



“Sense of the Faculty”

Russia Futures Project—Summary Report

On 25 March 2016, the Naval War College convened a group of faculty experts to discuss Russia’s future trajectory and the challenge it may pose to U.S. national security. The group of about 20 professors included many with extensive Russian-language skills and significant time in either Russia, other states of the former Soviet Union, or Central Europe. There were also a number of faculty members with diplomatic and military experience dealing with Moscow present for the seminar. Some faculty experts with specialized knowledge (e.g., Syria, energy, arms control) were also invited to participate. As a forum open to the whole of the NWC faculty, the group not only was exceptionally knowledgeable regarding Russian affairs and associated issues but can genuinely provide a “sense of the faculty” assessment with respect to the Russian challenge.

I. ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY AND THIS REPORT

This “sense of the faculty” study is unique in at least three respects. First, there was a commitment to focusing on the in-house talent resident at the Naval War College on the faculty. NWC professors are neither constrained by rigid bureaucracies, nor beholden to sponsors for research contracts, nor so close to events that they are chasing headlines. They have a uniquely objective set of viewpoints built on broad and deep intellectual experience. Second, this study aims to gauge faculty viewpoints through the use of surveys. While not without pitfalls, this methodology has the advantage of delivering crisp assessments to decision makers in an efficient format. The organization of this seminar implies, moreover, that these results represent a genuine poll of uniquely qualified experts.

Third and finally, this study embraces an academic approach to policy formulation that emphasizes open and informed debate. There was no expectation that participants would agree on the major issues. Quite the contrary, the faculty were encouraged to offer counterarguments and explore unpopular ideas. Laying bare the best possible arguments on these complex issues, the debates presented in this report offer the opportunity for policy makers to make informed decisions on strategy. After all, the essence of strategy is making choices, and such choices frequently involve painful trade-offs. Objectively weighing the costs and benefits of any given policy initiative requires considering both sides of an issue.

Two sets of results are presented in this study. Part II below discusses the faculty survey and summarizes the discussion during the seminar. Part III presents the most important part of the study: a series of nine debates among roughly a dozen faculty members. These debates emerged directly from the faculty discussion in the March seminar. During that seminar, the discussion was organized into five basic themes: (A) Russia’s internal situation, (B) Russia in European security, (C) Russia on the global stage, (D) Russian military doctrine, and (E) Russian naval strategy. Part IV offers some general conclusions, including touching on various logical follow-on research questions.



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II. SURVEY RESULTS AND RELATED DISCUSSION

A. Russia's Internal Situation. Survey results show NWC faculty experts strongly believe that Vladimir Putin will successfully run for reelection in 2018. Fifty-nine percent of respondents assessed that outcome as a “very high” likelihood, while another 29% judged it as “high.” Possible successors to Putin suggested by NWC faculty included former defense minister Sergei Ivanov, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, while current defense minister Sergei Shoigu was viewed as unlikely.

On the crucial subject of Russia's economy, 65% expected Russia's economy to achieve slow average GDP growth of 0%–3% during 2015–25, reversing the dramatically negative trend of the last two years, but far behind the rates achieved before the 2008 financial crisis. Many voiced skepticism in the discussion regarding the Russian economy, as well as related demographic and social welfare trends.

NWC faculty described Putin as an “opportunist,” or a “jazz improviser,” who has “played a bad hand well.” But the faculty divided over the question of whether the United States confronts a “Putin problem” or alternatively a “Russia problem.” Some viewed him as a unique personality, while others saw broad consistency in Kremlin policies that simply reflect Russian elite opinion. It was widely agreed that Putin views the Russian Navy as a key enabling tool for his dynamic approach in foreign affairs.

On the overall issue of characterizing the nature of the Russian challenge to U.S. national security, 59% suggested that Moscow presents a “medium level threat [wherein] Russia is inclined to make trouble, but its mischief is limited.” Twenty-nine percent characterized the threat as “significant . . . [entailing] major dangers that require extensive new defense outlays and deployments.” Just 6% judged that Russia represents “a gravely serious threat [and] the most serious threat to the United States.”

B. Russia in European Security. Only 18% of NWC faculty experts held that Russian aggression is the most important threat to European security at present. Fifty-nine percent held that “Middle East instability, the refugee crisis and terrorism” eclipsed the Russian threat.

Fifty-three percent viewed “Russia's fear of potentially ‘hostile’ forces on its doorstep and within its historical sphere of influence” as “the most fundamental cause of the Ukraine Crisis” that began in 2014. Seventy-one percent viewed the probability of a Russian military move against the Baltics as “low” or even “very low,” while 18% considered it “high” or “very high.”

Much of the discussion in the second session focused on the issue of widely varying perceptions regarding Russia in different parts of Europe. But it was also noted that Europe was never completely unified in the face of the Soviet threat during the Cold War either. The cause of diminished conventional military forces among European countries was also broached along with the realization that Washington actually pushed European countries to emphasize counterinsurgency (vice conventional forces) over the last decade.

One faculty expert decried Russian coercion on Ukraine's future development as amounting to forcing negotiations “with a gun to someone's head.” But few NWC faculty members seemed enthusiastic about extending NATO membership to Georgia, Moldova, or Ukraine and they seemed quite opposed to any readjustment of Pentagon priorities to favor Europe's security over commitments in the Asia-Pacific or in the Middle East. However, it should be noted that these two final questions were not addressed in the survey.

C. Russia on the Global Stage. The third session of the seminar concentrated on three main areas: the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific, and also the Arctic. Regarding Moscow's main objective in the Arctic, 50% of NWC faculty experts suggested the principal driver is “economic development/resource extraction,” with only 6% viewing the national security motive as primary, and the remainder highlighting pride and national sentiment.

As to the prospects for a China-Russia military alliance, not a single faculty member thought Moscow would intervene with military forces in a mid-level U.S.-China contingency, but a majority (61%) held that Russia would support China by maintaining supplies of energy and weaponry in such a conflict.

Turning to the Middle East, 72% characterized Russia's intervention in Syria as a “success [that] increased Russia's influence and distracted attention from the Ukraine Crisis.” A minority viewed it as negative for U.S. interests because “it showed greater leadership and strength than the US.” But a majority seemed to hold that the Russian incursion was not a threat to U.S.



national security. Some faculty experts also took note of Moscow's positive contribution to the nuclear accord with Iran. One noted faculty expert summarized the current debate concerning global strategy in Moscow as follows: either Russia should pursue Eurasian entente with China, or it should endeavor to balance China by improving relations further with India, Japan, and Vietnam, or Russia should alternatively focus on rebuilding relations with Europe.

D. Russian Military Doctrine. During the fourth session, faculty participants grappled with numerous plausible Russian military moves, spanning the gamut from cyber to nuclear operations.

Some faculty portrayed the Russian military as an ominous threat, citing for example tactical nuclear weaponry as a key asymmetry. “Snap” exercises that rapidly mobilized hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers were also highlighted as evidence of the significant proportions of the Russian military challenge. Other faculty cautioned against using recent history—for example, the 1990s when Russian military strength reached a new nadir—as a benchmark to gauge current developments.

A particular concern was voiced with respect to the Russian “gray zone” threat. Some argued for a “bigger stick” to enhance deterrence, or to “pursue comprehensive information operations” and “counter-escalate.” One expert faculty member advocated strongly for setting up permanent NATO military bases in the Baltic as the most concrete assurance against such threats. Others felt modest “trip wire” forces should be sufficient, and still other faculty emphasized the imperative of reducing the risk of uncontrollable escalation.

Seventy-one percent of the NWC faculty experts participating in the seminar believed that Russia's central strategic objective is to “expand its influence” rather than trying to “overturn the global balance of power” (6%), or “recreate the borders of the USSR and its sphere of influence beyond” (6%).

There was no such agreement on the question: “What US capabilities are most useful in deterring Russian aggression?” Thirty-five percent of NWC faculty experts favored ground forces, while 29% put a premium on nuclear forces. Just 18% suggested naval forces were most important for deterring Moscow. Fifty-three percent, however, did note the increasing salience of the Russian Navy within Russian military doctrine.

E. Russian Naval Strategy. Sixty-seven percent of NWC faculty experts did not view Russia's naval development as “extremely rapid,” but rather as “moderate, but from a low starting point.” However, 87% did also suggest that the Russian Navy was either “quite significant” or “somewhat relevant” to recent political-military crises in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria.

In a conflict against NATO, 53% of faculty experts expected the Russian Navy to have interdiction of NATO forces as its primary mission, while 33% viewed support for Russian ground and air operations as its likely primary mission. In the discussion in the seminar's final session, some faculty felt that Russia's naval posture was not especially troubling, viewing it primarily as a diplomatic tool for the Kremlin. By contrast, the point was also made that Moscow secured Crimea in just 10 days—hardly enough time for the U.S. to move significant forces back into the European theater, even taking sea control for granted.

Other faculty argued that attempting to contest Russian control of the Black and Baltic Seas might not be feasible and that the U.S. Navy should focus on controlling the key maritime choke points, such as the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. However, many faculty opposed the idea of ceding any sea areas to exclusive Russian control and recommended an enhanced pattern of regular patrols.

III. NWC FACULTY EXPERTS DEBATE THE SALIENT ISSUES

Debate #1: Russia's Strategic Intentions

Debate #2: Russian Military Power

Debate #3: Russia's Economic Outlook

Debate #4: Russia in Syria

Debate #5: Russia and China

Debate #6: Baltic Security

Debate #7: NATO's Future Role

Debate #8: Russian A2/AD in the Black Sea

Debate #9: Russian SSBN Modernization



LIMITED IN SCOPE

It is clear that Russia under Vladimir Putin is actively working to alter the post–Cold War settlement, and is prepared to use force or the threat of force in certain circumstances. Many now advocate for major increases in U.S. spending and deployments to counter Russian revisionism. Given that any pivot “back to Europe” would shift resources away from other geostrategic priorities, it is important to consider whether a renewed focus on countering Russia is an overreaction.

Russian moves—while deeply troubling to Russia's immediate neighbors—are in the large part limited in scope and are not any effort to restart the Cold War. Russia is seeking the ability to dominate the core of the Eurasian landmass and its adjacent coastal waters. Russia does not directly threaten core U.S. interests and it does not seek to conquer or control Europe but instead to create a “Eurasian” pole of power that would counterbalance the Western Euro-Atlantic world and a rising China.

Russia most directly threatens the interests of post-Soviet neighbors that prefer to be integrated into the West and also seeks to pressure those members of the EU and NATO who favor extending the Western zone into the Eurasian space. This is not equivalent to the Soviet era when the USSR was committed to spreading Communism and was prepared to send military forces into European states in the event of any major conflict with the West.

It is a problem that is containable with existing U.S. forces working with European allies who can deter Russian adventurism from impacting the European core. Indeed, defense analysts all too often measure Russia's current military forces against its paltry capabilities in the mid-1990s, when Russia's military was in total disarray. A more objective appraisal reveals that the current modernization program is moderate in its scope and barely a shadow of the Soviet behemoth.

Even if it were intended, Russia's economy could hardly sustain a major military challenge to the West. A significant concern for U.S. defense planners must be a diversion of resources from more-pressing needs in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific if the limited extent of Moscow's intentions is not viewed objectively.

A DIRECT THREAT TO THE UNITED STATES

The United States is facing an aggressive and revanchist regime in Russia that is determined to pursue its objectives not just through economic and political means but also through its increasingly capable military. Since Vladimir Putin came to office, Russia has sought to reclaim a sphere of privileged interest along its periphery. In Europe Putin's two principal goals are (1) to hollow out the existing security regime by undermining NATO's ability to act collectively in a crisis; and (2) to exploit the current crisis in the EU, especially the migration crisis, in order to paralyze European Union institutions. This strategy directly threatens the interests of the U.S. and our allies. Russia is a revisionist power, as Putin has described the collapse of the Soviet Union as the “greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century.”

Since Russian power was significantly degraded in the 1990s, Putin has played from a position of relative weakness; still, before the collapse of energy prices, he nonetheless managed to capitalize on Russia's energy resources to consolidate state power and to modernize its military. During the past 15 years Russia has bought selectively into different sectors of Europe's economies, with a special focus on energy and banking. On the military side, Putin's decision to launch a 10-year military modernization program—at a time when Europe has effectively disarmed and the United States has withdrawn assets from Europe—has significantly altered the balance of power along NATO's northeastern flank. Russian deployments in Kaliningrad and more recently in Crimea constitute a direct challenge to NATO's ability to operate in the Baltic and the Black Sea. This changing strategic landscape poses a direct threat to the U.S., our European allies, and as of late increasingly to Turkey. By increasing military pressure along NATO's periphery, Putin expects to break the allied ability to mount a unified response in a crisis, to force the lifting of economic sanctions, and ultimately to bring key European states into an accommodation with Russia on his terms. The principal area of competition in Europe is now the Baltics, but Russian pressure and influence are increasing in Moldova and in the Balkans. Moreover, Putin's strategy reaches beyond Europe and constitutes a direct threat to the United States' interests in the Middle East and the Pacific, where Russia has aligned itself with our competitors and adversaries.



HAS SIGNIFICANT LIMITATIONS

The Russian military has made great strides in acquisitions and operational effectiveness since its nadir in the 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet state and institutional neglect by the new Russian Federation produced low morale, poor training, and long years without meaningful procurement. The Russian military has conducted impressive exercises to demonstrate its capacity to mobilize and deploy formations on short notice, and has corrected many of the problems revealed by the 2008 Ossetia War. It has matched Soviet reach and expeditionary presence, at least for limited units in limited circumstances over limited periods of time.

It remains questionable, though, whether high effectiveness by picked units can be sustained by larger formations. Much of Russia's military activity is calculated to produce maximum political impact at minimum expense. A single long-range bomber sortie, submarine cruise, or flyby over an American warship creates a lasting impression, while neither requiring nor demonstrating the capability to maintain an active forward presence, sea, land, or air.

Russia's ability to field and sustain large and effective forces remains suspect. For example, while estimates vary, Russia's military footprint in eastern Ukraine may have reached 10,000 troops, with 50,000 actively involved or supporting from Russian territory. Sustaining that required steady rotation of troops from almost all of Russia's 11 army-level formations (five of them based in Siberia). Putin's intervention in Syria coincided with a noticeable de-escalation in Ukraine, and Putin had to pull elite units from Ukraine in order to operate in Syria. While the precise motives for Putin's partial drawdown in Syria are still unclear, financial and logistical constraints are certainly possible.

Russian procurement of new, advanced systems continues to be limited and slow. Russia's serious economic difficulties, combined with low energy prices, have already forced cuts in defense spending. Ambitious programs for tanks, aircraft, submarines, and surface warships routinely run late. Russia certainly possesses a number of high-quality systems, but its ability to follow through with large-scale production is still undemonstrated.

SHOULD NOT BE UNDERESTIMATED

The U.S. must accurately assess the potential impact of Russia's resurgent military capabilities as part of Russian grand strategy. There is a tendency to underestimate Russia's ingenious military technical prowess, and assume that because Russian forces do not look similar to U.S. forces, they are less capable. A rusty naval platform firing a Sizzler or Zircon antiship cruise missile (ASCM) is a credible threat. Considering the latter weapon, Russia is the only country to have deployed a hypersonic ASCM. We must estimate Russian capabilities as they are, not as the U.S. might employ them. In other words, while Moscow can hardly match the USN in aircraft carrier groups, the overall lethality and effectiveness of its navy should not be in doubt.

With an increased budget for new ships, fighters, submarines, tanks, air defense systems, deployments to Syria, cyberspace operations, and aggressive diplomacy, Russia has returned to global politics with a "big stick" in hand. From Peter the Great to Putin, there is a constancy to Russian foreign policies. The Kremlin's new doctrine of sophisticated hybrid warfare and upgrades in military equipment, combined with the practical experience gained in Estonia, Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, means that this is not the bumbling Russian military of even 10 years ago. Russia is a strategic threat to U.S. interests both through its military flexing, to include its aggressive flybys of USN ships during April 2016, and also as a result of the perceptions of other states in Europe and Asia.

Russian naval operations are not as extensive as 1989, but neither are NATO's. Moscow already controls the Arctic and Black Seas, and now threatens the Baltic and North Atlantic. Putin is focused on military professionalization, especially within the navy, and new weapons platforms. Within the Russian armed forces, the operational tempo is much increased, and "snap" exercises regularly demonstrate the potential for large-scale mobilization and serve as a tool of diplomatic coercion.

Russia wields military power in campaigns with sophisticated political, economic, and strategic messaging dimensions. It is not a question of whether Russia can defeat U.S. forces in a global war. Rather, the question is whether Russia has the ability to significantly challenge U.S. interests. At present, Russian military capabilities pose a very credible, disruptive, destabilizing threat to the U.S. and our allies.



SURPRISINGLY RESILIENT

The Russian economy is in bad shape. In 2013, the last year before the Ukraine crisis, over 60% of Russian exports were made up of hydrocarbons, so falling world prices for oil and gas, not to mention other natural resources, have badly damaged Russia's foreign exchange earnings. Capital flight triggered by insecure property rights and political uncertainty has worsened the fall of the ruble triggered by Western economic sanctions. To maintain the value of the ruble, even at a reduced level of around 65 to the dollar (down from 30 before the Ukraine crisis), interest rates rose to 11%–13%. Russian government currency reserves have fallen sharply, and some observers suggest the extent of those reserves may have been significantly overstated.

All that said, the Russian economy may prove more resilient than many observers have suggested. This is not to argue that Russia will see vigorous growth, but that countervailing factors will prevent complete collapse and limit the damage caused by falling energy prices.

The August 1998 financial crisis provides an intriguing parallel. Russia's default on its debt in that year produced substantial economic pain. Reserves of foreign exchange were minuscule, oil prices were even lower than they are today, capital was fleeing the country, and the ruble collapsed from 6 to the dollar to 20 to the dollar by the end of the year.

The result, though, was reindustrialization. Russian industrial production began a steady rise in 1998, doubling by 2008. Devaluation made imports expensive, reinvigorating Russian domestic production. At the same time, Russian manufactures became more price competitive, and the wage bill of Russian energy and raw material exporters fell. Russia may follow a similar path today. Sharply reduced energy revenues, capital flight, and a fall in the ruble are balanced at least in part by import substitution and more-competitive non-raw-material exports, cushioning the blow of financial crisis, providing for limited economic growth, and maintaining reasonably high levels of employment. While this is unlikely to be enough to sustain an aggressive program of military expansion, it will prevent disaster.

STARING INTO THE ABYSS

Russia's long-term economic outlook is dire. Two years ago (April 2014), the ruble exchange rate stood at roughly ₪35=\$1. It currently stands at ₪68, after reaching a low of ₪79. Even if the ruble stabilizes, it will likely do so at a rate twice as high as before the Ukrainian crisis. As for oil, since June 2014, the price of Brent crude has declined from \$114 per barrel to \$40. Even if we assume that oil prices increased to \$50 per barrel, it will still be less than half of the price when Russia began its most-recent military modernization program.

To stem the collapse of the ruble, Moscow depleted \$100 billion in foreign exchange reserves, which are more than 20% below their pre-2014 average. The hit to the Russian government's Reserve Fund was even greater. As of October 2015, it was down to \$70 billion, and Moscow expects to burn half of the remainder in 2016. Capital flight also led to a major contraction in the Russian money supply, since inflation should be at precrisis levels.

One way to consider the magnitude of Russia's fiscal challenge is to consider how much the real versus the nominal cost of military modernization has increased. When Putin announced his plan in 2010 (₪20 trillion over 10 years), the dollar cost was \$650 billion. Although only a fraction of the modernization program requires foreign exchange, the real cost has doubled.

Not surprisingly, the Russian government cut 2016 defense spending by 5% and it cannot expect to undo those cuts unless economic activity increases dramatically. The health of the Russian economy still depends on oil and gas, which account for 25% of GDP, or 60% of government revenues. Since non-hydrocarbon GDP growth has stalled since 2012, the Russian government effectively has two choices—either cut back expenditures or extract additional revenues at the risk of impairing long-term growth.

The fact that the Russians are hiking taxes on oil and gas at the expense of future investment suggests that Moscow is eating the seed corn in order to make it through this current economic crunch. The long-term economic consequences could be devastating even if oil prices rebound, since a dearth of investment means Russia will be unable to offset declining oil and gas production from existing fields.



A BLUNDER IN THE LONG RUN

Many believe that Russia's military intervention in Syria has put a feather in Putin's foreign policy cap, but Russian actions in Syria may prove to be a long-term strategic mistake for Russia even if short-term gains appear to be in Russia's favor. Indeed, Russian intervention seems at this time to have prolonged the lifespan of President Asad's government. It also appears to have provided the temporary political space for a renewed discussion that leaves Asad in some sort of leadership position in a post-conflict scenario.

But two issues should keep the Russians up at night: First, this is a paltry outcome for a nation that projects itself as a barrier to U.S. and NATO expansionism and as a "top-tier" player on the world stage. The Russian intervention in Syria has done little to undermine NATO's basic defense framework and has arguably drawn important resources away from Ukraine. Moreover, an extension of the Syrian regime's lifespan does little for Russia's overall position as a world power. It proves only that Russia can prop up a failing state in the short term. In fact, minor and reversible diplomatic gains in an ongoing civil war in a weak and failing state like Syria opens the door to a longer, perhaps indefinite relationship with a weak central government with or without Asad. Russia will foolishly own Syria's dysfunction for the foreseeable future. In the short six months of the intervention, Russia has strained its bilateral relations with Turkey to the breaking point with significant trade and security ramifications, triggered further NATO assurances, and perhaps most importantly given room to Iran (whose military presence remains much less "showy" but more effective) to reconsider quietly its own strategic objectives in both Iraq and Syria.

Second, territorial gains in Syria have proved hard to maintain, whether by Syrian military forces, pro-Syrian groups, or anti-Syrian Islamists of all types. The retaking of Palmyra with the assistance of Russia, while symbolic, is a tactical rather than strategic gain. The strategic locus of the Syrian regime is not and has never been in Palmyra. If it had been, ISIL would have been unable to take this area in the first place and the fight would have looked more like that taking place in the outskirts of Damascus or in Aleppo.

A SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTION

Vladimir Putin's intervention in Syria was probably intended to stabilize the Asad regime and shift the direction of the ongoing civil war in favor of Damascus. Under the umbrella of countering ISIL and the Nusrah Front, al-Qa'ida's franchise in Syria, Russian activities have bolstered the Asad regime and resulted in battlefield gains for the Syrian Arab Army, particularly along supply routes south of Aleppo, in Idlib Province, and with the recapture of Palmyra (Tadmur) from ISIL.

Putin's support for Asad provides Damascus with top cover in venues like the United Nations and demonstrates Moscow's commitments to its allies. In 2013, Putin's role as an intermediary allowed Asad to remain in power and avoid U.S. military action in exchange for Damascus giving up its chemical weapons program. The Kremlin has framed Moscow's relationship with Syria going back decades as part of Russia's long-term engagement in the Mediterranean with its base at Tartus. Likewise, Russia has positioned itself as an honest broker between the Asad regime, Syrian opposition groups, and the U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition.

Russia's intervention showcases new weapons systems and capabilities, particularly precision-guided munitions and systems that can also deliver nuclear payloads. The use of the Kaliber cruise missile, launched from a diesel-electric Kilo-class submarine in the Mediterranean and from surface vessels in the Caspian Sea (more than 1,000 miles from the intended targets), provides a real-world combat demonstration of Russian capabilities. In addition, Moscow has flown sorties from bases in southern Russia against targets in Syria with Tu-22M3 strategic bombers, and has reportedly deployed nuclear-capable (and ABM-evading) Iskander short-range ballistic missiles to Syria. Combat use affords Russia opportunities to improve its logistics networks, determine its own signatures, and develop ways to conceal its moves. Meanwhile, Russia's sea, land, and air presence provides ample opportunities to gather intelligence on the TTPs and signatures of the U.S., NATO, and Arab countries that are involved in counter-ISIL operations.

Finally, actions in Syria play well for the Russian domestic audience and provide a distraction from events in Ukraine. Stories of bravery, sacrifice, and love of the motherland have spread across the internet, such as that of a 25-year-old Russian soldier who allegedly called for an air strike on himself in Syria to kill his ISIL attackers.



UNLIKELY TO FORM AN EFFECTIVE COALITION

A strategically effective Sino-Russian naval coalition is unlikely because they are each other's prime adversaries, while the United States is at best only a secondary enemy. Historical tensions over the lengthy Sino-Russian border, Beijing's growing economic clout, and possible Chinese revanchism in Siberia prohibit a close alliance.

If it were formed, a Sino-Russian naval coalition would seek to challenge and ultimately erode the American-backed global order in certain spheres of influence. However, China largely benefits economically from this global order, while Russia, with the exception of foreign petroleum sales, does not. Any such Sino-Russian alliance would, therefore, be highly opportunistic.

Nazi Germany and imperial Japan formed just such an opportunistic naval coalition during the late 1930s, but since they had different primary enemies, and since they sought to dominate different parts of the world, their wartime cooperation was extremely poor. Opportunistic coalitions are not based on trust. During the war, Karl Dönitz wanted to send a team of German scientists to Japan to study their shipbuilding, but, as Gerhard Weinberg writes: "No one [in Tokyo] had informed him that most of the ships he wanted studied and copied were already at the bottom of the ocean."

The most successful naval coalitions are based on opposing existential threats from a common enemy. Inclusive coalitions, which pull together many large and small sea powers and attempt to leverage their asymmetrical naval assets, work best against diplomatically isolated continental powers. By contrast, when a naval coalition opposes other sea powers—such as when Germany and Japan attacked Great Britain and the United States—it can glue all the major sea powers together against a common enemy.

The one "spoiler" strategy that Moscow and Beijing might adopt is if Russia were to attempt to close off outside access to the Sea of Okhotsk, thereby forming a Cold War-era strategic bastion. If such an action were coordinated with Chinese attempts to dominate the air and waters of the South China Sea, then it might seek to split Washington's attention into two geographically diverse regions.

STRATEGIC SYNERGIES ARE EVIDENT

Strategic cooperation is already at a high level between Russia and China at present and trends point to further enhancement. Western analysts tend to reify Cold War-era tensions, concluding that Moscow and Beijing are doomed to a tepid collaboration at most. But there is a real danger of underestimating the potential of Russia-China relations.

Sales of Russian military hardware to China have played a major role in gradually altering the military balance in the western Pacific. Flanker interceptors and attack variants are a major pillar of China's A2/AD strategy and China has deployed them by the hundreds. J-11, J-15, and J-16 are all Chinese derivations of the successful Russian design and these Chinese knockoffs are now all in serial production. Beijing just signed a major contract for two dozen Su-35s in late 2015. The same process of importing in large numbers and then developing improved Chinese versions has also long been evident in the key areas of antiship missiles, air defense, and submarine development.

2015 witnessed a visible increase in the intensity of Russia-China naval cooperation. Two major exercises occurred during the year, including the first-ever visit of a Chinese naval squadron into the Black Sea at a time of increased tensions precisely in that area. An exercise of unprecedented scale (23 surface ships and two submarines) occurred in August 2015 in the Sea of Japan. The tendency in these exercises is toward more-complex and -realistic war-fighting drills, such as a new focus on anti-submarine warfare.

China's tacit diplomatic support has been crucial on such issues as Russia's annexation of Crimea and coordination appears to be likely in policies with respect to territorial disputes China and Russia have with Japan. It is likely that such coordination has had an impact, frequently as spoiler, on sensitive questions such as North Korea, Iran, and Syria as well in recent years. While Russia-China trade has seen some setbacks, there remains a strong complementarity between the two states, since Moscow requires Chinese capital and China covets Russia's bountiful natural resources. The emerging "Silk Road" project in Eurasia could potentially serve to enhance these economic synergies, moreover.

Bipolarity is not a desirable tendency in the emerging global order. Meanwhile, developing Russia-China military relations may ominously go beyond sales of weaponry and joint military exercises to encompass doctrinal innovation and even joint contingency planning.



THE STATUS QUO IS SOLID

The best NATO posture in the Baltics is maintenance of the status quo with slight modifications: continuing ground troop rotations and joint NATO air policing, combined with expanded efforts to bolster Baltic capabilities and stepped-up NATO ship visits to Baltic ports. The Putin regime is driven by weakness; promising serious consequences for bad actions while not driving it to desperate measures is the best way to avoid serious complications.

A large increase in conventional forces, especially with substantial offensive capabilities, has serious drawbacks. It helps the Putin regime to portray itself as the victim of NATO aggression. Under the terms of the NATO-Russia 1997 Founding Act, NATO pledges to refrain from permanently basing forces in the Baltics. While some contingencies might justify abandoning this commitment, it would strengthen Putin's domestic position, would undermine NATO solidarity, and might not make the Baltics safer. A large segment of Putin's regime believes NATO works for regime change in Moscow, so a large increase in conventional forces in the Baltics could provoke the military crisis it is intended to deter. Given the Baltics' geographical vulnerability, a recent RAND study found that even seven NATO brigades (three of them heavy armored) would not suffice to hold the Baltic States over the long term.

The better alternative is a slight modification of the current trip-wire strategy. Putin has so far carefully directed his military moves against states with substantial domestic weaknesses and lacking NATO protection. Keeping the Baltics well-governed and enjoying credible NATO guarantees is the best way to deter Russian aggression. Rotating NATO ground troops and multinational air policing, supplemented by the constant presence of NATO ships in Baltic ports, would signal resolve to Putin without playing into his regime's magnified threat perception. At the same time, assistance to the Baltic States to improve their border controls, internal policing, and antitank and antiaircraft military capacity will prevent the crippling vulnerabilities that left Georgia and Ukraine poorly positioned to fight.

FROM REASSURANCE TO REINFORCEMENT

The Baltic States today are an exposed flank of NATO, posing challenges of an unprecedented urgency and complexity. Russia has the ability to mobilize and deploy a significant military force along NATO's northeastern flank and to seize territory along its periphery before the alliance has a chance to consider how to respond and whether the potential costs outweigh the price of inaction. The Russian threat has increased exponentially since 2008. The current approach of reassurance based on rotational deployments and the prepositioning of equipment is insufficient to provide effective deterrence, as it communicates continued divisions within the alliance and hesitation on our part. Two years after the NATO summit in Wales we are still operating within the parameters of the compromise reached to create the VJTF and to launch a series of exercises in the region. Unfortunately we have not moved the goalposts sufficiently forward to generate the requisite consensus on the need to put in place permanent installations along NATO's northeastern flank.

NATO must deter and, if need be, plan to defeat the invader. To begin addressing the threat posed by Russia to NATO's northeastern flank we need to move forthwith from reassurance to reinforcement, and specifically from rotational to permanent U.S. bases along the periphery. As soon as possible the United States should station on a permanent basis (1) at least one brigade in Poland (and one brigade in Romania as part of the overall strategic adaptation along NATO's eastern periphery), and (2) battalion-level assets in each of the Baltic States, with the necessary enablers. In addition, we need to deploy MD systems to protect such U.S. deployments, and plan for further U.S. and NATO deployments into the region. The deterrent value of this approach will be increased if NATO can demonstrate that it is fully prepared to reinforce our deployments rapidly. This also means having the capacity to break decisively and speedily through Russian A2/AD capacities in Central Europe and the Baltics. As part of the overall reinforcement strategy of NATO's northeastern flank, we need to maintain a robust naval presence in the Baltic Sea and to do a better job of factoring the region into our maritime strategy, especially where this concerns the Navy's role in destroying Russian A2/AD capabilities in the Baltic.



THE IDEAL TOOL FOR TAMING THE BEAR

NATO, together with the EU, can confront and contain Russian attacks against NATO members, even along the Baltic front. A RAND war game painted an inordinately dark picture, assuming Poland will not contribute its armed forces, including four F-16 squadrons. The greater threat is the old Soviet strategy of *razvyazka* (decoupling), in trying to fracture the alliance and union with bilateral actions. Another threat is the new combination of Russian actions in “hybrid” warfare: from fomenting ethnic unrest to undertaking sophisticated cyber-attacks such as Luhansk (December 2015).

With more than \$1 trillion in combined defense spending, and a population (~800 million) that dwarfs Russia's (143 million), NATO and Europe are fully capable of adapting to deter, confront, and contain Russian appetites for Baltic or Carpathian adventures. Russia's meager military experience in Georgia, Crimea/Ukraine, and Syria actually pales in comparison to the experience of NATO since 2001. While actions along the NATO-Russian boundaries favor Russian forces in time/space calculations, of course, their initial gains eventually will be met with superior and better integrated forces.

The Baltics, and to a lesser degree the Black Sea, are exposed to a Russian military attack, but two factors militate against this. First, large amounts of Russian money and exports move through the Baltics, and that access to the EU would obviously be terminated with any kind of hostilities. Russian pride might trump pragmatism, but invading the Baltics and losing access to EU financial mechanisms would be crippling for Moscow. Second, NATO must honor Articles 4 and 5 if they are to mean anything; there will be a counterattack. The best way to prevent Russian action is to ensure Moscow understands that NATO *can* and *will* take action to defeat Russia—economically, politically, and militarily—if the Kremlin were to undertake such a risky gambit.

Russia, under Putin, plays a weak hand well—but it is very unlikely to overplay these cards on the fringes of Europe. Russia's major trading partner is Europe, and the cantankerous bear is massively overmatched against the combined economic, political, and military might of NATO.

THE ALLIANCE IS PART OF THE PROBLEM

NATO was an important tool in the early Cold War when Europe was on its knees and unable to defend itself against the Soviet Army. Since 1989, however, NATO serves no meaningful role. This aged institution exaggerates the “free rider” tendency among partners. Hardly any European states are willing to spend the 2% of GDP recommended for defense spending, while U.S. defense spending has regularly exceeded 4% (2005–15).

In effect, U.S. policy has allowed Europeans to concentrate their tax revenues on the construction of social-welfare states. The defense commitment not only is unfair to American taxpayers but also expends disproportionate and scarce resources, since European travel and housing are extremely expensive and the NATO commands have bloated staffs with innumerable sinecures. Meanwhile, the Europeans' military capabilities have degraded to the point where they cannot make any meaningful contribution to thwarting a Russian military incursion. NATO contributions to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, moreover, did little to alleviate the stress on U.S. forces engaged and had no measurable effect on reversing negative outcomes in either case.

The NATO alliance is not just expensive and unfair for Americans; it actually gravely hampers European security. The organization of NATO that always has Washington as its leader cannot respond efficiently to European problems, especially when those problems do not directly impact on America's interests. The obvious case in point is Syria. The flood of refugees from that country's civil war imperils the very fabric of the European Union and even European societies themselves. Yet NATO steadfastly refuses to get seriously involved in Syria—largely because of America's negative experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. In other words, a European defense entity, albeit less experienced and less well kitted out, would still be more effective and decisive than NATO in acting on Europe's periphery. Not surprisingly, it's the Europeans themselves who are best positioned to act to solve European problems.

Finally, NATO expansion has played into Russian paranoia over the last two decades. Wise voices, not least George Kennan himself, warned presciently against expanding the NATO alliance. That was indeed a major mistake and any new security architecture in Europe will need to take account of Russian sensitivities.



THE LIMITS OF U.S. NAVAL POWER

Naval strategy is not theology. Since the beginning of the Cold War, the U.S. Navy's strategy has been driven by mantras reminiscent of religious doctrines. Take the fight to the enemy. The best defense is a good offense. The most recent in this series of nonempirical non sequiturs is that no nation has the right to deny us any portion of the world's waters. That is, no nation can employ an "anti-access, area denial" strategy against us without our severe reaction. This discussion emanates from Chinese moves in the South China Sea.

Regrettably, the Black Sea is not the South China Sea and Russia is not China. The Black Sea is virtually landlocked and international conventions have determined that those naval forces on which we are counting for our Pacific A2/AD strategy—aircraft carrier battle groups and nuclear attack submarines—cannot be employed in the Black Sea. Those forces allowed to us by the Montreux Convention would be small- and medium-size surface combatants, suitable for most non-kinetic missions in support of our NATO allies, but utterly defenseless against an onslaught of Russian cruise missiles and land-based air. Russia has recently improved and expanded its Black Sea inventory of diesel submarines, deemed "acoustic black holes" by some ASW experts. Russian offensive mining capability is formidable. Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula has more than doubled its Black Sea coastline and Ukraine's demise as a naval force has further tilted the balance of naval power in the region in Moscow's direction. Finally, Vladimir Putin has made his international reputation by overplaying weak military hands to his geopolitical benefit.

This same logic might apply, albeit less emphatically, to American naval strategy in the Baltic Sea. Should NATO-friendly nations in the Baltic region attempt to peel back Russian A2/AD, that should be their business.

The U.S. has made several loud strategic statements in the region over the last decade. However, the virtual removal of the Sixth Fleet from the Mediterranean following Russian aggression in Georgia and Ukraine spoke louder than these strategic statements. The Black Sea is not a vital American interest and any strategy suggesting that it is will only lead to the loss of outgunned American naval forces.

TURNING A2/AD AGAINST RUSSIA'S FLEET

Historically, one of Russia's greatest challenges has been to secure access to warm-water ports that would allow it to project naval power—particularly toward the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. The Black Sea provides such access, but its restricted geography makes it an area of strategic vulnerability for Russia. A concerted A2/AD strategy involving regional NATO allies could deny its use to the Russian Navy in the event of conflict.

Like the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea is largely ringed by NATO allies or by countries far friendlier to NATO than to Russia. As with the Baltic, access to or egress from the Black Sea requires passage through narrow straits controlled by a NATO member state. In the event of a NATO-Russian conflict, Turkey would be within its rights under the Montreux Convention to deny passage to Russian warships.

Legal niceties aside, the U.S. and its allies have the capability to bottle up, and potentially destroy, Russian surface and subsurface naval forces in the Black Sea, removing them from the fight at relatively low military risk to the alliance. NATO assets that could be deployed for this purpose include sea mines, land-based attack and ASW aircraft (deployed, perhaps, to Turkey, Bulgaria, and/or Romania), and a new generation of air-launched antiship missiles (LRASM) that could strike Sevastopol, Novorossiysk, and many other potential Russian targets from relatively safe locations well within NATO airspace. In addition, in a nod to China's A2/AD strategy, mobile ground-based antiship-missile systems could be deployed along the Black Sea littoral in NATO territory. It is hard to imagine that Russia would be able preemptively to take out such a multilayered array of systems.

Denying the Black Sea to Russia would also make its naval forces elsewhere that much more vulnerable to NATO. Since many of the A2/AD assets described above would come from allied air or ground forces, the bulk of U.S. and NATO naval forces could instead be concentrated against Russia's few remaining westward-facing naval outlets.

Such a strategy would not be without challenges. Wobbly Black Sea allies might fear deploying systems that could attract preemptive Russian strikes or prompt the shutoff of Russian energy and trade flows. Allies should be thinking now about how to address such legitimate concerns.



HOLD RUSSIAN “BOOMERS” AT RISK

In isolation, replacement of an aging SSBN/SLBM fleet with more-reliable and -capable systems may not be threatening to the U.S. Russia is, however, also modernizing the other legs of its strategic “triad”—namely, land-based ICBMs, bombers, and nonstrategic nuclear weapons. Most significantly, Russia is modernizing large numbers of road-mobile ICBMs. These systems serve as a survivable deterrent that are hard to target. Therefore, new SSBN construction is not necessary for Russia to maintain a survivable “second-strike” capability.

A modernized Russian SSBN fleet may be able to threaten the U.S. in a much more dangerous way. If Russian SSBNs are able to approach the continental U.S. undetected, they pose a serious threat as a first-strike weapon. A modernized Russian SSBN with accurate, MIRVed warheads could get much closer to U.S. strategic C2 nodes and bases, greatly reducing our warning time of an attack. The U.S. SSBN fleet could pose this kind of threat to our adversaries. However, these weapons also represent the whole of our survivable retaliatory threat. Our land-based systems are fixed and vulnerable to surprise attack.

Further, Russia has continued to deploy and develop nuclear-capable SSGNs. The ability to launch nuclear land attack cruise missiles relatively close to the U.S. coastline is extremely worrisome and destabilizing because there are few uses for these weapons outside of surprise attack.

The U.S. cannot prevent Russian SSBN modernization. However, the threat can and should be mitigated by concerted USN effort. The USN should enhance its capability to hold Russian SSBNs at risk through its strategic anti-submarine capabilities. This will force Russia to keep these platforms to areas in which they can be defended. Restricting Russian SSBN freedom of maneuver would preserve adequate warning time for our land-based strategic forces. In a wartime environment, a robust strategic anti-submarine capability would force a large portion of Russian maritime forces into a defensive posture in order to protect the seaborne retaliatory deterrent force. The effect of this would be threefold. First, it would likely force Russia to cede the initiative in a conventional maritime fight. Second, it would positively affect the balance of forces in the U.S. favor. Third, attrition of the Russian seaborne deterrent would increase uncertainty in the minds of the Russian leadership and encourage caution about escalation to nuclear use. The most important areas for this effort are underwater sensing superiority and a robust attack boat (SSN) fleet.

DOES NOT UNDERMINE U.S. DETERRENCE

After long neglect, Russia is modernizing its strategic submarine forces with new boats (*Borei* class) and SLBMs (Bulava). These systems will enhance Russia’s retaliatory capability but do not undermine U.S. deterrence of Russia or pose a new challenge to the USN.

Russia’s modernization does not change the nuclear balance. Russia lacks the capability to conduct an effective first strike against the U.S. triad. *Borei* deployment will not change that. Similarly, the U.S. could not confidently eliminate Russia’s retaliatory capability even when it was using Delta III/IV boats; no U.S. options will be lost. Russia’s new SSBNs might shift the quantitative balance, but not enough to matter. According to official Russian statements SLBM warhead increases will be matched by ICBM reductions, but even if that does not happen, Russian arsenal growth by ~250 warheads would little change the relative devastation each nation could inflict.

Some have suggested *Borei* is quiet enough to operate near U.S. shores, from where depressed-trajectory Bulava flight time could be 7–10 minutes versus 20+ minutes from traditional launch bastions. Assuming the Russians solve associated technology challenges, that warning time reduction might significantly reduce U.S. bomber survivability but would not affect U.S. SSBN capability or reliably eliminate the ICBM force. Nuclear strikes from near-shore Russian SSGNs could conceivably reduce warning even more—possibly to zero—but it is unlikely U.S. C2 networks are so fragile that *no* retaliation would be possible. A Russian strike during a crisis is far more plausible than a true “bolt from the blue,” so U.S. strategic forces would probably be at enhanced readiness. If Russian risk acceptance is so high that a short-warning strike appears attractive, it is doubtful today’s 20-minute warning time is an adequate deterrent, either.

In peacetime, Russian SSBNs do little for power projection or presence. Nuclear saber rattling is more likely with visible systems like Iskander GLCMs or bombers. Russian doctrinal emphasis on nuclear use, including “de-escalatory” demonstration strikes, is worrying and destabilizing. The Russians are unlikely, however, to reveal SSBN locations during a limited exchange, preferring to use land-based tactical strikes. Targeting Russian SSBNs during a conflict would be ill-advised. Russian nuclear escalation on “use or lose” grounds would be likely—and catastrophic, since even perfect American ASW would still leave Russia’s mobile ICBM force.

Russia’s SSBN modernization is *less* threatening than either its modernization of tactical nuclear forces or conventional naval power projection. *Borei* and Bulava do not require a change in U.S. Navy priorities.



IV. CONCLUSION

This “sense of the faculty” study does not purport to provide easy answers to “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” Rather than generating policy recommendations in the form of a typical staff memo or think tank report, this brief study endeavors to provide an academic approach to an exceedingly multifaceted and intricate challenge for U.S. national security decision makers. The survey coupled with the debate on key questions serves that purpose in the most efficient manner.

From the above summary of faculty viewpoints, one can readily imagine a series of follow-on research questions to explore. Taking, for example, the conclusion that the Russian Navy plays a pivotal role as a diplomatic tool, one might logically ask what the implications of that assumption are for both Russian and also U.S. naval force structures. Similarly, given the major concerns voiced with respect to “gray zone” conflict with Russia, one might ask what U.S. Navy forces could play a role in phase zero conditions if coercive, paramilitary forces have been deployed by Russia into a crisis situation. Would vertical escalation from “gray zone” to conventional force-on-force operations be advantageous to the U.S. and Europe? Is vertical escalation with Russia from deterrence to conflict controllable? To take another worrisome scenario highlighted by NWC expert faculty, if Russia plays a role as a logistics support partner for China in a limited U.S.-China military conflict, what vulnerabilities could be exploited to mitigate that collaboration? Alternatively, if one assumes that Russia’s strategic objective is achieving greater global influence, could that objective be compatible with U.S. national security interests? Likewise, if the majority of experts do not hold that Russian aggression is the greatest threat to European security at present, how should that impact U.S. Navy priorities and also NATO priorities?

This “sense of the faculty” study regarding the Russian strategic challenge presents a snapshot of a given subset of the faculty on a certain day in March 2016. Various of these assessments will change in the light of new developments and the intention is to repeat and refine this effort to refresh the thinking in it every few years. For now, this summary may provide some scholarly insight and a certain amount of common sense for the ongoing Russia-focused strategic deliberations within the U.S. national security studies community. The debates, moreover, could help to elevate the level of discourse on key matters of dispute. Decision makers should be able to examine the best possible arguments and evidence on both sides of an issue, so that they can make tough but informed judgments. Above all, this assessment reinforces the imperative to balance vigilance with due caution; to balance forward presence with a clear understanding of the “security dilemma” and resultant escalation dynamics; and to weigh the value of tried and true institutions against the imperative to develop innovative structures and doctrines to address new challenges.





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- **Prof. David T. Burbach**, PhD, earned a doctorate in political science from MIT, and has a background in international security, nuclear strategy and arms control, and Soviet/post-Soviet studies.
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