makes Putin's role important for any major decision.	Putin's views are not outside the Russian elite mainstream. Plausible alternative leaders might well have taken the same decisions.	Not a central factor in explaining Russia's interventions.
Coidentity groups in host	Russian rhetoric on this issue has raised a variety of concerns.	No evidence to suggest that this factor has been a determinant of Russian actions absent other drivers.	At most, a secondary factor.
Domestic politics and legitimacy	- Bureaucratic politics was an important factor in the early post-Soviet period. - Putin's popularity has been boosted by the Crimea intervention.	- As the state consolidated in the early 2000s, bureaucratic politics was no longer a significant factor. - At most, there is limited evidence to suggest that concerns about legitimacy were the driver of interventions.	At most, a secondary factor.

Table 6.1—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Alliance or partnership with host	• Russia has several treaty allies to which it is bound by collective defense guarantees. It maintains several bases on the territory of its allies. • Relations with separatists in post-Soviet Eurasia are long-standing. • Russia saved the Assad regime.	• Alliance commitments have never been tested. Regional deterrence and signaling missions (bases) seem equally driven by factors unrelated to alliance obligations. • Relations with separatists have been far from smooth. Moscow has instrumentalized separatists when it perceived the need. • Assad had mostly instrumental value for Russia.	• One of the drivers of deterrence and signaling missions (bases). • Alliance commitments have never been tested. • Commitment to separatists is not a central driver in itself, but it is difficult to disaggregate, given Russian citizens' presence. • In itself, the partnership with Syria was not a significant factor.
Ideology	Factor not evaluated in detail; initial assessment suggested very limited role		
Economic interests	Factor not evaluated in detail; initial assessment suggested very limited role		

sin's presidency, long before the New Look reforms modernized Russia's military.

The second implication stemming from this report is that concerns about national status and the regional power balance appear to be constants in Russia's decisionmaking on military interventions. The persistence of these drivers for Russia's interventions matches their persistent role in Moscow's foreign policy generally. On the one hand, this is an important insight for understanding potential future drivers of Russia's interventions: We should expect these two factors to play important roles. On the other hand, these factors are possibly less useful for prediction because of their consistent importance for Russian decisionmaking over time. They would need to be supplemented by granular data on how Russian perceptions of these factors are shifting and by a nuanced understanding of the threshold for intervention. In other words, we would need to know how acute Moscow's concerns are at a given moment, not just the fact that such concerns exist.

A third observation is that, at least for the two case studies, Russia's combat interventions (although resulting from a range of factors) were immediately triggered by a perceived urgent external threat. Without the Georgian assault on Tskhinvali and the terrorist and regime-change threats resulting from the perceived imminent collapse of Assad in Syria, it is unlikely that Russia would have intervened. Russia engaged in combat only when it felt the necessity to respond to a development on the ground that posed a pressing threat. Moscow sought to achieve its objectives using coercive measures short of military intervention. It undertook combat missions, judging from the two case studies, only when it felt forced by circumstances. Moscow attempted to force Tbilisi to back down using means short of intervention, and the decision to intervene (by our definition) was reactive, even if the broader policy of coercion was proactive.

The other two combat missions undertaken in the past 15 years—Crimea and the Donbas—do not fit this pattern. In neither case was there a plausible imminent external security threat. And Moscow certainly acted preemptively in the case of Crimea. This divergence could be explained by the extremely high level of importance of Ukraine for Russia. For a variety of strategic, political, economic, and

cultural reasons, Russia has more interests at stake there than elsewhere in the region and even globally. It is possible that Ukraine in 2014 was the only setting thus far where Moscow has had sufficient interests at stake to engage in a preemptive combat operation. The timing of the Syria intervention, which began a year later than the two Ukraine cases, suggests that there has not been a dramatic paradigm shift toward preemptive action after those cases. It is possible, however, that other circumstances that are similarly exceptional to those in Ukraine in 2014 might materialize in the future. In short, although Russia generally seems more reactive in its decisionmaking about combat interventions and prefers to rely on other means of coercion until its vital interests are directly threatened, Moscow might decide to be proactive in special circumstances (particularly relating to events in its neighborhood).

Fourth, the one combat intervention beyond post-Soviet Eurasia—Syria—does not appear to be setting the stage for a series of such interventions. The drivers of that intervention—the combination of external threat, status concerns, and regional power balance—are not commonly encountered. Although the Syria operation has demonstrated to the world and proven to the skeptics within the Russian government that the post-New Look military is capable of conducting limited (by U.S. standards) out-of-area operations, there were several factors specific to Syria—for example, air access to the theater, access to bases—that made the intervention possible. The success of the Syria intervention may have made the Kremlin more likely to consider undertaking an expeditionary intervention, but there are still significant logistical challenges for the Russian military beyond post-Soviet Eurasia. Afghanistan, which borders Tajikistan (the country that hosts Russia's largest foreign base, including an air detachment), would not pose such logistical challenges, at least in the northern part of the country. A major advance for ISIS there could ramp up threat perceptions in Moscow regarding terrorist threats to the homeland. A response to such a development involving, for example, air strikes is certainly possible. But that would be an intervention of a far lesser scale than the kind of sustained operation over the course of more than four years far away from existing Russian bases that we saw in Syria.

Fifth, Putin's eventual departure is unlikely to change the patterns observed here. Assuming that the next Russian leader reflects similar views that produced the interventions described here, which are common throughout the Russian elite, we would not expect a change in leadership to lead to dramatic changes in Russian patterns of military intervention. None of the key factors highlighted in our analysis are specific to Putin. Much commentary on Russian interventions that portray them as a function of Putin's character, therefore, obscures more than it illuminates.

Signposts of Russian Military Interventions

These results point to several signposts that could allow policymakers and planners to identify and anticipate Russian military interventions.

The first signposts are region-specific developments. Changes on the ground in post-Soviet Eurasia—particularly in Ukraine—that create an external threat or the perception of a rapid change in the regional balance or in Russia's status in ways that contradict Moscow's interests should be seen as potential triggers for military action. Moscow will not hesitate to act, including with force, in its immediate neighborhood. That said, not every change is likely to precipitate a military response, just those that invoke one or more of the drivers identified in this report.

Second, Russia seems to act in ways that are consistent with a desire to avoid losses when it comes to regional power balances. Moscow has intervened when it perceived regional balances to be shifting away from a status quo that was favorable to Russian interests. In Syria, for example, Russia's intervention was partly intended to prevent the loss of Russian influence in the region, not to shift existing regional balances in its favor. In Georgia, Moscow moved to block Tbilisi's assertion of control over South Ossetia; it was preventing a potential change to a status quo (South Ossetia's being beyond central government control). In short, prevention of imminent loss could push Russia to act. Therefore, U.S. planners should view potential future significant (perceived) losses for Russia as potential signposts for military action.

Third, although Russia intervenes in some cases in response to exogenous shocks, it often openly signals its interests and even its red-lines. In the Georgian case, Moscow made clear that it anticipated the need to act following the Bucharest Summit. With Ukraine, Russia had for years made clear that it would react to perceived Western encroachment. Although Russian leaders have frequently uttered untruths about their country's actions and interests, there are genuine signals within the noise.

Taken together, these signposts suggest that Russia is most likely to intervene to prevent erosion of its influence in its neighborhood, particularly following a shock that portends such an erosion occurring rapidly. If there were to be a regime change in a core Russian regional ally, such as Belarus or Armenia, that brought to power a government hostile to Moscow's interests, it is possible (if not likely) that a military intervention could ensue.

Implications for the Army

The U.S. Army is active throughout the U.S. European Command Area of Responsibility, which includes six of the 11 post-Soviet Eurasian states, and is present, to a lesser extent, in Syria and the five post-Soviet Central Asian states, where Russia has ongoing interventions. Hence, understanding where, when, and why Moscow might intervene is critical to U.S. Army planners' ability to anticipate where they might encounter Russian forces. Such an understanding is crucial for avoiding unintended escalation, anticipating where a potential clash might occur, and understanding where other nonkinetic efforts may be required to counter potential Russian threats to U.S. interests.

First and foremost, our analysis reinforces the fact that Russia is willing to go to extreme lengths to pursue its interests in post-Soviet Eurasia. With the exception of Syria and Russian participation in multilateral peacekeeping missions, all of Russia's interventions have occurred in the region. Ukraine appears to be the only country where Moscow has engaged in combat without the trigger of an imminent perceived threat to its security. The U.S. Army should carefully consider any moves it makes in the region to avoid being caught in a fight

in which Russia has local military advantages and a far greater level of interest. Although U.S. military cooperation with states in the region has not yet proven a *casus belli* for Russia, and it seems unlikely that it would (as long as this cooperation does not imply a U.S. security guarantee or other change that would dramatically shift the regional balance of power), it is important to factor in the possible escalation risk when evaluating potential partner engagements.

Second, as the U.S. Army increases its posture in Poland and the Baltic States in response to allies' concerns about potential Russian aggression, it should keep in mind Moscow's loss-prevention mindset. Russia has enjoyed a favorable military balance in the Baltic region since 1992. The deployment of NATO enhanced forward presence battalions to the region has not fundamentally altered that balance. Indeed, the same is likely true of further modest enhancements to ground force presence in the region. However, if the posture enhancements continue to grow, we might reach a point at which Moscow concludes that it can no longer tolerate a further downturn in the regional military balance. It is in the interests of all parties to avoid testing the limits of Moscow's perception of this risk, while ensuring credible deterrence in the region.

Third, beyond post-Soviet Eurasia, the U.S. Army should mostly be concerned about Russian involvement other than combat interventions. There is little evidence to suggest that Syria is the beginning of a pattern of combat interventions in the Middle East or other regions further afield. However, Moscow appears increasingly willing to use such tools as military assistance, private military contractors, and intelligence operatives in highly assertive ways. Russian involvement in countries where it has used those tools, however, need not escalate into sizable deployments of Russian troops, let alone combat missions. In other words, Russian activities in, for example, Libya or the Central African Republic may be notable geopolitically, but they have been quite limited in scope and are likely to remain so. Partly, this is a function of the logistical and capabilities limitations of the Russian military. But more importantly, the key drivers of Russia's combat interventions—in particular, a perception of an imminent external threat and a concern for maintaining favorable regional power balances and great-power status—are largely absent in those countries.

List of Soviet Military Interventions

Table A.1 lists the 41 military interventions undertaken by the Soviet Union from 1946 to 1991.

Table A.1
Soviet Military Interventions, 1946–1991

Intervention Name	Intervention Location	Start Year	End Year
Post-WW2 Occupation of Austria	Austria	1946	1955
Ili Rebellion/Soviet Assistance to Second East Turkestan Republic	China (East Turkestan)	1946	1946
Post-WW2 Occupation of Manchuria	China (Manchuria)	1946	1946
Post-WW2 Occupation of Bornholm Island	Denmark (Bornhold Island)	1946	1946
Post-WW2 Occupation of Eastern Europe	East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria	1946	1954
Soviet Cold War Deterrence Posture in Finland	Finland (Porkkala)	1946	1955
Iran-Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946	Iran (Autonomous Azerbaijan)	1946	1946
Post-WW2 Occupation of Korea	North Korea	1946	1948
Soviet Cold War Deterrence Posture in Manchuria	China (Port Arthur/Lushon/Dalian naval bases)	1947	1955
Soviet Advisory Mission in the DPRK	North Korea	1948	1950
Shanghai Air Defense	China	1950	1950
Korean War	North Korea, China	1950	1953
Soviet Cold War Deterrence Posture in Eastern Europe	East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania	1955	1991
Hungarian Revolution	Hungary	1956	1958
Poznan Riots (I, II)	Poland	1956	1956
Soviet Cold War Deterrence Posture in Syria	Syria (Tartus and Latakia naval bases)	1956	1991
Soviet Training, Advisory, and Assistance Mission to Cuba	Cuba	1961	1991
Soviet Cold War Advisory/Assistance Mission in Algeria	Algeria	1962	1991
Cuban Missile Crisis	Cuba	1962	1962

Table A.1—Continued

Intervention Name	Intervention Location	Start Year	End Year
North Yemen War	North Yemen	1962	1968
Soviet Advisory and Training Mission During Vietnam War	North Vietnam	1965	1974
Soviet Training, Advisory, and Assistance Mission to Egypt	Egypt (Alexandria and Marsa Matruh naval bases)	1967	1976
Six-Day War	Egypt (Sinai)	1967	1967
Soviet Cold War Deterrence Posture in Mongolia	Mongolia	1967	1991
Invasion of Czechoslovakia/Prague Spring	Czechoslovakia	1968	1969
Sino-Soviet Border Conflict/ Zhenbao Island Incident	China (Ussuri River, Zhenbao Island)	1969	1969
War of Attrition	Egypt	1970	1970
Soviet Deterrence and Advisory Mission in South Yemen	Yemen (Socotra and Aden naval bases)	1970	1990
Sudanese Civil War	Sudan	1971	1971
Soviet Cold War Deterrence and Advisory Mission in Somalia	Somalia	1972	1977
Yom Kippur War	Egypt, Syria	1973	1973
Soviet Cold War Deterrence and Advisory Mission in Libya	Libya (Tripoli and Tobruk naval bases)	1974	1991
Soviet Cold War Deterrence and Advisory Mission in Angola/ Angolan Civil War	Angola	1975	1991
Soviet Cold War Deterrence and Advisory Mission in Ethiopia/ Ethio-Somali (Ogaden) War/ Ethio-Eritrean War	Ethiopia (Ogaden, Eritrea, Dahlak Archipelago naval bases)	1977	1990
Soviet Cold War Advisory Mission in Mozambique	Mozambique	1977	1990
Soviet Advisory and Assistance Mission to People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan Government in Afghanistan	Afghanistan	1978	1979

Table A.1—Continued

Intervention Name	Intervention Location	Start Year	End Year
Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan/ Mujahideen Insurgency	Afghanistan	1979	1989
Soviet Deterrence of the PRC in Vietnam	Vietnam	1979	1991
Soviet Cold War Deterrence Posture in Vietnam	Vietnam (Cam Ranh Bay)	1980	1991
Operation “Kavkaz-2”	Syria	1982	1983
Nicaraguan Civil War	Nicaragua	1984	1991

NOTE: PRC = People’s Republic of China; WW2 = World War II.

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oscow's use of its military abroad in recent years has radically reshaped perceptions of Russia as an international actor. With the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the invasion of eastern Ukraine and sustainment of an insurgency there, and (in particular) the 2015 intervention in Syria, Russia repeatedly surprised U.S. policymakers with its willingness and ability to use its military to achieve its foreign policy objectives.

Despite Russia's relatively small global economic footprint, it has engaged in more interventions than any other U.S. competitor since the end of the Cold War. In this report, the authors assess when, where, and why Russia conducts military interventions by analyzing the 25 interventions that Russia has undertaken since 1991, including detailed case studies of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War and Moscow's involvement in the ongoing Syrian civil war.

The authors suggest that Russia is most likely to intervene to prevent erosion of its influence in its neighborhood, particularly following a shock that portends such an erosion occurring rapidly. If there were to be a regime change in a core Russian regional ally, such as Belarus or Armenia, that brought to power a government hostile to Moscow's interests, it is possible (if not likely) that a military intervention could ensue.

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