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## Great Power Posing

### RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp / Or what's a heaven for?

—ROBERT BROWNING, “ANDREA DEL SARTO”

PAST CHAPTERS have shown that the lens of comparative autocracy is helpful for understanding many aspects of Russia's domestic politics, but with its military power, nuclear weapons, large population, natural resource wealth, great geographic reach, and seat on the UN Security Council, Russia is an unusual autocracy in its foreign policy. Given this, how should we try to understand Russian foreign policy?

Some people focus on the background and worldview of its most important decision maker: Putin. Others discount Putin's personal role, and point to Russia's unique geography, culture, and history that generate values and interests largely at odds with Western liberalism. Russian foreign policy is a continuation of its past policies. Or as former National Security Council Russia expert Thomas Graham puts it, “The West has a Russia problem, not a Putin problem.”<sup>1</sup>

These two conventional approaches have much to offer, but also come up short in three respects that reflect the themes of previous chapters. First, popular narratives take Russia's relative power in

global politics as a historical given beyond the Kremlin's capacity to change.<sup>2</sup> Observers frequently note that Putin is "playing a weak hand well" or Russia is "punching above its weight" on the international stage.<sup>3</sup> But Putin's hand in global politics is weak in large part due to the constraints identified in previous chapters. As in its domestic politics, the Kremlin faces hard choices in foreign policy that reflect the power and interest of different groups. Like all leaders pursuing greater influence in global politics, Putin would like to spend more on guns and butter, but can't do both. Russia's more assertive foreign policy empowers those groups least supportive of economic reforms needed to spur economic growth and ultimately undercut Russia's global power. Power in international politics is not dealt at random from a deck of cards but instead is a function of state policy. Having been in power for the last twenty years, Putin's weak hand is largely his own doing.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the Kremlin's tools for managing foreign policy are often as blunt as they are in domestic politics. The Kremlin has exploited the annexation of Crimea to boost popular support, but has had much less success in convincing the broader public to support great power status over economic development. Moreover, Russia's military might is impressive, but it is hardly an all-purpose tool, and Russia's stagnant economy and poor governance hinder the use of economic aid as a means to gain influence.

Third, while the conventional wisdom traces Russia's anti-Westernism and assertive foreign policy to Putin's worldview or Russia's status as a great power, other personalist autocracies have used similar tactics to bolster legitimacy at home. While we need to recognize that Russia is an unusual autocracy in its foreign policy, the logic of autocratic politics can nonetheless help us understand why Russia's reach often exceeds its grasp on the international stage.<sup>5</sup> This chapter begins by describing Russia's current status in global politics, and then critiques two conventional wisdoms before tracing Putin's weak hand to the difficult trade-offs and blunt tools that are common to personalist autocracies.

## A Great Power, but a Diminished One

For all the disagreement in popular debates on Russian foreign policy, all agree that Russia has expanded its international presence in the last decade. In its backyard, Russia unleashed a cyberattack on Estonia in 2007 and fought a shooting war with Georgia in 2008. Six years later, it annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea—the first example of a European country taking the territory of a neighbor since the end of World War II.<sup>6</sup> To boot, it sent troops and weapons to eastern Ukraine to battle the Ukrainian army.<sup>7</sup>

To counterbalance the European Union, Russia helped to form the Eurasian Economic Union, an organization including Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. This is hardly an effort to re-create the Soviet Union, but is an attempt to reassert influence in the region by developing stronger trade ties.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond its immediate neighbors, the Kremlin has stepped up its use of social media and funding for political groups to gain influence and increase social division in Europe. In Syria, it has provided considerable military support to keep al-Assad in power.<sup>9</sup> In Venezuela, it sent financial aid and military advisers to prop up President Maduro. From the Arctic, where Russia seeks to exploit untapped sources of energy by making claims on new territory, to Africa, where Russian firms provide security, capital, and technological advice to a handful of countries, Russia's global footprint is much larger than a decade ago.<sup>10</sup>

Russia has strengthened its military and trade ties with China, particularly in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, and then the imposition of sanctions by the United States and European Union in 2014.<sup>11</sup> Relations are complicated by geopolitical competition, but Russian and Chinese trade doubled in 2017, and three thousand Chinese soldiers took part in a massive military exercise in Russia's far east in September 2018. Personal relations between President Putin and General Secretary Xi Jinping are good. Putin celebrated his birthday with Xi over vodka and sausages—the only time he has done so with a foreign leader—while Xi referred to Putin as “his best, most intimate friend.”<sup>12</sup>

The Kremlin has challenged the United States in ways that would have seemed hard to fathom a decade ago. Beyond trying to influence US presidential elections via social media and computer hacking, Russia backed the Maduro government in Venezuela and intervened in Syria in part to counter US influence in regions of central importance to Washington.<sup>13</sup> In its competition with the United States, the Kremlin has sought to modernize its nuclear arsenal and develop new weapons, including nuclear cruise missiles, although experts are divided about their effectiveness.<sup>14</sup>

Some aspects of Russian power never went away. With more than 6,800 nuclear warheads, Russia boasts the largest nuclear arsenal in the world. By comparison, the United States has 6,550, France, China, and Britain have between 200 and 300, while Pakistan, India, and Israel have lesser amounts.<sup>15</sup> According to the Stockholm Institute of Peace Research, Russia has about the fifth- or sixth-largest defense budget in the world, behind the United States, China, and Saudi Arabia, and just about the same as India and France.<sup>16</sup> It has more tanks than any other country, and can mobilize them quickly—a thought that keeps NATO war planners trying to protect the Baltic countries up at night.<sup>17</sup>

And Russia has used this might to good effect in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. In regions where the United States and Europe are unlikely to respond with force, Russia's military is a powerful persuader. Countries vary in their abilities to translate military power into foreign policy success, but by just about any measure Russia is a military force to be reckoned with.

With the second-largest gas and third-largest oil production in the world, Russia is an outsize force in global energy. Russian oil production has not fallen in the wake of sanctions. Even as shale gas production surged in the United States and global energy markets have liberalized, Russia continues to provide about one-third of Europe's energy and is likely to remain the low-cost provider of energy to the continent. Russia has also played an increasing role in forming global energy prices in recent years. With Saudi Arabia, Moscow helped prop up energy prices before causing a collapse in the price in 2020 to drive out competition. With its large financial reserves and low-cost production, Russia hoped

to seize market share from US shale producers, who struggle to be profitable at these low prices. Few countries influence global energy markets on this scale.

Russia's great size, which includes borders with the United States, China, and even EU countries like Poland via its enclave in Kaliningrad, also gives it global reach. Finally, Russia holds a seat on the UN Security Council. Due to its geography, military power, natural resources, and participation (for better and worse) in some of the most intractable problems on the planet, such as the Syrian Civil War, conflict in eastern Ukraine, global warming, nuclear proliferation, and the struggle against Islamist extremism, Russia has become an increasingly important global player in recent years.

To be sure, Russia's resurgence should be kept in perspective. Russia is vastly outspent by its rivals. In 2017, NATO countries spent \$900 billion on defense, while Russia spent \$67 billion. For all the current problems between the Trump administration and its European allies, NATO spends about fifteen times what Russia does on defense. Even without US contributions, NATO defense spending is about four times larger than Russia's. The United States and China spend about nine and four times, respectively, what Russia does on defense. Russia's defense increased from 2010 to 2015, but has trended downward since.<sup>18</sup>

Russia's economy, which is roughly five times smaller than the economies of the United States, China, or the European Union at purchasing power parity, constrains Russia's ability to project power. Czarist and Soviet governments were brought down by economies that could not keep pace with the Kremlin's great power ambitions. While Putin's Russia is far from this fate, slow economic growth has already curtailed its ambitious plans to build military power laid out in 2012.<sup>19</sup> And Russia's ability to use the economic lever as a foreign policy tool is also limited. As political scientist Peter Rutland notes, "Twenty years of subsidized energy prices for Belarus, for example, has not produced a loyal and subservient ally for Russia, a striking example of how hard it is for Moscow to turn energy sales into political leverage."<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, Russia's ability to use soft power to persuade and cajole countries is limited.<sup>21</sup> With its autocratic government and vast

corruption, Russia is an unappealing model. Russia has found some purchase as a champion of antiliberal sentiments in countries where these feelings run deep, but public opinion polls suggest that Russia is not trusted even in these places.<sup>22</sup> The Kremlin's opposition to gay rights, support for traditional families, and promotion of Orthodoxy is a rearguard action in response to developments in the West. To the extent that Russia's soft power has been effective in recent years, it is due more to the declining attractiveness of Western-style democracy and capitalism than to the inherent successes of Putin's own model.

One way to measure Russia's best friends is to explore support for a 2014 UN resolution declaring that the Russian annexation of Crimea was illegal. One hundred countries voted in favor of the resolution, fifty-eight abstained, and just ten voted against the declaration, specifically Armenia, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, North Korea, Sudan, Syria, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe—a gallery of rogues to be sure, but apart from North Korea, not much of a challenge to the United States or its allies.

Russia's unconventional tactics in international affairs often speak to its weakness rather than its strength. Moscow's botched poisoning of the Skripal family in Salisbury, England, in 2018, reliance on cyberwarfare (explored in the next chapter), support for fringe movements that seek to undermine democracy in Europe, and attempts to compromise foreign policy elites in rival countries are better seen as weapons of a relatively weaker party than as an indication of newly powerful Kremlin.

Indeed, for all its muscle flexing in its immediate neighborhood, Russia has defied predictions that it would expand the war with Ukraine beyond Luhansk and Donetsk to re-create the czarist-era unit of New Russia. It has also not intervened with military force in the Baltics despite some forecasts.<sup>23</sup> And every few years since the mid-1990s, observers have predicted that Russia is planning to merge with Belarus. This may yet happen, but history suggests caution. Indeed, recent calls to tighten relations have largely come from Belarus' beleaguered autocrat, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, rather than from the Kremlin.

Russia is a great power, albeit a diminished one. Yeltsin would look on Russia's global position with delight, but Brezhnev would view it with panic.

## The Role of Putin in Russian Foreign Policy

How can we account for Russia's more assertive foreign policy? Most observers trace Russian foreign policy to the attitudes and values of Putin. As noted in chapter 2, it is easy to find facile arguments linking Putin's background and experiences to specific policy choices, but subtler treatments can be made as well. In one of the best works in this vein, political scientist Brian Taylor focuses on the values, habits, and emotions not just of Putin but of those around him too. Taylor argues that Putin and his closest advisers are united by a set of core values rooted in statism, anti-Westernism, and conservatism that guide their policy choices. For Taylor, Putinism is not an ideology but instead more akin to Thatcherism and Reaganism in that it generates a way of seeing the world that leads to a clear set of policies, such as a dominant state role in the economy and the pursuit of great-power status on the global stage.<sup>24</sup>

One can distill the disparate views of Putin and his confidants into broad categories, but it is hard to go much further and link these views to specific policies. In addition, these views and policies have changed over time. Indeed, it is difficult to demonstrate the independent impact of elite attitudes on policy because these attitudes do not exist in a vacuum but rather are shaped by events and interactions with other countries. As Robert Legvold remarks, relations between Russia and the United States have deteriorated to the point that many on both sides exhibit what political psychologists call "the fundamental attribution bias"—the tendency to explain one's own behavior as a response to the situation and the other side's behavior by its innate characteristics.<sup>25</sup> In other words, each side thinks, "I had no choice to escalate given what the other side was doing, but the other side escalated because that is just who it is." And the other side follows the same self-defeating logic. In these situations, it is hard to determine if elite values are the causes or effects of policy choices. To the extent that Putin's attitudes are responses to the behavior of other countries, it is difficult to say that his core values are driving his policy.

One core value that does seem broadly held among Putin's inner circle is skepticism toward the United States—a view that has increased

as relations have soured. William Zimmerman, a professor emeritus at the University of Michigan, and some collaborators organized eight rich waves of surveys between 1993 and 2020 that probed the views of Russian foreign policy elites. One analysis of these data by Danielle Lussier showed that while Russian foreign policy elites have rather diverse views on domestic politics and other foreign policy issues, they have increasingly similar views of the United States as a threat rather than a partner.<sup>26</sup> Using the same data Sharon Rivera and James D. Bryan found that “whereas 50.6% of elites agreed that the United States constituted a threat to Russia in 1995, fully 79.8% of respondents expressed that view in 2016.”<sup>27</sup> In 2020, this figure fell to 57 percent, but foreign policy elites were also more supportive of sending Russian troops abroad than at any point in the study.<sup>28</sup> If in the past Putin’s inner circle of policy makers was balanced between economic liberals and national security hardliners, the latter have come to rule the roost as Putin’s domestic political coalition shifted after he returned to the presidency in 2012.

### The Continuity Thesis

Other observers downplay the importance of Putin’s worldview and trace the more assertive Russian foreign policy in recent years to historical factors specific to Russia. A key component of this continuity thesis is Russia’s topography. Russia is largely a flat plain with few natural borders or barriers—a condition that makes it vulnerable to invasion, but also makes territorial expansion easier. Having invaded or been invaded by just about all its neighbors at one point, czars in Imperial Russia, general secretaries in the Soviet era, and presidents in modern Russia have all seen military dominance in Russia’s neighborhood as critical to the national interest.

Russia’s historic role on the global stage reinforces the importance of great-power status. In the nineteenth century, Russia was a great power that fought with and against the empires of Europe and Asia in wars in Crimea, the Balkans, and Japan. It was a key member of the Concert of Europe with the United Kingdom, Austria, France, and Prussia that balanced the ambitions of European powers in the



century leading up to World War I. During the Cold War, Moscow oversaw an external empire in Eastern Europe, an internal empire in the former Soviet Union, and a far-flung set of ties with regimes from Cuba to Angola to Vietnam as one of two global superpowers. In 1972, Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko boasted correctly that “no international problem of significance anywhere can be resolved without Soviet participation.”<sup>29</sup>

As in other great powers throughout history, elites in the Kremlin see Russia as an exceptional country with a mission to spread its values. Whether in the guise of Orthodoxy and monarchy in Imperial Russia, Marxism in the Soviet era, or national sovereignty and a multipolar world order in the Putin era, many Russian foreign policy elites do not see their homeland as just another important country but instead as one with an outsize role to play in global politics. Regardless of who occupies the Kremlin, great-power status, or what Russians call *derzhavnost'*, is thought to be central to Russian foreign policy.

Political scientist Seva Gunitsky sees two components in Russia's great-power status: “In Russia's immediate neighborhood, this means an unquestioned sphere of influence, similar to America's Monroe Doctrine. In dealing with other powerful states like the U.S., it implies respect, prestige, and peer recognition rolled into one—in other words, a seat at the table of managing global affairs.”<sup>30</sup> Former NSC Russia expert Thomas Graham and political scientist Rajan Menon note that “at the core of Russian identity is the deeply held belief that Russia must be a great power and that it must be recognized as such.”<sup>31</sup> British policy analyst Keir Giles writes, “The notion of greater-power status and superiority among nations is a key component of Russian national identity, and one that at present appears impossible to relinquish.”<sup>32</sup> To make the case, these scholars point to the surge in national pride following the annexation of Crimea, increasing trust in the military among the Russian public, and Russia's acerbic reactions to perceived slights in international affairs, such as President Obama referring to Russia as “a regional power,” being kicked out of the G-8 group of advanced industrialized economies, or being subject to economic sanctions. Russia's long-serving foreign minister Sergei Lavrov put it bluntly: “I am

convinced that Russia simply cannot exist as a subordinate country of a world leader.”<sup>33</sup>

One anecdote reveals how perceptions of Russia’s great-power status sometimes emerge in subtle ways. I was in Moscow on September 11, 2001, to attend an academic conference. That night, on a television at a Russian bar called Uncle Sam’s, I saw the Twin Towers collapse, flames rise from the US Pentagon, and mayhem engulf New York and Washington. In response to the horror of the attack, Russians created an enormous makeshift shrine in front of the US embassy of flowers, candles, condolence cards, and deeply felt testimonials, many of which were wrapped in cellophane to protect them from the rain. Some tributes referenced Russia’s loss of life from recent acts of terrorism. Others mentioned Russia’s staggering losses in World War II. Walking among the remembrances on the day after the attack, I cried.

Several days later I interviewed a high-level official at the Russian Central Bank. He had started working at the Central Bank in the Soviet period and was now in his mid-forties. He was not a Western-oriented liberal and was often critical of Yeltsin, but also appreciated that Russia needed to modernize its banking system and build ties with other market economies. I had interviewed him a few times about bank policy, and we shared a good rapport. He began by offering sympathies for the attack and enormous loss of life, and then turned to a long discourse on why the United States and Russia needed to ally against terrorism. After a heavy pause, though, he concluded by saying, “Well, you wanted to be the only superpower.”

Good evidence for viewing Russian foreign policy as a continuation of great-power competition comes from the struggle to create security arrangements in Europe. Russia’s relations with Europe have long been a tangle of attempts at integration and cooperation, followed by periods of tension and competition.<sup>34</sup> Russia is part of Europe, yet also apart from it. In the post-Cold War era, Russian and Western policy makers have clashed over how to accommodate Russia’s interests and military power in the region, while also preserving the core principles of the Western alliance that have helped to keep the peace in Europe since 1945. One key issue has been Russia’s relations with NATO. At various

times, policy makers in Moscow and Europe floated the idea of Russia joining NATO, but it never got much traction.<sup>35</sup> To manage relations short of Russian membership, Brussels and Moscow formed several different bodies over the years, without much success, and NATO ended these efforts following the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The issue took on new importance with NATO expansion—a policy that came to be bitterly opposed by Moscow.<sup>36</sup> With memories of Soviet dominance during the Cold War still fresh, Eastern European countries sought membership in NATO in the mid-1990s. After initial reluctance from the Western alliance, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999, followed in 2004 by seven more Eastern European countries, including three that share a border with Russia: Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

In 2008, the Bush administration led efforts to bring Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. The stakes were high given Ukraine's size, complicated history with Moscow, and strategic significance. The United States faced criticism not only from Moscow but also from NATO allies such as Germany and France, and even some generally pro-Western Russians. After much internal debate, NATO pledged that Ukraine and Georgia "will become NATO members," but did not offer a Membership Action Plan with any details or start date. The open-ended commitment was the worst of all worlds. It encouraged Moscow's suspicions that NATO wanted to surround Russia, disappointed governments in Ukraine and Georgia that wanted NATO to move more quickly, and caused resentment among alliance members that were divided on the issue.<sup>37</sup>

Some argue that the threat of NATO expansion ultimately led Russia to annex Crimea and intervene in eastern Ukraine in response.<sup>38</sup> The most prominent proponent of this view sits in the Kremlin. In 2007, at an annual meeting of defense experts known as the Munich Security Conference, Putin stung Western observers with an acerbic speech that contended "it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask:

against whom is this expansion intended?”<sup>39</sup> After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, he remarked that Western nations are “constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position. . . . But there is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine our Western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally.”<sup>40</sup>

Defenders of NATO expansion dismiss this view, and argue that countries in eastern Europe have the right to choose alliances as they please and that NATO helped keep the peace in much of this part of Europe for the last sixty years—no mean feat given the experience of two world wars in this region in the twentieth century.

Stephen Sestanovich, ex-Ambassador at Large for the former Soviet Union and now a professor at Columbia, views the Kremlin’s attempt to link NATO expansion to Russian moves in Ukraine as an *ex post facto* rationalization of policies undertaken for domestic political reasons. He argues that NATO membership for Ukraine had been a dead issue since 2009 due to opposition in Europe and the Obama White House as well as lukewarm support in Ukraine itself. Sestanovich downplays the NATO threat to Russia by noting that the number of US troops in Europe in 2014 was about one-sixth as large as in 1990, the number of aircraft in Europe was down 75 percent, and the United States had removed all of its tank divisions from the continent.<sup>41</sup> In his view, Putin chose to annex Crimea to avoid being seen as the leader who “lost Ukraine.” Michael McFaul observes that in his five years as a key Obama policy adviser and US ambassador to Russia, he “cannot remember a single serious conversation about NATO expansion between Obama and a Russian official.”<sup>42</sup>

The clash over security policy in Europe has been an enduring feature of US-Russian relations, and reflects an underlying conflict of interests more than the worldview of any particular world leader, the ups and downs of the economy, or political events in Europe, Russia, or the United States. Historian Stephen Kotkin maintains, “What precluded post-Soviet Russia from joining Europe as just another country forming an (inevitably) unequal partnership with the US was the country’s abiding great power pride and sense of special mission.”<sup>43</sup>

The exceptional Russia approach to foreign policy too is not without criticism. History and a great-power legacy are important, but they are also not straitjackets. In his study of Russia's complicated ties with the countries of the greater Balkans, Dimitar Bechev takes issue with canned histories that emphasize Russia's "traditional influence in the region." He reminds us that "the past is not a monolith. Rather it is a repository of multifaceted, often dissonant and conflicting experiences, events, and memories. As such, what we call 'history' is susceptible to political distortion to the point of outright manipulation."<sup>44</sup>

Bechev's analysis of Russia's foreign policy in southeastern Europe provides a good test of the continuity thesis. Russia has long-standing cultural and religious ties with Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia, but not with Croatia, Romania, and Slovenia. Looking across a range of issues, he finds that while Russian rhetoric emphasizes cultural ties, Russian policy reflects this cultural division only dimly. Across both sets of countries, Russia asserts its influence in the region by building economic relations and supporting local groups friendly to Moscow, but this is not due to a grand plan, deep cultural ties, or historical legacies. Instead he points to the Kremlin's desire to establish alternative routes for gas exports and develop Russian economic interests. Bechev notes that "hard-nosed pragmatism and the absence of ideological scruples differentiate Russia from both the Soviet Union and the Tsarist Empire."<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, great-power status, or *derzhavnost'*, is not codified in stone but is rather a flexible concept. Seva Gunitsky and Andrei Tsygankov argue that

Russia's constant attempts to engage the United States in cooperation, including those following the 9/11 attack and over Iran and Syria, demonstrate the principal importance to the Kremlin of being recognized as a major power, or *derzhava*, in relations with the world outside Eurasia. Despite its internal institutional differences from Western nations, Russia sees itself as an indispensable part of the West and will continue to reach out to Western leaders in order to demonstrate Russia's great-power relevance.

In their view, Russia's great-power status does not necessarily mean an aggressive foreign policy; rather, Western powers should recognize Moscow as a member of the great-power club.<sup>46</sup>

*Derzhavnost'* implies a sphere of influence in Eurasia and recognition of status, but other policies that flow from it are not clear. Does it mean building a Eurasian economic union to counter the European Union or integrating more deeply into European markets? Does it mean abrogating (or cheating on) arms control treaties to show independence or concluding arms control treaties with the United States to demonstrate parity? It is also helpful to remember that Russia is not the first former great power to struggle with its diminished status, as evidenced most clearly by Britain and France.

### Autocratic Politics and Foreign Policy

Russia is an unusual autocracy to be sure, but some insights from previous chapters can help us understand some aspects of its foreign policy. As in their domestic politics, autocratic rulers face difficult trade-offs in foreign policy. Even autocrats as unchallenged as Putin have to manage the interests of competing groups. Policies needed to generate economic dynamism in Russia—opening the economy to foreign trade, reducing corruption, strengthening the rule of law, increasing competition, and attracting foreign direct investment—are difficult to square with an assertive foreign policy that benefits precisely those groups opposed to these reforms, such as hard-liners in the security agencies, managers of state-owned companies, and firms in import-competing sectors.<sup>47</sup> The Kremlin's more assertive foreign policy toward the West has brought Moscow back as a global force and secured Putin's place in Russian history, but has also undercut much-needed economic and political reforms that would strengthen Russia's position abroad over the longer term as well as satisfy domestic constituents who want increased living standards. This trade-off is central not only in domestic politics but in foreign policy too.

One good example of this trade-off is Russian policy toward Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea brought a four-year surge in support for the

Kremlin in Russia, but also removed the largest and most pro-Russian voting bloc—the roughly 1.5 million Russians in Crimea—from Ukrainian politics. In past elections, parties openly sympathetic to Moscow regularly received around 40 percent of the vote, but advocating for close relations with Russia is a tougher sell with the Ukrainian electorate after the annexation of Crimea. The landslide victory of the thirty-eight-year-old Volodymyr Zelensky, a Russian speaker from eastern Ukraine, in the presidential elections in Ukraine in April 2019 suggests that the polarization between eastern and western Ukraine that served Russia so well is less important today than prior to 2014. Moreover, Ukraine's largest trading partner by far is the European Union (\$40 billion per year) rather than Russia (\$11 billion), and China is soon to replace Russia as its second-biggest trading partner.<sup>48</sup>

Moscow's policies toward Ukraine have bolstered NATO. By the end of 2020, NATO members are expected to have increased spending on defense by \$100 billion.<sup>49</sup> NATO has moved roughly four thousand advanced troops to the Baltic states and a smaller number to Poland as a token force to deter Russia. Given the centripetal forces at work in Europe today, weakening of the European Union, and election of a NATO skeptic as US president, one would have expected NATO to be in grave danger, but it has held up better than anticipated. And that is largely due to Russia's moves in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and elsewhere.

Moscow's annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine also led to economic sanctions that have further slowed the Russian economy.<sup>50</sup> Key features of the economic sanctions included prohibitions on access to finance, travel bans, asset freezes on sanctioned individuals and firms, and a total embargo on transactions and economic cooperation with Russian-occupied Crimea. The European Union, Switzerland, Canada, Norway, Australia, and other countries have followed suit too. Despite many predictions in 2014, both the United States and European Union have kept economic sanctions in place for more than six years to the surprise of just about everyone.<sup>51</sup>

Corruption and low oil prices have been a much bigger drag on the Russian economy, but the economic sanctions have had effects as well.<sup>52</sup> They have scared off foreign investors, and reduced Russian access to

foreign technology and financing. That Kremlin elites frequently call for them to be removed gives some evidence of their impact. Sanctions have inflicted considerable, if intermittent, pain on specific oligarchs. In April 2018, the US government levied sanctions on companies held by Oleg Deripaska, a metals and energy magnate, for their role in the Kremlin's "malign activity around the globe," immediately leading to stock market losses of more than \$3 billion for his main company. In 2019, Deripaska sued the US government, claiming losses of more than \$7 billion.<sup>53</sup> Or consider the response of another wealthy Russian businessmen, Viktor Vekselberg, after being banned from doing business with or traveling to the United States in 2018: "For me this is a total crisis of my life. This is not about money, not about business. This is my personal situation. . . . For me, the whole world was about opportunity. Now, what can I do?"<sup>54</sup>

Some sectors in Russia, like agriculture, have benefited from Russian sanctions on agricultural products from Europe and the United States, but even Prime Minister Medvedev acknowledged in 2015 that "it is hard to name countries that have made continuing, steady progress by prolonged self-limitation in trade."<sup>55</sup> According to the OECD, Russian economic productivity per worker is at less than 40 percent of US levels, and an assertive foreign policy will do little to help improve this ratio.<sup>56</sup> Even before the collapse of oil prices and pandemic-induced recession of 2020, the World Bank estimated that Russia will hit its target growth rate of 3 percent no sooner than 2028, and only if it implements structural reforms and boosts the size of the workforce via immigration. These are two big ifs.<sup>57</sup>

The trade-offs of a more assertive foreign policy and slow economic growth are well known in the Kremlin. Alexei Kudrin, who for many years advised Putin on economic policy and now heads the Russian Audit Chamber, has argued that the success of Russia's economic policy depends on reducing tensions with the West—a comment that brought a quick rebuke from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>58</sup> Pursuing more accommodating policies abroad could boost the economy by attracting foreign investment and technology, and increasing economic competition, but also risks alienating interest groups within Russian



that gain from a more forceful foreign policy and an economic status quo that delivers slow growth, yet generous benefits to incumbents in key sectors. Agricultural groups benefiting from protection against Western goods, defense-sector firms that rely on state contracts, nationalist groups that place a high priority on Russia's great-power status, and state-owned firms wary of privatization by foreign owners all oppose attempts to liberalize the economy, even if these efforts would benefit the country as a whole. Just as in domestic politics, decision makers often have to choose between competing visions in foreign policy as well.

Beyond having to navigate between rival interest groups, Putin faces a second limitation in foreign policy. Previous chapters have highlighted that public opinion does not always follow the Kremlin's lead, and this is true in foreign policy too. Thomas Sherlock's exhaustive review finds that most Russians welcome their country's return to global prominence, but are wary of a more assertive foreign policy and uninterested in great-power status.<sup>59</sup> Every year since 2003, the Levada Center has asked Russians whether they would like to see their country as "a great power which other countries respect and fear," or a "country with a high standard of living, albeit not one of the strongest countries in the world." Only in 2014 at the height of the Crimea crisis did Russians prefer seeing their country as a great power over one with a high standard of living (48 versus 47 percent). In every other year, more Russians preferred to see their country as one with a high standard of living than as a great power—and often by considerable margins.<sup>60</sup> In 2017, 56 percent of Russians favored a Russia with a high standard of living, and 42 percent favored a Russia as a great power.

In a 2014 national survey, the Russian Academy of Sciences asked respondents to "identify the values on which the future of Russia should be based" and gave eight options. Even as Russians were basking in the successful annexation of Crimea, just 32 percent said "Russia should become a great power"—a figure that was unchanged when the survey was repeated in 2018. During the post-Crimea honeymoon, public support for Russia's role as a superpower did not increase. Nor did support for seeing the introduction of a "strong hand," which was backed only

by 26 percent of the respondents in both rounds of the survey. By far the most popular response in both surveys was that Russia should be built on the idea of “social justice.”<sup>61</sup>

Surveys by Kremlin-friendly pollster FOM show that Russians are now much more likely to say that the Kremlin spends too much time on foreign policy (32 percent in 2019 versus 17 percent in 2015), and just 45 percent think that Russian policy has experienced more successes than failures in recent years.<sup>62</sup> When asked in fall 2018 whether Russia’s top priority should be “superpower status” or the “welfare of its own citizens,” 51 percent of Russians chose the second, up from 33 percent in 2014.<sup>63</sup>

Public support for the Syrian intervention has been modest. In August 2017, just 30 percent of Russians thought that the Kremlin should continue its military operations in Syria, and 49 percent thought the Kremlin should end them. And as noted previously, Russian attitudes toward intervention in eastern Ukraine have been sensitive to the costs in terms of Russian lives. Russians supported the Crimean annexation in large numbers in part because the military option itself involved so few costs.

President Putin may note that “Ukraine is not a country,” and “Russians and Ukrainians are one people that cannot live without each other,” but a January 2020 poll by the Levada Center found that 82 percent of Russians believe that Ukraine should be an independent state, and just 15 percent believe that “Russia and Ukraine must unite into one country.”<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the lack of support for unification with Ukraine has changed little in annual surveys in Russia since 2008.<sup>65</sup> And in summer 2020, only one in four Russians supported unification with Belarus.<sup>66</sup>

Since 2011, President Putin and Russian state media have sharply increased their criticism of the United States for everything from stoking anti-government protests in Russia to renewing the arms race. But Russians doesn’t seem to be following the script. Throughout 2012 and 2013, roughly 60 percent of Russians had a positive view of the United States, despite the Kremlin’s harsher public stance toward Washington.<sup>67</sup> This figure fell to 18 percent after the imposition of US sanctions, as one

might expect, but has rebounded steadily and reached 47 percent in December 2019. This increase has occurred even as a majority of Russians believe that the United States has had an “unfriendly/hostile” position toward Moscow since 2014.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, a January 2020 poll found that 67 percent of Russians feel that the Kremlin should view the West as a “partner,” 11 percent as a “friend,” and just 16 percent as a “rival.”<sup>69</sup> One pollster at the Levada Center noted that these data “once again underline the mass exhaustion from foreign policy confrontation. . . . The conception of a “besieged fortress is weakening as the share of Russians who consider that Russia has nothing to fear from the countries entering NATO is higher than it has been in 20 years.”<sup>70</sup> With official anti-Americanism at a high pitch, Russian mass attitudes toward the United States and the West have generally been on the mend. Russian foreign policy elites may share a deep-seated desire for great-power status and strong anti-American views, but the Russian public is much more ambivalent.<sup>71</sup>

The point is not that Russian public opinion tightly constrains the Kremlin, but for those who argue that Russian foreign policy is driven by deeply held historical and cultural patterns in support of great-power status, it is important to recognize that these patterns are political creations rather than objective facts. As political creations, they are shaped by political elites for strategic reasons, and these political creations may or may not find acceptance among the broader public.

Third, as in previous chapters, we do find some common patterns among personalist autocracies. Anti-Westernism and the use of bellicose rhetoric is hardly confined to Russia. Other personalist autocracies with far different types of leaders and historical legacies have also tried to legitimize their rule by seeking greater influence abroad. In Venezuela, Chávez used oil sales to create an Alliance of Tolerance and silence potential critics of his human rights policies among Latin American governments. He also embarked on an aggressive foreign aid program to buy support in the region, donated to Chavista-like parties across Latin America, and dramatically increased propaganda via television to foreign countries.<sup>72</sup> These tools are familiar to observers of Russian foreign policy.

In Turkey, Erdoğan has sought a greater role for Turkey in the Middle East that is more independent of the United States. More important, he has grown closer to Russia than any of his predecessors, including purchasing a sophisticated missile defense system from Moscow in a move that was widely opposed in NATO.<sup>73</sup> Turkey has also backed Azerbaijan's side in its renewed confrontation with Armenia over the contested territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

In Hungary, Orbán openly advocates on behalf of Hungarian minorities abroad and seeks to position himself as the nationalist alternative to the liberal, globalist vision embodied in the European Union.<sup>74</sup> As Orbán noted on the hundred-year anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, which defines Hungary's border, "The West raped the thousand-year-old borders and history of Central Europe. They forced us between indefensible borders, deprived us of our national treasures, separated us from our resources, and made a death row out of our country. Central Europe was redrawn without moral concerns. We will never forget that they did this."<sup>75</sup> This type of "besieged fortress" language is reminiscent of Russian foreign policy after the annexation of Crimea. Anti-Western sentiment and an assertive foreign policy stance seem to be as much a function of modern personalist autocracies as a feature specific to Putin's Russia.

Indeed, some observers see Russian foreign policy as driven less by the core principles of Kremlin elites or historical patterns, and more by opportunities and interests—the same factors that propel foreign policy in most countries.<sup>76</sup> In this view, Russia's resurgence is due more to disorder in the West than to an expansion of Russian power per se. Yes, the Russian economy has recovered from shocks of the 1990s, and military spending and living standards have rebounded, but in international affairs power is relative, and the financial collapse of 2008, discord within the European Union, the rise of illiberal regimes in Europe, and the current political chaos of the United States have hamstrung the Western powers in global affairs. In contrast to his predecessors, Trump harbors a deep aversion to NATO and the European Union, and his willingness to air doubts about commitments to NATO have undermined the US assurances to the alliance. In addition, the Trump

administration's spats with allies from Canada to Australia to Germany have further weakened the broader alliance of democracies.<sup>77</sup>

No better example of Russia's opportunism exists than its enlarged footprint in the Middle East.<sup>78</sup> The Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and abrogation of the Iran nuclear deal signed in 2015 distressed allies in the Middle East and Europe, and the Kremlin has exploited this division. Moscow has maintained good relations with a diverse set of countries and interests in the region.<sup>79</sup> It is on good terms with both Israel and the Palestinians. It has worked with the longtime rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia. Russia maintains trade and military ties with Iran, while also cooperating with Saudi Arabia to manage international energy prices. Moscow's good relations with Saudi Arabia are notable as the two countries have long been on opposite sides of divisive issues in the Middle East and compete in global energy markets. Russia and NATO member Turkey have had a volatile yet on balance more productive relationship in recent years than in the past. In the Syrian conflict, Russia has worked with Turkey, Iran, Israel, and Iraq to try to broker a peace in the region without direct US involvement—a thought hard to imagine just a few years ago. In the Middle East, the Kremlin is not locked into relations with historical partners or driven by the core values of decision makers. One prominent Russian foreign policy analyst noted, "Virtually anyone can be a partner and practically anyone can be an opponent."<sup>80</sup>

By taking advantage of the United States and Europe's reluctance to intervene in Syria on a large scale, Russia established itself as a power-broker on the cheap, while also keeping President al-Assad in power, and protecting that country's naval and air bases. Russia has been effective in Syria with a small outlay of forces; around fifty thousand Russian troops have rotated through Syria since 2015, with most serving in the navy and air force rather than on the ground in order to limit casualties.

Continuing in this vein, Robert Legvold observes that events on the ground can generate openings for cooperation when they align the interests of the United States and Russia.<sup>81</sup> Even during a period of increasing rivalry, the Kremlin helped the United States provide troops and matériel to NATO soldiers fighting in Afghanistan via the Northern Distribution

Network, a commercial supply route stretching from the Baltic and Caspian Seas through Russia and Central Asia.<sup>82</sup> Designed to be less expensive than air transport and more reliable than moving goods through Pakistan, the Northern Distribution Network opened in 2009 and soon became an important route to transport troops and goods to Afghanistan.<sup>83</sup> Supporting the network made sense for Russia. Fearing the chaos that might ensue following a Taliban victory in Afghanistan, Putin supported the creation of NATO bases in Afghanistan in 2012, stating, “We have a strong interest in our southern borders being calm,” and adding, “We need to help them [US and coalition forces]. Let them fight. . . . This is in Russia’s national interests.”<sup>84</sup> In an irony of history, Putin offered NATO the use of a transit base in Ulyanovsk, the birthplace of Lenin and home to the world’s largest museum dedicated to the former Soviet leader. With the steep withdrawal of US forces in Afghanistan, this cooperation ended, but it still serves as a good example of tactical collaboration driven by an alignment of interests.

Moscow and Washington cooperated on the New START Treaty that sharply reduced nuclear weapons in 2011. The first verifiable arms control agreement between the countries since START 1 in 1994, this treaty capped nuclear warheads at 1,550, a 30 percent reduction from past agreements, and limited nuclear-capable launchers to 800, down from 1,600.<sup>85</sup> More important, it created new monitoring regimes and ways to exchange data that were designed to increase trust in the agreement.<sup>86</sup>

Finally, the two countries collaborated to slow Tehran’s progress toward creating nuclear weapons.<sup>87</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015 was backed by a number of countries, but Russian and US support for the agreement was critical.<sup>88</sup> Neither the United States nor Russia favor nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Moscow also sought to build its economic ties with Tehran beyond weapons and energy infrastructure. President Obama noted,

Russia was a help on this. . . . I’ll be honest with you. I was not sure given the strong differences we are having with Russia right now around Ukraine, whether this would sustain itself. Putin and the Russian government compartmentalized on this in a way that surprised

me, and we would have not achieved this agreement had it not been for Russia's willingness to stick with us and the other P5-plus members in insisting on a strong deal.<sup>89</sup>

Cooperation between countries is always difficult, particularly in the case of Russia and the United States—two countries that trade little and have few common enemies. Moreover, it is hard to imagine cooperation on this level today given domestic politics in both places. But sometimes events can align interests and shift policies. Russian foreign policy is in many respects driven by reactions to events and the strategies of other countries.

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In its domestic politics, Russia shares many commonalities with other personalist autocracies, but in its foreign policy Russia is unusual. As a great power, Russia faces a different landscape than do many autocracies. These differences make simple comparisons with other autocracies difficult, and insights from the rich cross-national research on the foreign policies of autocratic states should be applied to Russia with these caveats in mind.<sup>90</sup>

Nonetheless, a close evaluation of Russian foreign policy reveals some themes found in prior chapters. Putin faces some of the same constraints that he grapples with in domestic politics. He holds rather blunt tools for achieving policy goals and confronts a public that doesn't always echo the Kremlin line. More important, he must deal with the difficult trade-off that a more assertive foreign policy strengthens groups in Russia most opposed to the kinds of economic reform that would generate power over the long haul. Putin has to decide whether to continue playing his weak hand well in the short run and abet further long-term decline, or try to strengthen his hand with all the inherent political risks of altering the status quo at home.