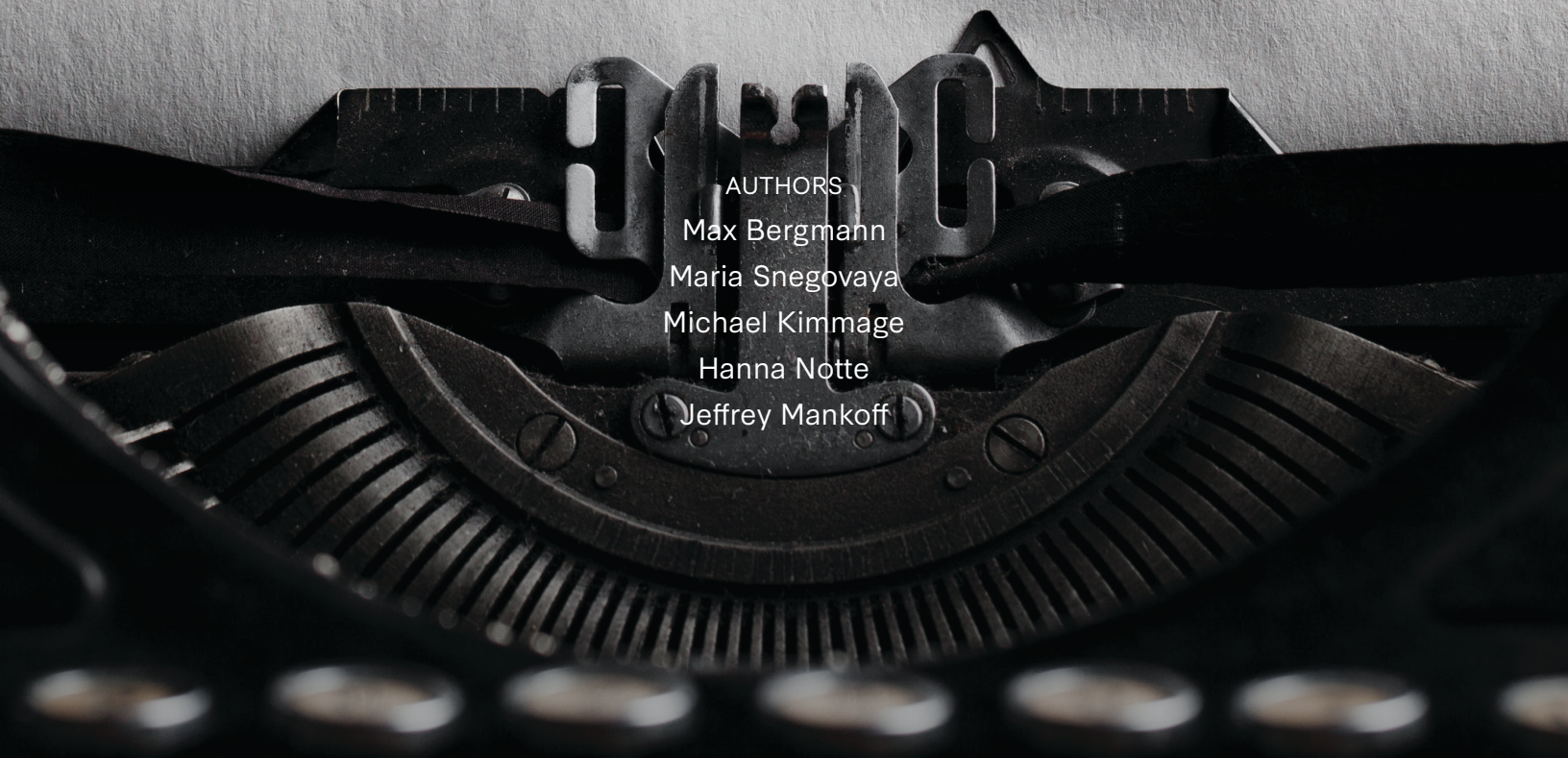
JULY 2025

A Long-Term Russia Strategy for Europe

Back to Containment?



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A Report of the
CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program

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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has marked a paradigm shift in how Europe must conceptualize relations with Moscow. After three decades of seeking to reconcile the expansion of the Euro-Atlantic security space with reassurance and engagement with Moscow, European states now find themselves the principal backers of Ukraine's effort to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty as the United States looks to reduce its transatlantic commitments. Amid this crisis, Europe must grapple with the longer-term implications of an era of protracted confrontation with Russia, one that will almost certainly outlast the fighting in Ukraine. Whatever end state it achieves in Ukraine, Moscow will likely maintain its adversarial posture toward Europe, insofar as Europe remains committed to Atlanticism, liberalism, and European integration.

The first three years of the conflict saw consistent transatlantic cooperation, with Washington providing substantial military assistance—including actionable intelligence—and working closely with European capitals, the European Union, and NATO to ensure a coordinated response. Despite frictions over weapons deliveries, strikes on Russian territory, and other issues, Europe and the United States maintained a common outlook on securing a favorable outcome to the war. The arrival of the Trump administration in 2025 has raised new questions about the nature and extent of transatlantic comity, with the White House calling for a concentration of resources in the Indo-Pacific theater. While some of these shifts could stall or be reversed after the next U.S. election, they testify to a new strategic reality facing Europe, which must now bear more of the burden of keeping Ukraine in the fight and ensuring a stable postwar settlement on the continent.

Greater strategic clarity and unity is paramount. Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Europe was divided in its posture and policy toward Moscow. In Europe's east, former Warsaw Pact states viewed Russia as a hostile actor and advocated a hawkish approach toward Moscow. However, splits emerged as far-right leaders in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria took a softer line. Western Europe, meanwhile, tended to adopt a more transactional approach toward Russia, embodied by Germany's support for the Nord Stream 1 and 2 natural gas pipelines, the United Kingdom's embrace of Russian oligarch wealth, and decades of efforts by Western European leaders to engage Russian President Vladimir Putin. The stark split between Western and Eastern Europe on Russia policy left the European Union divided and without a coherent policy toward Moscow.

With the United States now playing less of a deterrent role, it is paramount that Europe develop a common strategy toward dealing with the threat and challenge posed by a revanchist Russia. It is often difficult for "Europe" to reach a common foreign policy approach, as Europe often exists in slightly different formats—the European Union and NATO have overlapping but not identical memberships. However, it will be vital for the future of European security that Europe, meaning the European Union plus the United Kingdom and Norway, adopt a common long-term strategy toward Russia. There has been considerable talk of power shifting eastward within the European Union, demonstrated by two prominent Baltic political leaders gaining top foreign and security positions within the grouping. Yet a common strategy toward Russia can only be forged through the support and backing of Berlin, given the size and importance of Germany within the European Union. Thus, the future of German foreign policy toward Russia will set the tone for the bloc. Furthermore, EU and UK alignment on defense and foreign policy is critical and has become a cornerstone of rebuilding cross-channel relations post-Brexit.

Europe and Russia will likely remain antagonists for years to come. The Kremlin possesses immense disruptive global power and is willing to take great risks to advance its geopolitical agenda, including potentially even risking a land incursion into NATO territory. Coping with Russia will demand a long-term strategy for Europe, one that echoes containment, which guided the United States through the Cold War—what President John F. Kennedy called a "long, twilight struggle" against the Soviet Union. More than 75 years have passed since the U.S. diplomat George Kennan first formulated that strategy in his famous "Long Telegram" from Moscow.[1] In his ensuing 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," Kennan described containment as a political strategy reinforced by "the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points."[2] The goal was to avoid direct conflict with the Soviet Union while halting the spread of Soviet power.

Kennan was writing for an American audience at a moment when much of Europe remained prostrate from World War II. Today, however, a wealthy, democratic Europe will have to take on more of the burden of containing Russia's renewed campaign to expand its influence and weaken the West. This report calls for a new European containment strategy for Russia in full recognition of Europe's structural complexities. What is critical is that European states, the European Union, and Europe's NATO members adopt a common strategic approach toward Russia.

A new containment strategy must account for the novelty of the present moment in other ways as well. Kennan's vision of containment focused primarily on Central and Eastern Europe. While the lands and peoples lying between the European Union and Russia will again be central to the success of a containment strategy, European leaders will have to account for the fact that Europe itself is no longer the pivot for global geopolitics. A modern containment strategy must grapple in particular with the role of China, which is both an enabler of Russia's war effort and a rising global power that will remain the central focus of U.S. foreign policy during the Trump administration and beyond. It will also have to account for the shifting, perhaps unpredictable role that the United States itself will play in European security in the coming years.

A refashioned containment strategy would presume that Russia will continue trying to dominate Ukraine. Containing Russia in Ukraine means keeping the line of contact as close to the Russian border as possible, thereby constraining Russia's expansionist tendencies. But containment will remain necessary irrespective of how the war in Ukraine ends. As in Kennan's day, a containment strategy seeks to check Moscow's aggression without risking a direct conflict. But it is not enough to dust off Kennan's prescriptions. The past is a guide, but new times call for new thinking.

1

Drawing Lessons from the Containment Strategy Toward the Soviet Union

What Led to Containment

The Cold War containment strategy arose in response to two basic circumstances. The first was the recognition, after 1945, that the Soviet Union was expansionary. Moscow was projecting its military power into new theaters—from East Germany to Iran to the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, Moscow's political influence was spreading via the international communist movement, whose different parties were loyal to the Soviet Union to varying degrees. The rise of a communist China supercharged the task of managing an ascendent and ambitious Soviet Union. The second circumstance was the advent of the nuclear age. Although the United States had a monopoly on nuclear weapons from 1945 to 1949, Washington could not assume that there would be only one nuclear power in the world. From the beginning, it had to presume that the Soviet Union might join the ranks of the nuclear powers, though by the measurement of its remarkable conventional power in 1945, even a non-nuclear Soviet Union was effectively undefeatable. This condition of having an undefeatable adversary forced creative ways of thinking on the United States, which had entered World War II with the explicit (and militarily traditional) goal of defeating Nazi Germany and imperial Japan.

Containment answered the dilemma of what to do about the Soviet Union. Key to containment was the refusal to accept widening spheres of influence for the Soviet Union, particularly in Europe. Containment was about holding the line, as evidenced by Washington's unwillingness to concede West Berlin to Soviet control in the late 1940s. Containment also led to the Korean War in 1950, when Soviet and Chinese power combined to produce a military confrontation on the Korean

Peninsula. Well into the 1950s, containment demanded high levels of military expenditure, part of which was used to hold the line in places like West Berlin and South Korea, and part of which was used to deter the Soviet Union directly. The establishment of the NATO alliance must be understood within the strategic parameters of containment. In addition to holding the line, containment entailed the *management* of conflict with the Soviet Union; it eschewed regime change in the short to medium term (with some expectation that the Soviet Union's internal contradictions may lead the country to defeat itself, or "mellow," in Kennan's words, over time); and it did not threaten the territorial integrity of the Soviet Union itself. Nor did containment threaten the territorial integrity of the Warsaw Pact states, which were under Soviet control throughout the Cold War. If NATO existed within the strategic parameters of containment, so too did arms control and negotiation with the Soviet Union. Occasionally at risk of being contradictory, containment was at its best a flexible strategy.

Versions of Containment

Different versions of containment crystallized around the influential figure of U.S. diplomat George Kennan. At first, Kennan argued against any kind of diplomacy with the Soviet Union: He judged Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to be too deceptive and intransigent for normal diplomatic back-and-forth. Especially after Stalin's death in 1953, however, Kennan came to feel that containing the Soviet Union could be combined with conventional diplomacy. Kennan also emphasized two particular aspects of containment. The first was that it was primarily a political doctrine and that stemming the spread of Soviet communism had to be practiced through support for democracy (among allies) and by the setting of a good political example. The second was that covert methods were preferable to anything resembling direct military confrontation. As with diplomacy, Kennan would change his mind about covert action in later phases of the Cold War, coming to feel that the United States had too zealously embraced covert action in its struggle with Soviet communism.

Kennan's intellectual rival in the U.S. government was Paul Nitze, his successor as director of policy planning at the State Department and later a U.S. deputy secretary of defense. Nitze placed a higher premium on military confrontation with the Soviet Union, an ideological reading of the Cold War as a titanic struggle between liberty and tyranny, and the use of fear to mobilize the American population into supporting high levels of defense spending. Nitze won many of his bureaucratic arguments with Kennan in the 1950s. The American president who revived Nitze's thinking, after the catastrophe of the Vietnam War, was Ronald Reagan. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, three years after Reagan left the White House, many Americans concluded that Reagan's robust language and actions, along with high levels of military spending, had won the Cold War for the United States. But with the overreach of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and then again with the deterioration of relations between Moscow and Washington since Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Kennan's version of containment began getting a second look by policymakers in Washington. The intellectual battle between Nitze and Kennan continues.

Cold War containment was never anything other than a transatlantic venture, even if the strategic tone was initially set in Washington.

Cold War containment was never anything other than a transatlantic venture, even if the strategic tone was initially set in Washington. Over time, France and the United Kingdom would join the United States as nuclear powers, holding up a nuclear umbrella over Western Europe. West Germany engaged in serious rearmament in the 1950s and 1960s, joining the United States and a host of other NATO member states to balance out the conventional military superiority that the Soviet Union had in Europe throughout the Cold War. On the cultural and political plane, Europe and the United States were in agreement about the imperative of stopping the spread of Soviet power, which Moscow attempted to disseminate across Europe through structures designed to promote sympathy for Soviet communism. Through espionage and subversion and through active measures, Russia attempted to weaken the underpinnings of European and transatlantic unity. But while Europeans at times chafed at certain Cold War decisions made in the United States—which sat far removed from the frontlines of Soviet campaigns—on balance they were deeply committed to containment.

Problems of Containment

Containment led to two core problems. The first was its potential to spill over into regional wars. Historians have increasingly rethought this aspect of the Cold War. Not only did the Vietnam War end in failure for the United States, and at enormous cost to the people of Vietnam, but Washington found itself embroiled in many bloody conflicts throughout what was then called the "third world." A large price was paid for these conflicts, even when U.S. forces themselves were not the ones doing the fighting. For one, they damaged the United States' global reputation, leaving millions upon millions of people skeptical about the claims made in Washington about democracy and human rights. In a different sense, these wars and conflicts undermined support for a strong Cold War policy within the United States itself. In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States experienced a great deal of civic unrest, some of which was derived from the sense that what Washington was doing abroad—particularly in Southeast Asia—was morally questionable.

Containment's second, and related, problem was its lack of nuance. Too often the strategy was pursued as a one-size-fits-all approach. In Vietnam, U.S. policymakers fundamentally misunderstood the nature of the conflict, precisely because they viewed it through a containment lens. They failed to see the significance of Vietnamese nationalism and the resentment of foreign interference in the country's domestic affairs; the different political patterns in the nations and cultures of Indochina; and that China too could be perceived (in Vietnam and elsewhere) as a source of foreign interference. The Vietnam War provided a microcosm of a core problem of U.S. Cold War foreign policy. When containment shaded over into regime change, as it occasionally did in U.S. Cold War policy, it led to unpredictable and negative consequences. For instance, U.S. efforts to

topple the Iranian government in the 1950s created layers of resentment that directly enabled the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Containment needed to be balanced with careful and precise analysis of local and regional dynamics. Yet such analysis was more the exception than the norm. Again and again, the simplistic application of containment to situations of great internal complexity led to policy failures.

Containment as a Strategic Success

For all its problems, containment was a remarkably successful strategy that accomplished three goals. First, it did not overstretch the United States and its European partners. When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, all were still committed to containment, and all were economically viable states: There was enough political will, enough financial backing, and enough societal agreement on the validity of containment for the strategy to prevail.

Second, the Soviet Union *was* contained—not everywhere and not perfectly to be sure—but sufficiently. Western Europe remained free from Soviet domination. So too did Greece, Turkey, and much of the Middle East, along with Japan and South Korea. Latin America and Africa had checkered histories in this regard, but in no sense were they overrun by the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Third, there was no nuclear conflict. It came close during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and there were other moments of high tension, but ultimately the worst was avoided. Because containment had left room for diplomacy, there was an elaborate architecture of arms control in existence by 1991. It would endure for about three decades after the Cold War, which is more surprising than the recent unraveling of arms control between Russia and the United States.

2

The Strategic Case for Containment of Russia in Ukraine and Globally

Containment Strategy Today

Containment has three advantages as a contemporary strategy toward Russia. First, because Russia is expansionary, the spread of Russian political and military power can either be accepted as unavoidable, or it can be contained—within and outside of Ukraine. To accept an expansionary Russia in Europe (and elsewhere) would be to undermine the foundations of liberal international order based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states big and small, which has been instrumental in Europe's post-1945 peace and development. A collapse of this order will be followed by multiplying threats to European security.[3]

Secondly, containment, if carefully pursued, will keep escalation in check. It will not tip over into calls for regime change, and it will take into account the reality that Putin's Russia is a nuclear power that also maintains the conventional capacity to inflict enormous damage on Europe. There is sufficient evidence that Russia is, indeed, containable. It is a myth that Putin always fights to the finish. When faced with a superior force and resistance, Putin often backs down, as he has from multiple threats of retaliation over U.S. and European support for Ukraine. Containment is not the absence of escalation—it is escalation within strategic and discursive limits.[4]

Third, containment meets the fundamental needs of Europe, pinning outcomes to preventing the spread of Russian military power within Ukraine. It is anything but appeasement. It also can be communicated as a strategy that does not amount to a blank check, that honors the imperative of restraint, and that helps with the prioritization of foreign policy problems and budgeting. Policymakers can present containment to European citizens concerned about costs, escalation,

and other risks as a strategy that emerges from the political center and that, if successful, could strengthen that center. It is a strategy that is neither quiescent or passive on the one hand, nor extreme or militaristic on the other.

Europe taking the lead on devising and implementing a new containment strategy could reinforce transatlantic relations by allowing the U.S. government to prioritize other strategic challenges such as China, while limiting Russia's assertiveness as long as the existing restrictions and their enforcement remains in place.

Nor does it require a large investment of U.S. financial or military resources over the longer term. While Europe will not be able to fully replace U.S. capabilities, it can do enough to make a containment strategy viable with limited U.S. backstops. Europe taking the lead on devising and implementing a new containment strategy could reinforce transatlantic relations by allowing the U.S. government to prioritize other strategic challenges such as China, while limiting Russia's assertiveness as long as the existing restrictions and their enforcement remains in place.

The Nature of the Russian Threat

Russia has a global strategy to diminish Western influence within existing international institutions, develop and expand new nonliberal or illiberal multilateral institutions, reassert its hegemony in much of Eurasia, and roll back Western power from strategic regions of the globe (as well as outer space). This strategy of revision and expansion is now central to the Putin regime's ideology and domestic legitimation. It also has strong echoes in Russian and Soviet history that will make it likely to endure even after Putin departs the stage. Russia is not the only expansionist, revisionist power challenging the West and the world order it prefers, but in many ways Russia is the most ambitious and aggressive adversary Europe faces because of its willingness to use force to disrupt the existing international order and its long-standing strategic focus on maintaining a sphere of influence around its borders.[5] It is also the principal driver of an emerging autocratic axis encompassing Iran, North Korea, and (to some degree) China that presents the democratic West with the most complex strategic challenge it has faced since the end of the Cold War.

The war in Ukraine has consolidated the preeminence of this worldview inside Russia, while exacerbating anti-Western resentment.[6] The war has also forced the Kremlin to confront many of the weaknesses facing its military and defense industrial base, including outdated technology and production bottlenecks. Following massive wartime investments in the defense industry, the Russian military is projected to come out of the Ukraine war with greater material capabilities than it went in with. Shortages of personnel will likely present the Kremlin a greater challenge;

nevertheless, its policy of paying large bonuses to recruits has reinvigorated the economy of formerly derelict regions and ensured a minimally adequate flow of recruits.[7] Moscow has been able to compensate for its shortage of personnel with mercenaries and troop contingents from North Korea and elsewhere. Even if the cost of these expedients makes them impractical over the longer term, they demonstrate how the Kremlin can improvise solutions to its vulnerabilities.

In three years of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated remarkable agility, defying many pessimistic forecasts. Having become the most sanctioned country in the world, it has managed to maneuver around many economic constraints, keeping revenues from energy sales high and its budget balanced, investing in the military and defense industry, ramping up domestic production of weapons and equipment, and boosting economic growth.[8] At the moment, Russia appears economically and socially resilient and has adjusted to the sanctions-induced disruption of its ties with the West. Although defense spending is set to reach a post-Soviet record of 6.3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2025 (7.2 percent including related expenditures) and is expected to rise further despite growing signs of economic slowdown or recession, Russia's economy appears sustainable for the next few years.[9] Despite having suffered around one million casualties and losing hundreds of armored vehicles and artillery pieces per month on average over the last three years, Russia is estimated to be able to continue waging the war at the current level of attrition at least until 2027.[10] The Kremlin has maintained social stability thanks to its efforts to create a wide pool of stakeholders among the elites and working classes and to boost domestic repression, propaganda, and ideological indoctrination, as well as the exodus of opposition-minded Russians and the popularity of triumphant propagandistic narratives in contemporary Russian culture.[11]

Russia's war-induced socioeconomic changes have been so significant that the process of societal militarization is unlikely to stop even if the war in Ukraine were to end. Because military spending has by now become the main driver of economic growth, the end of hostilities will not lead to a radical cut-off of military investment. Russia will likely continue inflating its military industrial sector, and by most assessments will be able to reconstitute its army within the next decade.[12] Besides conventional capabilities, Russia's sophisticated and persistently evolving tool kit of aggression includes cyberattacks, coordinated disinformation, artificial migration crises, proxy actors, airspace violations, assassinations, political interference, and operations against critical infrastructure. This hybrid tool kit allows the Kremlin to move swiftly, run higher risks, and act aggressively across various domains. Accordingly, despite being inferior to NATO in terms of its conventional capabilities, today's Russia represents a bigger challenge to European security than it did at the start of 2022. The Kremlin is learning from its past mistakes, upgrading its methods, and growing more emboldened by what it perceives as a Western inability to confront and contain it. Moscow's ongoing large-scale military reforms signal that Russia could be preparing for some kind of future confrontation with NATO within roughly the next decade—including even a large-scale conventional war.[13]

3

Implementing Containment

Ukraine and the Containment of Russia

The cheapest way for Europe to contain Russia is by assisting Ukraine. As of now, there are three plausible scenarios for how the war in Ukraine could play out.

The first is Russian victory. In this scenario, tension and hostility would move closer to the borders of NATO. The fear of Russian invasion would percolate throughout Poland and the Baltic states, and the mistrust and friction between Russia and the West might well increase. Ukraine itself would be a failed state and source of chronic instability for Europe, or it would be a de facto Russian protectorate, like Belarus.

The second scenario is a long, inconclusive war. In this case it would be in Europe's interest to keep the line of contact between Ukraine and Russia as close to Russia as possible, and prevent it from moving westward. In this scenario, Kyiv could consolidate a functioning state in much of the country, acting as a buffer between Europe and Russia. Long-term consolidation of a prosperous, democratic Ukraine could exert a magnetic pull on Russian-occupied regions of eastern Ukraine (and on Russia itself), much as West Germany did with East Germany during the Cold War.

The third, and preferred, scenario is Ukraine's victory and recovery of its occupied territory. While this is unlikely at the moment, a Russian defeat in Ukraine may trigger a wide variance of outcomes, such as precipitating regime collapse or, conversely, causing Moscow to "lash out" more aggressively elsewhere, necessitating further containment. Russia might lose the war but not necessarily the intent of occupying Ukrainian territory or of sponsoring regime change in Kyiv. So

long as the intent and the capacity for such meddling and aggression remain, containment will be strategically salient.

The fate of Ukraine remains fundamental to Europe's security and to the success of a new containment strategy writ large. While a new strategy does not depend on Ukrainian victory, it should still retain Ukrainian victory as a long-term strategic goal. Forcing Russia to abandon most or all of its conquests will push the Russian threat further from Europe's borders, forcing the Kremlin to grapple with the consequences of a failed war of aggression—much as the Soviet Union did after the Afghanistan debacle in the 1980s. A Ukrainian victory would encourage other countries to push back against Russian malign influence, especially across Europe and Eurasia. Conversely, a conclusion of the war on Russia's terms could result in a new division of power and spheres of influence.

Ukraine will require sustained Western military assistance. Importantly, the need to aid Ukraine will not stop when the fighting stops, as Kyiv will be in a race to rearm and rebuild its military capacity to deter future Russian aggression. It will also have to rebuild huge amounts of infrastructure, housing, and other assets destroyed during the war. Therefore, Europe will be asked by Kyiv to provide sustained military support, similar to that provided by the United States to Israel. Should Western governments prove willing to provide durable security guarantees to Ukraine, including potentially NATO membership, the urgency of the task to recapitalize Ukraine's military will be reduced, since it would then have an effective deterrent to future Russian aggression. But without Western security guarantees, Ukraine will need to sustain a massive military force for the indefinite future, with deleterious effects on its civilian economy and standard of living.

Additionally, European militaries will also need to significantly rearm to deter Russia. The shambolic state of the European defense industrial base is an acute military vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia, in addition to being a major source of tension with the United States.[14] Thus, Europe should focus its efforts on ramping up defense industrial production, both to support Ukraine and to rearm itself. This will require not just significant outlays of funding but also greater integration and coordination of European procurement efforts, ideally involving Ukraine and Ukrainian firms as well.

Energy: Russia's Economic Achilles' Heel

Given their significance to the Russian economy, the dynamics of the global oil and gas markets should be taken into account in any containment strategy. While there is no way to predict the future of global energy prices, at some point global oil prices are likely to fall, creating significant economic and potential regime difficulties for Russia.

Reflecting on the Soviet economy, former Russian Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar explained in 2007 that in the late 1970s, "The hard currency from oil exports stopped the growing food supply crisis, increased the import of equipment and consumer goods, ensured a financial base for the arms race and the achievement of nuclear parity with the United States, and permitted the realization of such risky foreign policy actions as the war in Afghanistan."[15] Conversely, the drop in oil prices in the

1980s damaged the Soviet economy, prompting Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. Low oil prices in the 1990s added to Russia's troubles and helped precipitate the 1998 financial crisis and the ruble's collapse. The dramatic increase in oil prices in the 2000s bolstered Putin's government and gave the Kremlin the resources necessary to modernize the Russian military.

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Russian economy was buoyed by the increase in global energy prices. Yet future changes in the oil market and the acceleration of the green transition create real vulnerabilities for Russia that can be exploited by the West. The Russian economy remains heavily dependent on fossil fuel exports. Over the past decade, the oil and gas sectors together have contributed to 30 to 50 percent of Russia's total federal budget revenues and amounted to 20 percent of GDP on average, with oil constituting about 70 to 80 percent of that total.[16] Oil prices futures will continue to have a dramatic effect on Russia's ability to amass and project power.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine saw the West impose significant economic sanctions, but these only mildly targeted the energy sector. The West has feared that aggressive action against Russia's energy industry would trigger a global economic crisis and worsen inflation in the United States and Europe. The throttling of gas exports to Europe by Russia and the destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines have effectively closed off much of the European gas market to Russia. This development hit Europe's economy hard, but it may hurt Russia more, stranding much of its gas supply in western Siberia. Russia has tried to involve China in building the Power of Siberia II pipeline to redirect stranded gas, but Beijing has shown little interest.[17] In response, Russia is seeking to build up its liquified natural gas (LNG) export capacity, but this has proven easier said than done, especially as sanctions and perceptions of political risk have caused foreign investment to practically dry up since the start of the full-scale war.

The impact of natural gas on Russia's budget is minor relative to the role of oil. The West's efforts to impose an oil price cap to force Russia to sell its oil below global market value have had mixed results. The Group of Seven (G7) price cap and the corresponding European oil embargo put in place in December 2022 did impact Russia's energy revenue, forcing Russia to procure a "shadow fleet" of tankers and alter its supply routes to Asia. Recent efforts to crack down on the shadow fleet have stalled deliveries and pushed Russian oil prices further below the G7 cap, cutting into the country's budget revenues.[18]

The decline in energy prices from the spike in 2022, the loss of the European gas market, and the extra costs to redirect oil to Asia have had some impact on the Russian economy. Russian gas output has fallen by more than 15 percent since the war began thanks to the loss of the European market. Alongside Russia's efforts to diversify its revenue by increasing non-energy taxes, these factors contributed to the share of oil and gas in government revenue falling from 42 percent in 2022 to about 30 percent in 2024.[19]

While Russia's fossil fuel exports have kept its economy and therefore its war effort afloat, time is likely not on Russia's side. Aside from the impact of war and sanctions, there are various economic and energy trends that could gravely impact Russia's economy.

In the short term, the world may have an oil glut of new production. In 2024, the International Energy Agency (IEA) projected that global oil production capacity will far outpace demand, with the latter plateauing by 2030.[20] A world of excess oil supply could lower prices and slow the energy transition. Prospects for a global economic slowdown are putting additional downward pressure on oil prices.

In the long term, the clean energy transition should reduce global oil demand. More than 50 percent of global oil demand comes from the transportation sector, with 25 percent of total demand—or about 25 million barrels per day—due to passenger travel.[21] Road freight, aviation, and shipping make up the other half and will be harder to abate. Encouraging and accelerating the adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) globally will impact Russia's economic prospects, making the energy transition a key part of any containment strategy. The IEA predicts that oil demand in advanced economies will fall sharply by 2030.[22] The West will then be less politically and economically sensitive to global oil prices, which may have a significant impact on the willingness of Western, and particularly U.S., policymakers to target Russia's oil sector.

If the green transition accelerates not just in developed but in developing markets, it could further lower global demand. In China, for instance, new data shows that 50 percent of new cars sold this year are EVs or plug-in hybrid vehicles.[23] Chinese overproduction of EVs may also flood developing markets in Asia and Latin America, not to mention Europe itself, accelerating the adoption of EVs in emerging economies that would put additional downward pressure on the global demand for oil.

As a major consumer of oil and gas, Europe has some ability to shape these price dynamics through its investments and regulatory actions. Figuring out ways to deprive the Russian state of critical export revenue will weaken its ability to wage new wars, modernize its military, and maintain social services critical to sustaining public support for the regime.

The Nuclear Factor

Moscow has successfully deterred more intense Western intervention in Ukraine in part because of its substantial nuclear arsenal, which is roughly equal to that of the United States. Russia has gradually raised the nuclear temperature vis-à-vis the West by (1) engaging in nuclear "saber-rattling"; (2) taking additional steps up the escalation ladder, such as moving tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, hinting at the possibility of a nuclear test, and announcing revisions to its nuclear doctrine; (3) rejecting offers to return to nuclear arms control talks with the United States; and (4) reducing its support for nuclear nonproliferation efforts, especially in relation to North Korea and Iran.[24]

The constraints on Russia's actual use of a nuclear weapon remain real: Moscow's risk aversion vis-à-vis NATO in the context of the Ukraine war suggests that nuclear deterrence with the United States continues to hold. Russia's key partners in the Global South—as well as China—have also warned the Kremlin against using nuclear weapons. Still, a containment strategy with regard to Russia should assume that Moscow will remain comfortable with a higher level of systemic nuclear risk than Western states. Containment should also prepare for the fact that Russia's irresponsible

nuclear actions will have a cumulative impact over the medium term. Moscow is establishing a more dangerous nuclear environment. Within it, nuclear escalation may become more likely.

Russia Regionally and Globally

Russia is doubling down on its long-standing effort to diminish Western influence in the heart of Eurasia. Russian-backed gray zone operations aim to destabilize pro-Western governments in Moldova and Armenia. Moscow is also using a mixture of carrots and sticks to contest or squeeze out Western influence in states like Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, and Serbia. All of these states are in or closely tied to Europe, and Russia's ability to influence them has a direct impact on European security.

Beyond Eurasia, Russia is taking advantage of disillusionment with the West to establish outposts of influence in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere. Many of these interventions are opportunistic and of limited strategic importance. Others, though, pose a challenge to Western counterterrorism campaigns—for instance, in the Sahel region—or access to critical resources. And efforts such as those in Libya and Sudan could allow Moscow to imperil vital lines of communication in the Mediterranean and Red Seas.

This Russian intervention in the Global South aligns with steps to transform the liberal international order to one more favorable to authoritarianism and regional blocs. Along with China, Russia is at the forefront of efforts to promote alternative institutions of global governance. Institutions such as the BRICS alliance and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) lack the binding rules and commitment to liberal principles underpinning much of the international system crafted in the West at the end of World War II and given global remit by the collapse of the Soviet Bloc between 1989 and 1991. As Moscow emphasizes the lasting nature of its break with the West, it is increasingly pushing for these organizations to both expand their geographic scope (e.g., allowing Iran to join the BRICS and the SCO as a full member) and take on new functional capabilities to duplicate or replace many of the global governance tasks performed by legacy multilateral institutions.

WESTERN EUROPE

The war in Ukraine has highlighted the Russian security threat to the European continent above and below the threshold of war. These Russian actions, variously described as "active measures," "hybrid warfare," or "gray zone activities," will pose a major challenge to European security in the coming years.

Russia's aim with these actions is two-fold: To undermine support for Ukraine and pursue a broader long-term revisionist challenge to Europe and the U.S.-led global order. The Kremlin views both conventional and unconventional military means as tools of national power and applies them in combination. The basic characteristic of this Russian line of effort is actions to harm or undermine its adversary that possess a degree of deniability, making these actions unlikely to trigger a wider war.

Russia's goal with these efforts remains to erode European political and societal cohesion, test European focus and resolve, and serve as an asymmetric deterrent—imposing costs or threatening

to impose costs on Europe for actions taken against Russia. More broadly, these efforts strive to cause death by a thousand cuts. Each action viewed in isolation may appear rather limited in significance, but taken together they have the potential to have strategic effects.

Although Russia may not be able to retaliate with sanctions, it can impose costs through active measures. Former Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns and Richard Moore, chief of the UK Secret Intelligence Service, described a "reckless campaign of sabotage across Europe being waged by Russian intelligence, and its cynical use of technology to spread lies and disinformation designed to drive wedges between us."[25] A spate of unexplained attacks on gas pipelines and data cables in northern Europe have demonstrated the threat and inspired a range of European Union and NATO initiatives to protect critical infrastructure. Russia has been accused of being responsible for reports of explosive devices in DHL packages and aircraft, and a number of industrial arson attacks and drone usage targeting sensitive facilities.[26] Russia has also stepped up its sabotage campaign across the European Union, as demonstrated, for example, by weaponization of immigration, a wave of attacks on gas pipelines and data cables in northern Europe, and the "Operation DoppelGänger" disinformation campaign disseminated through a network of cloned websites.[27]

Russia has also assassinated defectors. From the use of a chemical weapon to attempt to kill Russian defector Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom to killing a Russian helicopter pilot who defected to Spain, Putin's Russia has used assassinations as a tool of foreign policy.[28] These assassinations serve to both intimidate and deter. The foiled plot to assassinate the head of Rheinmetall, one of the main producers of weapons being sent to Ukraine, would represent Russia taking its efforts a step further and actively seeking to punish those in the West supporting Ukraine and therefore to intimidate and deter others from doing the same.[29]

Russia may prioritize political interference in particular. Russia sees this as a key vector to erode Europe's political cohesion and undermine transatlantic relations with relatively low risk of significant blowback. Moreover, the shock of Russian political interference in the West has subsided and even become somewhat normalized, thus making Russia fear little in terms of reprisals. Reduced U.S. commitment to European security would further ease these fears, making the escalation of such attacks increasingly likely.

The nature of European politics may make Europe more vulnerable to Russian interference than the United States or other countries. The regulated nature of European politics—with the amount of money, advertising, and campaigning often being more tightly controlled than elsewhere—means that covert financial or campaign support may have a more sizable impact. Relatively small amounts of money and effort, especially related to online influence campaigns, can have significant political effects. Indeed, there have now been numerous credible allegations of Russian actors seeking to provide financial support to far-right and far-left political figures and parties across Europe. Increasing support for antiestablishment parties and parties seeking a rapprochement with Russia is a cost-effective way to impact European cohesion. Europe, with its frequent elections, is a target-rich environment, where even a small country's vote can shift EU or NATO dynamics through a Trojan horse leader or party.

With Washington potentially reducing its focus on European security, Moscow may further escalate its activities. The present dynamic may soon resemble the early days of espionage in the Cold War, where seemingly few clear redlines existed, with each side pushing the boundaries of what the other side could tolerate.

With Washington potentially reducing its focus on European security, Moscow may further escalate its activities. The present dynamic may soon resemble the early days of espionage in the Cold War, where seemingly few clear redlines existed, with each side pushing the boundaries of what the other side could tolerate. Given the resurgent and emboldened Kremlin, the risk of hybrid escalation in Europe will increase rapidly in the coming years.[30] As the Russian hybrid threat to Europe continues to evolve and intensify, Europe should be prepared to understand, mitigate, and prevent an inadvertent and uncontrolled escalation scenario.

The problem for Europe, however, is that its tools for deterring and responding to Russian hybrid attacks and political warfare are no longer clear. Europe has already used many of the tools at its disposal to respond to Russia's invasion. Sanctions have been put in place, "diplomats" have been expelled, and Russian economic and oligarchic interests in the West have been seized or evicted. Thus, Europe now has fewer means left to retaliate and impose direct costs on Russia short of military force, meaning Europe's ability to deter has weakened.

Europe must now be hypervigilant and call out Russian active measures and interference efforts. Counterintelligence efforts and pan-European coordination and solidarity will be important. One way to deter these attacks is to raise awareness of their wide-reaching impacts, thereby turning them into political rallying points that can build support among European publics for a long-term containment strategy. However, European leaders need to guard against creating a new "red scare" like that seen in the United States in the 1950s, when Senator Joseph McCarthy fanned societal fears of the Soviet-backed communist movement to target internal political enemies.

Europe therefore needs to think about the tools it has to impose costs on Russia for its hybrid attacks. The most obvious method is direct support for Ukraine, whereby exposure of Russian measures could prompt European leaders to approve a new aid package or introduce a more advanced system to the battlefield. Alternatively, a Russian cyberattack or kinetic attack on critical infrastructure could prompt Europe to diplomatically or economically pressure China to reduce its support for Russia. In addition, Europe could escalate its existing efforts at sanctions enforcement.

Lastly, Europe may need to think about developing tools and means to respond in kind. Such tit-for-tat responses may not have equivalent impact, as a hypothetical European cyberattack on a Russian hospital system may not have the same political impact on the Kremlin as one in Europe.

Nevertheless, to deter Russia, particularly without the backing of the U.S. intelligence community and U.S. Cyber Command, Europe may need to develop its ability to respond unilaterally.

EASTERN EUROPE

The war in Ukraine has positioned Central and Eastern Europe on the front line of the new strategic competition between Russia and the West. While states along NATO's eastern flank—including Poland, the Baltic countries, and Romania—worry about the expansion of the Ukraine war or Russian gray zone escalation, it is "in-between" states like Moldova, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and even Serbia that are most exposed to Russian-backed destabilization. Both eastern flank states and "in-between" states need reinforcement as part of a containment strategy. Containment will, however, look vastly different for countries in each of these two categories.

NATO's military capabilities along its eastern flank have been shored up over the past decade, beginning with the Enhanced Forward Presence adopted in the aftermath of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas. Post-2022 deployments have shifted NATO's center of gravity to the east, with Germany playing a key role, including through the deployment of Panzerbrigade 45 to Lithuania. The challenge for NATO members will lie in ensuring these deployments and commitments are maintained over the longer term. Budgetary pressures and calls to distribute the burden of protecting NATO's eastern flank more equitably are likely to shape the intra-alliance debate, especially in the event of a ceasefire in Ukraine.

The indications from the Trump administration that the United States plans to shift the burden of European security to Europe, with the Pentagon planning significant force withdrawals, will leave Europe with a tremendous military challenge. Filling the gap left by departing U.S. forces will require Europe to both spend more and to reorganize itself militarily. In particular, Europeans will need to ensure they are able to fight as Europeans—and have the stockpiles to sustain an attritional war against Russia. European militaries currently lack the ammunition—from high-end long-range missiles to low-end artillery—to sustain a war against Russia. This will require not just procuring weapons from external suppliers but building a robust and capable defense industrial base.

Furthermore, given the difficulties of dislodging an entrenched force, Europeans will need to ensure they are ready and able to defend every inch of EU and NATO territory at the outset of conflict, because once territory is lost, uprooting Russian forces may prove incredibly costly. NATO's current posture in the Baltics, with multinational tripwire forces, is not enough of a deterrent. Russia may calculate that it can overwhelm this tripwire force, absorb NATO's initial barrage of strikes, and then make major territorial gains as European forces run out of munitions and follow-on forces take time to deploy to the region. Thus, Europe needs to worry that its perceived military weakness will invite Russian aggression.

Outside of the European Union and NATO, Moldova and the non-NATO states of the Western Balkans are uniquely vulnerable because of their location, institutional weaknesses, and Russian influence among disaffected segments of the population, especially ethnic minorities. In Moldova, the 2024 election and commitment to EU integration offer a window of opportunity for Brussels and EU member states to encourage anticorruption measures that will root out sources of malign

Russian influence and accelerate Chişinău's path to EU membership. In the Western Balkans, the West's leverage is premised on the promise of integration into transatlantic organizations. Given that those integration efforts have stalled, Russia is able to play on dissatisfaction with pro-Western reform efforts and hijack domestic politics by leveraging interethnic and political tensions in countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. Russia exerts its influence in the region through hybrid activities, propaganda, and continuing energy sales.[31]

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

Moscow aspires to wall off the South Caucasus from Western influence by leveraging geoeconomic tools and its influence over key political actors in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. These states are critical to Europe because they control access to Central Asia and serve as an important source of hydrocarbons. Even amid rising strategic competition, the South Caucasus—and even more so Central Asia—will remain a low priority for Europe. Still, European leaders should focus on ensuring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of these states, including the ability to maintain trade and transit ties with the outside world.

Since the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Moscow has pursued a strategic alignment with Azerbaijan (and its ally, Turkey) to bypass Western sanctions.[32] It has also forged close ties with the ruling Georgian Dream party to imperil Tbilisi's pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration.[33] While Armenia has pivoted toward the West since the Second Karabakh War, Russian influence in Azerbaijan and Georgia risks leaving Yerevan isolated and vulnerable to further aggression.[34] Russia aims to partner with Turkey and Iran to establish a regional condominium in the South Caucasus and isolate the region from Western influence. While Georgia remains a formal candidate for EU membership and has been promised eventual membership in NATO, it is highly unlikely to join either organization anytime soon. Without Georgia, Armenia's prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration remain slim as well.

Moscow has meanwhile leveraged its economic and energy connections to Central Asia to facilitate sanctions avoidance while bolstering trade ties, particularly with Eurasian Economic Union members Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These states have also been important destinations for Russians fleeing the country.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Moscow has deported large numbers of Central Asian migrants, while press-ganging others into military service. These experiences are likely to erode goodwill toward Russia in much of the region, providing an opening for European outreach. The five Central Asian states have also made real progress addressing the sources of their mutual distrust, leading to greater regional cooperation and integration. Central Asia's growing interconnectivity provides a hedge against a Russian imperial resurgence and (conceivably) increases the region's ability to attract Western investors. The European Union's decision to invest around €12 billion (roughly $14 billion) in Central Asia under the Global Gateway Initiative is a positive step that requires sustained follow-up, as well as coordination with like-minded partners.[35]

The biggest challenge to Russian influence is likely to remain the inexorable expansion of China's economic and political footprints in the region. As long as Moscow and Beijing remain aligned

strategically, Russia will continue to view Chinese influence in Central Asia as an acceptable price for Chinese support in Ukraine and at the level of global order.

CHINA

A main difference between a strategy of containment toward Russia today compared to the Cold War is the global role reversal between Russia and China. During the Cold War, the major geopolitical competitor for the United States and its European allies was the Soviet Union, making Europe the geographic center for that competition. Today, China is seen by the United States as the "pacing challenge." Thus, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine has refocused NATO on its original core task of deterring Russia, the United States, as NATO's key military actor, is focused more on Beijing than on Moscow.

China is a key partner for Russia, not only in Ukraine, but also as an enabler of Russia's challenge to the global order.[36] There are reasons to believe Sino-Russian alignment is quite durable. The Sino-Soviet split during the Cold War erupted following Stalin's death, and at its core was a fight over leadership of the global Communist movement. Modern commentators have often interpreted the Cold War schism as an indicator that there is an unseen fault line that is bound to shake the contemporary relationship at some point. But Russia and China today share a similar global outlook and are willing to set aside potential irritants to the relationship.

However, the Sino-Russian partnership is becoming increasingly one-sided, as Moscow has come to depend more and more on Beijing for trade, technology, military, and financial support. Russia's challenge to global order is more radical than China's, and a durable containment strategy should look for ways to exacerbate Chinese concerns over Russia's destabilizing behavior.

Under current circumstances, it is unlikely that the United States, Europe, or their allies will be able to pry Russia and China apart. Both China and Russia share mutual concern over perceived U.S.-backed and instigated "color revolutions" and a desire to make the world "safe for autocracy." They further share an interest in asserting territorial claims and control over neighboring countries and territories (much of the former Soviet Union for Russia; the South China Sea and Taiwan for China), and in moving away from a U.S.-led and dominated world order toward a multipolar one. If anything, since the start of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the relationship between Russia and China has deepened, with the total value of imports and exports between the two having almost doubled from $141 billion in 2021 to $244.8 billion in 2024.[37]

Nevertheless, there are clear limits to Chinese support for Russia. This is in part because Russia has much less to offer China. While Russia has provided China with high-end military technology and potential access to the Arctic, China has been reluctant to deepen energy ties, continually begging off Russian requests to build a new gas pipeline or boost investment. Deeply tied to the U.S.-led global financial system, China has sought to avoid major diplomatic and economic fallout over Ukraine and has resisted Moscow's requests for direct lethal support. European leaders conveying to Beijing that providing lethal aid to Russia will have dire implications for its relations with Europe, its largest trade partner, serves as an additional deterrent to China's more robust support of Russia. China has sought to build relations with Europe in order to maintain access to the European

market, but also in the hopes of potentially creating a wedge in the Atlantic alliance. Chinese hopes of exacerbating divisions between the United States and Europe appear to have grown since Donald Trump's election to a second term. Europe will need to do its part to maintain transatlantic coordination on China, even when doing so comes with definable costs.

AFRICA

While Russia has had success pushing European influence out of Africa in recent years, the Kremlin's mounting resource constraints and a backlash against the brutality of Russian forces (especially those from the Wagner Group) create new opportunities.[38] Russia's inroads in Africa are a product of its ability to leverage anticolonial narratives and willingness to work with various unsavory actors, including Sahelian juntas, Sudanese warlords, or criminal syndicates. Its motives are both commercial and strategic, in the sense of displacing France and other postcolonial powers as the partner of choice. Its successes are grounded in the narrative that Moscow is the only partner willing to effectively fight separatism and terrorism in Africa.

THE MIDDLE EAST

In the Middle East, confrontation with the West has caused Moscow to tilt closer to Iran and its partners in the "axis of resistance" (see below). This trend has intensified amid the ongoing conflict in Gaza, in which Russia has adopted a staunchly pro-Palestinian position. While accepting a considerable cooling in its relations with Israel, Russia has continued to balance its growing closeness with Iran by also catering to its partnerships with the Gulf Arab states, which are important to its wartime economic survival. Russia's military presence in the region remains confined to Syria (for now), though it is also eyeing a deep-water port in eastern Libya and other countries of the region.

Containing Moscow in the region requires a clear-eyed assessment of the opportunities—and associated risks—for Russia in exploiting tensions in the Middle East to harm Western interests. In response to setbacks in Ukraine or increased tensions with the West elsewhere, Russian horizontal escalation in the Middle East in the form of assistance to the Houthis in Yemen or other Iranian partners remains a distinct possibility. With ongoing Iran-Israel tensions, the question of Russia's military support for Iran has added importance. Though Russia has attempted to position itself as a potential interlocutor between Iran and the West, the intersection of the Ukrainian and Middle Eastern conflicts is likely to reinforce the Moscow-Tehran axis.

THE "AXIS OF UPHEAVAL"

To recognize the scale of the challenge Russia represents is, first and foremost, to connect the dots of its global foreign policy. An especially urgent task in this regard is understanding the axis of Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran—its internal dynamics, objectives, and limitations. Despite its illiberal, revisionist tendencies, the four-way axis lacks a shared, concrete vision for a future global order; there is limited evidence of trilateral or quadrilateral defense cooperation among the countries to date, and the partners differ in their tolerance for "upheaval"—with China likely being more risk-averse than Russia when it comes to fomenting tensions in the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula. Notwithstanding these limitations, cooperation stands to evolve, with implications for

all four countries' military capabilities, regional conflict dynamics, nuclear proliferation, and their collective potential to fragment the global order.

In response, Western states need to develop a coherent and joined-up approach both within NATO and the European Union toward the axis, including enhanced coordination on sanctions and in multilateral fora, especially on nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) issues. The efforts to undermine the growing alignment among the axis powers may enable Europe to bring the United States on board. These measures should include improved intelligence sharing among allies on axis activities, as well as the use of strategic disclosures to warn of impending technology transfers and deter sensitive cooperation, as was previously applied in the case of Iran and Russia. It should also involve planning for a conflict where more than one of the axis powers is a belligerent. While acknowledging that sanctions and export controls alone will be of limited utility due to the axis's long history of evading such measures, Western states should still target critical "chokepoint" technologies needed by axis members for drones, missiles, and other sensitive systems. Western capitals should also engage with countries on the axis's periphery to prevent their closer alignment with it, as well as with countries that have leverage over its members (for instance, Saudi Arabia, India, and others). In addition, there are ways to exacerbate existing tensions between the axis members, including by reinforcing existing differences in their geopolitical interests in the Middle East and Central Asia.[39]

4

Possible Pitfalls

Underestimating Russia

As the saying goes, "Russia is never as strong as she looks, nor as weak as she looks." In the post-Cold War period, several assumptions led the West to repeatedly underestimate Russia's resilience, newfound assertiveness, and ability to foment international disruption.

First, past policy often dismissed Russia as a "declining power," overlooking the fact that indicators like the country's shrinking population and resource-dependent economy had limited short-term impact on Russia's disruptive capacity.[40] A large, commodity-driven economy can remain viable even when isolated from Western markets, if it prioritizes short-term geopolitical power over long-term economic development. Second, the liberal internationalist belief that economic integration would moderate Russia also proved misguided.[41] Instead of restraining its aggression, the Kremlin used energy revenues to elevate Russia's global standing and attempted to leverage Europe's dependence on Russian energy.[42] Far from deterring hostility, joining the institutions like the Financial Action Task Force and Interpol allowed Putin to exploit them to serve Russian interests.

Third, the belief that Russia would eventually become a "normal" power and a liberal democracy reflected the post-Cold War "end of history" mindset. It made the West downplay Russia's growing assertiveness: overlooking the 2008 invasion of Georgia, responding weakly to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and blaming Russia's aggression on NATO enlargement while underestimating the imperialist roots of its actions.[43] These inadequate responses emboldened the Kremlin. Russia's renewed assertiveness suggests its brief post-Soviet democratization was an anomaly, driven by the

Kremlin's temporary economic weakness. Without strong civil society, institutional constraints, or a break from imperial identity, post-Soviet Russia preserved much of the Soviet elite and mindset.[44] Once it recovered its material capabilities, it resumed its global ambitions. Given the ideological roots of its aggression, appeasement will be futile, and containment remains the only viable strategy.

"Messianic" Containment

Containment is not a passive strategy. It is compatible with proactive approaches to both the war in Ukraine and to countering the spread of Russian power outside of Europe. At the same time, containment should not be a messianic way of conceptualizing foreign policy, as it sometimes was during the Cold War. In the Cold War, containment often led into strategic cul-de-sacs and foreign policy mistakes outside of Europe—justifying regime change (like in Guatemala and Iran), becoming tainted with paranoia when merged with the domino theory of state collapse and communist takeover (in Vietnam), and generating an overly militarized foreign policy in Africa and the Middle East.

The proper spirit of containment is patient, resolute, and targeted. Containment is thus compatible with the effort to prioritize that will dominate U.S. foreign policy in Trump's second term, and an effort that harmonizes with European foreign policy at a time of tight budgets and competing priorities.

In sum, containment can be understood as a messianic doctrine, predicated on high defense spending and zero-sum conceptions of global great power competition, and at times aligned with the drive for regime change. It is desirable, however, not to understand containment in this fashion, to be conscious of the potential for strategic overreach, and to be alert to the limitations, an approach that historically and in the present moment has been the foundation for containment's strategic successes. The proper spirit of containment is patient, resolute, and targeted. Containment is thus compatible with the effort to prioritize that will dominate U.S. foreign policy in Trump's second term, and an effort that harmonizes with European foreign policy at a time of tight budgets and competing priorities (in both domestic and foreign policies).

5

Policy Takeaways

Russia's resilience and adaptation to the Western countermeasures that have followed its adversarial actions have emboldened the Kremlin, making it double down on its trajectory of intensifying military and hybrid threats to Europe. If the past is prologue, this dynamic will persist as long as Vladimir Putin remains in power, and possibly beyond his rule.[45] Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, Russia will remain an acute security threat to Europe, the transatlantic alliance, and the liberal international order. The hybrid confrontation between Russia and the West will continue for the foreseeable future, while the risks of conventional confrontation—possibly with a nuclear dimension—will keep rising.

Containment's value as a strategy could only be perceived over time. Kennan acknowledged that Washington had to commit to containment for as long as necessary—until Soviet power had "mellowed" and no longer posed a threat to global stability. Containing Russia in the twenty-first century will require a similar commitment of time and resources.

In retrospect, while the Cold War strategy of containment appeared easy to maintain, in reality it was always a struggle. At times, it was too attached to the status quo, too passive, too drab; and at times it shaded into overreach. In the 1970s, many Americans were convinced that the United States was losing the Cold War. They had a hard time seeing a path to victory. Containment's value as a strategy could only be perceived over time. Kennan acknowledged that Washington had to commit to containment for as long as necessary—until Soviet power had "mellowed" and no longer posed a threat to global stability. Containing Russia in the twenty-first century will require a similar commitment of time and resources. With Europe taking a larger role in devising and implementing containment, it will also require a greater degree of cooperation and unity among the European states, despite their different histories, strategic priorities, and perceptions of the Russia threat.

Military and Paramilitary Tools

UKRAINE

European countries should fully commit to supporting Ukraine militarily and economically. The fate of Ukraine is fundamental to European security and to the success of a containment strategy. Russia's victory in Ukraine would bring the threat to the European Union's doorstep. Conversely, if Russia perceives its war in Ukraine to be a strategic dead end, it could be contained to the point of admitting failure. Europe will have to take the lead in bringing about a satisfactory conclusion to the war in Ukraine and to Ukraine's reconstruction and redevelopment afterward.

To date, Europe's investment in Ukraine, while significant, has not been sufficient. As a result, Ukraine is currently in an increasingly unfavorable position on the battlefield. Since January 2024, Russia has captured under 5,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory—averaging about six per day by April 2025, marking slower but persistent gains that reflect the Kremlin's continued commitment to the offensive.[46] An effective containment strategy requires further investment into provisions of weapons to Ukraine, and higher levels of defense integration within Europe. With U.S. military support for Ukraine likely to end, in the short term, Europe must ensure Ukraine can keep weakening Russia by purchasing U.S. weapons and coordinating aid with third countries like South Korea and Turkey in order to buy time required to address urgent capability gaps, particularly in munitions and coordination.[47] In the long term, Europe must get serious about building a unified force capable of defending the continent without U.S. support and making military assistance to Ukraine sustainable.

CONVENTIONAL MILITARY CAPABILITIES

As mentioned above, Europe should urgently ramp up defense industrial production. The importance of boosting European defense is particularly acute in light of the new U.S. administration's strategic prioritization of the Indo-Pacific and promises to reduce lethal support to Ukraine. Even as war has raged in Ukraine, European production lines have not yet fully maxed out their capacity. This persistent problem is rooted in the European Union's failure to coordinate procurements and a chronic lack of defense funding, and urgently needs to be resolved. Through the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (UDCG), the United States has coordinated the global effort to aid Ukraine through frequent ad hoc meetings at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. This has helped

avoid duplication and focus the assistance efforts of certain countries on particular tasks, such as providing air defense. However, under the Trump administration the United States has transferred leadership to the United Kingdom to convene and coordinate the group, leaving its future uncertain.

Addressing the key capability gaps left by a disengaged United States will not only require more European spending but also—crucially—more European defense cooperation and integration.

Moreover, Europe may have to cope with a United States less engaged at NATO. European militaries should aim to be able to fight together without relying on the United States. Addressing the key capability gaps left by a disengaged United States will not only require more European spending but also–crucially–more European defense cooperation and integration.

ECONOMIC STATECRAFT

Europe needs to maintain economic pressure on Russia. Sanctions and lack of access to the global financial system are negatively impacting Russia's economy and war effort. But Moscow has also been adapting by transitioning to a war economy sustained by vast fossil fuel energy resources, particularly oil, and has found willing customers in Asia.[48] As a result, Russia is unlikely to make major concessions, hoping instead that Western sanctions enforcement and its financial isolation erode over time. Maintaining pressure on Russia economically, and going after its oil revenues in particular, remain crucial to containing and limiting Russia's current and future military and foreign policy options. Given political sensitivities about energy prices, the European Union should focus on sanctioning Russia's shadow tanker fleet and otherwise imposing secondary sanctions on third-country firms failing to comply with sanctions.

HYBRID RESILIENCE

European governments should become hypervigilant in calling out and responding to Russian active measures or interference efforts. In the next few years, the Russian hybrid threat to Europe will keep growing, with the Kremlin likely becoming more emboldened through a perceived lack of response in kind. Europe should urgently develop coordinated tools to understand, mitigate, and prevent an inadvertent escalation scenario. This includes further steps to enhance resilience and developing bolder asymmetric responses to Russian actions, such as approving new aid packages for Ukraine, introducing more advanced systems to the battlefield, or deepening diplomatic and economic pressure on China in an effort to limit its support to Russia.

Regional and Global Frames

EASTERN EUROPE, THE SOUTH CAUCASUS, AND CENTRAL ASIA

The European Union and its members should do more to support vulnerable countries in Russia's vicinity. Europe should backstop security for countries around Russia's periphery, offering

reinforcement to both the eastern flank and "in-between" states. A new containment strategy should emphasize calibrated levels of political and military support to countries that are vulnerable to Russian aggression. With the exception of Belarus, Europe should help ensure these countries' security and independence through training, arms sales and security assistance, and exercises. It should also focus on building their resilience against Russian hybrid threats via information sharing, law enforcement, intelligence cooperation, and investment in critical infrastructure. Europe's strategy should further aim to disrupt Russia's influence by supporting independent media platforms to counter Russia-backed propaganda in the region. An easy step would be to offer more funding for independent journalism to push back on Russian narratives by supporting outlets such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Deutsche Welle, and the BBC.

Additionally, Western states should help the Western Balkan countries and Moldova wean themselves off of Russian energy. This would have to be balanced by active diplomatic efforts to prevent further instability in these countries.[49] European partners and the United States could also offer the investments and support mechanisms for Western Balkan arms companies to meet the needs of the Ukrainian army.[50]

Containment of Russian power in the South Caucasus requires being realistic about both the region's challenges and the lack of consensus about its future within Europe. With formal integration remaining far off, the European Union should prioritize keeping the South Caucasus free from domination by regional powers. That approach requires maintaining the existing EU missions in Armenia and Georgia; investing in new infrastructure projects, particularly clean energy; and leveraging the interest of specific allies (e.g., France in Armenia and Turkey in Azerbaijan) to promote common objectives. It also means modernizing EU and NATO partnership arrangements to further promote reform and modernization in line with Western standards.

While Europe and the United States can likely do little to catalyze a rift between Russia and China, they should be prepared in the event of a split to devote resources and attention to Central Asia in order to further pressure the relationship. In the interim, Western powers must remain engaged with the region's leaders and peoples. They should work with regional leaders and organizations to encourage new investment, especially in projects that promote connectivity away from both Russia and China. They also ought to encourage and promote the role of friendly powers such as India and Turkey to counter any push for a Sino-Russian condominium.

CHINA

Europe may have some ability to soften Beijing's approach to Russia. But to do so, Europe would have to make containing Russia a priority in its engagement with Beijing, which may come with an economic price. Currently, Europe's economic relationship has taken precedence in relations with China, especially given the possibility of a transatlantic rift over trade and tariffs. Officials speak of "de-risking" Europe's economic ties with China, but have been wary of threatening economic actions over China's immense and vital support to Russia's defense industry. Europe—especially Germany—will ultimately have to make a choice: If they accept that Russia's invasion of Ukraine poses an existential risk to Europe and the global order that has facilitated the emergence of EU and European prosperity more generally, they will need to use the substantial economic leverage

they have to limit China's contribution to the Russian war effort. Doing so would require not just European states, but the European Union as a whole to think and act strategically, using its geoeconomic weight to achieve geopolitical goals. Being more assertive toward China would also give Europe more credibility with the Trump administration, which has made checking Chinese power a top priority.

Over the longer term, Europe should leverage its trade and investment ties with China to influence Chinese policy toward Russia. While catalyzing a split between Moscow and Beijing is likely not possible, Europe should prioritize reducing Chinese support for Russian imperial ventures against its neighbors. It should also be willing to work with China and its companies on a case-by-case basis to build infrastructure projects—especially in energy and transit—that enhance countries' resilience in the face of Russian coercion.

THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Western states face serious constraints when seeking to limit—let alone roll back—Russian advances in Africa. They should try to contain Russia's current presence and work to prevent its entry in other vulnerable states, including by exposing atrocities committed by the Wagner Group and other Russia-controlled forces on the continent, devising a security cooperation package that is tailored to the needs of African partners while still observant of transatlantic values, and engaging with African partners to develop their energy infrastructure and natural resources in a mutually beneficial way.[51] Europe needs to show that it can deliver for ordinary Africans, whether by promoting improved governance, facilitating trade, or keeping the door to legal migration open.

The closing of the U.S. Agency for International Development and the reduced engagement and prioritization of Africa in U.S. foreign policy creates a void that Europe should seek to fill. Yet Europe's colonial legacy, its intense focus on stopping migration flows, and a lack of firm diplomatic, economic, and military tools through which it can productively engage African states has left European engagement wanting. However, Europe's institutional complexity can be an advantage; while a colonial legacy may haunt some European countries' engagement, it may not impact others or the European Union as a whole.

In the Middle East, Russia's threat lies less in scaling up its military presence and more in using the region for limited horizontal escalation, deepening defense ties with Iran, and undermining Western efforts to reduce conflict. Getting Saudi Arabia to use its leverage with Russia has proven somewhat successful in limiting Russian cooperation with Iran in the past. The fact that Saudi Arabia has continued to hedge on its invite to join the BRICS since 2023 indicates that there may be continued scope to work with Riyadh to curtail Russia, if only on the margins. But Western policymakers should also be cognizant of the reality that as long as the Gaza war and Israel's campaign against the "axis of resistance" continue, Russia will be able to exploit grievances with Western states in the Middle East (and the broader Global South).

MULTILATERALISM

To counter Russia's efforts to chip away at trust in legacy multilateral institutions while boosting the BRICS, Western states should pursue a two-pronged approach: They need to get serious about

global governance reform, while also exploiting fissures within the expanded BRICS. The former requires genuine steps toward UN Security Council reform, but also addressing perceived power imbalances in other bodies like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Regarding the latter, important powers like Brazil or India do not see BRICS as an "anti-Western" club. They harbor reservations over the pace and scope of BRICS enlargement, and they pursue complicated foreign policy objectives. Western states should ensure that these countries remain interested in cooperation in the G20, which stands at risk of losing its capacity for collective action and sliding into a setting for East-West and North-South recriminations.[52]

European Frame

CONTAINMENT AS GOOD FOR EUROPEAN BALANCING

Containment can unify Europe's diverse policies on Russia and Ukraine by addressing security fears in Scandinavia, Poland, and the Baltics, while also acknowledging public concerns, especially in Germany, about war costs and escalation. There is the chance to work toward a synthetic European Russia strategy, and this chance could be missed if the policies embraced are either too militaristic or too passive and reactive. Germany is well positioned to shape such a unified policy: Close enough to the conflict to stay engaged, yet able to connect with countries further from the war that are more concerned about escalation.

CONTAINMENT AS A STRATEGY FOR INTEGRATING UKRAINE INTO EUROPE

A viable containment strategy would not defer Ukraine's integration into Europe. It would not posit Ukraine's inclusion in European institutions and structures as something that can only happen when the war is over. This will strengthen Ukraine's resilience and send a clear message to Moscow: The war launched to dominate Ukraine and sever its ties to Europe is backfiring, as Russia's control over Ukraine steadily erodes. It is not enough to hold the line militarily in Ukraine. Kyiv's emergence as a member of the European family would be the crowning jewel of a European and transatlantic containment strategy.

Domestic Frame

European publics demonstrate a wide spectrum of opinion on the war in Ukraine. Containment can work well across the political spectrum by balancing between a more aggressive approach favored by some parties and leaders and a more accommodationist stance preferred by others. In the same way that containment can be used as a tool of policy synthesis within Europe, it can be used as a tool of consensus building. It is not the strategy of any one party or any one group of political parties. It should be approached as the baseline policy of European governments and institutions like the European Commission, to which government coalitions can make their preferred modifications. It is helpful in this context that containment is not a strategic dogma, and it is not zero sum. It is a flexible strategy, which means it can be embraced by many different kinds of political leaders and political parties, and by wide segments of the electorate.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

"Containment" was a defining term of the Cold War, but it's not essential to today's strategic messaging and can sometimes be counterproductive due to its Cold War baggage. The word matters less than the concept, and the concept matters less than the story that is being told about the war in Ukraine. This story, crucially, is a story of progress since February 2022.[53] Over the past three plus years, the transatlantic allies and partners have succeeded in containing the spread of Russian political and military power in Ukraine and Europe. The story can be woven into strategic communications at many different points. It can be used to underscore the value of the enterprise—the enterprise of containing Russia more generally. It can point to the future, not downplaying the challenges that lie ahead, but elucidating the supreme value of patience, the many long-term vulnerabilities Russia has, and the prospect, if not of outright victory, of achieving that which is most important for Ukraine and Europe—the preservation of an order based upon the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all European states.

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