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The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action

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Summary

Since 2014, Russian “hybrid warfare” has been at the center of attention of Western security analysts. The Kremlin’s reliance on proxies, disinformation, and measures short of war has created the impression that its hybrid capabilities are distinct and separate from its military and can serve as a substitute for hard power. That impression is incorrect. Russian military and hybrid activities and tools are inextricably linked.

Hybrid warfare has been associated with Russian Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov, the author of the so-called Gerasimov doctrine—a whole-of-government concept that fuses hard and soft power across many domains and transcends boundaries between peace- and wartime. Rather than a driver of Russian foreign policy, the Gerasimov doctrine is an effort to develop an operational concept for Russia’s confrontation with the West in support of the actual doctrine that has guided Russian policy for over two decades: the Primakov doctrine.

Named after former foreign and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, the Primakov doctrine posits that a unipolar world dominated by the United States is unacceptable to Russia and offers the following principles for Russian foreign policy:

- Russia should strive toward a multipolar world managed by a concert of major powers that can counterbalance U.S. unilateral power.
- Russia should insist on its primacy in the post-Soviet space and lead integration in that region.
- Russia should oppose NATO expansion.

The record of the past two decades reveals several key themes about the role of hard power in Russia’s foreign and military policy:

- Military power is the necessary enabler of hybrid warfare. Hybrid tools can be an instrument of risk management when hard power is too risky, costly, or impractical, but military power is always in the background.
- Nuclear weapons are the foundation of the country’s national security and the ultimate guarantee of its strategic independence. But they are not an instrument for risky endeavors—they ensure that other powers do not engage in such endeavors against Russia.
- The implementation of the Primakov doctrine has been anything but reckless. Russian uses of hybrid warfare and military power—against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014, as well as in Syria since 2015—have been calibrated to avoid undue risks.

- Yet the intervention in Syria has also highlighted the limits of Russian hard power and hybrid warfare. Russian hard power is insufficient to impose the Kremlin's preferred version of peace on Syria, and Moscow lacks the vast economic and military resources to become a hegemon in the Middle East.

The key question for the Kremlin is whether to push for greater capabilities and take additional risks in pursuit of a more ambitious set of global aspirations, or to continue to follow the Primakov doctrine and the careful practice of calculating the risks and benefits of a given course. New generations of Russian leaders—less mindful of the Soviet experience of overextension than the current generation of leaders—may be more influenced by the successes of Crimea and Syria, more inclined to take risks, and more ambitious in their vision for Russia. How they address these ambitions and exercise Russian hard power will have major consequences for the future of Russia, Eurasia, and the world.

Introduction

When the Russian Federation occupied and then annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the specter of major interstate conflict returned to the heart of Europe for the first time since the end of the Cold War. In the United States and Europe, discussions about this new standoff between the United States and Russia (or the West and Russia) have focused a great deal of attention on the idea of “hybrid warfare,” or gray zone operations.

The concept of hybrid warfare has been associated with Russia’s current chief of the general staff, General Valery Gerasimov. In a 2013 article, published in a relatively obscure Russian defense industry journal, he outlined the key elements of what has become known as the Gerasimov doctrine.¹ In it, Gerasimov described a version of whole-of-government warfare that transcends boundaries between peace- and wartime, best described as a fusion of various elements of soft and hard power across various domains. The Gerasimov doctrine is, in other words, permanent conflict.

Russia’s seizure of Crimea and undeclared war in eastern Ukraine—Russian covert operatives and entire military units played critical roles in both—have reinforced the impression that hybrid warfare is the new Russian way of war and even a major driver of Russian foreign policy. Subsequent Russian use of information and disinformation to shape public opinion in Europe and the United States—including Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Kremlin’s courtship of fringe political parties and movements, and Moscow’s use of social media platforms to create and inflame societal divisions in countries deemed hostile to Russia—has reinforced the impression that the Gerasimov doctrine is a major driver of Russian foreign policy. That impression is wrong.

The Continuation of Politics

The notion that a military doctrine could drive Russian national security policy runs counter to the long-established traditions of civil-military relations in Russia and the Soviet Union. The military has never been the driver of Russian or Soviet national security policy; it has always been its implementer. On those rare occasions when senior military leaders appeared to pose a challenge to the political leadership of the country—Marshal Georgy Zhukov in 1946 and 1957 and Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov in 1984—they were removed from their posts.

The same pattern of civil-military relations has persisted in post-Soviet Russia. While some senior military figures attempted to play a more prominent role in the country’s domestic politics during the chaotic tenure of president Boris Yeltsin, they were never able to gain the upper hand in their

dealings with the Kremlin. General Alexander Lebed was brought into Yeltsin's inner circle when the political circumstances required it, but he was quickly shunted aside to a provincial post once his services were no longer needed.

General Gerasimov is no different in this respect from his predecessors. His so-called doctrine is hardly a driver of Russian national security policy. Rather, it is an effort to develop an operational concept for the Russian national security establishment to support its ongoing confrontation with the West. Instead of a new doctrine, Gerasimov offers a strategy to implement the actual doctrine that has guided Russian foreign and defense policies for over two decades: the Primakov doctrine.

The Primakov doctrine, named after former foreign and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, which Russia's current Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov extolled as a concept that will be studied closely by future historians, posits that a unipolar world organized by a single global center of power (the United States) is unacceptable to Russia.² Instead, Russian foreign policy should strive toward a multipolar world managed by a concert of major powers—Russia, China, and India, as well as the United States. According to this vision, Russia should not try to compete with the United States single-handedly; rather, Moscow should seek to constrain the United States with the help of other major powers and to position itself as an indispensable actor with a vote and a veto, whose consent is necessary to settle any key issue facing the international community. A further argument in favor of multipolarity was that a unipolar world was inherently unstable, whereas multipolarity would provide checks and balances on unilateral and arbitrary uses of power by the hegemon.

Primakov's elevation to the post of foreign minister in 1996 marked a major shift in Russian foreign policy. Prior to that, Russian foreign policy had largely sought accommodation with the West, following the outlines of Mikhail Gorbachev's late-Soviet foreign policy. According to Lavrov, Primakov implemented a radical departure from that course: "Russia left the path of our Western partners . . . and embarked on a track of its own."³ Russia has stayed the course since then—a choice vividly demonstrated by Primakov's decision to cancel his visit to Washington in mid-air and order his pilot to fly back to Moscow, to protest the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) impending bombardment of Serbia in March 1999.⁴

One of the key elements of the Primakov doctrine is its insistence on Russia's primacy in the post-Soviet space and pursuit of closer integration among former Soviet republics with Russia in the lead. Opposition to NATO expansion and, more broadly, persistent efforts to weaken transatlantic institutions and the U.S.-led international order are another. Partnership with China is the third fundamental component. All three remain major pillars of Russian foreign policy today.

Moscow's adherence to the Primakov doctrine has varied depending on Russian capabilities. With Russia's economy still reeling from the financial crisis of 1998 and its foreign policy arsenal weakened

by a decade of turmoil, Primakov's options were limited: he chose not to follow the U.S. lead. But as the Russian economy recovered and Russia's foreign policy toolkit expanded, Russian policymakers' options expanded too, marking a gradual transition from passive to increasingly active opposition.

Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, undeclared war in eastern Ukraine, use of disinformation, and interference in Western elections have reinforced the impression that the Gerasimov doctrine is the new Russian way of war and even a foreign policy driver. **That impression is wrong.**

Primakov Doctrine (1996)

The defining concept of Russian foreign and defense policies for over two decades

- View of Russia as an indispensable actor with an independent foreign policy
- Vision of a multipolar world managed by a concert of major powers
- Insistence on Russia's primacy in the post-Soviet space and the pursuit of Eurasian integration
- Opposition to NATO expansion
- Partnership with China

Gerasimov Doctrine (2013)

Effort to develop an operational concept for ongoing confrontation with the West

- Whole-of-government warfare
- Fusion of elements of hard and soft power across various domains
- Permanent conflict transcending the boundaries between peace and war

Hard Power Rules

The current preoccupation with Russian hybrid warfare risks creating the impression that the so-called hybrid toolkit is somehow distinct and different from Russian hard power, or its military toolkit. That is incorrect. The record of the past two decades points to a tight linkage between Russia's military capabilities and its practice of gray zone operations. Indeed, Russian hard power is the critical, necessary enabler of Russian hybrid warfare; without the former, the latter would not be possible. The scale and scope of Russian hybrid warfare operations have expanded with the growth and improvement of Russian hard power capabilities. Taken together, Russian hybrid warfare and hard power capabilities have been developed and employed to implement the Primakov doctrine.

Hybrid warfare is also an instrument of risk management in the service of the Primakov doctrine, employed when hard power applications are to be avoided—either due to excessive risks or costs—or

are otherwise impractical. And though hybrid tools can serve as a substitute for hard power, military force is always in the background when hybrid tools are deployed.

A Pattern of Calculated Risk-Taking

Russia's record of using hybrid and hard power tools over the past two decades suggests that the image of the Russian military as reckless is far from true. The Kremlin's use of both capabilities has been carefully calibrated to avoid undue risks, let alone the risk of escalation and military confrontation with NATO.⁵

Perhaps the riskiest action taken by the Russian military in the past two decades was the June 1999 incident at the Pristina airport in Kosovo, a tense standoff between a detachment of Russian paratroopers and NATO troops that could have escalated into an outright military confrontation.⁶ But even that dramatic episode, which occurred when Russian military power was at its nadir, suggests that Russia's actions were deliberate and calculated. Notwithstanding the poor condition of the Russian military at the time, the underlying calculus of the Russian deployment to Pristina is obvious—NATO allies would not risk a nuclear confrontation with Russia. This was especially salient at the time, because Russia's conventional capabilities (its weapons of first resort) were so inadequate that the distance between them and the nuclear deterrent (its weapons of last resort) on the escalation ladder had narrowed significantly.

Nuclear Weapons: The Ultimate Insurance

The Pristina crisis highlighted the fact that nuclear weapons are Russia's ultimate guarantee of independence and sovereignty. According to the Primakov doctrine, that means being able to chart an independent course in the international arena rather than following someone else's lead. The foundational role of nuclear weapons in Russian national security has manifested itself on numerous occasions since the end of the Cold War. It has been affirmed in successive iterations of the country's military doctrine, in an ambitious program of nuclear modernization launched and sustained by the Russian government despite the sluggish—at best—pace of the economy, and it has been reflected in official statements about Russian defense policy from the highest levels, including, most notably, President Vladimir Putin.⁷

One of the most striking aspects of these statements is their emphasis on the invincibility of Russia's nuclear arsenal and its ability to penetrate even the most robust defenses developed

by the United States. Putin and other Russian spokesmen have made repeated references not just to the traditional nuclear triad—land-, air-, and sea-based weapons—and its upgraded capacity to defeat U.S. missile defenses, but also to an array of “weapons of revenge” that promise to inflict devastating blows upon the United States in the—unspoken but presumed—event that the triad fails to penetrate U.S. missile defenses or is destroyed by a devastating U.S. first strike.⁸ Taken together, this and other official positions and statements highlight the unique importance of nuclear weapons and the way they enable Russian foreign policy.⁹

Despite Russia’s status as a nuclear superpower, Russian leaders have not used their nuclear insurance to pursue unduly risky behavior on the world stage. Their posture over the course of many years suggests that the risks they take are carefully calculated and calibrated to match their capabilities.

In 2003, Russia opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq.¹⁰ But at the time, Russia’s economic recovery was still new, the Kremlin had not yet regained its self-confidence, its military capabilities had not yet recovered from the implosion of the 1990s, the insurgency in the North Caucasus had not yet been suppressed, and the United States still projected the image of an invincible superpower that just a year earlier had achieved a swift victory in Afghanistan—something the Soviet Union was unable to achieve over an entire decade. Thus, faced with a combination of massive U.S. military power, the firm resolve of then president George W. Bush’s administration to go to war, and overall U.S. superiority, Russian leaders chose to remain on the sidelines and let a longtime client, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, fall. They resorted to relatively limited forms of hybrid warfare—such as sharing intelligence with the Iraqi regime—reportedly provided some equipment to the Iraqi military, and engaged in a vigorous propaganda campaign to mobilize international opposition to U.S. war plans.¹¹ But neither Russia’s stake in Iraq nor its capabilities were sufficient for the Kremlin to intervene more aggressively and face the risk of a military confrontation with the United States.

The situation was fundamentally different five years later, in August of 2008, when the Russian army defeated the Georgian army. By then, the Kremlin had regained its self-confidence—enough for Putin to draw a so-called redline around the former Soviet states, warning NATO to stay away in a speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference.¹² The Kremlin had a major stake in Georgia: as a former Soviet republic, it is a priority area for Russia under the Primakov doctrine; it borders the troublesome North Caucasus region and thus, from the Kremlin’s point of view, could serve as a springboard for hostile powers to exploit this key Russian vulnerability; it was actively seeking

and had been promised membership in NATO; it was the United States' favorite laboratory for democracy promotion in the former Soviet Union—a major source of friction between Moscow and Washington; and it was the perfect target for the Kremlin to demonstrate the United States' limited reach—hardly the global superpower it aspired to be—and undermine the unipolar world.

Russia also enjoyed a number of important advantages in its war with Georgia. Geographic proximity to Russia made Georgia an easy target. The long Russian campaign against the Chechen insurgency in the North Caucasus had resulted in a major permanent Russian military deployment just across the border; the United States, by contrast, was far away. The Georgian military was tiny and no match for the Russian army. And although it had been promised future membership in NATO, Georgia lacked the security guarantee of the alliance. For the Kremlin, it was a low-risk, high-payoff undertaking.

Russia resorted to hybrid warfare in its campaign against Georgia, including cyber attacks, disinformation, and the use of proxies in the breakaway South Ossetia region in the run up to the war.¹³ However, it was Russian hard power that proved decisive and necessary in accomplishing the Kremlin's goals: reestablishing Russian dominance in the former Soviet space and demonstrating that Russia was willing to go to war to assert regional primacy while the United States and NATO were not prepared to respond with force. Hybrid warfare alone could not have delivered Russia's central message—hard power confirmed the Kremlin's willingness to go to war in pursuit of its goals.

While successful in many respects, the war with Georgia also demonstrated major shortcomings in Russian military power.¹⁴ Nearly two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union—and after multiple failed attempts at military reform—the Russian military was a shadow of the Soviet military that was organized around a mass mobilization concept. The Russian military was top-heavy, with general officers commanding hollow divisions equipped with obsolete hardware and manned by poorly trained conscripts. A far-reaching military reform was launched.¹⁵

The old military Russia inherited from the Soviet Union had been designed and built for a large-scale conflict with the West, a mission that neither the Soviet economy could ultimately sustain nor the Russian economy could support. The new-look Russian military was reduced in size with much less ambitious goals in sight—to assert and protect the so-called privileged sphere of interests around the periphery of the Russian Federation.¹⁶ The 2010 Russian military doctrine noted “the decline in the likelihood of a large-scale war” but zeroed in on NATO's expansion close to Russian territory and foreign troop deployments in countries along Russia's periphery as “external military dangers” that could lead to armed conflict.¹⁷

Unlike earlier attempts at reform, Russia's post-Georgian war military reform proved to be a credible, far-reaching undertaking and a major commitment on the part of the Kremlin. The reform

entailed significant and politically sensitive reductions in the size of Russia's armed forces, including cuts in the senior echelons of the military. The Kremlin committed resources to purchase equipment and provide training, even as the Russian economy suffered a major contraction in 2008–2009.¹⁸ The major effort reflected the Kremlin's resolve to upgrade its hard power capabilities—for the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union—to fulfill the critical mission mandated by the Primakov doctrine and reasserted by Dmitry Medvedev in 2008: ensuring Russian primacy in the post-Soviet space.¹⁹

2014: A New Chapter

The results of Russia's military reform manifested themselves in 2014, when the Russian military swiftly occupied Crimea, launched an undeclared war in eastern Ukraine, inflicted significant losses on the Ukrainian military, and threatened a massive invasion beyond eastern Ukraine. Whereas the 2008 war with Georgia demonstrated—notwithstanding its strategic accomplishments—the shortcomings of the Russian military, the 2014 war with Ukraine was widely perceived as Russia's return to the ranks of major military powers.²⁰

Despite the seismic shifts in European security and relations between Russia and the West triggered by the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine, the invasion itself, from a purely military perspective, was a relatively low-risk undertaking. Although it was promised NATO membership in 2008 and given separate security assurances in 1994 by the United States and UK—as well as Russia—Ukraine is not a member of NATO and lacks NATO's security guarantee. In fact, one of Russia's principal goals for the invasion of Ukraine, same as the 2008 war with Georgia, was to prevent a country in the post-Soviet space from getting that security guarantee. NATO's inaction beyond public statements as the crisis escalated sent a clear signal to Moscow that the West would not intervene militarily on behalf of Ukraine.²¹

The Ukrainian military, while larger than the Georgian military, had suffered from the same kind of systemic neglect and corruption as the country's other state institutions and economy.²² And it had not undergone beneficial reforms, like the Russian military. The circumstances surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine were also highly adverse to the Ukrainian military's ability to mobilize to repel an aggressor—a revolution sweeping the country, the fall of the government, a massive disinformation campaign by the Russian state propaganda machine targeting all segments of the Ukrainian population, the presence of a large Russian population in Crimea, including many active duty and retired Russian military personnel, as well as a significant ethnic Russian population in eastern Ukraine all left the Ukrainian military at a major disadvantage.

Taken together, the military, political, and geopolitical circumstances surrounding Russia's aggression toward Ukraine made it a relatively low-risk undertaking for the Kremlin. Moreover, from the perspective of Russia's national security establishment, the war with Ukraine was a war of necessity rather than a war of choice—even more so than the 2008 war with Georgia had been. The potential loss of Ukraine to the United States and NATO, as the Kremlin leadership perceived the Euromaidan revolution to portend, would be fraught with far-reaching, unacceptable strategic consequences for Russia, and it warranted decisive action.

While hybrid operations against Ukraine received a great deal of attention as Russia's new way of war, it was traditional hard power that proved decisive. It was the decisive factor that enabled the Russian military and other instruments of national power to be employed against Ukraine, it was decisive in seizing Crimea and in the conduct of the military operation in eastern Ukraine, and it remains decisive as the Kremlin's tool for keeping the pressure on the government of Ukraine.

Despite the preponderance of Russian military power vis-à-vis Ukraine, the Kremlin's actions suggest that it still carefully calculated and calibrated the risks. Having inflicted heavy losses on the Ukrainian military, the Russian army was expected to continue its offensive and seize the port city of Mariupol in 2015 (and again in 2018) or push deeper into southern Ukraine.²³ However, a large-scale invasion and subsequent occupation of Ukraine would have amounted to a far more ambitious and risky undertaking for Russia, requiring a much greater mobilization of military resources and associated costs than the operation and maintenance of separatist regimes in eastern Ukraine entails. This suggests that the limits of Russian hard power are carefully calculated in the Kremlin.

The invasion of Ukraine was a watershed moment in Russian security policy. The new Russian military doctrine published at the end of 2014 echoed the 2010 doctrine, acknowledging that the “unleashing of a large-scale war against the Russian Federation becomes less probable.”²⁴ That statement was most likely intended to reassure readers that the deterrent capabilities of the Russian military were more than up to the task. However, the new doctrine was permeated by a sense that the overall international environment had grown more dangerous. Whereas the 2010 doctrine referred to “a weakening of ideological confrontation,” the 2014 doctrine warned of “the strengthening of global competition, tensions in various areas of inter-state and interregional interaction, rivalry of proclaimed values and models of development, instability of the processes of economic and political development at the global and regional levels against a background of general complication of international relations.”²⁵ And whereas the 2010 doctrine seemed to acknowledge—even if only implicitly—the possibility of peaceful coexistence, the 2014 doctrine points to a long-term confrontational relationship with the West.

Russian military posture since 2014 has reflected that view—that confrontation with the West along the line of contact between NATO and Russia is the new normal.²⁶ Russia has engaged in a sustained military buildup along its western border.²⁷

Russian military posture in the European theater since 2014 also illustrates the critical, indispensable role of hard power in Russia's application of hybrid warfare. The broad range of Russia's military activities—from violations of its Baltic neighbors' airspace and harassment of U.S. aircraft in international airspace over the Baltic and Black Seas to the Zapad exercises and the deployment of new weapons systems to Kaliningrad—is equal parts a manifestation of Russian hard power and hybrid abilities. The obvious intent behind these activities is not only to demonstrate Russian military capabilities but to undermine the credibility of NATO's Article V security guarantee, especially among new NATO members. Absent hard power insurance, the Kremlin's hybrid warfare would not be nearly as effective.

However, even these activities—widely perceived in the West as reckless and destabilizing—represent a pattern of deliberate, calculated Russian risk-taking. The most notable Russian hardware deployments have been designed to have a deterrent effect on an adversary equipped with a number of important advantages. Thus, Russian deployment of air defense systems in Kaliningrad and Crimea is intended to deny NATO, and particularly the United States, the advantage of superior air power that the United States has traditionally enjoyed in the European theater.²⁸ Deploying nuclear-capable Iskander missiles to Kaliningrad is intended to both hold at risk critical targets in frontline states and psychologically intimidate Europe, where most people have written off the threat of nuclear war on the continent.²⁹

Often overlooked in Western discussions of Russian military policy is how close the line of contact with NATO is to major Russian cities—less than a two-hour drive from St. Petersburg—and the effect that proximity has on Russian threat perceptions. The disappearance of the buffer that existed between NATO and the Soviet heartland during the Cold War has instilled a new sense of vulnerability in the Russian national security establishment.

Russia and the INF Treaty

Russian military and civilian leaders have long expressed dissatisfaction with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and have threatened to withdraw from it for over a decade.³⁰ The treaty, negotiated in 1987, banned land-based, but not sea- or air-based, intermediate-range missiles, leaving Russia at a perceived disadvantage vis-à-vis NATO, which had superior sea- and air-based capabilities.

The rationale behind the Kremlin's decision to develop, test, and eventually deploy the new, treaty-breaking 9M729 (or SSC-8) cruise missile can only be guessed.³¹ Its underlying logic likely had to do with the deteriorating relationship between Russia and the West, and some combination of a perceived new geographical imbalance, NATO's arsenal of intermediate-range sea- and air-launched missiles, and NATO's deployment of missile defenses in Europe, which Russian analysts maintained would eventually put Russia at a further disadvantage. Although the actual date of the 9M729 missile's deployment is not publicly known, its development path likely followed the downward trajectory of Russia-NATO and Russia-U.S. relations.

The new missile, with a reported range of nearly 2,500 kilometers (km), can hold at risk virtually the entire European continent. It vastly exceeds the capability of the Iskander missile, with its reported range of 400–500 km.³² It fills a major perceived gap in the Russian military's arsenal—between short-range and intercontinental missiles—that is critical to its posture in the all-important European theater.

However, the hybrid effect of the new missile is just as important: its impact on public opinion in Europe, a perceived return to Cold War-era competition, and renewed public fears of war—especially nuclear war—on the continent. As Washington and Moscow prepare to withdraw from the INF Treaty amid accusations that both sides violated it, European NATO allies are caught in the middle, and the long-standing Russian goal of undermining the alliance is coming closer to fruition.

MAP 1

Range of Select and Prospective Russian Missiles



Sources: "SS-26 (Iskander)," Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 27, 2016, last modified May 13, 2019, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/ss-26/>; "SSC-8 (Novator 9M729)," Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 23, 2018, last modified January 23, 2019, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/ssc-8-novator-9m729/>.

MAP 2

Range of Select and Prospective U.S. Missiles



Sources: "Tomahawk Cruise Missile," United States Navy Fact File, April 26, 2018, https://www.navy.mil/navydata/fact_print.asp?cid=2200&tid=1300&ct=2&page=1; Michael Gordon, "After Treaty's Demise, Pentagon Will Develop Two New Midrange Weapons," *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/after-treatys-demise-pentagon-will-develop-two-new-midrange-weapons-11552517630>.

The new geography of the NATO-Russia standoff, combined with long-standing Russian concerns about U.S. superiority in precision-guided systems, underscores that sense of vulnerability. Putin, in his February 2019 address to the Federal Assembly, warned the United States that new Russian weapons would let Russia hold the United States at risk the same way U.S. systems in Europe threaten Russia.³³ Gerasimov, in a recent address to the Academy of Military Sciences, voiced the same concerns about U.S. precision weapons that Russian and Soviet military theorists have been raising since the 1980s.³⁴

The same sense of vulnerability accounts for the Kremlin's focus on Belarus. Both Russian and Western analysts agree that Belarus would play a critical role in a conflict between NATO and Russia. To NATO analysts, it constitutes a springboard for Russian aggression against Poland or the Baltic states. For Russia, it is a source of critical vulnerability. Historically, Belarus has been the gateway for foreign invasions and—in the Kremlin's worst-case scenario—it could be the site of another color revolution that, like in Ukraine, installs a government that switches sides from Russia to the West.

In this context, Russia's military posture vis-à-vis NATO appears to be a calculated mix of hard power and hybrid warfare designed to deny NATO its advantages—the numerical superiority of allied militaries, technological superiority, an edge in air power, economic potential, and a long record of political cohesion and commitment to shared principles. Russia's posture suggests a country that is realistic about its limited prospects to achieving superiority and is instead focused on denying its opponent's advantages—consistent with Primakov's vision.

The Syrian Deployment

The year 2015 marked another milestone in the development of Russian hard power. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Russia engaged in a major military operation beyond its periphery, intervening in the Syrian war. The move stunned observers in and outside of Russia, who were long accustomed to the idea that the Russian military had neither the resources nor the political will necessary to intervene in a theater where it did not enjoy the advantage of proximity to Russia. News of the Russian deployment was met in Russia and abroad with predictions of overextension, major casualties—reminiscent of the invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s and the Chechnya campaign in the 1990s and early 2000s—and undue risks. In retrospect, none of those predictions proved accurate. Instead, Russia reemerged as a major actor in the Middle East for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Again, it was an example of the Primakov doctrine in action—intervening to prevent a U.S.-sponsored regime change, behaving like a major power alongside the United States, and checking Washington's unilateral ambitions.

In keeping with the established pattern of Russian military activities over the past two decades, the Syrian operation was a calculated risk rather than an example of reckless great-power ambition. By 2015, the risk of a military confrontation with the United States over the fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime had greatly diminished, as then president Barack Obama's administration had made it clear it would not intervene in Syria beyond what was necessary to combat the self-proclaimed Islamic State.³⁵

The risk to Russian military personnel was relatively small as well, since the deployment of ground troops was quite limited, with Russian air power playing a crucial role. Russia's high-altitude, indiscriminate bombing campaigns put its air forces out of reach of the limited air defenses that anti-Assad forces had at their disposal. The use of private military contractors—such as at Deir Ezzor in February 2018, when several hundred Russian contractors were killed in U.S. artillery strikes—enabled the Russian military to minimize the loss of active duty personnel.³⁶

Russia's gains in Syria far exceeded the operation's risks. As a result of the deployment, Russia saved a client regime and established itself as a major actor in the Middle East, using its success in Syria as a springboard for outreach to other actors from Saudi Arabia to Egypt. Moscow has positioned itself as Washington's antithesis—a major power that is willing to use military force to support its clients.

Russian hard power again proved indispensable in Syria. Russia has established itself as a military presence in the eastern Mediterranean that no other major military power—not the United States, not Israel, not Turkey—can ignore. Russia's deployment of air defense systems in Syria, missile strikes launched from the Caspian Sea, operations in the congested Syrian air space that forced the United States to deconflict its operations with Russia, and presence—however limited—on the ground have created the effect of a Russian military presence in the Middle East that far exceeds its modest—relative to the United States—naval, air, and ground military assets.

What Next?

The Syrian operation is a perfect example of the Primakov doctrine in action. With limited resources, Russia accomplished a series of very important but limited objectives and established itself as an “indispensable nation,” guaranteeing a seat at the table of major powers. Moscow has stepped into the vacuum left in the wake of the United States' stepping back from the Middle East.

But the involvement in Syria also highlights the limits of Russian hard power and the irrelevance of hybrid warfare in this conflict, as well as of Russia's ultimate weapon—its nuclear arsenal. Russian hard power has not been sufficient to impose the Kremlin's preferred solution on the Syrian civil war, its hybrid tools have had little utility in the conditions of primitive sectarian warfare, and its nuclear weapons may deter other major powers but have not deterred Syria's warring factions.

The United States, for most of the post–Cold War period, aspired to be the hegemon in the Middle East, with vast economic and military resources and a major commitment of political capital. Russia lacks the economic and military resources, and is apparently so invested in its role as the “indispensable nation” capable of conducting dialogue with all major actors in the region that it constrains its ability to conduct effective diplomacy, which would require it to take sides. The leap from the “indispensable nation” to hegemon is too much for Russia to cover even with its improved “hybrid” and “hard power” resources.

In Europe and Eurasia, geography, history, and politics present Russia with undisputed advantages that effectively serve as force multipliers for its hard and hybrid capabilities; in more distant locales, their utility is diminished. In many such situations—like Syria or Libya—Russia has been able to insert itself as a party whose interests have to be taken into account. But it has so far been unable to impose its preferred solutions.

The key questions for the Kremlin now are whether to push for greater capabilities and a bigger role in the Middle East and on the world stage or to be content with remaining an “indispensable nation”; to take greater risks or to continue the practice of carefully calculating the risks and benefits of a given course; to follow the Primakov doctrine or to pursue a more robust set of global ambitions.

There have been occasional hints that some in the Russian national security establishment are harboring such ambitions, but there is little concrete evidence to suggest that the Kremlin is prepared to act on them. Russia's far-flung engagements—in Venezuela, in the Central African Republic, in Libya—are more indicative of its agility and ability to seize opportunities when they arise than of a long-term muscular pursuit of a global agenda. The risks, thus far, have been modest and appear calculated, while the long-term benefits have yet to be realized.

The older generation of Russian leaders, like Putin, cannot help but be mindful of the experiences of the Soviet Union—its arms race with the United States, the quagmire in Afghanistan, and ambitious schemes that reached far-away corners of the map. However nostalgic they may be for the former glory of the Soviet Union, their posture so far has been careful, calculating, and risk-averse. But new

generations of Russian leaders may be less mindful of Soviet history and, instead, may be more heavily influenced by the successes of Crimea and Syria, more inclined to take risks, and more ambitious in their global vision. How they handle their ambitions and their challenges will have major consequences for the future of Russia, Eurasia, and the world.

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Notes

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