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Understanding Russia's Interest in Conflict Zones

By Paul M. Carter, Jr.



Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks at news conference in Moscow with President Erdogan of Turkey on March 5, 2020. (Photo by Pavel Golovkin/AP)

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Summary

- During the past decade, Russia's foreign policy ambitions have steadily increased, including in areas of conflict or instability in the Middle East, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere.
- Current Russian engagements in conflict zones are driven by the geostrategic interests and character of the traditional Russian state, global political ambitions and behavioral patterns inherited from the Soviet Union, and the political, economic, and private motives of the highly personalized Putin regime.
- A rough overall pattern in Moscow's interventions in conflict zones, based on proximity to the Russian heartland, is discernible: the closer to Russia, the more important are traditional geostrategic factors and the more willing the Kremlin is to commit resources.
- In more distant conflict zones, such as those in the Middle East, North Africa, and Latin America, Russia places greater emphasis on global-political or opportunistic economic and private interests, and is more selective in deploying its resources.
- Russia's activities in conflict zones usually directly or indirectly run counter to Western interests. Still, it is sometimes possible for the United States and its allies to carve out space for cooperation with Russia on specific issues in conflict zones.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the Russian government's posture toward and reasons for involvement in conflicts in less-developed or fragile contexts. The views expressed in the report are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the US government.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group stand guard during a parade in Bangui, Central African Republic, on May 1, 2019.
(Photo by Ashley Gilbertson/New York Times)

Introduction

Russia's involvement in less-developed, fragile, and conflict-ridden countries has grown over the last several years and raises questions about the Kremlin's interests, motives, and intentions. For the first decade or so after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's attention was focused on its neighborhood. But under Vladimir Putin—and especially since the beginning of his third presidential term in 2012—Moscow's global ambitions have steadily increased, including in unstable areas of the Middle East, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere.¹

The resources Russia can devote to foreign engagements remain limited, and in most instances Russia's global presence is less than that of the United States, China, or the European Union. But what Russia lacks in material and financial resources it makes up for in creative ways of pursuing its growing ambitions, and the variety and extent of its foreign engagements are remarkable.² In addition to ongoing interventions in neighboring states of the former Soviet Union and election meddling and other influence operations among EU and NATO member countries, Russia just over the last year became the dominant foreign power in war-torn Syria, bolstered embattled Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, sent more mercenaries of the Wagner Group to the Central African Republic, Libya, and elsewhere, and hosted fifty-four African leaders and thousands of businesspeople for the first Russia-Africa Summit.

For the most part, Russia's activities in these and other areas run counter to Western interests and undermine efforts to mitigate conflict through broad-based, transparent processes. How

are we to make sense of Moscow's interventions? What is driving the Kremlin's actions, and what does it seek to gain? Is there any prospect for cooperation with Russia, or is pushback the only credible option? Will the COVID-19 crisis alter Russian behavior in conflict zones? Answers to these questions are important not only for US and European policymakers but also for aid workers and those seeking to mitigate conflicts, as well as for the populations of the countries or regions directly affected by Russia's activities.

This report briefly outlines the basic factors that appear to be motivating the Kremlin's conflict-zone interventions and places these factors within the larger context of Russian foreign policy interests. Russia's interventions often have specific, opportunistic goals, such as securing access to energy or mineral resources or backing a friendly local strongman. But these interventions usually also fit into the larger pattern of Russian geostrategic and global-political interests. Thus this report's approach is multivalenced. Beginning with the fundamental geostrategic and historical context, the report examines the specific foreign policy imperatives of the Putin regime, followed by an exploration of some of the factors that have prompted Russian engagement in individual conflict situations and recommendations for how the United States should respond.

Geostrategic and Historical Context

Current Russian engagements in conflict zones are driven by a combination of the geostrategic interests and character of the traditional Russian state, global political ambitions and behavioral patterns inherited from the Soviet Union, and the particular perspective and motives of the highly personalized regime of Vladimir Putin.

From the earliest times, unique geographic, environmental, and sociocultural influences have shaped the character of Russia and its political institutions. These influences include such factors as the vastness and boundlessness of the Eurasian plain, which favored development of a strong, centralizing authority; the harsh, unforgiving climate, which encouraged a collectivist and paternalist socioeconomic structure; periodic invasion and domination by foreigners, which created deep insecurity and further strengthened a belief in a strong state as the guarantor of security and stability; and the Russian Orthodox religion, which fostered both a messianic mentality and distrust of the Roman Catholic and Protestant West and the Muslim regions to the south.³ While historians debate the relative weight to assign to these and other factors, what is clear is the character of the resulting Russian state as a centralizing, aggrandizing, and absolutist power, which has played a decisive role in Russian history.⁴

Over the centuries, Russia's princes and tsars subjugated the population to the state, neutralized invading enemies, and expanded their dominion to the frontiers of the Eurasian landmass. The result was the one of the largest empires in history and one of the most repressive, obscurantist political systems of its time. Tsarist foreign policy extended the traits of the Russian state into the international realm, viewing the world as a series of concentric circles in which to project Russia's sphere of power, influence, and security. In this way the Russian tsars presaged both the thinking and many of the policies of the Putin regime today. Also similarly to the Putin regime, the tsars continually intervened in neighboring states to ensure they remained in Russia's orbit and a buffer against invasion, while

A woman wearing a face mask to protect against coronavirus walks past World War II-era portraits of Soviet Army soldiers marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of the war's end in St. Petersburg on May 9, 2020. (Photo by Dmitri Lovetsky/AP)



leading efforts to suppress revolutionary threats against established, like-minded rulers in Europe.⁵

After their seizure of power in 1917 and during the almost seventy-five years of their reign, Soviet communists followed a similar pattern of consolidation, expansion, and intervention, though more quickly, more ruthlessly, and with farther-reaching effects. While an

import from the West, Marxism, with such notions as the eschatological class struggle, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and proletarian internationalism, heightened Russian authoritarianism, expansionism, and paranoia and fostered nearly limitless ambitions on a world-historical scale. By the 1930s the communists had established a totalitarian stranglehold over Soviet society and the economy; then, after World War II, the regime pushed the tsarist zone of vassal buffer states deeper into Eastern and Central Europe. On the global stage, the Soviets supported communist takeovers in China and other East Asian countries and eventually expanded their efforts to support leftist regimes and undermine Western influence in Africa, the Middle East, and the Western Hemisphere. While beneath its imposing ideological and military façade the Soviet regime was rotting and increasingly fragile, Soviet communists nevertheless managed to make the USSR a nuclear superpower and the leading alternative to Western capitalism and liberal democracy, with partners and clients around the world.

The Soviet heritage weighs heavily on post-Soviet Russia. Everything from the population's work ethic to the country's strategic perspective and international relationships bears the stamp of the Soviet past. Some of this legacy is discussed later as it pertains to Russian foreign policy. But one aspect deserves mentioning early because it has had such a profound influence on the character of post-Soviet Russia. That is Soviet communism's impact on the moral system of the country. Such issues are typically not the subject of a foreign policy analysis. But the Soviet experience was so radical, traumatic, and deep-reaching in its impact on the Russian psyche and the ethos of the nation that much current Russian behavior on the international stage is inexplicable without acknowledgment of this factor. Soviet Marxism-Leninism taught in word and deed that there was no higher system of morals beyond the interests of the Communist Party. One could lie, cheat, or kill in the interests of the party, a principle that easily and thoroughly devolved into doing anything in one's own self-interest. Since the collapse of the USSR, religious and social institutions, particularly at the grassroots level, have worked to rebuild the morality of society.⁶ But the legacy

of degraded morality continues to find expression in such phenomena as widespread corruption, organized crime, and—most important for this analysis—the current Russian political leadership’s perspective on international relations and its behavior in the global arena.

The Putin Regime

It was not inevitable that current Russian foreign policy would echo that of the tsarist and communist regimes to the extent it does. After the collapse of the USSR, a window opened for new thinking about how to rebuild society and pursue Russia’s interests. Would Russia continue along the old path of repressing its own population, dominating its neighbors, striving for military conquests, and allying with authoritarian regimes, or would it set a new course of seeking security and prosperity through peaceful negotiation, international cooperation, and drawing closer to Europe in spirit and in governmental form?

For a time in the 1990s, the newly independent Russian Federation enjoyed probably the most open and free period in its history, and there was a real possibility that Russia might embrace a new course. Boris Yeltsin was a flawed leader, and his policies had many shortcomings. Nonetheless, Yeltsin started Russia on the path of a free market economy, democracy, and cooperation with the West. But there also were impediments and strong countervailing forces. The economy deteriorated precipitously and received little support from the West, where many had unrealistic expectations for Russia’s easy transition, while the rise of crime, corruption, and the kleptocracy of the new class of oligarchs rightly or wrongly discredited democracy and free markets for many Russians. NATO enlargement into former Warsaw Pact countries also increased traditional feelings of insecurity and resentment. What is more, Russia did not come to terms with the Soviet past. There was no national process of de-Sovietization and no national conversation about the impact of the Soviet system on the country’s moral fiber or people’s attitudes toward politics, work, and a whole range of social issues. This led to deep-rooted confusion and ambivalence on the part of the general population about what it meant to be Russian, what Russia stood for, and Russia’s place in the world. It also allowed insecurity, distrust, and cynicism toward the West, its motives, and Russia’s international duties and obligations to fester among political and economic elites.

These were difficult obstacles to Russia’s rebirth. A liberal successor to Yeltsin with a commitment to democracy and cooperation with the West, such as Boris Nemtsov, might have been able to guide the country through its difficult transition period, and Russia today might be a very different place. This option was aborted, however, with Yeltsin’s choice of Vladimir Putin. Putin would protect the interests of the Yeltsin family. But though he initially promised to strengthen democracy, he used the country’s desire for greater stability after the hardships of the 1990s to take Russia back to the traditional authoritarian-statist model developed under the tsars and Soviet communists, though interpreted in his own manner.⁷

Putin was greatly underestimated when he became Russia’s president in 2000. Though everyone expected him to bring greater stability to the country after the tumult of the 1990s, many also saw Putin as an “empty suit,” someone who simply represented certain economic and security interests. But Putin moved methodically to consolidate his position and exerted increasingly autocratic command of power and policy.⁸ At times drawing parallels with such

Values such as international cooperation, the general welfare, and peace are viewed in instrumental terms. They are not ends but means to further Russia's and the Kremlin's interests.

rulers as Ivan III, the “gatherer of Russian lands,” Ivan the Terrible, and most recently Joseph Stalin, Putin systematically crushed independence movements in Chechnya and other minority regions and step by step subjugated oligarchs, the media, political parties, social institutions, and elected officials. The Putin regime has described itself as a “managed democracy” and valorized the “vertical of power,”

but its essence is a highly personalized authoritarianism. Indeed, the history of Russia since 2000 is bound closely to the personal history of Putin, and the regime's policies closely follow his preferences, proclivities, and worldview, drawing on an eclectic, often ad hoc, combination of elements from the country's tsarist past, Soviet history, and his own experience.⁹

This is evident in the regime's foreign policies, an aspect of statecraft closely managed by Putin. As a former KGB officer, he has very definite ideas about the nature of international relations, Russia's interests, and the means necessary to pursue those interests. Putin and his circle view the world in zero-sum terms and are highly operational and laser focused on pursuing Russia's national interests—or what they define in any particular situation as Russia's interests—as well as their own political and economic interests, which they see as virtually identical with those of the state.¹⁰ Values such as international cooperation, the general welfare, and peace are viewed in instrumental terms. They are not ends but means to further Russia's and the Kremlin's interests.

From this perspective, the world is viewed as a series of concentric circles of power and influence, based in firm control of the Russian population and resources and radiating outward to extend Russia's hegemony over neighboring states of the “near abroad” (*blizhneye zarubezh'ye*), exert strong influence in the Middle East, Arctic, and other middle-distance regions, and ultimately craft a prominent role for Russia as a major power in the rest of the world. In terms of global international relations, the Kremlin believes the path to restoring Russia's prestige and influence lies in undermining the rules-based order created by the United States and other liberal-democratic nations. In its place, Putin would like to see a multipolar order, in which the major powers would dominate their immediate spheres of influence as they saw fit and compete for influence in more remote regions. Putin has been keen to counter or discourage “color revolutions” or so-called Arab Spring uprisings, which he views not as legitimate expressions of dissent but as Western-inspired attempts to unseat established authoritarian regimes.¹¹ His arguments and tactics have provided a model for other authoritarians around the world.

A critical dimension of the Putin regime's foreign policy is its pursuit of Russian economic interests. The Soviet regime sought to advance its economic interests in international engagements, but the primary factors were ideological and strategic. The Putin regime places high value on global-political goals, such as supporting like-minded authoritarian leaders and demonstrating the futility of color revolutions, but beyond that it lacks a well-defined and universally applicable ideological framework, and the basis now of many of its relationships abroad is economic. With the loss of a significant portion of Soviet territory and the decline of many domestic industries as the country opened up to foreign trade and competition, Russia has sought economic opportunities with arms sales, including to many regimes and groups considered undesirable in the West, and with deals on oil, gas, and other extractive goods, which now make up a large percentage of

Select Russian Engagements in Conflict Zones



The boundaries shown on this map are approximate and do not imply official endorsement or acceptance on the part of the United States Institute of Peace.

Source: Adapted from map by Vector Shop/Shutterstock

Russian economic output. With the additional pressure of Western sanctions on various Russian industries, firms, and individuals, the importance of pursuing opportunities in less-developed and unstable regions has further increased. Additionally, much Russian economic activity abroad is driven by the private interests of individuals well connected to the Kremlin.

Specific Conflict Situations

The Kremlin's engagement in specific less-developed, fragile, or conflict-ridden countries or regions is driven by a mix of the various geostrategic, global-political, economic, and corrupt or private factors identified above. The specific mix usually is determined by the particular situation. But it is possible to discern a rough overall pattern based on proximity to the Russian heartland.¹² In simplest terms, the closer a zone of concern is to Russia, the more important are traditional geostrategic factors and the more willing the Kremlin is to commit resources. The more distant geographically the zone, the more significant are global-political or opportunistic economic and private interests and the more selective the Kremlin is with resources. Russia's foreign engagements are extensive, varied, and growing, but a few examples of specific countries and regions illustrate the pattern. These include Ukraine and other countries in the former Soviet space; Syria, Libya, and Tunisia in the Middle East and North Africa; the Central African Republic and Sub-Saharan Africa; and Venezuela and the Western Hemisphere.

THE “NEAR ABROAD” AND UKRAINE

Russia's immediate neighborhood, not surprisingly, is the most sensitive area and the one where the Kremlin is willing to devote the most energy and resources and take the greatest risks. In line with the vision of a multipolar world and spheres of influence among major powers, the Kremlin views the other states of the former Soviet Union—what some Russians call the “near abroad”—as very much in its sphere, where it aggressively asserts its prerogative to influence, if not control, developments and jealously guards against what it regards as outside interference. At the same time, the Kremlin has not been interested in having stable, peaceful, and prosperous countries on its borders, preferring weak, corrupt, conflict-ridden, and economically dependent states over which Moscow can exert leverage. This keeps any neighboring state from strengthening its ties to the EU or NATO or becoming a beacon of democratic progress that the Russian population might aspire to emulate. Russia's role in the frozen conflicts over breakaway regions in Moldova and Georgia and the pressure it is applying to the Baltic states all fit this pattern, as does the Kremlin's failure to use its leverage to press for resolution of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia plays a similar game in Central Asia and has created several multilateral organizations—including the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—to help enforce its hegemony throughout the region and provide an alternative to major Western institutions.

Russia's seizure of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine also fit the pattern, though the situation there is in a special category because of both the significance of Ukraine for domestic politics in Russia and the seriousness of the international issues at stake. Great Russian nationalism stresses the common origins of Ukrainians and Russians as one people in Kyivan Rus. Many

The COVID-19 Crisis and Russia's Engagements in Conflict Zones

Six months into the COVID-19 crisis, the pandemic has hit Russia hard and could have long-term consequences for politics, the economy, and society. As the virus spread to Russia, much of the economy was shuttered with imposed “holidays,” and the regime was forced to delay the Victory Day celebrations commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of Nazi Germany’s surrender and the plebiscite on constitutional amendments, which make possible fifth and sixth presidential terms for Vladimir Putin. Moreover, the precipitous decline in global demand for oil and the resulting drop in prices have ominous implications for Russia, where oil and gas make up about 70 percent of exports and 50 percent of federal budget revenues.

Even before the pandemic, there were indications that the Russian population was growing weary of foreign engagements that sapped

revenues while wages were stagnant and the ruble lost value due, at least in part, to sanctions.^a In this context, the Kremlin could pare back international commitments to ease political and economic pressure. The Kremlin might also use the opportunity of the pandemic and the West’s own turn inward to make advances in priority areas or to score a quick victory to divert domestic attention. These options are not mutually exclusive, but whether one gets more emphasis will depend on Putin’s calculations as events develop. At the start of the crisis, Putin was uncharacteristically indecisive and apparently confused by the onslaught of the pandemic, leaving responsibility for many decisions to regional and local officials.^b He later rallied to reschedule the Victory Day celebration for late June and the plebiscite on constitutional changes for July 1. But the response to COVID-19 remained haphazard.

In foreign affairs, there has as yet been little change from established policy, but pressure on the Kremlin is growing. In some conflict zones, such as Syria, Russian disinformation agents have accused the United States of concocting the virus and spreading it to sow chaos.^c The Kremlin reported that it had provided assistance in fighting COVID-19 to the Maduro regime in Venezuela, though no details were given.^d In eastern Ukraine and Crimea, it appeared the Kremlin was treating those regions as Russian territory in terms of dealing with the virus.^e In other conflict zones where Russia has been active, however, it appeared the populations were on their own and could expect little assistance from Moscow.^f

Notes

- a. Thomas Sherlock, “Russian Society and Foreign Policy: Mass and Elite Orientations after Crimea,” in “Russia and Europe,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 1 (2020).
- b. See, among many such analyses, Pavel K. Baev, “Putin’s Non-Decisions Paralyze Crisis-Stricken Russia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 61 (May 4, 2020).
- c. Office of the Spokesperson, US Department of State, “Briefing on Russian Engagement in the Middle East,” May 7, 2020.
- d. TASS, “Russia to Continue Aiding Venezuela in Fight against COVID-19, Says Diplomat,” March 27, 2020.
- e. Anna Myroniuk, “How Crimea and Donbas Are Responding to COVID-19,” *Kyiv Post*, April 12, 2020.
- f. Poline Tchoubar, “Covid-19: A Test for Russia’s African Ambitions,” European Council on Foreign Relations, April 29, 2020.

in Moscow continue to see hegemony over Ukraine—regardless of Ukrainians’ desire for independence—as central to Russian national identity and crucial for Russian geostrategic security.¹³ The reclaiming of Crimea as Russian territory probably had been on the Kremlin’s agenda for some time.¹⁴ But the events of the Maidan Revolution in 2014 and the prospect of Ukraine abandoning the Russian model of authoritarianism and corruption for a more European model and perhaps a closer relationship with the EU and NATO prompted the Kremlin’s aggressive seizure of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas. Russia’s purported annexation of Crimea is illegal under Ukrainian and international law and even according to the Russian constitution, violates tenets of the international order that kept the peace in Europe and among the former Soviet states, and is not recognized by the overwhelming majority of countries and the United Nations.¹⁵ The Kremlin’s ongoing war in the Donbas has cost more than thirteen thousand lives.

Putin may have counted on a limited Western response similar to that at the time of Russia’s earlier incursions into Georgia, but the result instead has been strong Western support for Ukraine, coordinated and debilitating sanctions levied against Russia, and Russia’s ejection from the G8. The Kremlin nevertheless has fortified its occupation of Crimea and continued military operations in the Donbas. But as Russia’s isolation and economic instability due to the sanctions have grown and the COVID-19 crisis has mounted, Putin’s approval ratings have declined, and more Russians are questioning the value of foreign adventures. In this context, some experienced observers believe that Putin may now be more open to some sort of deal on relief of sanctions in exchange for Russian withdrawal from the Donbas—though not from Crimea.¹⁶ Whether this is a real possibility or just a feint to split the Western allies and weaken their resolve to support Ukraine bears very careful watching. This issue is examined further below in the discussion of the Western response to Russian engagement in conflict areas.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Moving farther out from the Eurasian heartland, the Kremlin views the Middle East and North Africa as very important to Russian interests and the revival of Russia’s role as a major power. But it is more selective in its interventions, more willing to acquiesce to other powers’ involvement, and careful with its limited resources. Moscow’s engagement in the region is a continuation of the centuries-old tsarist, then Soviet, involvement after the hiatus of the 1990s and has geostrategic, economic, global-political, and even religious objectives. Because of Russia’s geography, Kremlin leaders have always viewed the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf as critical to their security interests, and Russian Orthodoxy has had enduring concern for the region as the birthplace of Christianity.¹⁷ The region is important for the Russian oil and gas industries and arms sales, and Russia has enjoyed other economic successes in the region as sanctions have closed off other outlets. Its exports of wheat to North Africa, for example, were up almost 50 percent in 2018 and have pushed many US and EU suppliers out of the market, while Russia’s state nuclear energy company Rosatom has signed contracts with Egypt and Turkey, in addition to other agreements in the Middle East and Africa.¹⁸ The Putin regime regards the Middle East and North Africa as an important arena for pushing its vision of multipolarity and defending established regimes against what it sees as the destabilizing influence of the United States through support of popular rebellions.¹⁹



Turkish and Russian forces, seen here near the town of Darbasiyah, Syria, launched joint patrols in northeastern Syria on November 1, 2019, under a deal that halted a Turkish offensive against Syrian Kurdish fighters. (Photo by Baderkhan Ahmad/AP)

Moscow prides itself on its relative success over the last decade in advancing active, productive relations with countries throughout the region regardless of ideological makeup or past historical differences—a “variable geometry of partnerships”—including Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, Iran, and others.²⁰ But

Syria is the linchpin of Moscow’s strategy. One of Moscow’s last remaining Soviet-legacy partners in the region, Syria provides Russia with a base of military operations in the Middle East and a port in the eastern Mediterranean—Russia’s only naval base (in addition to its illegal one in Sevastopol) outside its own territory—and is a strong customer for Russian arms and a partner in energy and infrastructure projects. After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Russia provided much support and diplomatic cover to the Bashar al-Assad regime, and intervened directly with Russian forces in 2015—the first use of Russian troops outside the former Soviet space since the end of the Cold War—when the Assad regime tottered on the brink of defeat and collapse. Russia became the dominant foreign power in Syria in the fall of 2019 following the US pullback from the Turkish border, though Moscow has shown little appetite for taking on the enormous task of rebuilding Syria after the devastation of the civil war.²¹

In addition to acquiring a base to project power throughout the region, access to a Mediterranean port, and the means to forward its economic interests, Russia’s intervention in the Syrian conflict is motivated by several domestic and global-political considerations.²² One is standing firm against regime change of what the Russians regard as a legitimate government. The Russians often note that their intervention was at the invitation of the recognized government, unlike Western interventions in such places as Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Libya.²³ Another is defeating ISIS terrorism before its influence and operations spread to the North Caucasus and other parts of Russia. Finally, as an influential Russian commentator noted at a recent track 2 dialogue on Syria, Moscow sees its defense of the Assad regime as proof of the brilliance of the Russian multipolar worldview and as its biggest success thus far in standing up to the West in the post-Soviet era.

Libya is another former Soviet ally in the region where Russia is keen to discredit Western involvement and reach a settlement of the internal Libyan conflict on its terms. Moscow believes the West illegitimately exceeded its UN mandate with the NATO bombing of the Gaddafi regime in 2011,

and often cites the violence and chaos in the country since then as proof of the bad results of a color revolution or a so-called Arab Spring revolt. Russia also has strong economic interests in the Libyan oil sector, with Rosneft, Tatneft, and other Russian companies signing major deals.²⁴ But other regional powers, such as Turkey, Italy, France, the UAE, Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, as well as the United States and several other European countries, are also interested in Libya, and with limited resources Russia cannot dominate the situation. Nevertheless, after four years of behind-the-scenes financial and tactical support, including the illegal printing of billions of Libyan dinars, Russia in 2019 upped its military support for Libyan strongman General Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan Arab Armed Forces with jet fighters, guided missile and artillery strikes, and the dispatching of Wagner Group and Syrian mercenaries to help in Haftar's rebellion against the UN-recognized and Turkey- and Western-backed Government of National Accord (GNA).²⁵ But Moscow also has reached out to the GNA, and its endgame in supporting Haftar is unclear. At a minimum, Moscow appears to want to gain access to Libya's immense oil reserves, discredit Western influence, demonstrate the futility of overthrowing an established dictatorship such as Gaddafi's, and perhaps gain another strategic foothold in the Mediterranean on NATO's southern flank.

In analyzing Russia's engagement in the Middle East and North Africa, it is instructive to consider the places where Russia has not engaged. Tunisia is particularly interesting on this account. In late 2010, Tunisia was the site of the first of the uprisings that came to be called the Arab Spring, and its fledgling democratic government has struggled with poor economic performance. It would thus seem an ideal target in the Putin regime's global-political campaign to discredit popular rebellions against authoritarian rulers. But Russia has shown little interest in intervening in Tunisia, and there appear to be few openings for Moscow to exploit. Despite economic difficulties, the Tunisian government enjoys democratic legitimacy, and there is no rebellious strongman to ally with Moscow. While Russia and Tunisia have maintained steady, if modest, bilateral trade, including arms deals and Russian tourist visits, there also is no big economic prize in terms of oil or mineral contracts to be had. Thus, while the chance to score political points by undermining the home of the Arab Spring doubtless is attractive to Moscow, there probably are not enough other necessary conditions to make such an operation worthwhile.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, CAR, AND THE WAGNER GROUP

Beyond North Africa, in the rest of the continent, traditional geostrategic considerations appear to have less applicability, and Moscow's engagements are more overtly opportunistic. While the Kremlin probably would like to reinvigorate many of the old Soviet relationships in Africa as a way of extending its global reach and countering the United States, the lack of a shared ideological framework of Marxism-Leninism and Russia's limited resources severely restrict such ambitions.²⁶ Yet there are occasional opportunities to score political points on global multipolarity and Russia's role as a major power. While the October 2019 Russia-Africa summit, the first-ever such event, resulted in some new agricultural and equipment sales for Russian companies, Putin's meeting with more than fifty African leaders and thousands of businesspeople more importantly aimed to show that Moscow is willing to step in, at least symbolically, as the United States draws back.²⁷ The event could also potentially pay dividends in terms of greater African support for Russian initiatives at the UN and multinational organizations.

Beyond such broad symbolic gestures, however, Russia is unable to play a leadership role on the continent and is limited to making economic deals and intervening in select conflict situations.²⁸ Rosoboronexport, Russia's state-owned arms company, declared 2019 the "Year of Africa" and reportedly struck deals with at least twenty African countries, including the Sub-Saharan countries of Burkina Faso, Angola, Mali, Sudan, and Nigeria (though Algeria and Egypt account for about 90 percent of Russian arms exports to Africa).²⁹ Russia also appeared to step up its efforts to find new markets in Africa following the Western imposition of sanctions in response to Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine.³⁰ But the structure of the current Russian economy, with its focus on extractive industries and raw materials, makes Russia more often a competitor to, rather than a supplier or customer for, Africa.³¹

Given these realities, much of the Russian focus in Sub-Saharan Africa has been on foreign policy adventures that benefit Putin's cronies and friends.³² The activities of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group of mercenaries in the Central African Republic (CAR) is a well-known case in point and an example par excellence of the melding of state interests and corrupt, crony interests. Sometimes called "Putin's chef" because of his catering business with the Kremlin (for what it is worth, Putin's grandfather reportedly cooked for Stalin in Leningrad), Prigozhin controls a diverse set of businesses and organizations, some of which have been sanctioned by the United States for activities in Crimea and interference in the 2016 US election, as well as the Wagner Group private military company.³³ While private military companies technically are illegal in Russia, the Wagner Group is closely connected to the Russian security services and often is used by the Kremlin as a proxy force when plausible deniability is important.³⁴ It participated in Russia's operations in Syria and Ukraine, has a presence in a number of African countries, and reportedly is protecting Venezuela's Maduro.³⁵ In CAR, the Wagner Group is part of Russia's efforts to support the government of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, providing personal security to the president, while Valery Zakharov, a former member of the Russian security services and an associate of Prigozhin, was named national security adviser.³⁶ For its part, the Wagner Group has used the opportunity to gain access to diamond, gold, and other mining contracts and to launder money.³⁷ Russia helped broker a peace agreement during the African Union–led negotiation between the CAR government and rebel groups in early 2019. The Russians were included to prevent them from leading a parallel peace process with Sudan, but allowing them such latitude might be a Faustian bargain. The resulting agreement has so far struggled to stop the violence and bring armed rebel groups to justice, and Russia has done little to support its implementation or to help rebuild the country.³⁸ Nevertheless, support for Touadéra is paying dividends. CAR joined Russia, Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua in co-sponsoring a failed April 2, 2020, UN resolution on COVID-19 that called for lifting all unilateral sanctions and other thinly veiled anti-American measures.³⁹

THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE AND VENEZUELA

The Soviet Union cultivated leftist regimes in Central and South America because of the region's proximity to the United States and the propaganda value of a rising revolutionary tide against the leading capitalist power. The Putin regime takes a similar tack, though on a more limited scale. The distance from Russia's natural geostrategic sphere notwithstanding, the region is important for boosting the Kremlin's global-political perspective on multipolarity, defending established authoritarian regimes against popular uprisings, and causing trouble for the United States in what many in Moscow regard

The Soviet Union cultivated leftist regimes in Central and South America because of the region's proximity to the United States and the propaganda value of a rising revolutionary tide against the leading capitalist power.

as the United States' own "near abroad."⁴⁰ While it appears that Moscow is trying to broaden its reach in Latin America, particularly with countries that share an interest in creating institutions and relationships actively opposed to the United States, its strongest relationships have been with Cuba, Nicaragua, and, most important for this analysis, Venezuela.⁴¹

Venezuela traditionally had strong relations with the United States. The situation changed in the early 2000s with

the rise of the Hugo Chávez regime, which reached out to the then-new Putin Kremlin for support to reduce its dependence on the United States. Putin and Chávez held a number of meetings, Russian energy and other companies gained access to Venezuela on increasingly favorable terms, and Moscow extended to the Chávez regime \$4 billion in credits for the purchase of Russian weapons.⁴² But the relationship drew closer after Putin's 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, in which he argued against US hegemony and for a multipolar world order, a theme in line with Chávez's view of the need to oppose the power and influence of the United States.⁴³ Chávez backed up his support during Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 by recognizing the independence of the break-away Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁴⁴ At the same time, Russia sent strategic bombers to participate in a joint naval exercise with Venezuela in the Caribbean Sea, an obvious counterpoint to US ships traveling to the Black Sea during the events in Georgia.⁴⁵

Warm Moscow-Caracas ties brought a boon to Russian economic interests, including gas and oil contracts to several big Russian firms, a contract to purchase Lada cars, a factory for building Kamaz trucks, and other agreements.⁴⁶ But after the economic crisis of 2008 and disenchantment with the levels of Venezuelan corruption, high even by Russian standards, most Russian companies pulled out, leaving the state-owned oil company Rosneft as the main instrument of Kremlin policy in Venezuela.⁴⁷ Headed by long-time Putin ally Igor Sechin, Rosneft became Russia's largest oil company after it swallowed up jailed oligarch and Putin opponent Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Yukos, but Sechin's close relationship to Putin and involvement in Ukraine and other areas also resulted in sanctions against him. In Venezuela, the Kremlin has used Rosneft in its political aim to support the *chavista* regime even when the economics did not always make sense for Rosneft.⁴⁸ Rosneft made a number of agreements with the Venezuelan petroleum company, including \$6.5 billion in loans for the 2014–16 period that helped support the new Maduro leadership through the 2015 parliamentary elections.⁴⁹ Russia also helped the Venezuelan government launch in 2018 a new cryptocurrency, the "petro," as a way to market Venezuelan oil on global markets outside the reach of US sanctions.⁵⁰

Moscow's support has been particularly important during the presidential leadership crisis that began in January 2019. While Russia was unwilling to extend new credits or prepayments for oil, Moscow offered technical military support and maintained military personnel in the country, including sending a contingent of Wagner Group mercenaries for Maduro's security.⁵¹ Russia also helped the Maduro regime in the UN, blocking US-sponsored resolutions, and Rosneft continued its help with moving Venezuelan oil into international markets. The latter action, however, resulted in US sanctions, imposed in February and March 2020, against Rosneft subsidiaries trading Venezuelan oil.⁵² This wrinkle complicated Moscow's support for the Maduro regime

and greatly increased the costs for Rosneft, which announced in late March that it had transferred its stake in Venezuela to a new, wholly state-owned Russian entity, Roszarubezhneft.⁵³ Nevertheless, there are reasons for the Kremlin to continue its support for Maduro as long as possible. Despite the sanctions, Venezuela remains part of the new international energy architecture Putin and Sechin seek to build to ensure Russia's continued role as an energy superpower.⁵⁴ Even if Maduro were to lose power, Russia now plays such a central role in Venezuela's energy industry that it likely would be asked to continue operations by any new government as the oil sector began what would be a very long recovery. Finally, Russian support for Maduro is above all geopolitical, and as long as he remains in power, he helps Moscow's positioning on the futility of popular rebellions against established authoritarians, the multipolarity of the twenty-first-century world order, and Washington's ineffectiveness even in its own "near abroad."

Conclusion: How Should the United States and Its Allies Respond?

This analysis has examined the interests, motives, and intentions behind Russia's engagements in less-developed, fragile, and conflict-affected countries and regions. The question naturally arises whether there is room for Western cooperation with the Russians in these situations, with the aim of mitigating conflict, or whether pushback or avoidance are the only prudent options. There are some examples of the Russians playing a positive, if limited, role in mitigating conflict. Although the Kremlin could do much more to bring Armenia and Azerbaijan together around the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and should stop using the conflict as leverage over both sides, Western diplomats give the Russian government credit for brokering cease-fires when hostilities flared in 1994 and again in 2016. On the issue of North Korea, the Russian Federation still is not compliant with all DPRK-related UN resolutions but is supportive of the US goal of a denuclearized Korean Peninsula.⁵⁵

Beyond these limited examples, however, the Kremlin over the past twenty years has been a problematic partner—when not an outright obstacle—in peace processes. The Putin regime has shown little, if any, interest in rebuilding civilian infrastructure or social institutions in conflict zones where Russia has engaged, focusing only on such projects as rebuilding oil wells or airfields that would directly benefit Russian interests. When Russia has engaged in some way in peace negotiations, its track record has usually been not to support a broad-based, inclusive process but to back a particular client who will advance its narrow interests. In fact, the evidence indicates Putin's regime does not view peace and the halting, ending, or avoidance of violence as ends in themselves. Peace might be considered a fortunate by-product of settling a conflict, but the primary focus is on the hard-nosed objective of achieving strategic, political, and economic advantage in a settlement, leaving underlying issues unaddressed and, thus, sowing the seeds for more violence later. Chechnya is the classic example. Moscow has tried since the eighteenth century to subjugate the Chechens by brute force. The Kremlin succeeds for a time, but after a generation or so the Chechens again rebel, and the cycle begins again.

But if the Kremlin is brutally determined in pursuit of its objectives, it is not irrational. In the



Russian President Vladimir Putin, center, poses for a photo with leaders of African countries at the Russia-Africa summit in the Black Sea resort of Sochi on October 24, 2019. (Photo by Sergei Chirikov/AP)

case of Putin's Soviet predecessors, the West could vehemently disagree with the Kremlin's worldview, objectives, and metrics of success but still trust that the Soviets would be carefully calculating in how they went about achieving their objectives. It was on this basis that the United States and the Soviet Union were able to negotiate arms-control agreements and why, ultimately, there was no World War III, despite the very high levels of tension.

The same perspective is warranted today in approaching the question of working with the Russians in conflict or fragile situations. As this report suggests, the interests motivating Russian behavior in specific situations are generally comprehensible. These interests usually directly or indirectly run counter to Western interests in a rules-based international order, global stability and security, democracy and human rights, and noncorrupt, free-market economic development.⁵⁶ Russian activities also often undermine efforts to mitigate conflict through broad-based, transparent processes. Nevertheless, it is sometimes possible to carve out limited space for cooperation with Russia on specific issues, such as the date and time of the start of a cease-fire, the demarcation of a line of contact, or coordination on rules of overflights in a conflict zone.⁵⁷ In such situations, it is important that Western actors have as clear an understanding of Russian interests as possible and not ascribe their own motives to their Russian counterparts. From such

a transactional perspective—and while remaining vigilant for Russian cheating or reneging—it is possible to reach limited agreements that further concrete objectives.

Such a window may be opening for dealing with Moscow on the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin since 2014 has fortified its occupation of Crimea and continued military operations in the Donbas. But as Russia's isolation and economic instability resulting from the sanctions have grown, Putin's approval ratings have declined, and ordinary Russians are growing weary of costly foreign entanglements—even as Putin has laid the constitutional groundwork to extend his hold on power beyond 2024, when his current presidential term is due to expire.⁵⁸ In the face of rising costs—and the new pressures of the COVID-19 crisis—Putin may be willing to cut some sort of deal that brings sanctions relief in exchange for Russian withdrawal from eastern Ukraine, though not from Crimea.

After years of insisting the Ukrainian government talk directly with the Donbas separatists, Putin last year signaled a willingness to negotiate with new Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky within the Normandy Format of Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France. Following prisoner exchanges and troop pullbacks along the line of contact last fall, the leaders met in Paris in December 2019—Zelensky's first face-to-face meeting with Putin. The meeting did not lead to a major breakthrough and highlighted how far apart Russia and Ukraine remained on such key issues as the timing of elections in the Donbas, Ukraine's control of its eastern border, and the withdrawal of Russian forces. But the exercise demonstrated that Zelensky is a formidable negotiator and unlikely to make easy concessions. In March 2020, Ukraine agreed in principle to the creation of an advisory council, which would include representatives from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine. In response to strong pushback from Ukrainians fearful the government was giving away too much to Russia, Zelensky and his ministers insisted such representatives would not be Russian-backed officials but community leaders and other laypeople, and that Ukraine remained steadfast in its goals to “deoccupy” and “reintegrate” the Donbas—and Crimea—no matter how long it took. They also underscored that the reintegrated territories would not have veto power with respect to nationwide decisions, which would include foreign policy decisions on moving closer to the EU and NATO.⁵⁹ Another summit under the Normandy Format scheduled for April was canceled because of COVID-19.

Going forward, Zelensky will need the continued strong backing of the United States and other Western powers. Putin is likely to continue to try to split the Western allies and to weaken their resolve, playing for as much time as he can in the hope that Zelensky's administration will collapse, though the COVID-19 crisis may put further pressure on the Kremlin. Zelensky is intent on making progress toward a cease-fire in the short term. If he remains resolute and if the United States throws its support into serious negotiations, the Kremlin will receive a strong signal that its current course is a dead end and the withdrawal of Russian forces is Moscow's only realistic option. “Peace is practical, peace is possible, peace is a process” is how the US Institute of Peace understands its mission, and on the basis of such an incremental, clear-eyed perspective, working with Moscow in Ukraine, as well as in other conflict zones, can, on occasion, bear fruit.

Notes

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2. Kimberly Marten makes this argument for Russia's interventions in Africa, but it is applicable to Russia's engagements worldwide. See "Russia's Back in Africa: Is the Cold War Returning?" *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 155–70.
3. On these respective issues, see John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700–1817: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974); and Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960 [1937]), 7–18.
4. This analysis of the character and development of the traditional Russian state draws on Thomas E. Graham, "The Sources of Russian Conduct," *National Interest*, August 24, 2016, www.nationalinterest.org/feature/the-sources-russian-conduct-17462.
5. In keeping with US State Department conventions, this report uses the spelling "tsar" rather than "czar."
6. Russia's various religious institutions are trying to rebuild individual and social morality in their pastoral work at the level of their communities and individual believers. But the Russian Orthodox Church also has become a patriotic pillar of the Putin regime and one of the chief defenders of Moscow's aggressive policies in the former Soviet space and globally. For an interesting analysis of the Russian Orthodox Church's growing role in supporting the Kremlin's foreign policy, see Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019). Coming from a different perspective, the organization Memorial is contributing in heroic ways to rebuilding morality through acknowledgment of the crimes of the past and remembering the victims.
7. For the promise on preserving democracy, see, for example, Vladimir Putin, *First Person*, trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), 169. In the same set of interviews, Putin also identified his regime with the domineering state developed under the tsars and communists: "From the beginning, Russia was created as a supercentralized state. That's practically laid down in its genetic code, its traditions, and the mentality of the people" (186). In another statement from that period often quoted by Western observers, Putin again emphasized the outsized role of the state in Russian history and society: "Russia will not soon become, if ever, a second version of, say, the USA or England, where liberal values have a deep historical tradition. For us, the state, its institutions, and structures have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country, of the people. A strong state for Russians is not an anomaly, not something to be resisted, but, on the contrary, the source and guarantor of order, the initiator and main driving force of any changes" (Vladimir Putin, "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium" [in Russian], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, December 30, 1999, www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html).
8. Vladimir V. Kara-Murza, "The Kremlin Emboldened: Putin Is Not Russia," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (October 2017): 110.
9. In this connection, we should keep in mind Kara-Murza's warning that Western democracies need to make a distinction, both in words and in action, between the nation of Russia and the unelected Putin regime. Kara-Murza, "The Kremlin Emboldened," 114.
10. Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 388–89.
11. While the term "Arab Spring" has gained popularity, it does disservice to the Copts, Amazighs, Kurds, Assyrians, Yezidis, and others who, in addition to Arabs, have been involved in these uprisings.
12. Stronski and Sokolsky propose a somewhat similar framework of proximity to Russia, combined with Russian threat perceptions, to explain Moscow's prioritizing of its engagements with countries in the former Soviet space; the United States, the EU, and NATO; former allies and clients; and, finally, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. See Stronski and Sokolsky, "The Return of Global Russia."
13. Taras Kuzio, "Putin's Imperial Ambitions Mean Ukraine Must Learn to Live with Frozen Conflict," Atlantic Council, December 19, 2019, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-imperial-ambitions-mean-ukraine-must-learn-to-live-with-frozen-conflict.
14. During a visit to Sevastopol in 2003, I heard from local Ukrainian officials their concerns about Russian attempts then to change the political situation on the ground by changing the demographics of Crimea by encouraging former Russian military personnel to retire on the peninsula.
15. Article 15.4 of the 1993 Russian Constitution states that "the universally recognized norms of international law and international treaties and agreements of the Russian Federation shall be a component part of its legal system. If an international treaty or agreement of the Russian Federation fixes other rules than those envisaged by law, the rules of the international agreement shall be applied."
16. William B. Taylor, Steven Pifer, and John E. Herbst, "Opinion: The Coronavirus Crisis Presents an Opportunity to End War in Ukraine," NPR, April 6, 2020, www.npr.org/2020/04/06/827608458/opinion-the-coronavirus-crisis-presents-an-opportunity-to-end-war-in-ukraine.
17. Eugene Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 31, 2019, www.carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/31/russia-in-middle-east-jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none-pub-80233.

18. On the respective matters, see Polina Devitt, Michael Hogan, and Valerie Parent, "Russia Eyes New Wheat Export Frontiers in Challenge to EU, U.S.," Reuters, November 22, 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-wheat/russia-eyes-new-wheat-export-frontiers-in-challenge-to-eu-u-s-idUSKCN1NR237; Ivan Nechepurenko and Andrew Higgins, "Coming to a Country Near You: A Russian Nuclear Power Plant," *New York Times*, March 21, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/21/world/europe/belarus-russia-nuclear.html; and Sonal Patel, "Russia Offers to Expand Nuclear Power in Africa," *Power Magazine*, December 2, 2019, www.powermag.com/russia-offers-to-expand-nuclear-power-in-africa.
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28. On Russia's leadership problem, see Marten, "Russia's Back in Africa," 165. According to Emmanuel Dreyfus, "Moscow's current activism in Africa, and more particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, is best understood as opportunistic moves that are unlikely to yield significant results" ("Kennan Cable No. 47: Moscow's Limited Prospects in Sub-Saharan Africa," Wilson Center, February 2020, www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-47-moscows-limited-prospects-sub-saharan-africa).
29. See Edward Lucas, "Western Neglect Gives Russia Free Rein in Africa," *Times of London*, September 23, 2019, www.thetimes.co.uk/article/western-neglect-gives-russia-free-rein-in-africa-p9n380vdf. On Algeria and Egypt accounting for 90 percent of arms purchases, see Dreyfus, "Kennan Cable No. 47."
30. Marten, "Russia's Back in Africa," 155.
31. Stronski, "Late to the Party."
32. Marten, "Russia's Back in Africa," 160.
33. For the story of Putin's grandfather as Stalin's cook, see Richard Lourie, *Putin: His Downfall and Russia's Coming Crash* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2017), 17.
34. Alexander Rabin, "Diplomacy and Dividends: Who Really Controls the Wagner Group?" Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 4, 2019, www.fpri.org/article/2019/10/diplomacy-and-dividends-who-really-controls-the-wagner-group.
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 45. Herbst and Marczak, "Russia's Intervention."
 46. Rouvinski, "Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads," 5.
 47. Rouvinski, "Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads," 5.
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former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, such conflicts are not in a region but from a region and have a direct impact on the national security of the United States. In this context, the United States has an interest in supporting a rules-based, inclusive, stable, and secure international order, in which citizens view their governments as legitimate, governments respect human rights and address the grievances of their citizens, and all the people of these regions—including women, youth, and those displaced—are enabled and empowered to create economic growth and prosperity. See Stephen J. Hadley, “America’s Role in the World: Submitted Statement of Madeleine K. Albright and Stephen J. Hadley [to] Committee on Armed Services,” March 21, 2017, United States Institute of Peace, www.usip.org/publications/2017/03/americas-role-world.

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