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**Russia and the 'Geo'
of its Geopolitics**

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ABSTRACT

Russia is widely regarded as one of the major revisionist powers in the world, determined to upend the global liberal order. To be a global power, Russia must become a maritime power as well. Thus, it seeks to gain control in Eurasia and the region between the Black Sea and the Baltic region. The North European Plain and the river Danube hold strategic significance for Russia, the former being a gateway to Europe and the latter the economic lynchpin of 10 important countries. However, the presence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the Black Sea and the Baltic states is an impediment to Russia’s plans. This paper analyses Russia’s geopolitical situation and its longstanding conflict with the Western powers. It draws on Grygiel and Mitchell’s insights in *The Unquiet Frontier*¹ to explore why the United States must preserve the current world order and what it must do to succeed.

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INTRODUCTION

The global liberal order, established at the end of World War II, gives primacy to democracy and free trade, with maritime transport as the backbone of global trade. The United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) are key institutions of this world order, and the US is in charge of its security.

In *The World America Made*, Robert Kagan notes that between 1950 and 2000, the global annual GDP growth rate increased to 3.9 percent, from 1.6 percent between 1820 and 1950 and 0.3 percent between 1500 and 1820. Between 1980 and 2002 alone, world trade more than tripled.² Economist Paul Collier, in his book *The Bottom Billion*, says that at the start of this era of prosperity, the world had been roughly divided between one billion rich people and five billion poor, with the majority of the poor living outside the transatlantic world. By the beginning of the 21st century, four billion of those poor were on their way out of poverty.³ Thus, this period of global prosperity has not only benefited the poor populations but also produced rising economic powers such as China, Brazil, Turkey, India and South Africa. The trade and commerce responsible for such prosperity are largely a result of the liberal world order, at the heart of which are safe sea lanes (since most trade is maritime) and a rules-based free market.

For a world order to be established, it is necessary to have consensus on shared values and an alliance to make things work. In the “European Concert” of 1815–53, the period between the Napoleonic Wars and the Crimean War, Europe did not see any major wars as the Metternich Order (a four-power alliance of Austria, Prussia, Russia and the UK) and the Holy Alliance (a three-power coalition between Russia, Prussia and Austria) maintained the order.⁴ Consequently, the UK was the major power at the time.

The current global liberal order similarly depends on the consensus

on the primacy of safe maritime traffic and rules-based free-market capitalism. Dominance over the seas and free-market trade, Kagan points out, gave the UK and the US power over the globalised economy. Since the liberal order is not preordained, it needs a “system operator” (a term coined by G. John Ikenberry),⁵ a largely benign hegemon that will guarantee its security. The US currently fulfils this role by providing the “public goods necessary for the functioning of efficient world markets,” because it is “profitable for them to do so.”⁶ Further, geopolitically vulnerable nations, e.g. Poland and Taiwan, must have adequate security to be able to focus on economic endeavours.

Grygiel and Mitchell’s seminal book, *The Unquiet Frontier*, demonstrates how the international order has benefitted the world and explains why the US must work to preserve and strengthen it. The book makes the following key arguments:⁷

1. Revisionist powers have started “probing” at the periphery of the US-led order “using low-intensity tests,”⁸ to assess the hegemon’s ability to defend the status quo and to gradually gain territory and reputation. “Probing stems out of a tentative belief that the existing geopolitical order is amenable to change.”⁹ Such probes are conducted “on the outer limits of the leading power’s strategic position.” Thus, Russia will not probe where the US is strong, e.g. at heart of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in Germany or France, but at the periphery, e.g. Ukraine.
2. To maintain the global liberal order, the US must act as a benevolent hegemon. However, spiralling expenses and misadventures such as the Iraq War have frayed the domestic consensus on the deployment of US forces across the globe.
3. The isolationist impulse of the US public opinion is not new. Given the natural barrier provided by the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean, critics feel that the US can stay away from global battlegrounds. However, such isolation is short-lived. In both World War I and World War II, the US was compelled to intervene later, at huge costs.

4. After World War II, the US strategists wanted to avoid eleventh-hour interventions. Thus, the US permanently stationed in Europe and built the NATO as a bulwark against the East Bloc. It formed alliances in East Asia and the Middle East as well. While there was a cost attached to this continuing involvement, it was akin to an insurance policy: the yearly premium of expanded military budget eschewed the possibility of a costly global war.
5. Aggressive revisionist states have now started probing, e.g. Russia's annexation of Crimea and China's "Nine Dash Line" in the South China Sea. To stop Russian expansion, a bulwark is needed.
6. Critics believe that since the US can influence a crisis with its bombers, physical presence in a region is unnecessary. However, bombers with a range of 6,000 nautical miles, capable of delivering intercontinental strikes, still need protection when they are on, say, Russian airspace, which is usually provided by fighter aircraft with ranges of 1,300–1,800 miles.¹⁰ Thus, while bombers can be dispatched from the US, supporting fighters should have an air base close to Russia.¹¹ Moreover, a B-2 stealth bomber costs US\$730 billion, while a C-17 Globemaster transporter costs only US\$235 billion.
7. Alliances are essential since the US cannot be present everywhere.

To understand the importance of the US' role as protector of the global liberal order, one must understand how Russia's expansion threatens it. Grygiel and Mitchell summarise it thus:¹²

"NATO's presence in this region blocks Russian re-entry into and control over a collection of territories that were indispensable elements in Russian power under the Tsarist Empire and communist regime. These include the Baltic states, Russia's traditional warm-water ingress into the Baltic Sea and window onto northern Europe; Poland, the historic gate to mainland Europe, control of which is necessary for exerting Russian land power in the European balance of power; the Bohemian highlands, a westward-facing Slavic salient that Bismarck called the most defensible real estate in Europe; Hungary and Slovakia, the keys

to control of the upper Danube River basin and supporting energy and transit routes that are linchpins of the European economic space; and Romania and Bulgaria, which occupy the westward approaches to the Black Sea Straits, access to which is necessary for Russia to project naval power into the eastern Mediterranean — the unending object of Russian nineteenth-century diplomacy. Historically, the possession or neutralization of these territories has been a necessary precondition to Russian great-power status.”

THE VIEW FROM RUSSIA

Russia has rightly alarmed many with its recent actions, including aggression in Ukraine, military build-up in Kaliningrad¹³ (next to the Baltic states), the annual Zapad military exercises with Belarus¹⁴ and the Vostok-2018 exercise.¹⁵ In his book *War with Russia*, former NATO Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR) General Sir Richard Shirreff outlines plausible scenarios in which Russia can attack fragile NATO member states in the Baltics.¹⁶

The Russian grand strategy has many drivers, one of which is geography. The European Plain has been an inviting territory for invaders throughout history, due to its uninterrupted geography. This is the driving force behind Putin’s aggressive policies in Ukraine. As Tim Marshall says, Putin—a devout orthodox—must ask God every night, “Why didn’t you put mountains in eastern Ukraine?”¹⁷

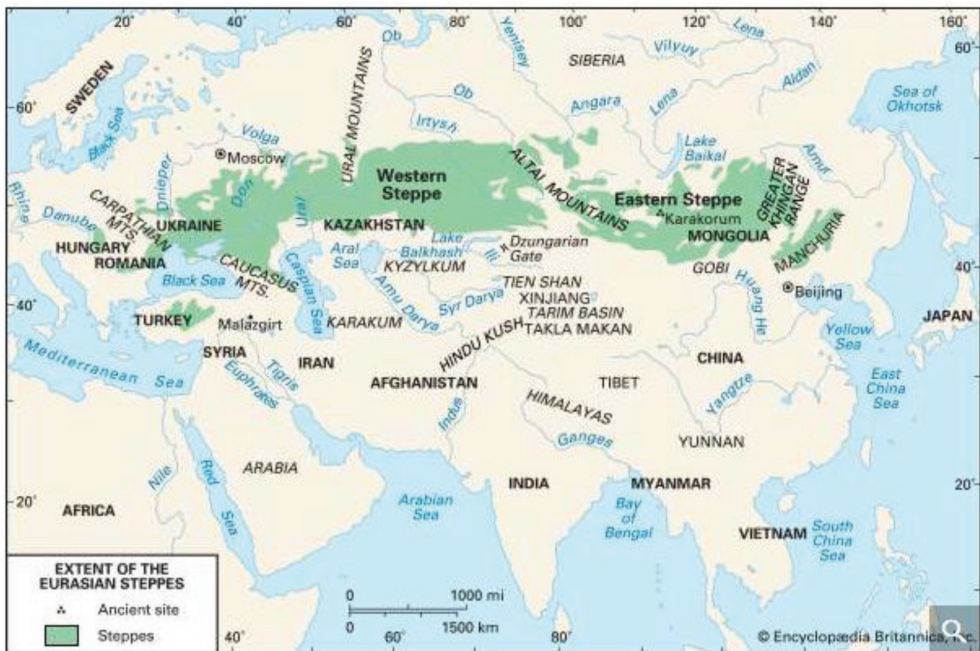
In the April 1904 issue of the *Geographical Journal*, Sir Halford John Mackinder, then a reader of Geography at Oxford, published his seminal paper, “The Geographical Pivot of History.” Mackinder’s key insights drew from the pattern of rainfall in the Eurasian plains and how its unique geographical features could explain almost the entire history of invasions into Eurasia. Due to the disparate pattern of rainfall, Europe’s heartland has two climatic zones: the Eurasian Steppe and the North European Plain. Both play significant roles in Russia’s history.¹⁸

The Eurasian Steppe

The Eurasian Steppe, especially the western tip, is significant in Russia's geopolitical calculus. In the east, it extends to Manchuria and Mongolia, and in the west, it skirts the Black Sea and extends to the Pannonian Plains (called the Great Hungarian Plain), what is modern-day Hungary and Croatia.¹⁹

Historically, the Eurasian Steppe provided aggressive groups in Mongolia with enormous strategic depth. Being unreachable, even by the sea, it formed an insurmountable barrier for superpowers. Between the ninth and the 12th century, the region around the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea was of mortal importance to the Russian people. The Kievan Rus suffered from repeated Mongol attacks from the south,

Figure 1: The Map of the Eurasian Steppe



Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/the-Steppe>.

leading the Russian people to eventually move to Moscow in search of security. This explains Russia's attachment to Kiev and the importance of the region between Kiev and Moscow.

The Great Hungarian Plain provides natural safety barriers: the Balkans and the Dinaric Alps in the south and the Carpathian Mountains in the north. The Carpathian and the Balkans were historically separated by low foothills, which horsemen could easily cross. Thus, crossing the entire steppes lead to a safe exclave, natural forts in the form of three mountains: the Carpathians, the Dinaric Alps and the Balkans.

Figure 2: Europe's Physical Geography



Source: *Physical Features of Europe*, <https://ecsforum1.wordpress.com/2013/01/29/mission-1-europes-physical-geography/>.

Figure 3: Barents Sea and White Sea, European Russia's Northwest



Source: World Atlas, <https://www.worldatlas.com/atlas/infopage/whitesea.htm>.

Figure 4: Eastern Europe before the 19th Century



Source: J.H. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal*, 1904, <https://www.iasscore.in/upsc-prelims/europe>.

Russia and the North European Plain

One of the oldest mentions of Slavic Russian people dates back to the 11th century. The region in pink (See Figure 5) was a loose federation of Russian Slavs centred around today's Kiev in Ukraine. In the south of the Kievan Rus was the Black Sea, with the Eurasian Steppe separating the two.

Above the Carpathians and the Alps is the North European Plain, which extends to the Baltic Sea and the Barents Sea. It consists of low plains with little strategic depth and is thus difficult to defend. The Grand Duchy of Moscow, or the Muscovy Rus, founded in 1283, was in

Figure 5: The Kievan Rus



Source: *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kievan-Rus>.

Figure 6: Grand Duchy of Moscow, 1283

Source: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2012; *Weapons and Warfare*, <https://weaponsandwarfare.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/3846-050-5f4c5ddb.gif>.

the middle of the North European Plain and contained wholly within it (See Figures 6 and 7).

Thus, the Muscovy Rus was a fledgeling state, with very little geographical protection due to the lack of barriers such as mountains or deserts to keep hostile forces at bay. Its national security was constantly at risk. Further, the state had no access to seaports. To reach the Black Sea, Russians needed to cross the hostile empire of the Golden Horde (the Mongols). Strategic depth was a problem in the absence of any hinterland to escape to in case of mortal combats, which later became all the more important when Napoleon arrived in 1812 and Hitler in 1941.

Figure 7: The North European Plain



Source: "The North European Plain: The Unsolved Problem," Clovis Institute, <http://clovisinstitute.org/north-european-plain/>.

It is important to understand how Russians achieved strategic depth. Four notable Russian emperors largely shaped modern-day Russia: Ivan III, also known as Ivan the Great; his nephew, Ivan the Terrible; Peter the Great; and Catherine the Great. Russia's gradual march started when Ivan the Great refused to pay tribute to the Mongols in 1480. Over the next 225 years, Russians expanded first to the east, annexing Siberia, and eventually reached the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Pacific. A few points must be noted:

1. Starting with the two Ivans, Russia moved eastward to attain its strategic depth. Just as the US explored the west, Russians explored the east all the way to the sea of Okhotsk, the Bering Straits and the Kamchatka Peninsula. In their respective expansions, the US and Russia come very close near the Diomedede Islands across the

Figure 8: Diomed Islands



Source: The World Atlas, <https://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/diomedede.htm>.

International Date Line in the Bering Straits, with the nations being separated by only four miles.

2. The eastward march gave Russia strategic depth in the form of an enormous hinterland. Due to this strategic depth, Alexander I could wait out against Napoleon without having to surrender, until the latter retreated to France.
3. Russia straddles both Asia and Europe, with the Ural Mountains as the boundary between the two continents. The Urals form a natural boundary between Asian Russia and European Russia, with the Russia–Belarus border nearly 2,000 km away and Moscow over 1,300 km away. From north to south, the mountains cover about

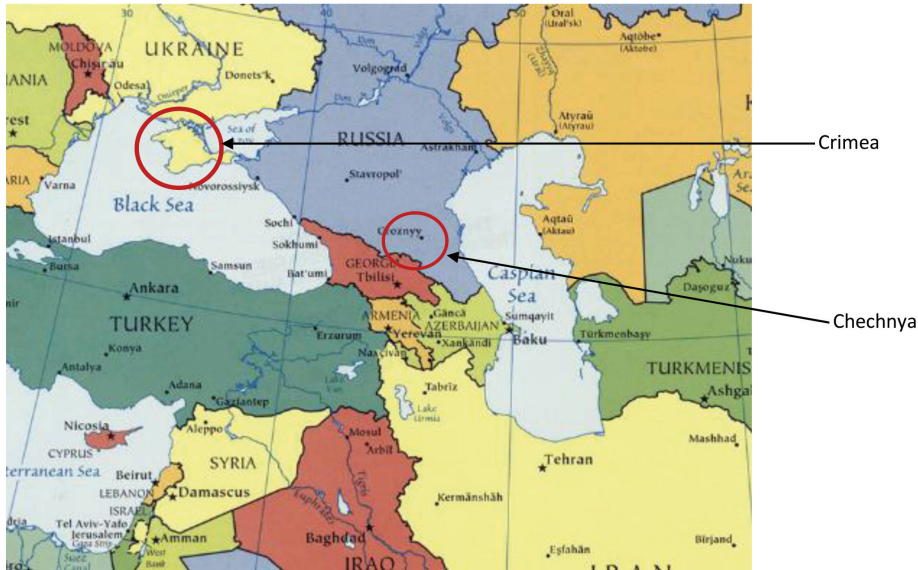
1,000 km. The Urals thus have immense strategic significance for Russia, in all four directions.

4. To the east of southwest Russia is the oil-rich Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountain (See Figure 9). The Caucasus offers a natural boundary, driving Russia to expand towards it. The Caspian Sea provides not only oil wealth but also a kind of strategic depth to the Russian Navy. The Russian Navy positions its “small” missile ships in the Caspian, capable of launching potent missiles. On 7 October 2015, Russia launched 3M14s at Syria from these missile ships,²⁰ forcing the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* to exit the Persian Gulf on 8 October 2015.
5. The west of southwest Russia allows it to project its power to East Ukraine and connects it to Crimea. Thus, Russia’s access to

Figure 9: Three Important Features: The Ural Mountains, The Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea



Source: *The World Atlas*, <https://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/asia/russia/ruland.htm>.

Figure 10: Crimea and Chechnya

Source: *Mapsworld*, <http://www.maps-world.net/central-asia.htm>.

its only warm water port—Sevastopol in Crimea—is through the southwestern tip. Russia is also interested in Chechnya—a relatively small region—due to the latter being located in the strategically vital southwestern tip of Russia.

Historically, Russia has most frequently sustained attacks via the vast North European Plain, with the exception of the Russo–Japanese War of 1905 and the conflict with China in 1968 on the Wusuli River. However, while the unhindered geography of the North European Plain leaves Russia vulnerable, its vastness works in the country's favour. The Plain spans from France to the Urals, covering nearly 4,000 km. For hostile powers to reach Moscow, they must service an almost unworkably long supply chain.

The North European Plain is 1,000-km wide and is the narrowest near Poland, at a width of 300 km. Thus, Russia has a special interest in

Figure 11: North European Plains

Source: Mapsworld, <http://www.maps-world.net/central-asia.htm>.

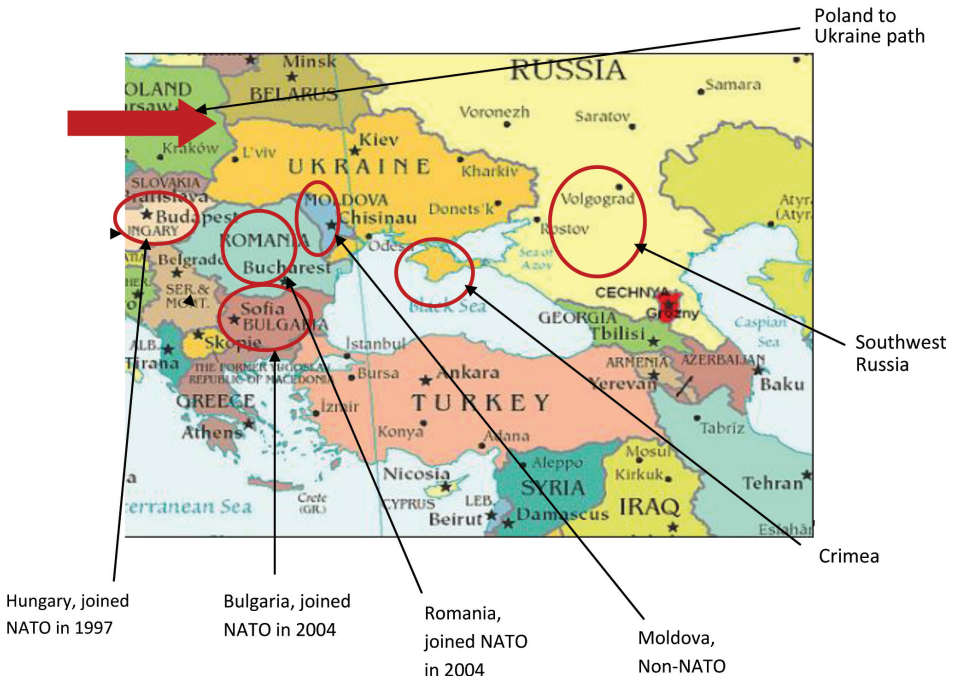
Poland, which is no longer a member of the Warsaw Pact. Today, Russia has a strong military presence in Kaliningrad (See Figure 11), just above Poland, to block any invading force before it crosses Poland.²¹ Next to Poland is Belarus, ruled by Europe's last surviving dictator, Alexander Lukashenko. Belarus is firmly in the Russian camp, and the two nations regularly participate in Zapad exercises, which partly signals to NATO: *till Poland, but no further*. Thus, in the event of the NATO invading from Poland, Russia has two springboards: Belarus and Kaliningrad.

Just above Kaliningrad are the Baltic states—Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia—which are located next to the North European Plain.

Thus, Russian regimes have always sought influence in the Baltic states for security reasons. In the early 1700s, Peter the Great fought the Northern War for access to the Baltic Sea and succeeded in annexing Latvia and Estonia. Later, Catherine the Great annexed Lithuania. Before its dissolution, the USSR included the Baltic states. In 2004, all three Baltic states became members of the NATO, contributing greatly to Russia's distrust of the organisation. NATO's presence in these nations rekindled Russia's old fears about the vulnerability of the North European Plain.

Today, despite Russia's concerns, it is unlikely for invasions via the North European Plain to succeed due to logistical issues. A more significant vulnerability for Russia is the Steppes, i.e. today's East Europe. As the NATO started to expand its influence in the former

Figure 12: Eastern Europe and Russia



Source: <https://exhibits.lafayette.edu/ppc/items/show/144>.

Warsaw Pact countries in the Steppes, Hungary joined the organisation in 1998, Poland in 1999 and Bulgaria in 2004.

This gives Russia cause for concern for a number of reasons.

1. Hungary is sufficiently protected, being surrounded by mountains on three sides: the Carpathians, the Dinaric Alps and the Balkans. The NATO's presence there allows it to deny safe harbour to any future invader from the East.
2. While movement from Poland to Moscow (via the North European Plain) can be intercepted by Russian presence in Kaliningrad and by Belarus (Russia's ally) on the east of Poland, the path from Poland to Ukraine is open to hostile forces, especially as Ukraine does not offer any geographical resistance.
3. Bulgaria and Romania have ports in the Black Sea: Varna and Constanta, respectively. Since Romania is next to Ukraine and shares a 649-km border with Ukraine, a hostile force can potentially reach Ukraine from Romania.

Against attacks through Romania, Tim Marshall suggests that Russia can use Moldova, ensconced between Romania and Ukraine. Since Moldova is not a member of the NATO, Chapter V does not apply to it (whereby, if one NATO nation is attacked, other NATO nations are duty bound to come to its rescue). While Russia cannot launch a direct attack on Moldova, since that will invite wide-ranging sanctions, it can intervene in case of a turmoil, real or manufactured. This is because the latter is not only dependent on Russia for its trade and energy, but also home to Russian settlements, and by law, Russia is obligated to protect "ethnic Russians" abroad.

In 2008, the NATO offered Ukraine a membership, a threat for Russia since East Ukraine's border with Russia is perilously close to Russia's strategically important southwestern tip. Russia's encroachment into Georgia in 2008 was thus a tactical move to secure this region. Former NATO DSACEUR General Sir Richard Shirreff considered the NATO's

offer to Ukraine naïve, since it is logistically impossible for the former to defend East Ukraine, given the distance between Hungary and Donetsk, at almost 2,000 km. Since 2008, Russia's hostility has only grown. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Vladimir Putin said, "We have all the reasons to believe that the policy of containment of Russia which was happening in eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries is still going on ... If you press the spring, it will release at some point; something you should remember."

Russia claims that in 1990, the NATO had assured then USSR that it would not admit Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia, due to the potential geopolitical implications for the USSR. While the NATO denies this, declassified NSA archives seem to corroborate Russia's claim.²²

J.H. Mackinder called Russia the "pivot state" of geopolitics, with the same strategic depth the old Mongol Empire had. He envisioned that with the "pivot state" at the core, there would be an "inner marginal crescent," with France, Italy, Egypt, India and Korea, and an "outer insular crescent," with the Americas and Australia. He also suggested that Russia, though a land power, would have access to abundant minerals and timber from its hinterland, which could be potentially deployed for fleet building. Given Russia's pivot position, Mackinder expected the nation to project its power across Eurasia through Eastern Europe, a region of that was felt would play a vital role in geopolitics and would be considered the "prize."

Keeping in mind Mackinder's projections, Grygiel and Mitchell interviewed western planners. They found that the current threat perception was largely in line with the insights Mackinder shared more than a century ago.

What Mackinder called the "pivot area" is the area extending from the Black Sea to the Baltic region. The geography that Mackinder suggested Russia would try to control to project its power worldwide—

Figure 13: The Pivot Area according to J.H. Mackinder



Source: J.H. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal*, 1904, <https://www.iasscore.in/upsc-prelims/europe>.

“inner marginal crescent” and the “outer insular crescent”—are those that Russia currently needs to reach the seas. Further, “probing” seems to be an indicator of what Russia is attempting to do in the long run. After the USSR broke, Russia degenerated into a country of oligarchs and mafia. When Vladimir Putin took over, he hired KGB senior officers in the Russian establishment, himself being from the same outfit. According to Putin, the fall of the USSR was one of the catastrophes of the 20th century. With the old KGB apparatchiks in power, the current Russian regime likely looks at the world as it did during the Soviet era.

NATO’s Attempts at De-risking

In the 1990s, Russia was unstable, with no democratic consolidation or civic culture. Putin and KGB officers coming to power alarmed western

capitals. Thus, in the 2000s, NATO expanded under presidents Clinton and Bush. This ensured that Russian expansion was hamstrung in Central and East Europe (CEE).

To be a great power, Russia needs to be a naval power too. However, the NATO has expanded to the west coast of the Black Sea, as well as to Turkey and Greece. Thus, it is difficult for the Russian Navy to pass through the Black Sea and reach the Mediterranean. The Baltic states, too, are members of the NATO. While Russia has an enclave, Kaliningrad, between Poland and Lithuania, the other side of Kaliningrad is Denmark, another NATO state. The NATO's presence in critical locations effectively ensures that Russia cannot project its power in the sea.

Figure 14: NATO in 1990



Source: Stratfor; Geoawesomeness.com, <https://geoawesomeness.com/top-14-maps-charts-explain-nato/>.

Figure 15: NATO in 2015

Source: Stratfor; Geoawesomeness.com <https://geoawesomeness.com/top-14-maps-charts-explain-nato/>.

On the other hand, Belarus is a Russian satellite state, and Russia can cross the former to reach Poland and the North European Plain, the gateway to Europe. Poland is a NATO state, but it is vulnerable. Ukraine, too, is of strategic significance. An assault across Ukraine can reach the Danube basin which borders 10 countries—Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Austria and Germany—and is essentially their lifeline as they rely on the river for freight transport, hydroelectricity, industrial and residential water supplies. Further, crossing Ukraine gives Russia access to Romania and Hungary, two geopolitically significant regions.

Thus, to keep Russia away from the North European Plain and the Danube basin, Poland and Ukraine are vital. It's difficult for the NATO to supply to Ukraine, making strategic alliances of utmost importance.

TOWARDS A US STRATEGY TO COUNTER RUSSIAN PROBING

Some of the observations made by Grygiel and Mitchell should be taken into account while formulating a robust US strategy to counter Russia.

Strategic Clarity: The US must recognise the threat that probing states pose to the existing order. Mixed signals only embolden revisionist states, such as a “reset” with Russia, the lack of a firm offer to the Philippines, a proposed deal with Iran despite Iran refusing to curb its nuclear programme.

Strategies such as “offshore balancing” have their limitations. The realist school of thought claims that US presence across the globe is not necessary and that if the US does not offer security guarantee to embattled allies, the latter will become self-reliant and a ‘balance of power’ will come into effect. However, history suggests otherwise. In 1948, Finland succumbed to Soviet pressure due to an absence of any security guarantee against the USSR. It signed an Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the USSR and became treaty-bound to support it and resist the West. Thus, if the US does not explicitly adopt a strategy to stand up to “probing states,” weaker states in CEE, and even the Baltic states may seek accommodation with Russia. The converse is also possible: an ally may attempt an aggressive strategy on its own without the capabilities to deter Russia, thus provoking the latter and creating a costly debacle.

Necessity of Alliances: While the US must have a clear stance when it comes to Russia, its forces cannot be physically present everywhere. The NATO, too, has limitations. In a fictionalised book, General Shirreff explained the logistical difficulties that will face the US in case of a Russian offensive in the Baltic state of Latvia:

- The formations that can be deployed the fastest, within 18 hours, are the Airborne Global Response Force. However, only a few hundred

(say, 500) can be deployed with their combat support and logistics. They eventually link up to larger ground troop, but problems start at that point.

- A brigade's worth of NATO vehicles is stored in many warehouses in East Europe. However, to prepare these vehicles for war, personnel must be allocated to the vehicles, which demands five days. Following this, all the vehicles must be brought to one place, requiring another 10 days. Only then these can the vehicles be deployed. A loss of two weeks is untenable, given how fast Russia can mobilise its troops (as evident in its expansion to Crimea).
- If the NATO wants to deploy F-16s, to say, Latvia, the preparation of the base is a prerequisite. To ready the base, a Contingency Response Group (CRG) must be present. Transporting a CRG takes 24 hours, and the CRG, in turn, takes another 24 hours to set up the base. Thus, the first F-16s can only arrive in a Latvian air base after a gap of 48 hours.
- The US Navy may be able to send ships from the Sixth Fleet to the Gulf of Riga in Latvia or the Gulf of Finland or the Baltic Sea. However, a vessel, even if it starts from Hamburg, needs 24 hours to reach the Gulf of Riga. Moreover, Russia has some new capabilities, such as 3M14s of the Kalibr family, with a range of over 2,500 km. Historically, the firing of Russian M14s forced the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* to retreat from the Gulf. Given its capabilities, Russia may deploy missile ships in Lake Peipus near the Russia–Estonia border. These scenarios must be war-gamed.

Given these limitations, the US and the NATO will need alliances in states that are close to Russia. A good alliance strategy must incorporate early warning systems for problems in alliances, such that allies are on the same page on important issues. Grygiel and Mitchell list a few instances of trouble in alliances:

- The Czech president criticised the western sanctions against Russia after the Ukraine crisis, since the Czech Republic is not exposed to Russian threat. For similar reasons, Slovak President Robert Fico

expressed unwillingness to come to Poland's aid in case of a conflict between Poland and Russia.

- Though a NATO member, Bulgaria has pursued a “balanced strategy.” After Crimea, it symbolically backed the pressure on Russia but opposed additional sanctions. Bulgaria also took part in Russian energy projects and sees Russian support as an alternative to Turkey.
- In the recent past, Hungary signed a 30-year nuclear deal with Russia, worth US\$14 billion, and has provided political support for Russia's South Stream pipeline, even though some Central and East European (CEE) states protested it.
- During the Obama Administration's Reset with Russia, the US pushed the CEE states to improve their relations with Russia. Poland and Romania, which wanted to resist Russia, instead started a détente with it. Further, while the US promotes democracy and freedom of speech in countries such as Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, the popular support for West has declined in these countries.
- The West's allies in the CEE states can be divided into two groups: the countries that are very serious about resisting Russia, i.e. Poland, the Baltic states, Finland and Sweden; and the fence-sitters, i.e. Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Hungary. A calibrated strategy must take cognisance of this nuance.

Capability: In recent years, Russia's military capability has increased. Russia is now also using its energy supply capabilities as a policy tool to influence countries such as Hungary and Germany. Defence spend levels are not similar across states.

In making alliances, the US must recognise that all allies are not equal. Poland recently launched a 10-year, US\$40-billion military modernisation programme. Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and the Czech Republic are significantly increasing their military spendings. On the other hand, Slovakia refused to increase its defence budget. In many NATO countries, the defence budgets are lower than the prescribed two percent of the GDP.

Grygiel and Mitchell suggest the following strategies for the US:

Empowering resisters: Providing full US military and political support for the allies that have the highest capability and willingness to resist revisionist states (e.g. Poland in the CEE region)

Buttressing the weak: Giving aid to states that are serious about resisting the revisionist powers but lack the means, e.g. the Baltic states

Nudging the fence-sitters: Utilising its diplomacy to persuade the states that decide to stay neutral or plan to accommodate the revisionist power, e.g. Bulgaria

Military means, while critical, have their limitations. The NATO must adopt a unanimous resolution under Article V to declare war. Further, to prevent Russia from successfully using its policy tools to dissuade some states from agreeing to the resolution, the US must deploy consistent diplomatic initiatives to ensure a united front in case of a conflict.

KNOWING THE ENEMY: RUSSIA'S CAPABILITIES

In his book *Losing Military Supremacy*, Pro-Russia expert Andrei Martyanov analysed the new Russian weaponry that may change the geopolitical calculus. There is a host of Russian platforms that the West must take into account to understand the military threat that Russia poses:

- Russia is about to launch TU-160M2 strategic bombers and new cruise missiles with a range of 10,000 km.
- Russian strategic bombers launched X-101 cruise missiles against the ISIS.
- The Russian TU-95 Bear strategic bombers are to be fitted with cruise missiles with a range of 10,000 km.

- Russia has 66 long-range strategic bombers, Tu-160s and Tu-95s and over a 100 TU-22M3 bombers.
- TU-22M3 bombers have inflight refuelling capability and are fitted with X-32 (Kh-32) cruise missiles with a range of 1,000 km and a speed of more than 4.2 mach.
- Russian generation 4++ fighters, such as the SU-35C, have Irbis-E radars capable of “seeing” even an F-22 fighter as far as 90 km away. The SU-35C also has thrust vectoring, state-of-the-art engines and avionics. Irbis-E radars have the capability to spot stealth aircrafts at a range of less than 100 km. Thus, the 4++ fighters can use missiles against stealth aircrafts in close range.
- Russia has made strides in Diesel Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) submarines powered by fuel cells. These submarines are difficult to pick up by enemy radars and are called “silent submarines.” It was a Russian AIP submarine that shot six Kalibr 3M14 missiles, with intervals of five seconds each, at terrorist targets in Syria on 5 October 2017. Earlier, it was considered impossible for a diesel submarine to achieve such a feat.
- Project 636.3 Varshavyanka-class SSK Diesel AIP submarines are being inducted; the first few were inducted in April 2019. This submarine class is supposed to have stealth technology. To reduce noise, its outer hull surface has a special anechoic coating. A rubber base hosts its main propulsion plant to prevent vibrations that can be picked up. It has a Kalibr missile system, comprising 3M54 and 3M541 anti-ships and 3M14 land-attack cruise missiles.
- Russia will induct 3M22 Zircon anti-ship missiles in its battle cruisers in 2020. The Zircon has an extreme speed of eight mach and may pose a serious threat to US carriers.
- Russia is trying to develop LIDAR, which will use laser waves to detect stealth aircrafts. This is still in the R&D stage. Stealth aircrafts are tough to detect because most radars depend upon electromagnetic waves that are high frequency and have a short wavelength. However, LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) depends on long wavelength lasers. If successful, Russia may be capable of intercepting and defeating the US and NATO stealth weapons.

- Shkval, meaning “squall,” is a project that started in 1977 for supercavitating torpedoes. Torpedoes have speed limits of around 50 knots due to limitations posed by the drag factor. Based on years of research, Russian scientists have found ways to nullify drag with supercavitation.²³ If this project succeeds, the torpedo will be capable of moving at over 200 knots per hour. The torpedo is to be called Khishchnik, meaning “raptor.”
- In 2018, Russia tested the Kinzhal hypersonic air-to-surface missile from a MIG31 BM. Russia claims that the missile can achieve a speed of 10 mach and has a range of 1,200 miles. (The MIG31 BM has a range of 1,820 miles without refuelling, making the combined total more than 3,000 miles.) The Kinzhal is also supposed to have an ability to manoeuvre even at hypersonic speeds. This missile may prove to be a game changer and threaten carrier battle groups.²⁴
- Russia already has the S-400 Triumph long-range air defence missile system. In 2020, the S-500 system may be inducted. According to one report, “It uses a lot of new technology and is superior to the S-400. It was designed to intercept ballistic missiles. It is planned to have a range of 500–600 km and hit targets at altitudes as high as 40 km. Some sources claim that this system is capable of tracking 5-20 ballistic targets and intercepting up to 5-10 ballistic targets simultaneously. It can defeat ballistic missiles travelling at a speed of 5-7 kilometers per second. This air defense system can target low orbital satellites.”²⁵
- Russia’s Iskander missiles can be fitted with tactical nuclear weapons. In every exercise, Russia has “used” Iskander tactical nuclear missiles. These Iskander missiles are stationed in Kaliningrad Oblast (former East Prussia), a Russian exclave on the Baltic Sea between Poland and Lithuania. Tactical weapons are as powerful as the ones that were dropped in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. If an Iskander is launched, Poland, Germany and Denmark will be in range.

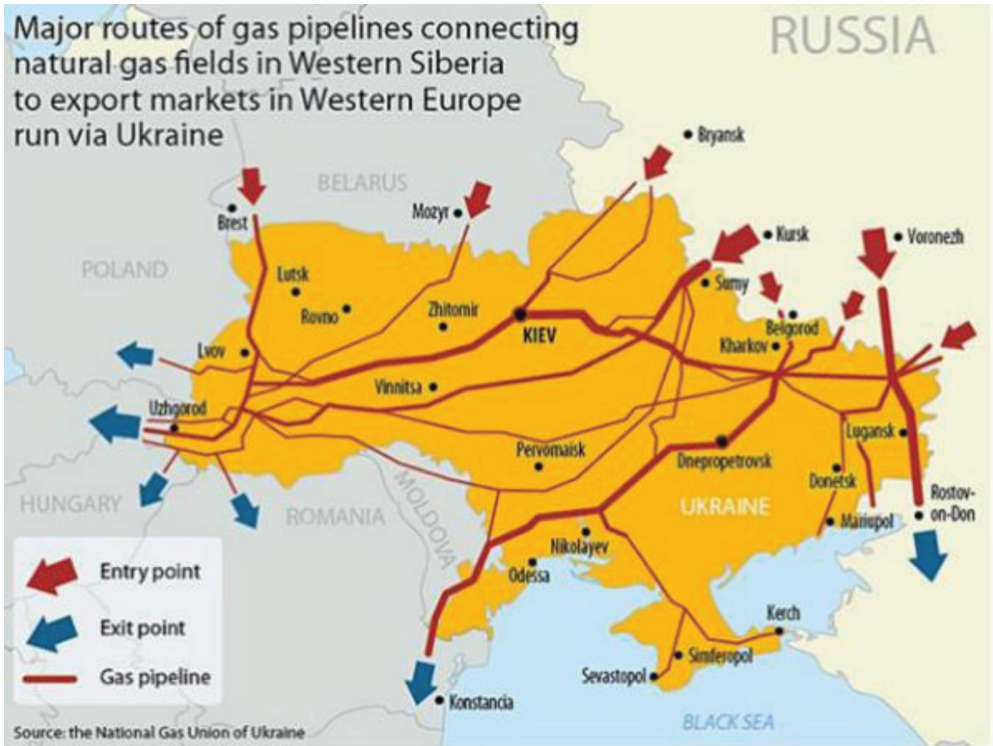
AGENDA FOR NATO

The NATO forces must map these new Russian capabilities and crank up their military industrial complex. However, the military is one part of the solution. There are other levers of power. During the Cold War, American statesmen launched the Marshall Plan to rebuild a war-ravaged Europe. This ensured that West Germany and then Germany have remained reliable NATO allies. During the Eurozone crisis, the IMF's harsh austerity measures hurt Greece. While Russia did not send financial aid to Greece, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras visited Russia in 2015. President Putin said that they discussed "various ways of co-operating, including major projects in energy."²⁶

The Great Recession and the Eurozone crisis rendered vulnerable states such as Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Italy and Spain. The IMF-prescribed austerity measures were uniquely unpopular in those countries. Thus, it is crucial to factor in economic aspects that would allow a revisionist state to befriend a vulnerable NATO state. The NATO Chapter V must be unanimously agreed upon by all NATO member states. The US and Germany can learn from statesmen such as George Marshall and use economic measures to assuage the concerns of the nations that are most vulnerable to economic crises.

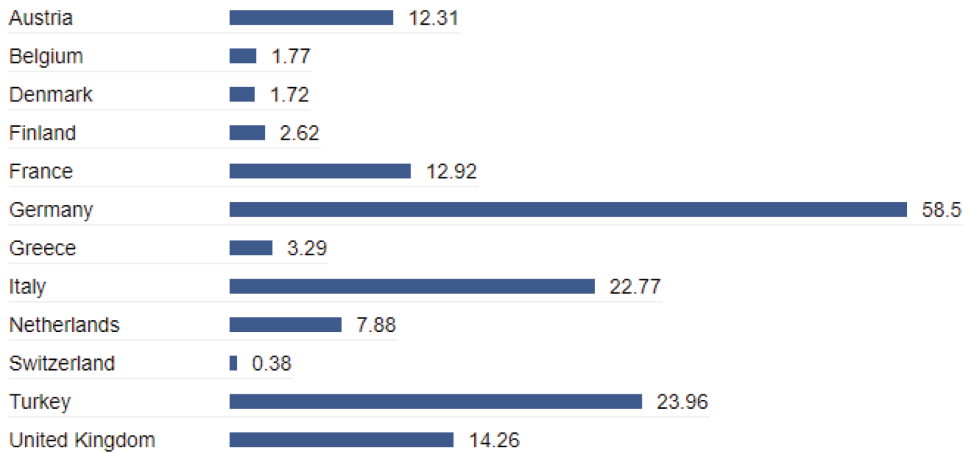
Energy is another important factor. About 60 percent of Ukraine's gas comes from Russia (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: Major Gas Pipelines from Russia via Ukraine



Source: *The National Gas Union of Ukraine; World Economic Forum, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/07/why-ukraine-is-central-to-europe-s-energy-security/>.*

Figure 17: Russian Export of Natural Gas to European Countries in Billion Cubic Metres in 2018



Source: Gazprom, <http://www.gazpromexport.ru/en/statistics/>.

Germany, too, is dependent on Russian gas. This gives the latter a powerful leverage,²⁷ since Germany is considered Europe's engine. Recently, US President Donald Trump criticised Russia for a new pipeline, the Nordstream-2. The 750-mile will connect the Ust-Luga area in Russia to Greifswald in Germany²⁸ and run through the Baltic Sea. In 2018, Gazprom exported 58.5 billion cubic metres (BCM) to Germany.²⁹ The capacity of Nordstream-2 is 55 BCM annually. Thus, nearly all of the current volume can be transported through this pipeline. The previous arrangement (wherein Russian gas used to come to Germany via Ukraine) used to deliver US\$3 billion a year to Ukraine. The Nordstream-2, to be functional in November 2019, will bypass Ukraine. Thus, Ukraine has expressed reservations about the new pipeline.

While the fracking revolution has brought gas supply to the US, to extract the full potential of gas-rich nations such as Cyprus, the West needs geopolitical acumen. However, gas has been struck in Cyprus

Figure 18 Nordstream-2 Pipeline

Source: <https://www.dw.com/en/nord-stream-2-gas-pipeline-what-is-the-controversy-about/a-44677741>

and Greece due to the Cyprus conflict. A visionary US leadership will be needed to reduce Russia's heft in the geopolitics of energy.

Cyber power is another weapon in the Russian arsenal. Strategists such as General Shirreff and Richard A. Clarke consider the possibility of a cyber Pearl Harbour a real threat. Russia may start its offence with a DDOS attack, such as the one on Estonia in 2007. In January 2018, there was a DDOS attack on the Latvian e-health system.³⁰ One advantage of such attacks is plausible deniability. The internet of things is becoming a part of daily life and is an additional node where cyber attacks may be carried out. In January 2019, the European Union (EU) Agency for Network and Information Security (ENISA) shared some advisories.³¹

- The EU should develop capabilities to address Cyber Threat Intelligence (CTI) knowledge management. Additionally, EU

member states must take measures to be less dependent on the currently available CTI sources (mostly from outside the EU) and enhance the quality of CTI by adding a European context;

- EU governments and public administrations must share a “baseline CTI” that covers the sectorial and low-maturity needs of organisations;
- The collection of CTI must be made easier. Coordinated effort amongst EU members is key to implementing proper defence strategies.

While the US is prepared to handle cyber offence, its cyber defences have scope for improvement. Many executives and leaders, such as Microsoft President Brad Smith, have recommended a Digital Geneva Convention so that cyber stacks have some limits.³² Richard A. Clarke suggests a few ideas for improving cyber defence:³³

- Scanning of data packets for suspicious patterns and deep-packet inspection at peering points, where fibre-optic cables come out of the ocean;
- Planning a strategy to scan and, if needed, temporarily close the US Department of Defence networks and have parallel networks; and
- Ensuring that control networks for power-generation and distribution companies require authentication when they connect to the internet.

The EU must first implement mechanisms in its own jurisdictions and then formulate a joint strategy with the US for cyber wars. This needs strong leadership and skilful coordination between the EU and the US.

While a conflict between Russia and the West may break out in one of several areas, including energy and cyberspace, geography remains a vital component and the key objective of wars.

THE WAY AHEAD

While the conflict between Russia and the West may evolve in various ways, three broad pathways are discussed in the following paragraphs:

Confrontation

A direct war may start with a single event. US leadership and EU cooperation will be crucial, since Russia has made rapid strides in weaponry. While the US defence budget is significantly very large, one-third of it goes to personnel and maintenance.³⁴ Further, the Department of Defence operates with 21 percent excess capacity in all its bases.³⁵ There will be pressure on the US leadership to not upgrade its weaponry, and in the Eurozone, with the fiscal crisis still fresh in the public's memory, excess defence spending will be criticised. The alliances that Grygiel and Mitchell suggest are still in the making. The relations between US leadership and European leaders are at an all-time low. This gives Russia a new incentive to go to war. However, in the event of a war, Russia is likely to lose out on new energy projects. The west must capitalise on this and smooth diplomacy, establishing a hotline with Russia to buy time until its weaponry is fortified and alliances are strengthened.

Détente

Since the US has conflicts with both China and Russia, two front wars are likely, which will prove to be catastrophic. The US can attempt a grand bargain with Russia, as suggested by Michael E.O. Hanlon of the Brookings Institution,³⁶ in a fashion similar to Nixon's deal with Beijing in 1973. In a US–Russia deal, both nations stand to gain from each other, e.g. Russian energy firms can benefit from fracking technologies and Russia's huge talent pool in science and mathematics can form an excellent resource base for US tech companies. However, the terms of such a deal might be hard to agree upon. The Putin administration is likely to demand the freedom to project power in the Baltic and the

Black Sea, which no US administration will allow.


Unlike China in 1973, with a per capita GDP of US\$131 and in desperate need of a partner, Russia has a per capita GDP of US\$10,750.³⁷ Moreover, the experience with China has been far from perfect. China benefitted from the global liberal order but committed atrocious acts in the South China Sea. China has established itself as a neo-colonial power in Africa, has become a regional bully to ASEAN states, and has an appalling human rights record. China's rise became a significant geopolitical threat for the rest of the world. Following a détente, Russia may follow the same pattern, especially given the edge it has in weapons, avionics, space technology, energy etc. More wealth and power can make the regime a benign welfare state, but it is also likely to make Russia more repressive. Moreover, due to the recent Mueller investigation, no US leader will entertain the idea of striking a deal with Russia.

Containment

The US followed the strategy of containment with the USSR during the Cold War, by avoiding direct war and using other tools. The goal was to cut off the USSR and not allow its influence to grow in any region. While this strategy failed in some regions,³⁸ it was an overall success, particularly in Western Europe. The two superpowers avoided engaging in a direct war, thus preventing the loss and destruction caused by two world wars. In 1991, the objective of the containment strategy was achieved with the fall of the USSR. In the same vein, Grygiel and Mitchell suggest building alliances to keep Russia boxed in with no means of projecting its power in the sea. However, modern-day Russia has no overt interest in overthrowing capitalism or ushering in a worker's paradise, making it difficult to galvanise public opinion in favour of containment.

CONCLUSION

Currently, the most effective course of action for the US is to maintain the status quo, while gradually building alliances and formulating a strategy for managing conflicts. At the end of the Cold War, when the US was cooperating with the Gorbachev regime for a win-win solution to allay Russia's security concerns, then Secretary of State James Baker had a nine-point plan. One of the points was to have liaison arrangements between the NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries to keep security breaches or small conflicts from spiralling out of control. While the US had a bipartisan consensus during the Cold War, today, a radical strategy will create a gridlock. Therefore, moderate incremental steps are most appropriate.

The conflict between Russia and the Western powers is complex, with many differences: historical, cultural, economic and military. Both sides have a wide range of military, diplomatic, economic and cyber power. While the future is difficult to foresee, the strategic rivalry between Russia and the US is likely to continue. 

ENDNOTES

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