

Analytic Framework for Emulating Russian Decision-Making

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June 2017

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken E. Gause". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Ken E. Gause, Director
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Abstract

The purpose of this report is to propose an analytical framework for emulating Russian decision-making in the national security realm. The framework is paired with a methodology that allows the user to systematically examine what Russian decision-making would look like in response to a foreign policy crisis. The framework is presented in the first section and then applied to three potential crisis scenarios in Eastern Europe. The analytical structure presented is meant to be used as a guideline. It offers potential answers, tools, and a systematic method for emulation that allows users to formulate decision-trees for Russian actions on the basis of reasonable assumptions about how Russia might act in various situations. The final product can be further developed and refined on the basis of observation of Russian actions in future interactions with its adversaries and behavior in crisis situations.

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Executive Summary

In this report, the CNA Russia Studies Program develops a framework for the emulation of Russian senior-level decision-making in the national security realm. The goal of the report is to help emulators develop an understanding of factors that affect Russian decision-making processes and how these processes influence military operational planning in the European theater. In the first section of the report, we present the analytical framework. This is followed by three case studies that examine how the framework could be applied to three potential crisis scenarios in Eastern Europe. The case studies are designed to demonstrate how the analytical framework could be used to emulate Russian decision-making in a crisis situation.

This framework is derived from several sources: what we know about Russian decision-making, what we know about how rational leaders calculate risk, the behavior of states in the international system, and distinct elements of Russian strategic culture, i.e. the prism through which Russian decision-makers approach their strategic calculus. The objective is to be explanative, parsimonious, and fuse the best of regional studies expertise with the work of the security studies community. We offer a base model for Russian decision-making and ways of thinking about Moscow's strategic calculus in conflicts that may subsequently be applied to hypothetical crises. It is not a simple derivation of actions Russia may take, or cards that Moscow plays in particular scenarios, but rather an analytical roadmap that aids in emulating a complex adversary.

Key elements of the framework

The model begins with a **strategic assessment** by Russian leadership of the situation and how it fits into the grander scheme of their security concerns, ambitions, strategy for the region, and geopolitical confrontation with the United States. The strategic assessment serves as an intellectual template or base for Russian decision-making in the scenarios explored subsequently in the paper. We then develop **strategic objectives** that serve as guidelines for Russian national security decision-making in crisis, what they wish to achieve, prevent, and over the horizon goals that influence short term decision-making. They are rooted and derived from three principal Russian foreign policy motivations: maximizing security which results in pursuit of extended defense, maximizing power, reflected in the quest for regional

hegemony, and maintaining great power status in the international system, a fixation that shapes foreign policy outlooks. The last driver in particular is one of historic patrimony inherited from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.

Strategy in conflict is focused discussion on the ways by which Russia's national security establishment seeks to achieve its objectives in a crisis. This is both an elucidation of Russian strategic preferences, which are typically emergent and less deliberate. Strategy is not a deliberate planning process, so much as a focused conversation on how Russia would construct a theory of victory, and attain leverage in a particular crisis. The preference for indirect versus direct approaches at first to keep costs low and mitigate risks, and a predilection for brief use of force to coerce and compel adversaries. Russian strategy as described here is iterative, and dynamic, offering sample answers and a method by which to emulate such discussions.

The second part of the framework lays out the process by which the Russian leadership would develop a plan of action for dealing with the crisis at hand. It begins by establishing the **range of goals** that Russia may seek to pursue. We define what should be considered maximalist goals that Russia may look to attain if given the opportunity, versus minimalist goals that are the base requirement for Moscow to feel satisfied with the outcome of a conflict. These goals in turn lead to a range of potential **courses of action** (COAs) Russia could take in response to a crisis situation. Russia employs COAs to achieve operational objectives that flow out of a given Russian strategy in conflict. Each one is tied to a given theory of victory, and includes a series of actions that Russian leadership believes will secure their objectives based on that particular theory.

The third part of the framework examines potential problems that the Russian leadership may face, and core weakness or risks that shape its decision-making, beginning with an examination of **Russia's vulnerabilities** in the situation. Vulnerabilities serve as constraints on Russian COAs, affecting the Russian government and military's ability and willingness to escalate a conflict to achieve maximal goals versus de-escalating to avoid potential negative consequences. We then address **Russian red lines and escalation points**, structuring the discussion in terms of 'theories of defeat' or what happens when Moscow realizes that its strategy in the conflict has failed. While there is no actual theory of defeat in Russian military or strategic thought, the concept is intended to be a useful analytical exercise in emulation to force a conversation on a critical question: at what point does the Russian leadership believe that its given strategy in conflict has failed, and what is it likely to do next?

This analysis leads to a set of potential **exit and/or escalation strategies** that allow Moscow to manage potential risk in a crisis scenario. The framework for each case study includes a set of decision-trees that highlight how Russia might respond to potential actions by other actors. The analysis also accounts for **black swans**, events that may impose new political realities, lead to escalation or a new confrontation

between the parties, and begin to add new potential paths for the conflict to deviate unanticipated by those involved.

Case studies

After presenting the framework that has been developed based on this analysis, we show how it can be used to emulate Russian decision-making in potential future crisis scenarios. In this report, the framework is applied to three scenarios: A Russian 'gray-zone' incursion into one of the Baltic States, a Russian response to a pro-Western shift in Belarus, and the resumption of high intensity conflict in eastern Ukraine. These scenarios are meant to be illustrative and to show how the framework can be used to emulate Russian decision-making in a variety of potential crisis scenarios, either for simulation purposes or to evaluate potential Russian courses of action in a real-life crisis situation.

The framework highlights a number of commonalities across the scenarios. The key characteristic of Russian strategy across all three cases is a strong preference for loss avoidance relative to the pursuit of opportunistic gain. Notably, in most of these scenarios, Russia is not the one initiating a conflict. Instead it is seeking to mitigate a deteriorating strategic situation, either by restoring the status quo ante or by reducing the potential losses. At the same time, Russian leaders are willing to use opportunities provided by such crises to improve their strategic position. In all cases, Russia would seek to minimize cost, both by using the minimal reasonably sufficient level of force to achieve its goals and by working to reduce the length of time forces need to be present in the area of operations. While Russia is willing to use military force against its neighbors, it prefers to use it for coercion in support of less expensive instruments, and is concerned about the possibility of a military confrontation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The prospect of such a confrontation, and its attendant military and political costs, is shown in the scenarios to be a key driver shaping Russian decision-making and at times backing down.

The scenarios are diverse, and share a strong affinity for different overarching foreign policy impulses in Russian strategic culture. Thus the emerging strategic objectives vary, from those intended to restore security and extended defense, to others more representative of Russia's drive for regional hegemony and maximizing utility. Use of force is closely tied to preventing losses, particularly in key countries in Russia's near abroad, whereas Russia is assessed to be far less likely to engage in overt military intervention for opportunities in the Baltics.

This difference in aggressiveness is largely the result of three factors: prospect theory-based decision-making models that weigh risk much higher than gain, the Baltics being excluded from Russian thinking on extended defense, and national

vulnerabilities that make conflict with NATO undesirable. Thus, Russia is assessed to be more open to a full-scale invasion of Belarus than of Ukraine because of its assessment that an intervention in Ukraine is less likely to succeed quickly, more likely to lead to unacceptably high costs, and more likely to result in punitive actions by the West. Similarly, the higher likelihood of NATO engagement in the Latvia scenario than in the other two cases reduces Russia's willingness to engage its forces openly. In other words, an overt, full-scale intervention by Russia is more likely against smaller, weaker adversaries.

Conclusions and next steps

This study accomplishes four tasks: it advances collective knowledge on Russian decision-making and strategic culture; it builds an analytical framework emulating Russian decision-making that can be applied to a range of cases; it provides a structure for how the analytical framework should be applied to a use case, showing the steps through which one emulates the adversary; and it tests the framework against three different cases, which can be further refined in an iterative process.

The framework used in this report has been developed on the basis of Russian actions in previous crisis situations, especially in Georgia and Ukraine. As a result, it is focused on emulating Russian responses to conflict situations, rather than situations where Russia wants to instigate a crisis. At the same time, parts of the framework would be applicable for scenarios where Russia acts first, and the framework as a whole can be modified to be applicable to such situations.

The application of the framework to three cases in the European theater demonstrates its utility for emulating Russian actions. The framework is generalizable: it allows users to formulate decision-trees for Russian decision-making in various situations, and can be used to analyze Russian actions in other regions such as the Middle East and Central Asia. The framework is also highly adaptable. It can be further developed and refined through the observation of Russian actions in future interactions with its adversaries and its behavior in crisis situations.

Using this framework, simulation of Russian decision-making can move beyond the model of putting some subject-matter experts in a room and asking them to react to prompts from a white cell. Instead, these experts can be familiarized with the framework and then asked to develop its components based on a particular scenario. Multi-move simulations can be accommodated by having the participants reengage with the framework after receiving new information at the start of each move.

The framework can also serve as the first step in developing a more detailed model that allows for better emulation of key decision-makers within the Russian government. As a next step, the framework presented here can be combined with

previously completed analysis of the constellation of key decision-makers in the Russian government on various security and foreign policy issues. By incorporating what is known about the interests and worldviews of the most influential Russian leaders and the goals of the agencies and organizations that they lead into a framework modeled on the one presented in this report, emulators can go further in modeling internal decision-making within the Russian state.

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Glossary

ATO	Anti-terrorist Operations
COA	Course of Action
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DIME	Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic
DPR	Donetsk People’s Republic
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
FSB	Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GUAM	Organization for Democracy and Economic Development
IO	Information Operations
LPR	Luhansk People’s Republic
MH-17	Malaysia Airlines Flight 17
MOD	Ministry of Defense
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
UN	United Nations
US	United States

USD	U.S. Dollar
USSR	United Soviet Socialist Republics
WWII	World War II

Introduction

Russian political and military activities in Ukraine and Syria have highlighted the need for a robust understanding of Russian national security decision-making. Moscow's recent adventurism underscores that **Russia remains a globally significant actor that is willing to challenge the prevailing status quo in pursuit of its national interests**, both in its near abroad and beyond. In Ukraine, as in both Syria and Georgia, Russia has demonstrated that it sees its military power as a tool that can shape political outcomes that are favorable to Moscow and at times unfavorable to the West.

In this environment, political-military analysis is a powerful tool that may be used to help U.S. decision-makers understand the implications of Russian national security decisions at both the strategic and operational levels for U.S. national security—and thereby to shape regional perceptions, assess partners and potential adversaries, and manage crises.

The purpose of this report is to propose a **framework for emulating how Russian top-level decision-making in the national security realm** is conducted under President Putin and to develop an understanding of how these decision-making processes may affect Russian foreign policy and military operational planning in the European theater. The framework that is presented in the first section is then applied to three potential crisis scenarios in Eastern Europe, as a demonstration of how it may be used to emulate Russian decision-making in a crisis situation.

Methodology

The framework developed in this report builds on the previous work on Russian decision-making completed by members of the CNA Russia Studies Program. This previous work examined Russian decision-making in the spheres of energy, non-proliferation, and technology transfer; discussed alternative models for how

strategic-level decision-making operates in the Kremlin; and evaluated the core decision-making institutions and leadership style of top Russian leaders.¹

This report goes one step further by formulating a framework for emulating decision-making among senior Russian leaders in crisis situations. In developing the framework, the study team has reviewed existing literature on models of Russian decision-making and strategic calculus, and has mapped the Russian decision-making landscape on military and security issues, including identifying the key actors and processes involved and determining the centers of gravity that drive the leadership's strategic calculus. This process has allowed the study team to further develop the model formulated in our previous work on Russian decision-making.² The framework was derived largely from the team's earlier analysis of recent Russian responses to security situations in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria.³

The analytical framework begins by mapping key nodes of Russian decision-making pioneered by Russian analysts such as Olga Kryshstanovskaia,⁴ Nikolai Petrov,⁵ and Evgenii Minchenko⁶ and summarized and extended in work by members of the CNA Russia team. It incorporates Western academic understandings of Russian strategic culture,⁷ game theory decision-making models of how actors behave,⁸ and relevant

¹ H. H. Gaffney, Ken Gause, and Dmitry Gorenburg, *Russian Leadership Decision-making under Vladimir Putin*, CNA Research Memorandum, May 2007; Dmitry Gorenburg, Paul Saunders, Paul Schwartz, and Samuel Bendett, *Emulating Russian Decision-Making*, CNA Research Memorandum, September 2016; Samuel Bendett and Paul Schwartz, *Crisis Decision-Making in the Kremlin*, CNA Research Memorandum, December 2016.

² Gorenburg et al., *Emulating Russian Decision-Making*.

³ Bendett and Schwartz, *Crisis Decision-Making in the Kremlin*.

⁴ Olga Kryshstanovskaya and Stephen White, "Putin's Militocracy," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 19(4), 2003; Olga Kryshstanovskaya and Stephen White, "The Formation of Russia's Network Directorate," in *Russia as a Network State*, Vadim Kononenko and Arkady Moshes, eds. (Springer, 2011).

⁵ Nikolai Petrov, "The Nomenklatura and the Elite," in *Russia in 2020*, Maria Lipman and Nikolai Petrov eds, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011); Nikolay Petrov, "Down the Funnel: Russia's Trajectory after 2014," *Russian Politics and Law* 53(4), 2015

⁶ "Vladimir Putin's Big Government and the 'Politburo 2.0,'" Minchenko Consulting, October 2012, http://www.minchenko.ru/en/insights/analitics_6.html; "'Politburo 2.0' and the Syrian Gambit," Minchenko Consulting, October 2015, http://www.minchenko.ru/en/insights/analitics_17.html.

⁷ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Brookings Institution, 2015).

⁸ Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics* (University of Michigan, 1998); Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47 (2), 1979.

components of international relations theory.⁹ The resulting model is meant to be relevant across a number of policy and scholarly communities, including international relations theory, security studies, and Russian area studies.

After presenting the framework, we show how it can be used to emulate Russian decision-making in potential future crisis scenarios. In this report, the framework is applied to three scenarios: a Russian gray-zone incursion into one of the Baltic States, a Russian response to a pro-Western shift in Belarus, and the resumption of the low-intensity conflict in eastern Ukraine. These scenarios are meant to be illustrative and to show how the framework can be used to emulate Russian decision-making in a variety of potential crisis scenarios, either for simulation purposes or to evaluate potential Russian courses of action in a real-life crisis situation. Future work by the CNA Russia Studies Program will turn to validation of some of the insights derived from such emulation exercises.

⁹ Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell University Press, 1987); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2001); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1979).

A Framework for Russian Strategic Calculus and Decision-Making in a Crisis Scenario

The analytical approach to Russian decision-making

Modeling adversary decision-making is a daunting task. The principal challenge with constructing frameworks for decision-making in any country is that no single theory, or level of analysis, is sufficient to paint a granular picture. Many international relations theories offer a strategic-level overview of how countries behave as individuals in the international system, but they often fail to account for or accommodate their internal complexities and other factors such as domestic politics, leadership dynamics, or the characteristics of their strategic culture. Game theory and rational actor decision-making models are useful for understanding patterns of behavior and thus recognizing when a country is engaging in expected policies, but leaders often value or weigh gains and risks differently from an expected norm—i.e., they are rational, but with caveats and cognitive biases.

This framework is derived from several sources: what we know about Russian interests and policies specifically; what we know about how rational leaders calculate risk; the behavior of states in the international system; and relevant elements of Russian strategic culture. The objective is to be explanative, be parsimonious, and fuse the best of regional studies within the work of the security studies community. In this section we offer a base model for Russian decision-making at the national level and ways of thinking about Moscow's strategic calculus in conflicts that may subsequently be applied to hypothetical crises. It is not a simple derivation of actions that Russia may take, or cards that Moscow plays in particular scenarios, but rather an analytical roadmap that aids in emulating a complex adversary.

Principal outlines of Russian decision-making

This section lays out some of the assumptions on Russian decision-making, combining theories on rational actor behavior in the international system together with the particulars of the Russian system. The purpose is to present a series of assumptions about how Russia behaves, a model based on bounded rationality that forms the core of this analytical framework. This includes prospect theory in international relations, concepts of territoriality, and the collective mind which represents Russia's national security aristocracy. In effect this is a set of derivatives founded in area studies expertise, research, and game theory, but adjusted for Russia's strategic culture.

The substance for the framework is sourced from an extensive literature review, prior studies done on Russian decision-making, and numerous emulation sessions conducted by the Russia Studies Program at CNA in support of the U.S. Government. The strength of this framework is that it presents a coherent model for emulating decision-making that is reproducible, and an alternative to having individual experts emulate Russian decision-making. The framework accommodates a range of Russian responses, is iterative, and dynamic. It also confers upon the user a base body of knowledge required to emulate and understand Russian decision-making in crisis, i.e. it is a training tool.

The approach developed offers an informative counterpart to individual expert emulation. Deep subject matter expertise often comes with confirmation bias, it must be moderated by concepts and theories that are not country specific, such as game theory or core concepts in international relations. A simulation with experts is only as good as the expertise available, whereas an analytical framework captures a broad range of knowledge and is largely consistent. Different experts play Russia differently, and with poor expertise come poor emulation results. An analytical framework is not a substitute, but successfully improves emulation and improves consistency. Finally, depth of expertise on Russia is mastered by few, and impractical to make available given current demand. An analytical framework can be employed with a modicum of subject matter expertise and represents a more practical approach.

The approach has limitations, and does not account well for non-state actors. The model is not designed to factor in empowered individuals within Russia, including oligarchs and others that take action on behalf of the state rather than at its express direction. Those constraints may be improved upon in later iterations, through sufficient application to cases that integrate non-state actor behavior in crises.

Prospect theory

With some exceptions, Russia is a “prospect theory” player—i.e., it generally abides with decision-making as expected by prospect theory in international relations. Prospect theory evolved from expected utility theory, which assumed that actors are able to objectively measure and order their preferences for a variety of different courses of action. However, expected utility theory struggled with the fact that actors often choose poorly. Prospect theory, based on ground-breaking work by Kahneman and Tversky in the 1970s, attempts to better determine how humans—rather than a purely rational “actor”—make decisions under conditions of risk.¹⁰

At the core of prospect theory is the observed phenomenon that actors are more risk acceptant when they perceive themselves to be losing, and more risk averse when they are winning.¹¹ Simply put, leaders take greater risks to prevent anticipated defeats than they do to pursue potential opportunities (Figure 1).

Understanding the actor’s “reference point,” or the status quo against which they compare losses and gains, is key to applying prospect theory to an actor’s strategic calculus. The cases of the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the Russian military intervention in Syria show that **Moscow evaluates prospects largely from a losses frame**. In these cases Russia sought to prevent what it thought was NATO expansion, the loss of control in a buffer country it defines as essential to its security, or to save a client regime facing military defeat.

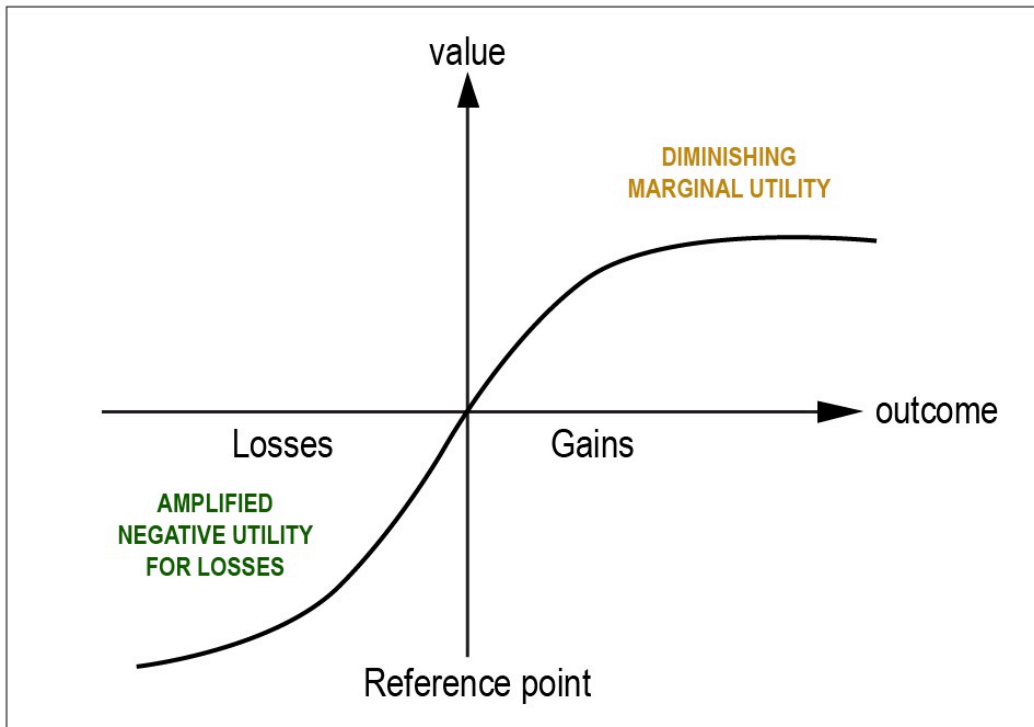
Intertwined with these practical considerations are strategic considerations about political loss in the international arena: loss of regional power, loss of great power status, and internal costs in domestic politics. Some foreign policy losses can translate into political defeats at home with their attendant consequences for ruling elites.¹²

¹⁰ Prospect theory was developed and refined by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky through a series of articles. See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica* 47 (2), 1979, and Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. “Advances in prospect theory: Cumulative representation of uncertainty,” *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 5 (4), 1992.

¹¹ Brian Lampert, “Putin’s Prospects: Vladimir Putin’s Decision-Making Through the Lens of Prospect Theory,” *Small Wars Journal*, February 15, 2016.

¹² Lampert, “Putin’s Prospects”; Bendett and Schwartz, *Crisis Decision-Making in the Kremlin*.

Figure 1. Function explaining Kahneman and Tversky's work on prospect theory



Source: CNA

Collective mind

The Russian decision-making environment consists of both formal and informal structures. Formal structures include the presidential administration, the Security Council, and the Security Cabinet (which includes the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, and representatives of the various security services). It is important to recognize, however, that, alongside these formal structures are several informal arrangements that the Kremlin uses to make key decisions. Understanding how these informal arrangements work is important for predicting how the Kremlin will act in a crisis scenario.¹³

¹³ Gorenburg et al., *Emulating Russian Decision-Making*.

Russia is best thought of as a combination of three systems: a ruling national security aristocracy; a feudalistic economic system controlled by oligarchs; and a competent bureaucracy managing key functions of state, such as the Ministry of Defense or Ministry of Finance. In terms of political reference the country is an anocracy, a form of marginal autocracy where restrictions are arbitrary, and freedoms exist incoherently with features commonly seen in a dictatorship.¹⁴ In part due to this mix, Russia is de facto an adhocracy, with formal rules and official positions not being indicative of actual rules of the game and the influence of key players.¹⁵

Russia's leader arbitrates the factionalism, the internecine clan warfare, and the competition for power or economic resources that take place behind the scenes. The most important decisions, those involving war and escalation, are made by a tight-knit inner circle consisting of around half a dozen highly trusted individuals, most of whom have known Vladimir Putin for more than 20 years, since his time in St. Petersburg.¹⁶

However, there is significant overlap between Putin's inner circle and formal structures of governance, particularly the Security Council.¹⁷ There is no consensus over whether Putin is "first among equals" within these informal arrangements, or whether he has created "a room for himself" above the decision-making structures where no one else is allowed.¹⁸ The question of how decisions are made within this environment and who exactly exerts the most influence is important because it impacts Putin's access to information and the quality of the information he receives.

It is believed that the predominant voice in both the Security Council and Putin's inner circle are members of the security services, or *siloviki*.¹⁹ This leads to a kind of "group-think" and bias in decision-making common in all small-group decision-making frameworks. As a result, assumptions are made on important questions that can prove consequential. For example, is Ukraine a real country and do Russian-speaking Ukrainians believe in a Ukrainian national identity? Beyond this established elite lie important local and non-state actors, whose views are generally more

¹⁴ Jennifer Gandhi and James Vreeland. "Political Institutions and Civil War: Unpacking Anocracy". *Journal of Conflict Solutions* 52, no.3 (2004): 401-425.

¹⁵ Robert Waterman Jr., *Adhocracy: The Power to Change* (Whittle Direct Books. 1990).

¹⁶ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (Public Affairs, 2016).

¹⁷ Bendett and Schwartz, *Crisis Decision-Making in the Kremlin*.

¹⁸ Gorenburg et al., *Emulating Russian Decision-Making*.

¹⁹ Olga Kryshatanovskaya and Stephen White, "Putin's Militocracy," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 19(4), 2003.

nationalistic and imperialistic, and who have a bias for taking action. These include Chechnya's infamous leader Ramzan Kadyrov, and certain oligarchs such as Konstantin Malofeev, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Oleg Deripaska.

The built-in bias of the ruling *siloviki* is for statism, central control over the commanding heights of the economy, a capable military, and a managed political system whereby all disputes are internal to one ruling party (commonly referenced as sovereign democracy).²⁰ Thus, Russia has a ruling class and a strategic culture. Just as politics is kept within one party, decision-making is kept within a circle of elites who share a bounded reality in terms of their foreign policy outlooks. That culture includes the views of Vladimir Putin, but much of the literature in the field indicates that ideas or decisions are pitched to him by the various members of the ruling elite, or what some have termed Politburo 2.0.²¹ A well-reputed model illustrating Politburo 2.0 and some of its members is presented in Figure 2. The framework is not set in stone, and there are occasional changes among the members of this decision-making club.

Important foreign policy decisions are discussed in a wider circle of national security elites, but are made in a small group. **Divining the individual machinations of Vladimir Putin is not only often impractical, but is in general unnecessary**, in order to understand the overall proclivities in Russian decision-making. It would also lead to a set of unworkable assumptions based on the individual psychology of one person which changes over time. Many consider there to have been at least three different "Putins" or changes in character for the Russian leader between 1999 and 2017. Russia's national security establishment is instead best viewed as a collective mind, and the efficacy of this approach is such that it allows one to examine scenarios in which Putin is not the deciding factor.

²⁰ Masha Lipman, "Putin's 'Sovereign Democracy,'" *Washington Post*, July 15, 2006.

²¹ Yevgeniy Minchenko, Kirill Petrov, "Vladimir Putin's Big Government and the 'Politburo 2.0,'" Minchenko Consulting, October 3, 2012.

Figure 2. One reputable model demonstrating roles



Source: http://www.minchenko.ru/en/news/news-en_58.html.

Strategic assessment

The model assumes that in any crisis Russian leaders will make a strategic assessment of the situation and how it fits into the grander scheme of their security concerns, ambitions, strategy for the region, and geopolitical confrontation with the United States. Interests may be immediate or localized, but they are ultimately part and parcel of strategic concerns. Not every conflict is of strategic consequence, but the purpose of this framework is to evaluate precisely those that will have such implications for the Russian state. This section discusses Russia's strategic

assessment, which serves as an intellectual template or base for Russian decision-making in the scenarios explored subsequently in the paper.

Every established policy community, has a strategic culture—a series of views, established truths, and a combination of traditional vectors of foreign policy or values in foreign policy, that characterize its world vision.²² It is also a set of patterns or predilections in behavior, such as using force, or avoiding confrontation, that over time define the strategic culture of national elites. The standing strategic assessment, or view of the world, informs this decision-making culture on a daily basis. It is the ever-present background upon which choices are made. Russia's strategic culture, with some variance, has a generally accepted view of post-Cold War history, the country's place in the international system, and its role in the region.

These views—geopolitical, historical, and conceptual—form a well-constructed intellectual edifice in which every previous encounter or conflict serves as an individual building block. There exists a policy consensus that the annexation of Crimea was just, even if not legal, or that Western intervention against Serbia in 1999, and subsequent recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, set a precedent for changing borders in Europe by force.²³ This sort of thinking bounds Russian discourse, both publicly and privately, on international security issues.

The overall consensus among the Russian leadership, which is largely composed of longtime members of the security services, is that the Soviet Union's collapse proved a disastrous experience for Russia and for Russians who found themselves outside the country's inherited borders. The subsequent period of the 1990s was one of economic and political chaos, during which the West took advantage of Russia's weakness to expand political, economic, and military blocs across Europe and work to dismember the former Russian empire. Russia had been weak, and, as Putin once remarked in a speech, “the weak get beaten.” Russia's leaders are oriented towards restoring Russia's recognition as a great power in the international system, and they are inclined to view the United States and its allies as adversaries who seek to weaken, contain, or further break up Russia.²⁴ Moscow sees the United States as a revisionist power, particularly in Europe and the Middle East, and one unconstrained by international norms.

The resulting policy is fixated on preventing the expansion of economic, military, and political blocs to Russia's direct borders. This has historically resulted in a strategy

²² Colin S. Gray, “Strategic culture as context: the first generation of theory strikes back,” *Review of International Studies* 25(1), 1999.

²³ Masha Gessen, “Crimea Is Putin's Revenge,” *Slate*, March 21, 2014.

²⁴ Bendett and Schwartz, *Crisis Decision-Making in the Kremlin*, 7.

reliant on maintaining buffer states, seeking to have countries in between Russia and other expanding power or alliances. Today this strategy can be termed as 'extended defense', where Russia seeks to have influence and control over the strategic orientation of its neighbors such that alliances and power blocs do not come to include them. Indeed the Soviet Union's establishment of the Warsaw Pact was a forerunner, designed to control Central European states and have them serve the role of buffers during the Cold War. In 1964-1982, when Soviet Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev was in power, this policy of intervention to control the affairs of Communist bloc states was defined as "limited sovereignty."²⁵

Historically **both the Russian empire and the USSR have intervened when they believed that an important buffer state or ally might leave their sphere of influence.** This fear remained heightened after World War II, when several central European states chose to bandwagon with Germany and invade the Soviet Union in 1941. As a consequence Russia has frequently fixated on the potential threat of invasion from the West and the need to maintain buffer states both for depth and to prevent countries from allying with an adversary. Thus extended defense is not only one of Russia's strategic priorities, but an area of zero sum gains vis-a-vis the West. Hence the visceral Russian reaction at any prospect that NATO might expand to what it considers a buffer state.²⁶ The underpinning drive behind this strategy is maximizing security more so than power.

Russian leadership has a hereditary view of Russia's role in the international system as a great power, one with special privileges not accorded others. This outlook is more akin to the turn of the 19th century and a system based on the Concert of Europe, where great powers consulted and arbitrated their rights of control over territory and lesser states.²⁷ That was a system of *primus inter pares*, or first among equals, to which Russian leadership very much wishes to return. Inherent in this concept is the existence of a balance of power among great powers, or the polycentric world that Moscow often cites today as its desired ideal.²⁸

In such a framework, countries such as Russia have privileged interests: one set of rules exists for great powers, and another for everyone else. Moscow believes that it

²⁵ Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

²⁶ Ted Galen Carpenter, "Why Russia Fears NATO," *The National Interest*, October 10, 2016.

²⁷ Huw Davies, "The Concert of Europe: The Rise and Fall of the First United Nations," *Defence-in-Depth*, October 24, 2014. <https://defenceindepth.co/2014/10/24/the-concert-of-europe-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-first-united-nations/>.

²⁸ Alexei Arbatov, "Collapse the World Order? The Emergence of a Polycentric World and Its Challenges," *Russia in Global Affairs*, September 23, 2014.

inherited great power status from the Soviet Union and the Russian empire. From Russia's perspective, this is a natural right, not qualified or defined by Russia's economic ranking, and codified by virtue of being recognized as the successor state to the Soviet Union.

This distinction is important, since in the West it is considered that great power status is earned, largely on the basis of economic prowess, whereas Russia's elites believe that it is inherited and economic foundations of power play a much smaller role in Russian thinking than other attributes. In truth, economic foundations of power have historically had little to do with Russia's position in the international system, and the threat that it may or may not pose to the United States. Even today Russia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is perhaps 3.3 percent of global GDP, and less than 10 percent of the U.S. GDP, but without doubt Russia is considered a peer nuclear power and near-peer adversary in some conventional capabilities as well.²⁹

The Cold War was also not a rivalry based on the USSR's peer economic status—it was never a genuine competitor to the United States in economic terms. Therefore, Russia's elite is less interested in establishing Russia as a great power on the basis of its economy than in making other countries recognize and believe that it is so through military power and decisive action in the international arena.

Two historical frameworks for managing international politics in Europe are important: the Concert of Europe and the division of spheres of influence at Yalta in 1945. Russia wishes to return to the Post-World War II order, based on recognized spheres of influence for great powers, which validate both Russia's desire for buffer states and regional hegemony over neighbors. Meanwhile the Concert of Europe helps explain why Russia is less interested in dealing with the European Union (EU) and NATO than in conducting relations with individual powers it considers to be peers on the continent.

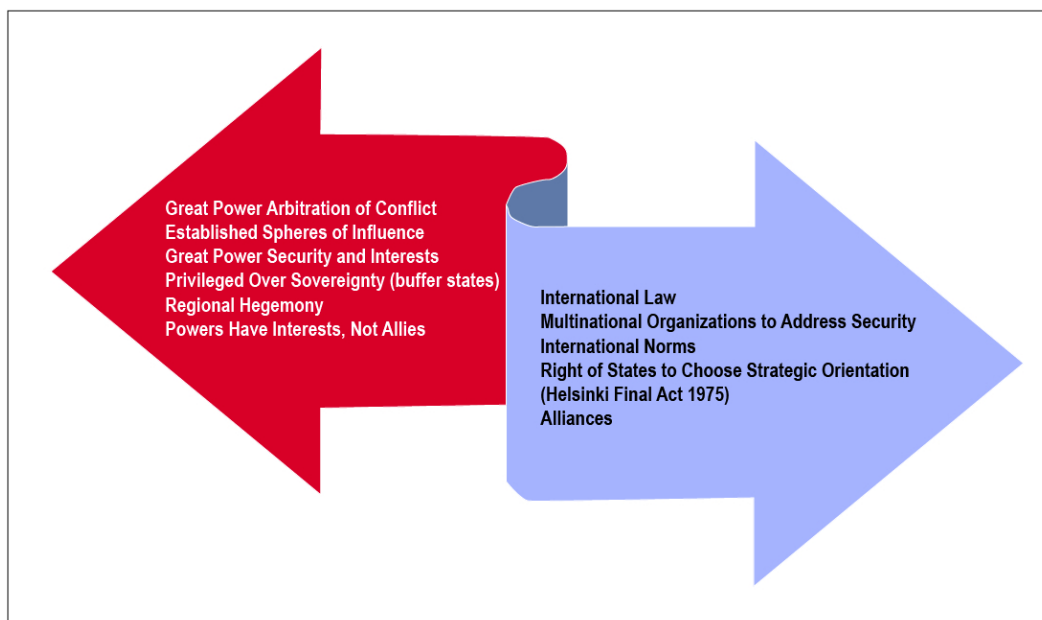
Moscow's preference is for bilateral negotiations, or multilateral negotiations, over security issues with countries it considers to be peers, as opposed to recognizing the existence of economic and political blocs in Europe as worthwhile entities. The current Normandy format to discuss the conflict in Ukraine is de facto a Concert of Europe-like mechanism, with Russia, Germany, and France largely arbitrating the fate of Ukraine (with Kiev's participation, of course). Figure 3 shows some of the inherent divergence in Russian and Western approaches to security in Europe.

No less important is the desire to make Russia's public view its own country as "great," and restore a sense of national dignity on the basis of its image in the

²⁹ Michael Kofman, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Russia Analysis," *War on the Rocks*, December 23, 2015. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/the-seven-deadly-sins-of-russia-analysis/>.

international system. Since the economic downturn, the Russian leadership has increasingly sought to reframe its legitimacy on the basis of restoring Russia on the international arena, and in more ambiguous terms as a great country, to compensate for the inability to deliver at home. This has taken on a form of militarism in internal politics, reinforced by parades, media attention to Russian military accomplishments, and a growing instilment of pride in the martial arts hitherto not present in Russian domestic politics since the collapse of the USSR.³⁰ In general, Russian political views have become more nationalistic and right of center.

Figure 3. Differences in Russian and Western approaches to European security



Source: CNA

Meanwhile, in its near abroad Russia pursues a traditional vector of Russian foreign policy: an economic and political integration of neighboring states, with Moscow in a leadership role. This is in truth more about maintaining or bolstering Russia's position as a regional power, and as an agenda setter in its near abroad. All geopolitics is ultimately local, and territoriality, or the ability to set the agenda in one's near abroad, ranks much higher on Russia's priority list than great power

³⁰ See, for example, the description of Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in 2015. Jana Bakunina, "Victory Day in Russia: why use a huge military display to commemorate peace?" *New Statesman*, May 11, 2015. <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/05/victory-day-russia-why-use-huge-military-display-commemorate-peace>

status. Unlike the United States, Russia is not book-ended by two oceans; it must instead deal with numerous bordering neighbors. The history with many of them is troublesome, and thus Russia has been on a perpetual quest to control its near abroad in an effort to secure its own borders and population from undesirable external influence.

Russia has inherited not only the aspirations and traditional vectors of foreign policy from the Russian empire, but more problematically, few of its resources. Indeed, modern-day Russia suffers from most of the weaknesses of the Russian empire. It has had poor economic, political, and technological development relative to the West while at the same time seeking to govern a vast and multiethnic territory. The result is that the state frequently perceives itself to be vulnerable, wedged between political blocs, rising powers, and transnational forces that threaten it.

This means that anticipated losses are accentuated, and in Russia's near abroad they become “unacceptable” in terms of prospect theory decision-making. When one is on a slippery slope, potential losses might appear greater than they actually are—that is, Russia feels that ceding its influence over a state might result in the collapse of its own position as a regional power and could unleash forces that would eventually result in the country's fragmentation. Such fatalism may seem unusual, but to a strategic culture that is perpetually dealing with a set of perceived vulnerabilities it is rather natural to have a distorted perception of losses. The end outcome may be a visceral and quick decision to use force, such as after the Maidan victory in Ukraine in 2014.

Crisis points are most common where Russia's zero-sum views on who sets the agenda in its near abroad intersect with a strategy to prevent the encroachment of political-military blocs near its borders. These are two vectors in Russian foreign policy: one seeks to establish regional hegemony; the other, to maintain buffers and secure the state from the expanding power of others. The case of Ukraine is almost unique because it represents three distinct fault lines: Russia's strategy to maintain extended defense and thereby a need to control Ukraine's strategic orientation; a regional reintegration project seeking to draw Ukraine into the Eurasian Economic Union with Moscow as its leader; and a strategic culture for which Ukraine was not just the object of foreign policy but also a territory deeply intertwined with Russian domestic politics, distorting decision-making on issues such as Crimea.

That said, Russia still meets classical definitions of a great power: able to bloody the reigning superpower in a fight, and capable of projecting some power outside its borders to another region. It is a great power because it is one of two preeminent nuclear weapon states in the international system, it retains a UN Security Council seat, and it is far beyond a common regional power, spanning numerous time zones and regions. Russian leadership is decidedly cautious, but cognizant that it too has the power to compel and deter, especially in contests on Russia's borders where there is a strong asymmetry of interests favoring Moscow.

Russian strategic objectives

From the strategic assessment—discussing Russia’s views of its position in the international system, its role in the region, and its vectors of foreign policy—flows a set of strategic objectives. These can be considered guidelines for Russia’s national security decision-making in crisis: what it wishes to achieve or prevent, and what over-the-horizon goals influence short-term decision-making. Below we discuss what are likely to be the standing strategic objectives for Russia’s current national security establishment, which will remain independent of, or largely unaffected by, the immediate politics in U.S.-Russia bilateral relations.

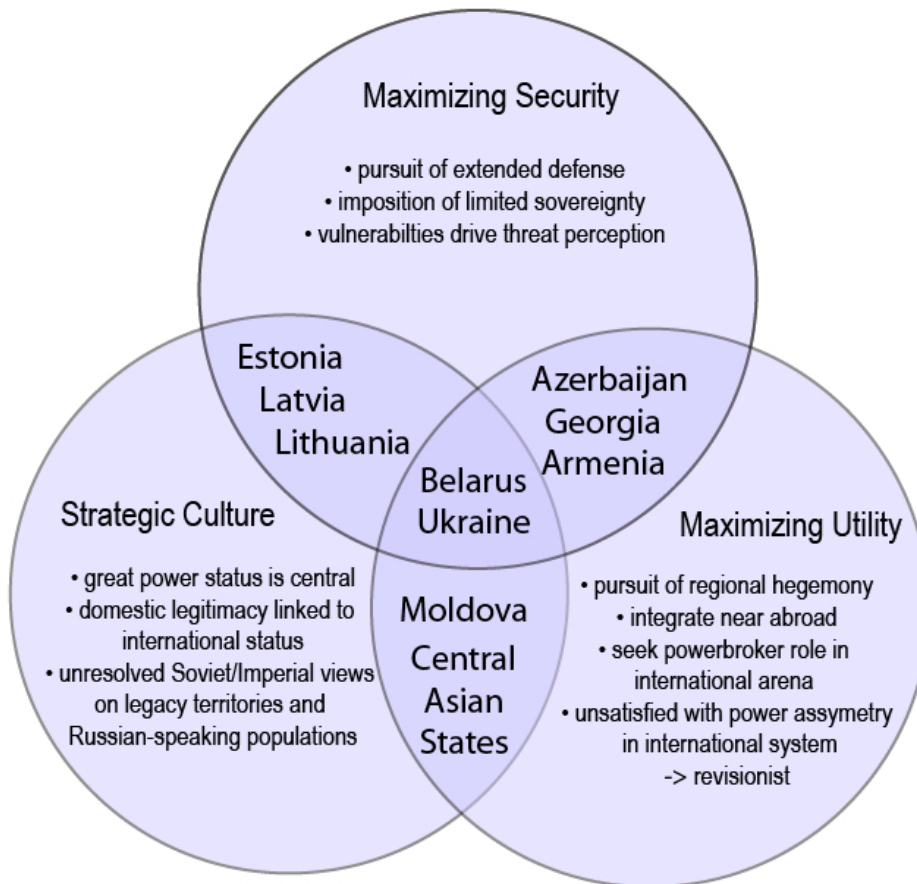
- Exert influence over the strategic orientation of key neighboring states: Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and Kazakhstan.
- Reintegrate the former Soviet space politically and economically into Russia’s orbit, and promote regional security cooperation as a vehicle to facilitate and legitimate use of force in the region.
- Prevent the expansion of economic and military blocs (e.g., EU and NATO) on Russia’s borders.
- Pursue extended defense, and secure Russia by maintaining political influence and stability in outlying states. This raises the perceived value of some states, such as Ukraine and Belarus, beyond which lies the majority of Russia’s population.
- Keep Moscow as the agenda setter in its region, retain regional power status to maintain influence in the near abroad.
- Restore Russia’s image at home, and convince other actors in the international community that Russia is a systemic power, i.e., a great power, with special privileges in the international system.
- Erode the political cohesion of adversary blocs to hinder their decision-making, taking the “wire brush” approach: challenging the alliance through small incremental steps that slowly accentuate or instill classical problems in alliance politics such as entrapment or abandonment.
- Reshape present-day European security arrangements, in which Russia has little voice, such that it can veto further changes in the regional security environment. Thus, Moscow wishes to recreate the Concert of Europe for conflict resolution, and defined spheres of influence akin to the post-WWII meeting in Yalta, 1945.

- Avoid use of force unless other instruments of national power fail to prevent losses, or are unable to secure vital national interests.
- Above all, Russian leadership, like other political establishments, seeks to retain power and avoid realizing costly losses in foreign policy which carry attendant losses in domestic politics.

Finally, when we view Russia's objectives through the lens of great power behavior in international politics, we can break them down into several overarching quests or strategic missions (Figure 4):

- Maximizing security, which may involve a host of behaviors driven by defensive concerns, but often translates into internal balancing and external balancing, seeking to check other powers. Both Russia's aggression in its near abroad and its military modernization at home are driven by a concern with security, heightened threat perceptions, driven by an asymmetry of power relative to the United States.
- A quest for hegemony, historically characteristic of great powers. This pursuit is principally revisionist, and arguably there are no status quo great powers. The Russian desire for a privileged sphere of influence is a quest for regional hegemony based on maximizing power. Great powers cannot trust the intentions of others, and they do not know how much power is enough, thus when given the opportunity they seek more.
- Ending American primacy, or the unipolar nature of power distribution in the international system in favor of a multipolar one. This is a great power quest to balance the dominant power in the international system, and reduce the asymmetry, though not necessarily challenge it directly. It is best thought of as a "stretch goal."

Figure 4. Broad drivers of Russian strategy



Source: CNA

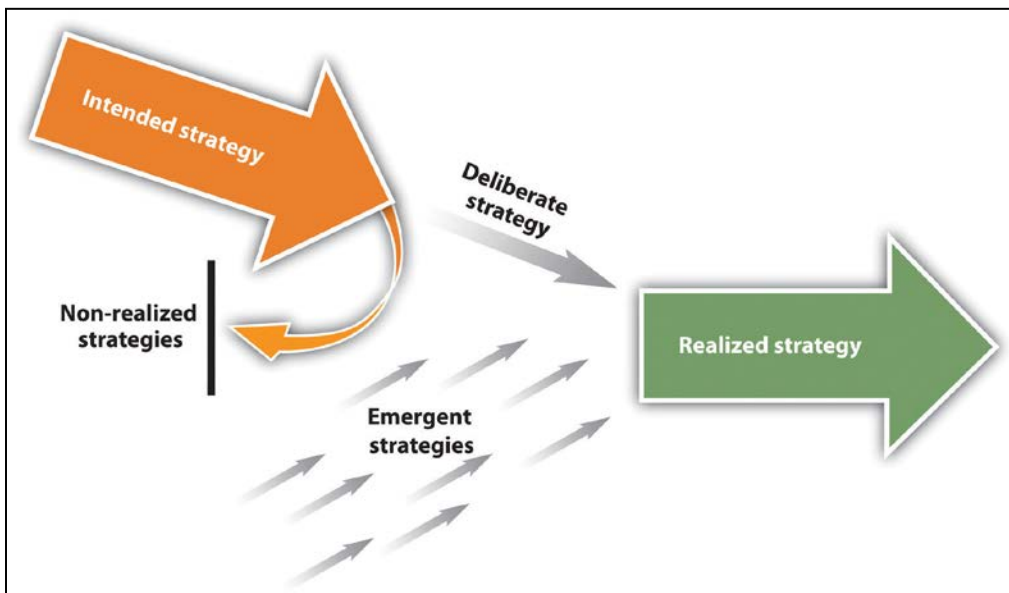
Russian strategic calculus

There are varying definitions of strategy, but perhaps the best way to think of it is as a theory of victory on how to achieve leverage in any particular situation. If done right, strategy results in power or the ability to shape events towards one's desired political end state—but that is what strategy should deliver, not what strategy is. Strategy at its essence is the hypothesis a country employs to gain decisive leverage. This should be thought of within the broader rubric of coercive diplomacy and competitive risk taking—that is, how a country, given its strategic objectives,

assessment of its operating environment (possible means and ways), and decision-making culture, is likely to pursue such leverage.

Russian strategy in conflict is best described as emergent, which is common to both large infrastructure companies and numerous successful business startups. This approach is based on expecting to fail fast, fail cheap, and adapt (Figure 5). That is, it accepts failure as the price of testing a particular hypothesis and quickly improvises towards success. The method is Darwinian, **favoring quick cycles of decision-making and reevaluation over a well-thought-through deliberate strategy** based on an ends- ways-means planning process. Desired political ends remain constant, while operational objectives change as Russian leadership tests different hypotheses on what will attain leverage over the adversary—i.e., operational objectives are tied to theories of victory. As the theory changes, the attendant operational objectives are also altered.

Figure 5. Depiction of emergent strategy vice deliberate strategy



Source: <http://open.lib.umn.edu/strategicmanagement/chapter/1-3-intended-emergent-and-realized-strategies/>.

Stratagems that are not realized, or proven non-viable, are discarded, and resources are put towards those that show greater likelihood of success. This favors flexibility and avoids path dependence, meaning that Russia does not commit to either political or military formulations at the outset of a conflict. The best way to conceptualize

this is as a lean strategy, which emerges from a series of decisions taken towards the desired end state, each one having the potential to attain decisive leverage in the conflict, such as to compel the sought-after outcome.³¹

In Russia's case there is a strong predilection for achieving favorable political outcomes through coercive use of force, or leveraging the diplomacy of violence in order to achieve objectives at bargain prices. While it may seem a truism that all countries seek to minimize their costs in conflict, that is not necessarily so: some seek rapid dominance and escalation, while others, including Moscow, prefer gradualism. Some engage in post-conflict settlement and reconstruction, while **Russia eschews ownership of the battlespace** in order to avoid both potential quagmires and prolonged operations. Gradualism poses the risk of steady and ineffectual escalation, and requires careful maintenance of coercive power in order to keep adversaries convinced that a country's leaders are willing to escalate, but it also gives them greater freedom of action. This is of paramount importance to political establishments seeking to husband limited resources, and cautious to maintain domestic political support, which could always prove a liability.

The following are discernible elements of Russian strategy, or how Moscow attains leverage in conflicts:

- Establishing escalation dominance over the local adversary, and potential external actors, by convincing them that Russia has both the capability and the resolve to escalate use of force in pursuit of objectives.
- Using reasonable sufficiency, employing the minimum military power required to achieve objectives while retaining the bulk of force uncommitted. This maximizes coercive effect since the adversary knows that there could be much more pain to come. It also minimizes the cost of conflict and actual losses in combat.
- Employing force multipliers—leveraging locals, volunteers, and mercenaries—with Russian forces playing a decisive tipping role in direct engagements rather than absorbing the losses of day-to-day fighting themselves.
- Using ambiguity to slow down adversary decision-making processes, and confound risk calculus both in the target country and among Western counterparts. This also serves to preserve plausible deniability among domestic audiences, and deflect some of the political ramifications of engaging in conflict in the international arena.

³¹ Michael Kofman, "The Moscow School of Hard Knocks: Key Pillars of Russian Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, January 17, 2017.

- Using force in burst mode, attaining dominance on the battlefield in the short term toward a defined political objective, i.e., convincing the adversary that it cannot win or forcing it to sign a ceasefire agreement under duress. The goal is to spend as short a time as possible at the higher thresholds of conventional conflict and withdraw forces quickly so as to compel the adversary but retain flexibility.
- Taking indirect approaches and using non-military instruments, which are low cost, but are frequently ineffective without the threat and coercive effect of conventional military power. Hence, Russia seeks to retain coercive credibility, the belief that it can and will use military power, despite the fact that it seeks to avoid use of force and to attain its goals at lower costs.
- Seeking to “box in” a conflict space, deterring external actors from interference, so as to engage in a cycle of iterative approaches in order to find leverage over the adversary. This is best demonstrated in fencing off a small region of the adversary's territory and using it to leverage strategic concessions, i.e., Donbas in Ukraine, or Abkhazia in Georgia. Controlling or occupying large swaths of land is beyond the financial and manpower resources of the Russian government, and therefore it must establish leverage over countries by denying them territorial integrity, or sovereignty, without engaging in wanton expansionism.

Minimum and maximum goals

This framework seeks to establish types of goals that Russia may seek to pursue, breaking them down into roughly three categories: maximum, intermediate, and minimum. The concept behind splitting potential Russian objectives is that a state will typically have limited political goals in conflict, at various times minimalist, maximalist, and somewhere in between. This part of the framework seeks to define the highest goals that Russia may look to attain if given the opportunity, versus the lowest goals that Moscow will feel satisfied to have gained at the end of a conflict. In general, they do not correspond directly to the form of warfare used; however, the larger the political ambition, the greater the chance that Russia will rely on use of force, rather than other instruments of national power, to achieve it. The following are examples of the kinds of strategic objectives Russia is likely to pursue in the European theater, grouped by the likely intensity of the conflict.

These maximum goals are not exclusive, but the types of objectives sought will employ a much higher mix of conventional military power relative to other methods:

- Force the withdrawal of all non-local forces from the Baltic countries, making them second-tier NATO members within Russia's sphere of influence.

- Impose limited sovereignty on neighbors through force, controlling their strategic orientation through economic, political, and, if necessary, military means.
- Reverse effects of a Belarus color revolution, and prevent Belarus from leaving Russia's orbit by invading and taking control of key infrastructure.
- Directly challenge the NATO alliance through limited territorial grabs, imposition on the sovereignty of members, or use of force on member territory such that the alliance must weigh the costs of a response against the risk of political collapse.

Intermediate-level goals are likely to see a combination of coercive instruments at lower cost, but with conventional military power playing an important supporting role:

- Conduct a limited intervention, bidding for leverage, to establish a frozen conflict in a neighboring country.
- Intimidate with large-scale deployment of force on a country's borders in an effort to coerce the leadership to give political concessions.
- Engage in state-sponsored insurgency to destabilize the country, combining local fighters, nationalist volunteers, and available mercenaries for an expendable force.
- Employ various non-kinetic means of national power, including economic warfare, cyber-attacks, information warfare, diplomatic pressure, and targeted damage to infrastructure in order to punish the country in retaliation for having undesirable policies.

Minimum goals tend to call for the lower band of methods, most of which are non-kinetic:

- Engage in political warfare to shape internal political conditions in a manner more favorable to Russia. Bribe, infiltrate, and influence political parties inside the country that may bring about favorable policies if in power.
- Create a crisis in retaliation for prior hostile acts or unfavorable political developments, which may serve as casus belli, and undermine the country's government.
- Undermine faith in NATO as an alliance, disintegrate it from the inside through political warfare, or even break up the alliance altogether through gradualism/salami-slicing tactics.

- Leverage proxies and intelligence services to disrupt an adversary's national politics, or government writ in a particular region.

Gradualism encourages an approach that initially bids low and then seeks to escalate. But the quick cycles of decision-making in Russia mean that strategy will rapidly evolve—and **as lower-intensity tactics fail, Moscow will move up the escalation ladder**. Within only three months of the outbreak of fighting in Ukraine Russian tactics evolved from political warfare to state-sponsored insurgency, and to an intermediate-intensity approach seeking to combine irregular forces with regular units of the Russian army. By August 2014 Moscow had decided that this too had failed and overtly invaded Ukraine, with a brief period of high-intensity fighting in late August/early September of that year. In Syria this timeline was dragged out over several years of proxy conflict, 2011-2015, during which Russia sought to support the regime through various means that did not necessitate its direct involvement.

Russian operational objectives are closely married to the political objectives initially set and the strategy in play. They change throughout the course of a conflict as the strategy adapts and evolves, while political objectives remain constant. The higher the intensity of the conflict, the more fixed operational objectives are likely to be; at lower thresholds these are liable to stay emergent, i.e., Moscow will see what works and what it can get out of political or unconventional warfare. In analyzing Russia's purpose, it is easier to work back from the political objectives and emerging strategy than to examine the various activities that Moscow is engaged in, since these are often in pursuit of shifting operational objectives, and not necessarily representative of the actual plan.

Courses of action

In developing courses of action for how Russian leadership is liable to tackle a particular crisis, the decision-making process begins with a strategic assessment, then derivation of objectives, a deliberation on strategy—or what would most likely achieve leverage in the given situation, in order to deliver the ability to shape outcomes—and finally the courses of actions that subsequently should be taken. Courses of action are operations—that is, the ways Russia employs to achieve operational objectives that flow out of a given Russian strategy in conflict. For example, potential courses of action may include effecting regime change, seizing a part of a country, or engaging in a set of activities that will politically destabilize a country. Each one is tied to a given theory of victory, and includes a series of actions that Russian leaders believe will secure their objectives based on that particular theory.

Thus, COAs are the part of the analytical framework that explores how Russia may seek to achieve its goals, examining likely predilections for use of force, non-military

instruments, and combinations of conventional and irregular warfare, among other tools. In our formulation, no scenario features only one course of action; rather, different types of COAs are explored, depending on Russian objectives. Furthermore, the courses of action are dynamic and iterative, meaning that the framework is equally concerned with what happens if one COA fails and Russia chooses a different approach. As described above, strategic objectives remain constant, but strategy itself does not, and operational objectives flow from a given strategy.

Russian vulnerabilities

Vulnerabilities serve as constraints on Russian COAs, affecting the Russian government and military's ability and willingness to escalate a conflict in order to achieve maximum goals, versus de-escalating to avoid potential negative consequences. In planning operations and assessing viability, Russia would consider the following sets of vulnerabilities:

- **Manpower limitations:** Russia has a limited ground force, which keeps it from undertaking large-scale military operations. Russia can likely muster around 50,000-60,000 combat troops within a few weeks for high-end conflicts, and will likely require an additional 40,000+ support troops. This is sufficient to conduct moderate-sized military operations, but seizing and holding territory would require more forces. Given that the entire ground force is only around 330,000-340,000 strong and that only a portion is combat ready, Russia remains limited in the manpower available for offensive operations.
- **Lack of reserves:** As an offshoot of the above, Russia's reserve system for introducing reinforcements or replacing attritional units is still in the early stages of being built. A reserve system for deploying territorial defense battalions has been established, but it is meant for civil defense at home and guarding infrastructure, while the reserve system for active ground forces is in pilot phase.
- **Reform process and modernization:** The Russian military is still in an experimental phase after tumultuous reforms, several reorganizations, and continued changes to the force structure. The adjustments continue, and, despite a high state of readiness, at the command level it is difficult to imagine who is prepared to lead this ever-changing force into a high-end conflict. Russia's military is in a learning phase, integrating experiences from Ukraine and Syria into ongoing reforms and modernization/procurement, which will yield a more cohesive organization in coming years. Modernization is a net positive for Russian capabilities, though with some notable drawbacks: for example it limits the utility of reserves, since reservists lack training in new

equipment, i.e., they are unqualified to operate equipment developed since the late 1990s.

- **Horizontal escalation:** Russia has vast territory to defend, which offers depth and problems given the small number of forces available to defend it. Thus, Russia remains vulnerable to horizontal escalation. Moscow will also be worried that in case of conflict neighboring states might defect, abandoning existing agreements, or be compelled to offer assistance to Russia's adversaries.
- **Lack of allies:** Unlike NATO, Russia can draw on relatively few allies. Belarus is likely to acquiesce in Russian use of its territory, but will prove unwilling to actively participate in a Russian military campaign. Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) allies are not going to get involved in a fight with NATO and cannot realistically contribute much to the effort.
- **Economy/Sustainment:** low energy prices and a structurally dysfunctional economy, much of which is run in a feudal manner by oligarchs, continue to constrain Russia's options in terms of how long it can sustain high-intensity combat operations. This both limits Russian ambitions and drives its leadership towards adoption of lower-cost approaches. The cost of prolonged confrontation with NATO could be economically unsustainable and therefore politically not viable.
- **Domestic politics:** Russia's greatest constraint is domestic politics; the extent to which the body politic is willing to accept casualties is an inherent limit on all political systems, especially when it comes to wars of choice. Managing public opinion is always the top priority at home; hence, Russia must maintain exit strategies and avoid getting overly leveraged into a conflict where it cannot control the course of events, because the situation may turn sour and costly. Russian leadership seeks to avoid at all costs the types of defeat in foreign policy that are impossible to keep from affecting domestic politics.

Red lines and escalation points

The final sections of the analytical framework examine likely Russian red lines and escalation points, structuring the discussion in terms of “theories of defeat” or what happens when Moscow realizes that its strategy in the conflict has failed. In the case studies proposed, the analysis also accounts for black swans, or what causes unintended escalation—the sort of events which occur as a conflict progresses and cause risks to multiply. In planning military operations and campaigns, Russia will also be highly cognizant of its redlines and other potential points of escalation, such as the following:

- Potential loss of Russian territory
- Large-scale conventional strikes against critical Russian infrastructure or high-value civilian targets
- Unacceptably high combat casualties
- Impending destruction or suppression of Russia's integrated air defense systems
- Damage or loss to important nuclear command and control or early warning infrastructure, which may be intended or unintended
- Horizontal escalation of fighting to other regions in Russia
- Political warfare against Russia that may destabilize the country from within
- Economic warfare intended to cause shock to the system (Disconnecting Russia from SWIFT for example)
- Prospect for regime change, through either popular mobilization or elite dissatisfaction.

Theories of defeat

There is no actual “theory of defeat” in Russian military or strategic thought, but the concept is intended to be a useful analytical exercise in emulation to force a conversation on a critical question: **At what point does Russian leadership believe that its given strategy in conflict has failed, and what is it likely to do next?** The purpose is to develop a more comprehensive framework that is dynamic, and does not simply offer Russian “plays” but instead considers those later moments of a conflict vignette, and what a national security establishment is likely to do when faced with failure. Would Russian leadership escalate, or seek an exit strategy?

The theory of defeat is a conceptual construct married to the previously discussed “theory of victory.” A set of approaches to achieve operational objectives ultimately has some theory of victory tied to it, a strategy being pursued. Similarly, a decision to escalate or de-escalate is based on an evaluation of what has hitherto transpired, and is de facto the outcome of an assessment process. This discussion is intended to emulate what critical factors would lead Russian leadership to assess that its strategy has failed, and ask what happens next. Does Russia throw more resources after bad? Escalate vertically to seek a settlement? Or abandon the quest entirely?

These decisions are inherently linked to the interests at stake, and close the analytical loop with how the conflict began—i.e., the strategic objectives and the strategic assessment at the outset form the inputs into whether Russian leadership is likely to undertake escalatory steps or withdraw. This section flows into the final two components of the framework, which look at exit/escalation strategies and potential “black swan” events.

Exit/Escalation strategies and black swans

Russian strategy is heavily weighted towards mitigating risk for itself and for the political leadership. Hence, **de-escalation is equally part of the Russian plan**. This may include using plausible deniability so that forces can be introduced and withdrawn from the conflict, rebalancing force posture from regular to volunteer units, announcing official withdrawals and segmenting campaigns such that domestic audiences do not perceive them to be prolonged operations, and signing agreements to consolidate gains. In general, the Russian approach seeks to avoid worst-case outcomes that could force it towards escalation in order to resolve the conflict, or terminate hostilities, because with escalation comes the compound risk that events will enter a spiral decision-making pattern or fall victim to unanticipated events.

Black swans are an important final factor to consider. Examples are the shooting down of MH-17 in July 2014, Assad’s use of chemical weapons in Syria, and the sudden choice by a leader friendly to Russia to flee, as in the case of Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. These may impose new political realities, lead to escalation or a new confrontation between the parties, and add new potential paths onto which the conflict can deviate, unanticipated by those involved. The analytical framework does not model Russian behavior, but considers what it might be in such scenarios, and examines how black swans may push the Russian leadership to consider an escalatory or de-escalatory path in the conflict.

Russian Grey-Zone Incursion in Latvia

Scenesetter

In the late spring of 2017, street protests erupt in Daugavpils, a city in southeastern Latvia (Figure 6), following the fatal shooting of an unarmed ethnic Russian resident by a Latvian police officer during a traffic stop. Stirred up by Russian-language radio and TV reports, which captured the incident on tape, as well as social media, these protests soon begin spreading to other Russian-speaking parts of the city and outlying areas. After two days, the local authorities dispatch extra police to the affected areas from other non-ethnic Russian parts of Daugavpils and a number of arrests are made.

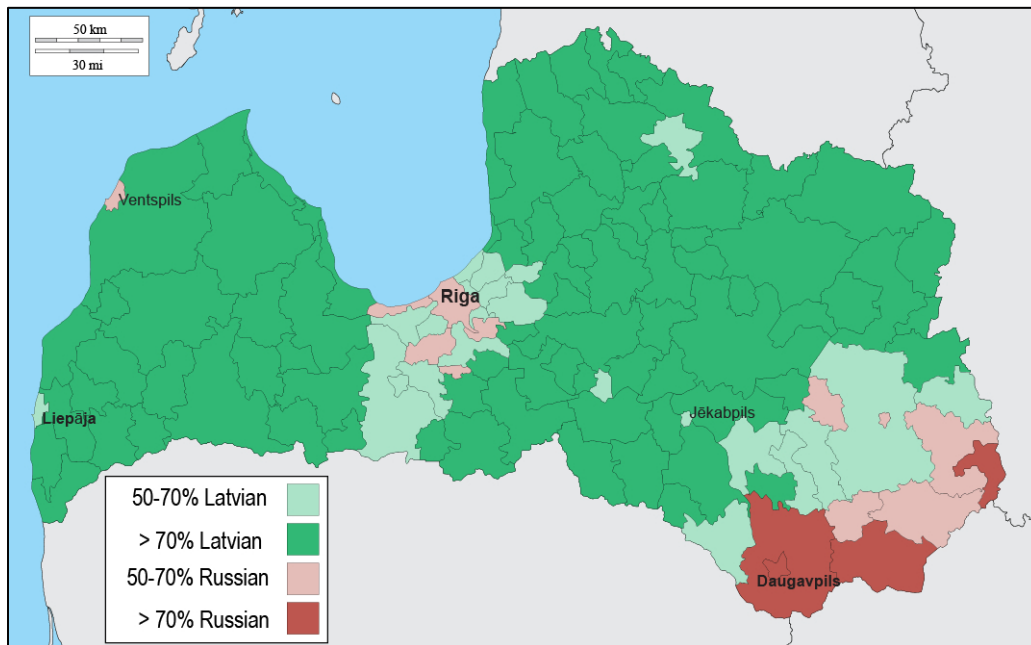
Figure 6. Political Map of Latvia



Source: CNA

Far from quelling the protests, however, these incidents only serve to further enflame the protesters. Moreover, due to widespread Russian-language media coverage, the protests begin spreading to other Latvian areas having a large Russian-speaking populace (Figure 7). Within a week, these demonstrations evolve into a general protest against the government as a whole over a range of grievances, including economic inequality, language discrimination, and lack of voting rights for ethnic Russians. Some protesters begin calling for immediate nationwide reforms as a condition for ending the protests.

Figure 7. Key ethnic areas in Latvia



Source: CNA

Soon thereafter, one of the demonstrations in Daugavpils turns unruly, and when Latvian police and security forces are called in to restore order, clashes break out, resulting in the deaths of three more ethnic Russians, injuries on both sides, and multiple arrests. These incidents only serve to spark further unrest, as Russian-based broadcast stations and social media outlets begin to weigh in, keeping up a steady stream of invectives against the “heavy-handed tactics” of the “fascist” Latvian government and its police and security forces, while further egging on the protesters. Increasingly fearing for their safety, many ethnic Latvians begin fleeing predominantly Russian-speaking areas where protests are taking place, exacerbating an already tense situation. Of particular concern to the Latvian government are ongoing protests across the capital, Riga, by ethnic Russians, who are calling on

Mayor Ushakov, an ethnic Russian himself, “to stand with them against the malign influence of the West.”

After two weeks, with the protests showing no signs of dissipating, the Latvian national government issues a broad proclamation declaring the protests to be illegal, ordering them to be immediately disbanded, imposing a dusk-to-dawn curfew in affected areas, and announcing stern new measures to arrest all those who continue to demonstrate. At the same time, the Latvian authorities plan to move additional security forces into the affected areas. In response, Russian officials in Moscow continue to urge calm on both sides. They strongly condemn the Latvian government for over-reacting, while simultaneously criticizing the mistreatment of ethnic Russians, which they proclaim is the root cause of the problem. In defiance of the government ban, protesters continue to hold late-night rallies, showing no signs of yielding to its demands. At the same time, some of the protest groups are now calling for greater autonomy for ethnic Russian regions of the country, and even outright independence from Latvia, while also requesting Russian assistance.

Strategic assessment

The first thing to note is that Russia views the unfolding situation in Latvia quite differently than it did some of the other recent crises in the post-Soviet space, especially those involving Georgia and Ukraine. The principal difference in this case is that the **stakes for Russia are not nearly as compelling as they were in Georgia and Ukraine**. In the latter two cases, all of the factors most likely to trigger a forceful Russian response (as identified in the preceding chapter) were present in the unfolding crises. These include Russia’s desire to maintain regional predominance over the states in its near abroad, its need to preserve security buffers around its borders, and its desire to prevent further expansion of Western economic, political, and military blocs into Russia’s neighborhood in order to preserve Moscow’s ability to set the agenda in that region. Ultimately, therefore, the scenarios unfolding in both Ukraine and Georgia represented a fundamental threat to Russia’s great power aspirations.

In the current scenario, Russia’s interests are not nearly as compelling, because Russia is facing a diametrically different situation in Latvia than it did in either Georgia or Ukraine. In the latter two countries, Russia was facing the prospect of a potentially catastrophic loss of power and influence if either of these states joined NATO against its express wishes; by contrast, in Latvia, the need to avert a similar major loss in its geopolitical position is simply not present since Latvia is already perceived to be outside of Russia’s sphere of influence. While Moscow tends to view the situation in Eastern Europe as a zero sum game, both Latvia and the other Baltic States have already largely succeeded in extricating themselves from Russia’s grip by becoming full-fledged members of NATO and the European Union. In short, Latvia

has already been lost to Russia, and the geopolitical impact of that loss has been fully absorbed into Russia's strategic thinking.

To be sure, Russia would benefit both politically and militarily if it were able to achieve greater control over Latvia (and its two Baltic neighbors) as that would allow Russia to strengthen its position as the dominant regional power in the former Soviet spaces while simultaneously enhancing its security. However, if Moscow extended its influence over Latvia, its gains would be comparatively tiny and hardly worth the enormous risks involved in realizing them. Moreover, such gains can easily be overstated, since Latvia's territory is simply too small to provide much of a security buffer for Russia. For the same reason, there are clear limits to the number of Western military forces that can be deployed in the country, so the actual threat to Russia from such forces remains fairly limited. Finally, the NATO-Russia Founding Act further limits the number of Western forces that can be permanently deployed in Latvia. Thus, the actual threat to Russia from a Latvia that remains aligned with the West is simply not very significant.

Still, Russia is concerned about the situation because it has several important interests at stake in Latvia, and therefore has something to lose if the crisis is mishandled. For one thing, Moscow wants to ensure that the crisis is resolved in a way that minimizes the negative impact on the ethnic Russian populace in Latvia. As mentioned above, Russia's leadership still believes that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a disaster for those Russians who found themselves outside the borders of the new Russian Federation. At the same time, the Kremlin has found it politically expedient both at home and abroad to position itself as the defender and champion of ethnic Russians everywhere. Domestically, such policies have been popular with the public, and thus have helped shore up support for the regime. Regionally, they have also played a key role in the Kremlin's strategy for maintaining influence in neighboring countries, thereby contributing to Russia's quest to regain its former dominance in the former Soviet space.

For all of these reasons, the Kremlin has placed a significant amount of its prestige and its credibility on the line by vowing to protect Russian compatriots located outside the borders of the Russian Federation.³² While this is a relatively ambiguous political commitment (akin to the West's commitment to a Europe whole, free, and at peace), if Moscow were to stand by idly while the Latvian authorities forcefully suppressed the protest movement, Russia's compatriot policy would lose much of its credibility overseas, while the Kremlin would also suffer a loss of domestic support.

³² See Russia's 2013 Foreign Policy Concept (applicable provisions are cited in Spruds, Andris, Karlis Bukovskis and Illyija Bruge, *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy 2017 Yearbook*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs. 2017, 135. <http://liia.lv/en/publications/latvian-foreign-and-security-policy-yearbook-2017-577>).

Such an outcome might also leave the ethnic Russian populace in Latvia in a weakened political state, which would undercut Russia's influence in the country.

Moreover, even if it refrains completely from taking action in Latvia, Moscow fears that the crisis is likely to have adverse consequences for Russia. For one thing, Russia is concerned that it will face a further deterioration in its relations with the West. Given what happened in Ukraine, Moscow is likely to be accused of complicity in the protests, both by the Latvian government and by the West, which will suspect it of using "hybrid war" tactics to inflame the crisis. The Kremlin fears that this could lead to increased tensions with the West, with the potential for additional sanctions as well.

Moscow is also concerned that tensions arising out of the crisis could further damage the already-strained economic ties between Russia and Latvia. While Russia is not overly dependent on trade with Latvia, it remains Latvia's fourth largest trading partner, with an 8 percent share of its total trade volume.³³ This gives Russia considerable influence over Latvia. Consequently, if trade were to decline further as a result of the crisis, or if key Russian stakeholders were to lose their interests in Latvian businesses, Moscow's influence in the country would be diminished.

The Kremlin is also concerned that NATO will use the crisis as a pretext to further beef up its military forces in the country in order to deter similar actions in the future. Such moves would work to the detriment of Russia's own security. A NATO enhanced military presence in the Baltic State states would also further isolate Kaliningrad from the rest of Russia.

Despite such potential losses, Moscow finds the gains it could achieve by deftly exploiting the crisis to be even more compelling. In fact, the Kremlin sees the crisis much more as an **opportunity for strengthening its strategic position in Europe** than as a significant threat to its vital interests. If it can effectively support ethnic Russians in Latvia, for example, it stands a good chance of enhancing its image as the defender of Russians everywhere, thereby reinforcing its compatriot policy, while causing a chill in other countries having a large ethnic Russian contingent. More importantly, the Kremlin views the crisis as an opportunity for achieving greater influence over the Latvian government, which in its view has been overtly hostile towards Russia in recent years.

By using the protests as a means of undermining stability in Latvia, for example, Russia seeks to compel the Latvian government to adopt a more conciliatory stance towards Russia in order to avoid further destabilization. Even better, if the Kremlin can use the protests as a means of achieving greater political participation for ethnic

³³ Latvian Foreign and Security Policy 2017 Yearbook, 133.

Russians in Latvia, it might achieve an even more substantial reorientation of Latvian policy towards Russia.

Just as importantly, Moscow sees the crisis as a potential opportunity for improving its overall geopolitical position in Europe. If it can demonstrate NATO's relative impotence in combatting Russian subversive efforts in Latvia, Moscow could succeed in undermining Riga's confidence in NATO. This would help weaken alliance cohesion at a time when Moscow's growing military presence in Kaliningrad is already undermining the confidence of NATO's eastern partners in the alliance's ability to defend them.

If successful, this strategy would **significantly weaken NATO's credibility**, which could well lead Latvia and the other Baltic States to become more accommodating towards Russia. Over time, it might even generate a bandwagoning effect in which Latvia and potentially the other Baltic States would all realign with Russia as a means of averting further aggression. This would help restore much of Russia's lost geopolitical presence in the Baltic Sea region, while also enhancing its ability to support Kaliningrad.

Even if the Kremlin could achieve only a portion of such strategic gains, Russia's image as an effective power broker would be further reinforced, and its recent string of geopolitical victories over the West would be extended. For all of the foregoing reasons, Moscow will be sorely tempted to exploit the crisis as a means of achieving substantial strategic effects on its Western flank.

However, in contemplating further action, Russia must be cognizant of the risks involved if it intervenes in the crisis. These include a potential hardening of Latvia's position towards Russia coupled with a further loss of Russian influence in the country as the populace turns against it and removes pro-Russian leaders (such as the current mayor of Riga) from the few influential positions they currently hold. Moscow's actions could also generate too much instability in Latvia, which could lead to unwanted escalation in the region, while also generating spillover effects into Russia itself. Moreover, the crisis could lead NATO to post additional troops in the Baltics. Even worse, Moscow might find itself involved in a full-scale crisis with NATO. Thus, if Russia is not careful in managing the crisis, it could end up significantly worse off than it would have been had it done nothing.

Strategic objectives

In this conflict, Russia has two key strategic objectives:

- Use the crisis as a means for achieving significant geopolitical gains at the local, regional, and global levels.

- At the local level, Moscow seeks to deter Latvia from forcibly suppressing the ethnic Russian protests, while defending the ethnic Russian populace, in order to vindicate Russia's compatriot policy. It also seeks to increase its influence in Latvia by pressuring Latvia's ruling elites into moderating their political stance towards Russia, providing greater political participation for ethnic Russians, and reorienting their foreign policy in ways benefitting Russia.
- At the regional and international levels, Moscow seeks to undermine the credibility and cohesion of the NATO alliance, thereby strengthening Russia's geopolitical position in the Baltics and in Eastern Europe more broadly while inflicting a political defeat on NATO. Ultimately, Moscow seeks to build on this development to achieve a more sweeping and more enduring reorientation of Latvia's political alignment away from NATO and towards either neutrality or realignment with Russia.
- Manage the crisis in a way that avoids or minimizes damage to Russia's geopolitical position at the local, regional, and global levels.
 - Locally, Moscow seeks to avoid three adverse outcomes: (1) Russia is unable to effectively support the ethnic Russian protesters and suffers a loss of prestige when they are forcibly suppressed by the Latvian security forces and/or their NATO allies; (2) Russian backing for the crisis results in a hardening of Latvia's policies towards Russia, a weakening of pro-Russian elements in the country, and a corresponding loss of Russia's economic and political influence in Latvia; and (3) the "catastrophic success" situation where Russian backing for the crisis, intended to further destabilize the situation in Latvia, is too successful leading to excessive and undesirable political instability in Latvia, which causes Russia to become entrapped in a prolonged conflict, a quagmire with substantial spillover effects in the region.
 - At the regional and international levels, Moscow seeks to avert an effective NATO response that turns the tide of the crisis in Latvia's favor, inflicts a political defeat on Russia, and leads to a substantial increase in NATO's military presence in the country.

Thus, Moscow has a mix of both positive and negative strategic objectives. It seeks to exploit the crisis to realize strategic gains but has to balance this desire with the need to avoid strategic losses.

Strategy

Russia's strategy for achieving its objectives in Latvia is based on its overall assessment of the situation. Moscow will calibrate its approach to reflect the prevailing geopolitical conditions and what is at stake for Russia in terms of both potential gains and losses.

In this case, two factors will serve to limit Russia's strategic options. First, as noted above, the stakes are not as high for Russia in this scenario, as it has much less to lose than it did in Ukraine in 2014, for example. There, Russia was facing the defection of a key geopolitical partner intended to play a central role in Moscow's project to reintegrate the former Soviet states. Faced with such a loss, Russia acted vigorously and took significant risks to avert this outcome.

By contrast, Latvia is already a member of both NATO and the EU; thus, the potential losses facing Russia in this crisis are not nearly as compelling as they were in Ukraine. Of course, by carefully exploiting the crisis, Russia has the potential to realize significant strategic gains—but the Kremlin tends to be more risk averse when faced with a potential geopolitical gain than it is when attempting to avert a serious loss. Thus, Russia's actions in this case are likely to be significantly more restrained.

Second, unlike Ukraine, Latvia is a full NATO member. Consequently, Russia's available military options will be much more limited. While Latvia's military capabilities are negligible, Russia must also factor NATO's military capabilities into its calculus. A direct Russian military incursion into Latvia would likely trigger NATO's Article V commitments, leading to a potential major military confrontation with NATO.

Moreover, as NATO commanders have made clear, Article V would also likely apply if Russia employed the kind of gray-zone methods it used in eastern Ukraine.³⁴ When NATO forces are factored into the analysis, the prevailing military balance is highly unfavorable to Russia. While it is true that NATO only has limited forces deployed in Latvia itself, they could act as a tripwire, triggering a much more vigorous NATO response.

Given the limited stakes involved in Latvia, **Moscow will be highly reluctant to risk a major military confrontation with NATO through overt use of Russian military forces.** This view is also consistent with the tenets of prospect theory, which hold

³⁴ "NATO Commander: We Need to Be Ready for Little Green Men," *VOA News*, August 17, 2014. <http://www.voanews.com/a/nato-commander-says-alliance-needs-to-be-ready-for-new-type-of-warfare/2416614.html>.

that a major nuclear power will strive at all costs to avoid a major military confrontation with a peer nuclear power over stakes that are relatively trivial in nature. Instead, the Kremlin will calibrate its use of military power in a way that avoids provoking a serious military confrontation with NATO.

Given these constraints, the Kremlin will be careful to limit both the level of risk and the level of effort it will take on in this scenario. Priority will be given to use of non-military instruments of power, while military force will be employed sparingly, and primarily as a means of deterring or averting worst-case outcomes. **The essence of this strategy will be to employ limited means to obtain limited operational gains which collectively yield compound strategic effects.**

Specifically, as in the other scenarios described in this report, the Kremlin is likely to develop a two-pronged strategy for Latvia: one for compelling Latvia, and one for deterring NATO. The first prong will be designed to bring coercive pressure to bear in Latvia in order to compel the Latvian government to make the desired political concessions. The second will be designed to deter NATO and other outside powers from intervening in the crisis in order to avoid undesirable escalation and potential worst-case outcomes for Moscow. While at a minimum, Moscow is seeking to influence Latvia's geopolitical orientation towards Russia, if conditions permit, Russia seeks to achieve even more sweeping goals, including a fundamental weakening of Latvia's attachment to Western economic and military institutions and eventually a fundamental reorientation in its geopolitical alignment.

In order to achieve its goals in Latvia, Russia's strategy will have to take into account all of the various power centers within Latvia in order to determine the specific centers of gravity that its strategy will target. These power centers include the following:

- **Latvian government.** The current government is controlled primarily by ethnic Latvian political elites. Many of them hold strongly pro-Western views; many are also highly distrustful if not overtly hostile toward Russia. Latvia's ruling elites fully control the country's national policy. Therefore, any concessions sought by Russia will need to be granted by the government.
- **The ethnic Russian populace.** The ethnic Russian populace represents a substantial minority (26%) of the country's population.³⁵ While a number of ethnic Russians have obtained citizenship, many others are classed as "non-citizens," which prohibits them from voting, holding key government jobs and running for office. Russia will need to rely on the support of the ethnic Russian

³⁵ Carol J. Williams, "Latvia, with a large minority of Russians, worries about Putin's goals," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2015.

populace to sustain the protest movement and exert influence on the Latvian government.

- **Latvian military/security forces.** Latvia has a small but relatively well trained and equipped military consisting of around 5,300 troops in total as of 2016.³⁶ Latvia's sole infantry brigade together with a Special Forces unit constitute the principal combat units the country. In addition, Latvian security forces include the National Guard, a reserve force comprising approximately 8,000 troops and an armed border guard force.³⁷ Russia will need to deter these forces from suppressing the protest movement and/or interfering with Russian operations in the country.
- **NATO.** As a full member of NATO, Latvia enjoys the benefits of the alliance's Article V commitment. To give greater assurances to Latvia, the alliance committed at the 2016 Warsaw Summit to increase its military presence in Latvia by deploying a rotational battlegroup to the country, led by Canada. NATO has also developed plans for moving forces rapidly into the Baltics in the event of conflict. Shaping NATO's response to the crisis in Latvia and deterring NATO from intervening in the crisis will be a key challenge for Russia in managing the crisis.
- **The European Union.** Latvia is also a member of the European Union. As such, it is subject to EU security obligations, which play a backup role to those of NATO. As a practical matter, Finland and Sweden are the only non-NATO EU members that could potentially intervene in the crisis. Russia will need to deter this from happening. Otherwise, the EU is likely to limit its response to economic and diplomatic measures. Russia will seek to calibrate its activities to avoid provoking the EU to impose significant additional sanctions against Russia.
- **The Latvian economy.** Latvia has a relatively small economy with a GDP of just USD\$27 billion. Russia plays a significant role in the Latvian economy, which is also heavily dependent on Russia for its energy supply. Russia could use this dependence to its advantage during the crisis.
- **Geography.** Latvia is a relatively small country, wholly lacking in strategic depth. It is also located on Europe's periphery, far from the bulk of NATO's military forces, and relatively isolated from the rest of Europe by virtue of

³⁶ The Military Balance 2017, p. 67.

³⁷ Robert Nurick and Magnus Nordenman, eds., "Nordic-Baltic Security in the 21st Century: The Regional Agenda and the Global Role," *The Atlantic Council*, September 2011, p. 3.

Russia's control in Kaliningrad. Given its precarious position, NATO will be hard-pressed to defend the country from a Russian incursion in a future military contest.

However, short of Russia's outright conquest of the country, achieving the kinds of concessions Moscow is seeking will require Riga's full cooperation. Therefore, Russia's strategy will need to focus primarily on obtaining sufficient leverage over the Latvian government to compel the desired political outcomes. Thus, the Latvian government will of necessity constitute the principal center of gravity in Russia's strategy.

Locally, Moscow's strategy will be designed to target Latvia's principal center of gravity. In this case, Russia is pursuing multiple strategic objectives in Latvia. For one thing, it is seeking to prevent the ethnic Russian protest movement in Latvia from being forcibly suppressed by the government. It also hopes to bring about favorable political changes in the country, including a moderation of Latvia's current political stance towards Russia.

If conditions permit, Russia seeks to achieve even more sweeping goals, including a fundamental weakening of Latvia's attachment to Western economic and military institutions and eventually a fundamental reorientation in its geopolitical alignment. However, short of Russia's outright conquest of the country, achieving these kinds of concessions will require Riga's full cooperation. Russia's strategy must therefore focus on obtaining sufficient leverage over the Latvian government to compel the desired political outcomes. Thus, the Latvian government will of necessity constitute the center of gravity in Russia's strategy.

To obtain such influence, Moscow will employ a range of political, economic, and military measures in Latvia. These will include use of information operations, to shape internal perceptions; economic measures and political subversion, to further destabilize the situation and bring additional pressure to bear on the government; and, if necessary, measured military action, to support the ethnic Russian protesters and deter the government from using excessive force to suppress them. In this last case, Russia will not seek to prevent the government altogether from employing force against the protesters so long as it is deterred from attempting to crush the protest movement completely. At a low level, Latvian use of force actually works to Moscow's advantage by increasing tensions between ethnic Russians and the Latvian authorities.

Moscow's strategy will also be designed to prevent NATO from intervening decisively in the crisis. To this end, Russia will employ a range of political and military tools. For one thing, Russia will use its arsenal of information weapons to try to shape Western perceptions by portraying the crisis in terms most favorable to the Kremlin's interests. Thus, the injustice of the Latvian position will be emphasized and contrasted with the legitimacy of the ethnic Russian cause. At the same time, Moscow

will attempt to present itself as a responsible actor in the crisis, while simultaneously championing the ethnic Russians.

Moscow will also attempt to manage escalation by setting the agenda, retaining the initiative, and adopting a gradualist approach to escalation in order to avoid provoking an aggressive Western response. Should the crisis start to get out of hand, Moscow will engage in diplomatic efforts at the bilateral and multilateral levels in an attempt to keep it from escalating further. If necessary, Russia will also deploy military forces in a manner intended to deter NATO intervention. This could include massing of Russian forces on the border and deploying precision strike and other key capabilities, in order to leverage its continuing escalation dominance in the Baltic region to affect NATO's strategic calculus. Thus, for deterrence purposes, NATO constitutes the center of gravity of Russia's strategy.

Minimum and maximum goals

This scenario represents a significant strategic challenge for Russia, because, on the one hand, if the crisis is mishandled (and even if the Kremlin elects to do nothing at all), Russia stands a good chance of suffering significant damage to both its prestige and its geopolitical standing in the Baltic Region. On the other hand, if it can wisely exploit the crisis, Moscow has a real opportunity to realize even greater geopolitical gains in the Baltics region and in Europe more broadly. Thus, Russia must simultaneously attempt to avert a loss of Russian influence in Latvia, a hardening of Latvia's policies towards Russia, and a deterioration of the overall military balance in the Baltics. At the same time, Moscow must attempt to leverage the crisis to achieve an increase in Russia's influence in Latvia, a moderation of Latvia's policies towards Russia, and, if all goes well, a substantial weakening of the NATO alliance. Yet these goals are not all equally important for Russia; moreover, some of them are more readily achievable than others. Thus, it is best to consider them as lying on a spectrum ranging from least to most important.

Therefore, in formulating its courses of action for the scenario, Russia will select a set of minimum, intermediate, and maximum goals to allow it to flexibly pursue different ends, depending on how the crisis evolves. This approach permits Moscow to vary its actions to achieve the best obtainable outcome from the crisis, depending on circumstances, while maintaining the flexibility to adapt as the scenario unfolds.

In this scenario, Russia's **minimum goal** will be to ensure that the ethnic Russian protests are resolved on terms reasonably satisfactory to Moscow in order to demonstrate Russia's continuing influence in Latvia and to vindicate Russia's compatriot policy. Here neither side gets all that it wants. To achieve this goal, Russia has to prevent Latvia from forcibly suppressing the ethnic Russian protest movement, as such suppression would lead to reduced Russian influence in the

country and a weakening of the ethnic Russian base, while simultaneously undermining the credibility of Russia's compatriot policy.

As an **intermediate goal**, Russia seeks to coerce the Latvian government to alter Latvia's policies and geopolitical orientation in ways more favorable to Russia. This shift could include granting ethnic Russian nationals greater participation rights in Latvia's political system (including citizenship, voting rights, and the right to obtain government jobs) and/or to otherwise moderate its political stance towards Russia.

Russia's **maximum goal** is to coerce the Latvian government into making even more sweeping political concessions in return for ending the crisis, such as granting ethnic Russians greater participation in the political process (compared to the level achieved as part of the intermediate goal), and providing a specified level of guaranteed participation for them in the government (minority rights) and/or some degree of autonomy, while adopting a more conciliatory stance towards Russia, such as agreeing to guaranteed limits on NATO forces in the country.

In deliberating its courses of actions, Russia would adopt an iterative approach. Specifically, Moscow will develop three separate courses of action (COAs), each constituting separate steps on an escalatory ladder. Thus, there will be low-, medium-, and high-end COAs, described in shorthand as political coercion (low-end option), compellence through political warfare (mid-end option), and gray zone incursion (high-end option). All of them depend to some degree on the use of military force for the purposes of deterrence and/or compellence, but only one of them (the high-end option) envisions covert use of military force inside Latvia itself.

Given the constraints on its actions identified above (relatively low stakes, and a high risk, due to Latvia's NATO membership), Russia is liable to start off at the low end, which is the least risky option, and then gradually escalate through the medium- to high-end options, depending on how the crisis evolves. So long as Moscow is able to keep the crisis relatively contained (avoiding major points of escalation), it will have no urgent need to end the crisis, because **in this scenario time works to Russia's advantage**: the longer the crisis persists, the more concessions the Latvians are likely to grant in order to resolve it. Moreover, there will be little risk of Russia incurring a major loss so long as the crisis is properly managed. Thus, Moscow can afford to allow the crisis to play out, increasing the chances that it will achieve a greater portion of its goals.

Courses of action

Moscow develops three potential courses of action for this crisis, each intended to occupy a separate rung on the escalatory ladder. The **low-end option** is designed to allow Russia to achieve its minimum goals in Latvia at the lowest possible cost.

Under this plan, Russia would rely primarily on information operations and diplomatic pressure to help shape the political environment and to sustain the protest movement long enough to force the Latvian government to make political concessions to reach a negotiated settlement. For this option, Russian military forces would be kept strictly on the sidelines; their sole purpose would be to help shape Latvia's overall political calculus.

Under this option, Russia would make extensive use of information operations in an attempt to place full blame for the crisis on Latvia because of its anti-ethnic Russian policies. Simultaneously, Russian-language media outlets inside Latvia would continue to stir up ethnic Russian resentment against the government by emphasizing the injustice of Latvia's current policies.

Moscow would also portray itself as a responsible actor, while simultaneously assuming the mantle of defender of ethnic Russians everywhere in order to carve out a legitimate role for itself in the crisis. By contrast, Russian media broadcasts would emphasize the incongruities between Latvia's policies and Western norms. Through such efforts, the Kremlin would hope to isolate Latvia, making it more difficult for Latvia to take decisive action against the protestors.

The Kremlin would also adopt a disapproving tone in its messaging to Latvia's leaders, criticizing them for their heavy-handed tactics, while urging them to negotiate with the protestors to resolve the crisis peacefully. Russian leaders would also signal through both public and diplomatic channels that further use of such tactics would seriously damage relations between Russia and Latvia. Such measures would reinforce Russia's efforts to deter Latvia from ending the protests forcefully.

The Kremlin's calculus here is to extend the crisis as long as possible, using low-cost methods in order to pressure Latvia to negotiate a settlement that grants certain concessions to the protestors. At the same time, the Kremlin would seek to avoid direct confrontation with either Latvia or the West by adopting a measured response, while leaving Latvia with a clear exit ramp. Moreover, the negotiated concessions would not need to be all that sweeping, so long as Moscow could claim that its compatriot policy was vindicated. For example, an agreement by the Latvian government to establish a commission to evaluate and make recommendations to redress ethnic Russian grievances would likely suffice.

The **mid-range option** is designed to allow Russia to achieve significantly more of its goals in Latvia, albeit at the cost of assuming appreciably greater risk and expense. Under this option, Russia would expand its campaign in Latvia to incorporate a broader range of non-military instruments, while adopting a more confrontational stance. Russia would also employ the military instrument more overtly in order to bring additional pressure to bear on Latvia while attempting to deter a potential NATO intervention. In short, under this option, Moscow would engage in out-and-out

economic and political warfare against Latvia, backed by the implicit threat of using military force to achieve more of its desired political objectives.

As part of this strategy, Russia would sharply escalate its information campaign against Latvia, adopting a much harsher tone in the process. Russian media outlets in both Russia and Latvia would relentlessly attack the Latvian authorities both for their poor handling of the crisis and for their continuing anti-ethnic Russian policies. The objective of this information campaign would be to sharply ratchet up tensions between the protesters and the government in order to further inflame the crisis, mobilize the ethnic Russian populace, and place the Latvian government on the defensive.

Moscow would also employ various economic weapons to further increase pressure on Latvia, including imposing an economic boycott on the purchase of certain Latvian products while limiting exports of specialized Russian goods. Moscow would also coordinate with Kremlin-affiliated private hacker groups in Russia to launch cyber-attacks against selected Latvian networks and servers in order to disrupt commercial activities, while maintaining deniability regarding Russia's involvement.

To increase pressure even more, Russia would place nearby military forces on a higher level of alert, while also moving selected military units from their bases to positions closer to Latvia's border under the guise of conducting snap military exercises. Such measures would be undertaken to deter Latvia from attempting to resolve the crisis by force, while also reminding NATO that Russia retains local escalation dominance.

Thus, the mid-range option is designed to bring significantly greater pressure to bear on Latvia, in order to force it to make additional concessions to end the crisis. By employing a broader range of measures, the Kremlin brings more pressure to bear to prevent Latvia from suppressing the protesters. Once again, the Kremlin's strategy would be to extend the crisis as long as possible in order to pressure Latvia to negotiate a settlement to end the crisis. In this case, however, Russia would demand greater concessions as a condition for settlement, including full citizenship rights for ethnic Russians and the right to hold office. This would pave the way for them to obtain greater participation in the government, leading to a more favorable shift in Latvia's overall policies towards Russia.

The **high-end option** is designed to enable Russia to realize the maximum possible strategic gains from the crisis. Under this option, Moscow would significantly intensify its campaign in Latvia, placing much greater emphasis on the use of both economic power and military power to achieve its objectives (Figure 8). At this stage, the energy weapon would be employed to bring greater economic and political pressure to bear on the Latvian government. For example, Moscow might elect to intermittently disrupt supply of key energy resources, including oil, gas, and electricity to place added pressure on the government. Cyber operations would also

be intensified, in order to collect intelligence, aid the propaganda effort, and affect Latvian commercial and governmental activities.

Figure 8. Possible high-end Latvian scenario



Source: CNA

However, military power takes center stage under the high-end option. Within Latvia itself, Russia would engage in proxy warfare to further undermine Latvia's security, with ethnic Russian forces employing tactics similar to those used in eastern Ukraine. If necessary, Russia (or perhaps Belarus acting on its behalf) would also funnel light arms to these forces, and would insert limited numbers of intelligence forces and special operators into the country to advise and assist them. But such forces would be under strict orders not to engage in direct combat operations. Externally, Russia would mass forces on Latvia's border to deter a potential NATO intervention. At the same time, the Kremlin would offer the West an off-ramp by engaging in diplomatic efforts at either the U.N. or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) promising to use its influence to help end the crisis while urging that the ethnic Russians be granted their full civil liberties.

The Kremlin's calculus here is to use military power and energy in a coordinated manner to coerce the Latvian government into making the sweeping concessions needed for Russia to achieve its maximum goals, while simultaneously deterring NATO and offering it an exit ramp. While some of these actions could trigger NATO

Article V, Moscow is willing to risk this because (1) it doubts whether NATO would be able to reach consensus among all of its members to support military action against Russia in these circumstances; and (2) even if it did, Moscow calculates that NATO would limit its response to Latvia itself with the sole military objective of restoring the status quo ante.

Russian vulnerabilities

Russia's position vis-à-vis Latvia and the other Baltic States is not as strong as some analyses may indicate.³⁸ Although Russian forces in theater are much stronger than the forces that the Baltic States and their NATO allies can bring to bear in the short term, Russian leaders are concerned about the overall force balance between Russia and NATO. They would want to ensure that any conflict in the region would not result in horizontal escalation, which could expose Russian territory to defeat by the much larger and stronger U.S. military in a regional or even global conflict.

Similarly, Russia is hampered by its lack of allies, especially in the European theater. Although Belarus is a member of the CSTO and a Russian military partner, it would be unlikely to actively participate in a Russian military campaign (it might, however, reluctantly allow Russia to use its territory as a staging area in a conflict with NATO). Neither Russia's other CSTO allies nor China will want to get involved in a fight with NATO and (with the exception of China) would not be able to contribute significantly to the effort.

Finally, Russian leaders may be concerned about the impact of any kind of extended or costly intervention on Russian domestic politics. They will want to make sure that they avoid costly and long-lasting entanglements in Latvia that might result in the Russian public turning against the intervention. Such a situation would be especially likely if Western states pursued strong economic countermeasures that had a direct negative effect on the Russian economy or on Russians' ability to travel to Europe. For this reason, Russian leaders will seek to avoid both defeat and long-term entanglement in a conflict in Latvia.

³⁸ David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank*, RAND Research Report, 2016. http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.

Russian red lines and escalation/de-escalation drivers

As mentioned above, Moscow views the crisis more as an opportunity to realize strategic gains than as a threat to its vital interests. Thus, the stakes for Russia in this crisis are relatively low. While Russia will try to exploit the crisis to achieve as much as it can, it will only do so as long as its costs remain low. Consequently, the Kremlin will try to manage the crisis carefully, escalating gradually and only when absolutely required in order to avoid triggering a vigorous response.

Since Moscow's strategy relies on using the protest movement as the principal means of coercing Latvia into making the desired political concessions, the protests must be sustained long enough for Latvia to grant such concessions. Thus **any attempt by Latvia to end the protests by force would cross Russia's red line**, leading it to escalate its involvement by transitioning first from the low-end to the mid-range option, and later to the high-end option if necessary to force Latvia to abandon the attempt.

Russia's strategy also relies on avoiding a major crisis with NATO in order to keep its costs low. Therefore, if in response to Russia's actions NATO (and especially the United States) begins to move additional forces into Latvia, and/or if the United States begins to flow additional forces into Europe, the Kremlin would likely de-escalate the conflict, even at the risk of abandoning its goals. While Russia would probably defeat any NATO forces stationed in Latvia, such an action could trigger a broader war with NATO, something which the Kremlin would be eager to avoid.

By the same token, if the West were to respond to the crisis by imposing or threatening to impose costly new sanctions on Russia, then Russia might also seek to de-escalate the crisis. While Russia has been willing in the past (e.g., Ukraine) to absorb sanctions without altering its course, the stakes are not nearly as high for Russia in this case. Thus, if Moscow were unable to maintain its costs at a manageable level, it could well decide to de-escalate the crisis in order to avert further losses.

Russia would also try to avoid what was termed above as "catastrophic success"—i.e., generating so much instability in Latvia that the country collapses into civil war and chaos. If that were to happen, the Kremlin could well find itself entrapped in a quagmire with high economic and political costs. Consequently, if the situation in Latvia began to move in this direction, Moscow could very well decide it was time to de-escalate the crisis.

The dynamics of Russian decision-making on whether to escalate or de-escalate in such a scenario are discussed in a subsequent subsection of this report.

Theory of defeat

There are certain conditions that could cause Russia's efforts in Latvia to fail altogether or to raise the costs for Russia to an unacceptably high level, thereby leading Moscow to abandon its strategy:

1. **Suppression of the protest movement.** Despite the Kremlin's best efforts, Latvia might succeed in suppressing the protest movement without having to make any significant concessions to Russia or the protesters. This outcome represents a failure of Russia's compellence strategy towards Latvia, and would likely cause Moscow to abandon its strategy.
2. **Additional sanctions.** In response to Russia's actions, the West might impose or credibly threaten to impose significant additional economic and financial sanctions against Russia, including potentially cutting Russia off from the SWIFT financial network. The imposition of such sanctions would substantially raise the costs of the venture for Russia, likely leading it to abandon its strategy. This outcome represents a failure of the Kremlin's strategy of keeping its risks and costs low to avoid incurring serious losses.
3. **NATO show of force.** The United States and NATO might also decide to move substantial additional forces into Latvia and surrounding areas and/or redeploying additional military units from the United States to Europe. They might also engage in direct military operations inside Latvia, especially if the high-end option were invoked. Faced with such a strong show of force, Russia might decide once again to abandon its strategy. This outcome represents a failure of the Kremlin's strategy for deterring NATO intervention.

Exit/Escalation strategies

Russia would develop strategies to address each of these forms of potential failure. If Moscow perceives that the protest movement is in danger of failing, it would have essentially two options:

1. *Escalate to a higher course of action.* This would be the likely response if Russia believes that Latvian military or security forces are planning to decisively end the protest movement by force. Assuming the Kremlin believes there is still time to avert this outcome, it would shift to the next higher option on the escalation ladder in order to deter Latvia from taking this step. If time was of the essence, Russia might even skip a rung on the ladder (e.g., move immediately from the low-end to the high-end option) to prevent this outcome, although its preference for gradual escalation would tend to discourage such a

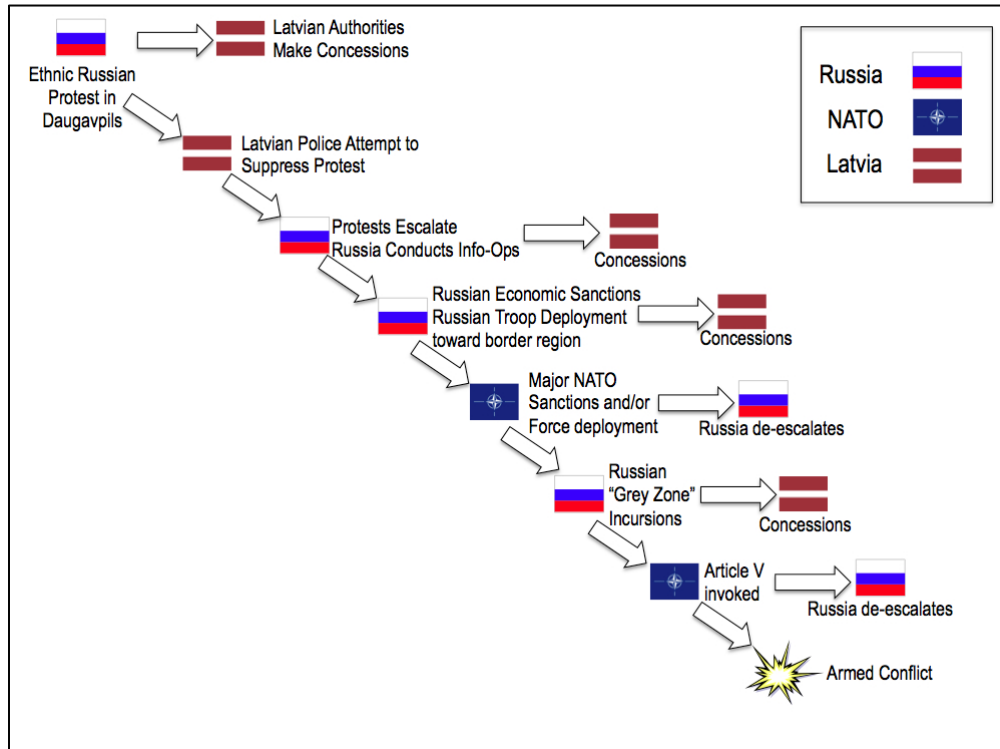
move. Since the various options are designed to be cumulative in nature, Russia can readily transition from one to the other by simply expanding and/or intensifying the scope of its activities. Note that escalation in this case should logically be treated as a response to the failure of a lower-tier option.

2. *Abandon its strategy and de-escalate the crisis.* If Moscow perceives that it is too late to prevent Latvia from forcefully crushing the protest movement or if the movement collapses of its own accord, Moscow would likely cut its losses and de-escalate the crisis as it would be unable to achieve significant additional gains without it. The protest movement could collapse if, for example, significant cleavages developed among the ethnic Russian populace due to lack of support, as happened in areas of eastern Ukraine in 2014. In this case, the Kremlin would choose to cut its losses, since it would be unwilling to intervene militarily with its own forces to defend the protesters given the asymmetry of interests involved. Russia can de-escalate quickly because its courses of action all require modest commitments and are therefore readily reversible. If Moscow felt it needed to do more to vindicate its compatriot policy, it could continue to criticize Riga after the fact, and it might even impose modest sanctions as well. However, Moscow would seek to avoid any action that would seriously disrupt Russian business (and other) ties in order to avert a further loss of influence in Latvia.

If the West imposed or threatened to impose costly new sanctions against Russia (such as cutting it off from SWIFT), and/or if the United States and NATO elected to make a significant show of force in Latvia (as discussed above), Moscow would also likely abandon its strategy. This move is logical, because it follows from the Kremlin's view that the stakes in Latvia are far too low to warrant the risk of major escalation, whereas Russia recognizes that NATO's credibility is on the line. Thus, if either (or both) of these events came to pass, Russia's principal objectives would shift to averting (or ending) sanctions and/or preventing additional NATO troops from staying on permanently. Figure 9 provides a graphical representation of these strategies.

In either case, Russia would seek to mitigate its losses and save face by negotiating an end to the crisis. Such negotiations would be conducted either multilaterally, under the auspices of the UN Security Council or the OSCE, or directly with either the United States or key NATO allies such as France and Germany. Here, the Kremlin would use the implicit threat of continued support for the Latvian protest movement (up to and including supporting an insurgency) as a means of gaining sanctions relief and/or a commitment from NATO to refrain from permanently stationing substantial additional military forces in the Baltics.

Figure 9. Latvia strategy and exit/escalation flowchart



Source: CNA

In attempting to achieve this result, Russia's low-cost strategy would pay off, as its actual footprint in the crisis will have been maintained at a relatively low level, allowing it to de-escalate quickly without becoming entrapped in the crisis. Moscow's use of limited forces in the country will allow it to maintain a certain level of deniability as well. This works to Moscow's advantage because it allows the West to negotiate a face-saving settlement without having to acknowledge that Russia may have violated NATO Article V.

Overall, Russia's approach to managing these contingencies is based on the recognition that the balance of stakes and capabilities in this crisis ultimately favor the West. If Latvia and NATO both hesitate in their response, Russia can milk the crisis for all it is worth. However, if both respond aggressively, Russia is well positioned to rapidly de-escalate the crisis, pocketing whatever gains it has achieved, while averting major losses.

Black swans

While it is impossible to predict potential black swan events, Russia will try to anticipate and prepare for some of the more likely unexpected contingencies and their potential consequences.

Accidental or inadvertent escalation is one potential source of a black swan event; this becomes even more likely as the crisis progresses. Given the loose control Moscow has over the ethnic Russian activists in Latvia, and given its near total lack of control over Latvia and the West, it is possible that one or the other could commit an unexpectedly provocative act which sharply escalates the conflict. The downing of MH-17 in Ukraine is a good example, as it helped consolidate Western opinion against Russia, and soon led to enhanced sanctions on Russia. In this case, such an event could lead Russia to reassess the situation and, depending on circumstances, push it either to escalate to one of its higher-level options in order to maintain its leverage, or to cut its losses and de-escalate. The latter course would be more likely if Russia were facing the increased prospect of armed conflict with NATO.

Sweden and/or Finland might be tempted to intervene because they would both be especially concerned about increased Russian influence in the Baltic region. Additionally, frontline NATO member states such as Poland and Lithuania might also be tempted to act unilaterally. The goal of such an intervention would be to bolster Latvia's ability to regain control of the situation while keeping the crisis from developing into a NATO-Russia armed conflict, with all its attendant consequences. Both scenarios would make it much more difficult for Russia to coerce Latvian behavior, likely leading the Kremlin to reassess its prospects and move toward de-escalation.

A final possibility involves an **unexpectedly negative Russian domestic reaction** to the crisis. If the crisis became protracted, for example, or if it was perceived to be developing in ways highly unfavorable to Russia, perhaps due to Western economic and military countermeasures, Russian public opinion could shift firmly against the Kremlin. If, for example, the West imposed crippling new sanctions against Russia, it could trigger an economic crisis or financial panic in Russia at a time when the Russian people were already unhappy with the current economic situation. Likewise, if the situation were to devolve into a full-on NATO-Russian crisis, the Kremlin could rapidly lose domestic support for its policies as well, since the perceived risks would be difficult to justify to the public. Thus, the possibility of increased domestic turmoil could well lead the Kremlin to de-escalate the conflict in order to avoid further de-stabilizing the domestic situation.

Responding to Pro-Western Government in Belarus

Scenesetter

In the late spring of 2017, economic protests against Belarusian president Lukashenko accelerate. The protesters start to press political demands, calling for the president's resignation. Lukashenko, eager to maintain freedom of maneuver on the international stage, refrains from using force to disperse the protests. Instead, he purges the *silovik* bloc that has been urging him to follow the playbook from 2010 by beating protesters and arresting the protest leadership. The pro-Western grouping around Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei consolidates its influence. At the same time, Makei makes a deal with protest leaders that allows for a gradual transition over several years to multi-party democracy in exchange for a continued political role for Lukashenko, modeled on the deal for transition in Chile in the late 1980s (and a rumored secret deal for full immunity from prosecution for Lukashenko, his family, and his closest advisors).

As Belarus starts to drift further away from its influence, Russia attempts to pressure Lukashenko to reverse his decisions. It rejects the bilateral energy agreement signed in April 2017 and requests the immediate repayment of all Belarusian debts to Russia. It also engages its full information warfare playbook, seeking to use media and agents in Belarus to push popular opinion within Belarus against rapprochement with the West while also threatening the Belarusian government with dire consequences should it continue to pursue an anti-Russian agenda. These efforts fail, as the pro-Western forces appear to be too well entrenched in government and the majority of the politically active population makes it clear that it prefers a Western course even at the price of short-term economic pain due to Russian sanctions. As the situation progresses, Belarus declares that it is

withdrawing from the Eurasian Economic Union with Russia and intends to join GUAM³⁹ and seek an Association Agreement with the EU.

Strategic assessment

Belarus is the former Soviet republic that is most closely integrated with Russia. The Union State agreement between the two countries dates back to 1996, and the customs union has been in place since 2010. It has long discussed adopting a single currency with Russia, though such plans have never come to fruition.⁴⁰ In fact, Belarus has been involved in all post-Soviet integration projects, though at times its agreement has been predicated on Russia bearing the costs.⁴¹

In addition to the extensive economic ties, Belarus and Russia are closely linked in the defense and security sphere. They share a common air defense and frequently conduct joint military exercises.⁴² Russia's quadrennial Zapad military exercise regularly includes participation of Belarusian forces and often takes place in part on Belarusian soil.⁴³ Furthermore, despite recent efforts to become fully self-sufficient, Russian defense industry remains dependent on Belarusian components in several sectors. Russian missile systems are largely made with chassis produced in Minsk. Overall, about 15 percent of Russia's annual defense order depends on Belarusian supplies, though Russia has taken steps to reduce that dependence in recent years.⁴⁴

³⁹ The GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development is a regional organization consisting of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova.

⁴⁰ Anna Maria Dwyer, Natalia Ryabova, *Belarus in the CES: Advantages and Disadvantages of Economic Integration*, PISM Policy Paper #24, Aug 2013. https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=14504.

⁴¹ Ryhor Astapenia, "Belarus and the Eurasian Economic Union: The view from Minsk," ECFR Commentary, Jan. 7, 2015. http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_belarus_and_the_eurasian_economic_union_the_view_from_minsk.

⁴² "Cooperation with Russian Armed Forces," Republic of Belarus Ministry of Defense, no date. http://www.mil.by/en/military_policy/cooperation_RF/.

⁴³ Roger McDermott, "Belarus and Russia Prepare Zapad 2013 Military Exercise," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Apr. 16, 2013. <https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-and-russia-prepare-zapad-2013-military-exercise/>; Siarhei Bohdan, "The West-2017 Belarus-Russian Military Exercise: Smaller Than Anticipated," *Belarus Digest*, Mar. 24, 2017. <http://belarusdigest.com/story/west-2017-belarus-russian-military-exercise-smaller-anticipated-29513>.

⁴⁴ Siarhei Bohdan, "Belarusian Arms Industry Struggles To Survive Under Kremlin Pressure," *Belarus Digest*, May 6, 2016. <http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarusian-arms-industry->

Separate from the extent of the two countries' interdependence, the geographic location of Belarus is strategically vital in any military conflict between Russia and NATO (Figure 10). As a result, the loss of Belarus to Western influence would represent a strategic dagger aimed at the heart of Russia. This is the core interest for Russia in any scenario that might result in its losing controlling influence in Belarus to the West. Even absent a military threat to Russia's heartland itself, the integration of Belarus into Western security institutions would consolidate the position of the Baltic States, while further isolating Kaliningrad.

In terms of the international dimension of this situation, as has been made clear in previous crises in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia sees security anywhere in Europe, especially on its periphery, in zero-sum terms. In that context, **if Russia loses Belarus, NATO gains Belarus**. This is something that no Russian government can allow. What's more, a Belarusian government under Western influence would be likely to share secret Russian defense information that it has received over the years with NATO and its member states.

In addition to the military and security dimension, because of the zero-sum nature of its perceptions of its security and influence in the near abroad, Russia is also concerned with the loss of influence in the region that would come with an expansion of Belarus' ties to the European Union. On the economic side, the withdrawal of Belarus would also do grave damage to prospects for the Eurasian Economic Union, where Russia would be left with a Kazakhstan that is already less than eager to participate fully, as well as some poor countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia) that contribute little to the union's overall economy.

The impact of losing Belarus on Russian domestic politics is not as dire as the international dimension, but the ruling elite would be concerned about the loss of face with the Russian public. Through the various Russia-Belarus integration projects that have been widely publicized since 1996, Russians have become accustomed to seeing Belarus as a Russian satellite state. Seeing it rejecting partnership with Russia in favor of the West would be a shock and would convince part of the Russian public that Russia's position in the international system is weakening. Russian leaders would be concerned that this would negatively affect their legitimacy and make it easier for populist opposition figures to mobilize the population to protest against government policies and corruption, potentially leading to efforts to bring about a regime change.

struggles-survive-under-kremlin-pressure-25618; "Belarus seeks stronger defense industry cooperation with Russia," *TASS*, Apr. 7, 2015. <http://tass.com/russia/787802>.

Figure 10. Strategic location of Belarus



Source: CNA

The Russian leadership would thus consider the loss of influence in Belarus as hugely damaging for Russian security both in the international sphere and in the Russian domestic political sphere. Belarus stands at the intersection of Russia's two

most important strategic projects: the political project of reintegrating the former Soviet space, and the security project of ensuring the maintenance of a territorial buffer between Russia and NATO.⁴⁵

Losing Belarus for Russia thus represents a strategic defeat of catastrophic proportions. It **would create an existential security crisis for Russia**. It also would place into grave doubt Russia's image as a significant regional power and agenda setter. The Russian leadership would be concerned about the potential cascade of consequences in other neighboring countries that would lose (1) their faith in Russia's power, and (2) their fear that Russia would take measures to ensure that its security interests were assured should those states begin to pull away. The possibility of a domino effect leading to the collapse of the integration project and the loss of other buffer states on Russia's periphery would mean the disintegration of Russia's strategy for the entire post-Soviet space and would create a regional security environment that is as adverse as could be imagined by the Russian leadership.

While the potential losses from a defeat in Belarus appear catastrophic from the Russian perspective, turning the negative situation into a victory might result in some appreciable strategic gains. Given the difficult relationship between Putin and Lukashenko, Russia could benefit from the latter's replacement with a younger, more pliable leader. Such a leader, especially one installed as a consequence of a Russian intervention, would likely be far more dependent on Moscow and would likely have better personal relations with Vladimir Putin. What's more, a younger leader could ensure stability in Belarus for a longer period than a president who has been in power for well over 20 years.

Unlike Ukraine, western Belarus is not a center of anti-Russian sentiment. There is a fairly strong urban/rural divide in sentiment, with the urban population being much more pro-Western in orientation. As a result, there would likely be significant resistance and protest in Minsk, Hrodna, and some of the other large cities. The rest of the country would be unlikely to resist and many rural and small town residents might well support a Russian intervention.

Strategic objectives

In this conflict, Russia has three key strategic objectives:

⁴⁵ Russia has other potential interests in Belarus, such as defending ethnic Russians, but these are not core strategic interests when compared to those discussed in this section.

- Prevent Belarus from exiting Russia's orbit and reorienting to the West. Russian leaders feel that they must retain a say over Minsk's strategic orientation. Thus, given the situation that has developed in Belarus, it has become clear that Russia must impose limits on Belarusian sovereignty.
- Prevent chaos and instability in a strategically critical country located directly on Russia's border. As the strategic assessment makes clear, any further deterioration of the situation in Belarus would be a disaster for Russia.
- Prevent the expansion of NATO to the east. Belarus needs to be kept within Russia's sphere of influence.

These are all negative strategic objectives, indicating that Russia's main goal is to return to the status quo ante, i.e., the situation that was in place prior to the start of Belarus' drift toward the West and its withdrawal from Russian-led Eurasian institutions.

Strategy

Unlike the other potential conflict scenarios, the military risk to Russia is relatively small in this situation. The risk of a Western military intervention is much lower than in the Baltics because Belarus is not a member of the NATO alliance. Belarus has a rather limited indigenous military capability and is a much smaller country geographically than Ukraine, making a Russian military intervention easier to carry out. Furthermore, Russian agents are integrated into the Belarus security apparatus to an even greater extent than was the case in Ukraine prior to 2014, so it could be relatively easy to suborn it or to use the agents to persuade the leadership to support Russian intervention.

At the same time, Russia will seek to keep its costs as low as possible while still achieving its objective. The leadership will shape the strategy to increase its chances of attaining its desired strategic objectives. The key factors that the leadership is likely to consider in shaping its overall strategy and goals and consequent courses of action include:

- **The Belarusian leadership in Minsk.** The leaders of Belarus decide the political direction of the country. Russia needs to control or replace the leadership in order to shift the direction of the country back towards Russia and away from the West.
- **The population.** The population plays a role in that it is instrumental in putting pressure on the leadership. This popular pressure can be used by Western forces to push Belarus toward the West, but it can also be used by Russian leaders to push Belarus toward Russia. The population therefore is primarily a tool for outside forces.

- **The Belarusian military and security services.** The Belarusian power structures play a role in maintaining the government in power. Conversely, they can also remove the government if they can be turned against it. Russia has a large number of agents of influence within these structures that can be used to weaken the pro-Western government.
- **Control of Belarusian territory.** Although Belarus is a strategically valuable country, there is no single part of it that is critical for Russian security. Unlike in Ukraine with Crimea, seizing and holding Belarusian territory does not have any inherent value for Russia, though it might be useful for preventing the consolidation of pro-Western forces in Belarus in the event that Russia cannot regain control of the entirety of Belarus.
- **Western states, including the United States and NATO.** These are the actors that are most likely to work to thwart Russia's strategy in Belarus. While Russia can survive Western pressure and sanctions, its leaders will seek to do whatever they can to deter Western intervention into Russia's near abroad, as Russian forces are not strong enough to defeat a full-scale Western intervention.
- **The European Union.** The European Union is largely limited to using economic and diplomatic tools against Russia. Russia is prepared to withstand such pressure, so does not expect the EU to play a critical role in this crisis.
- **Economic factors.** Although the Belarusian and Russian economies are closely linked, attempts to pressure Belarus into turning away from its pro-Western course failed in the early stages of the crisis. It seems that economic factors are not sufficient to force Belarus to change its policies at this point.
- **Critical infrastructure.** Belarus does not have any critical infrastructure that Russia needs to control in order to achieve its goals. Instead, its significance comes from its overall strategic position and the symbolic role it has played in Russia's return to greatness.
- **The leadership of the protest movement.** Russia sought to discredit the protest movement and its leadership in the early stages of this crisis. Now that pro-Western forces have come to power in Belarus, Russian leaders do not see these groups as playing a critical role in subsequent events.

The most important of these factors are the central government, the military and security establishment, and the population. The goal is not to gain the support of the population or to increase its cooperation. Rather, the ultimate goal of the strategy is to control or replace the Belarusian leadership in Minsk. Russia will need to develop various COAs that can achieve this objective. Given the Russian goal of following an emergent strategy, Russia will have to develop various levels of effort that can be

substituted quickly and relatively easily, depending on developments on the ground. These levels of effort need to be coercive but relatively cheap and can utilize both military and non-military elements from Russia's toolkit.

To summarize, Russia's goal is to employ military and non-military instruments of power to gain leverage over the government and security services of Belarus. With this leverage, Russia will seek to return the situation to as close to the status quo ante as possible, thus securing its influence in Belarus while denying the West from expanding its influence.

Minimum and maximum goals

Unlike the other scenarios discussed in this report, the minimum and maximum goals for Russia in Belarus are not on a spectrum; instead, they are all tied to the need to return to the status quo ante as the desired end-state. This strategy is driven by all of the negative factors that would accrue to Russia's strategic situation in the event that Belarus switched to the Western camp.

In this environment, the **minimum goal** for Russia is to retain Belarus within the Russian sphere of influence. To this end, Belarus does not have to return to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as long as it remains outside of Western orbit. This goal is achieved if, at the end of the conflict, Russia still has influence and has denied Western expansion to Belarus.

The **intermediate goal** for Russia is to return to the status quo ante, with Belarus fully re-integrated into the Russian sphere of influence and into Russian-led multinational institutions such as the EEU and the CSTO.

The **maximum goal** for Russia is not only to fully regain influence but to turn Belarus into a pliable ally that fully supports Russian initiatives in the international sphere.

In deliberating its course of action, the leadership would focus on developing an iterative strategy. There might be some debate as to whether to seek to buy time or to move quickly to seize the initiative. Planners developing courses of action for this conflict would likely begin by formulating low, intermediate, and high options. These options can be described as coercion (low option), compelling change through threat of invasion (intermediate option 1), regime change through a coup (intermediate option 2), and a full-scale Russian invasion (high option). Given that the low end option of using coercive strategies to pressure the existing Belarusian government to change course was tried early in the situation and failed to achieve Russian goals, the remaining strategic directions consist of the intermediate and high options. All of

these options will require the use of the military, either in a compellence mode or in an actual conflict.

In deciding which course of action to take, the Russian leaders would see themselves as being under a time constraint. **The longer the Belarusian government stayed on its pro-Western course, the more difficult it would be to reverse that course.** In this context, planners would be likely to discount options that place the time element outside of Russia's control. Therefore Intermediate Option 1 is likely to be discarded, as it gives control of timing to the Belarusian government and thereby increases the likelihood that the Belarus leadership would attempt to drag out the situation while taking steps to reinforce control over the country and the government in order to make the other two options more difficult and costly to implement. Furthermore, the failure of coercion in phase zero implies that the adversary is strongly committed to its course of action and therefore reduces the perceived likelihood of compellence working.

Rather than deciding between the remaining two options, Russian planners would take steps to begin planning for both, with the goal of starting with the lower-cost and lower-risk coup option, while making preparations for an invasion should the coup fail. While the leadership would prefer the cheaper and easier solution, it would recognize that the failure of the coup could provide a pretext for an open intervention. And the costs of losing Belarus would require the pursuit of the more difficult and expensive invasion option in the event that the easier coup solution failed.

In the next section, we describe in greater detail the courses of action that Russian planners would undertake for both of these options.

Courses of action (COAs)

The **intermediate option** centers on a plan to carry out a coup that would replace the pro-Western Belarusian government with one that is more supportive of Russian interests. The plan would utilize members of the Belarusian security services who are assets of Russian intelligence to organize the coup.

At the same time, Russia would mobilize its military assets, calling a snap exercise in the Western military district in order to highlight the possibility of a military intervention in support of the coup. As part of this exercise, Russian ground forces would be deployed to areas near the Belarusian border in order to deter Western intervention in support of the pro-Western Belarusian government. **The goal would be to stall Western decision-making** long enough to ensure that pro-Russian forces had consolidated power before the West made any decisions about a possible intervention in support of its new Belarusian allies.

Russia would also mobilize its full information operations arsenal, with the goal of painting the pro-Western government as illegitimate. Russian Information Operations (IO) would highlight the role of the United States and EU member states in bringing the pro-Western government to power and would argue that Western pressure had derailed Eurasian integration efforts, which had popular support among the majority of the Belarusian population. The coup would be portrayed as a popularly supported effort to remove foreign lackeys who had betrayed Belarusian values.

The calculus for Russian leadership comes from its perception that time is the most valuable currency Russia has in this crisis. This recognition requires Russia to seize the initiative in order to prevent the consolidation of the new government and to deter the United States and its allies from considering that an intervention could resolve the situation.

The overall focus is on covert actions, with the security and intelligence services taking the lead, while the Russian military provides support. This course of action is cheaper and lower risk than the alternative scenario and is likely to be attempted first, prior to any overt military intervention.

The **high-end option** COA basically flips the lead roles. It would be chosen if the intermediate option seemed unlikely to succeed because of a lack of sufficient support within Belarus power structures. It also might be chosen if the intermediate option has failed. In this scenario the military takes the lead, with the security and intelligence services playing a support role. The intelligence services begin by preparing the terrain for the invasion, working to coopt the Belarusian military and security services and to generate public support for the intervention. They will ensure that coopted Belarusian officials come out with a request for the Russian intervention, to provide cover for the invasion.

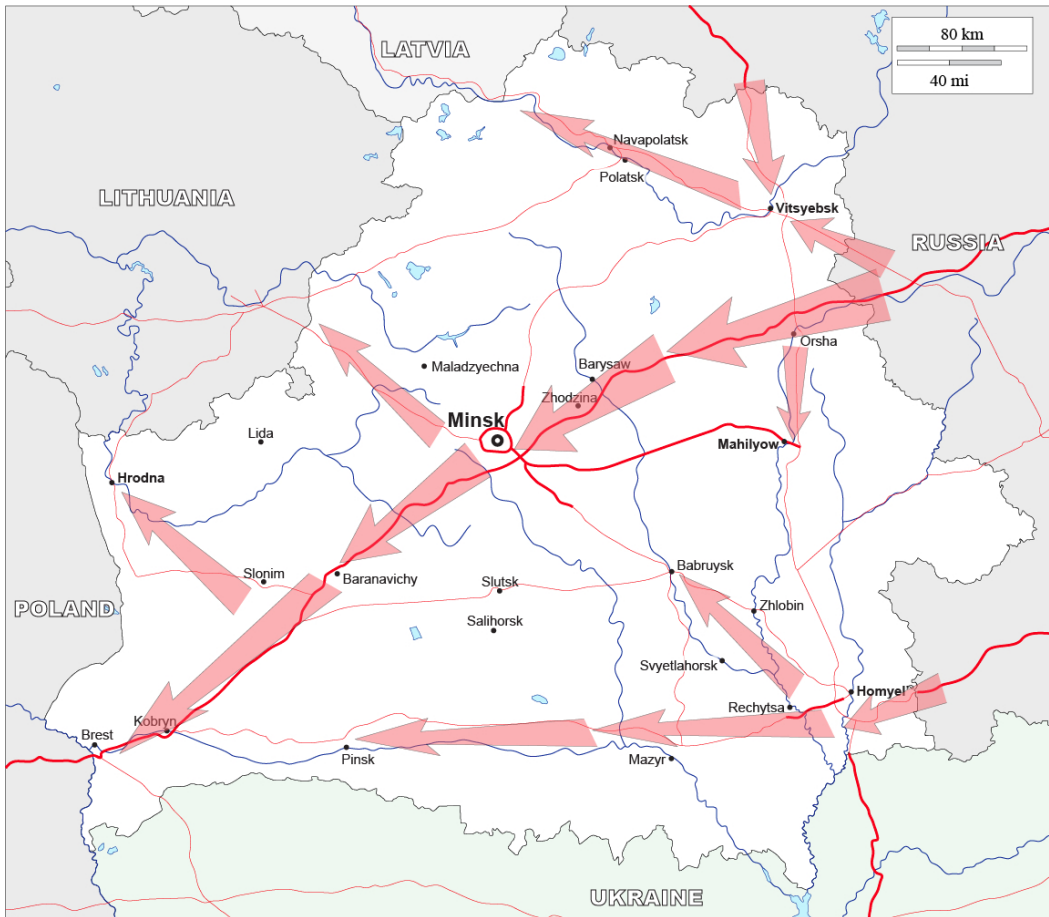
The invasion option does not call for hybrid warfare or camouflaged forces. Instead, Russia would introduce sufficient forces to dominate the battlefield and take control of the entire country as quickly as possible (Figure 11). If any Belarusian military leaders are judged to be supportive, their units may be encouraged to defect to the Russian side. Even if participation by Belarusian regulars is judged to be impossible, Russia will make every effort to engage local auxiliaries to join in the effort. This would help information operations seeking to portray the invasion as a liberation effort requested by local leaders.

Russian planners will also seek to leverage local support to avoid a prolonged occupation, hoping to withdraw the bulk of their forces as quickly as possible while leaving Belarusian forces in control of the territory with perhaps a minimal Russian presence in a supporting role.

Russia will engage in a cost mitigation effort vis-à-vis the West, focusing its diplomatic activity on deterring Western intervention. It will take steps to reassure

the West that it is not interested in pushing on beyond Belarus' borders or threatening NATO's eastern members in Poland and the Baltic region. It will also offer to engage in crisis resolution negotiations with the West, first in order to buy time to solidify control in Belarus and then to deescalate the crisis once control has been achieved. It will not use diplomatic tools in Belarus itself, in order to avoid giving any legitimacy to the pro-Western Belarusian government.

Figure 11. Possible Belarus invasion scenario



Source: CNA

In general, Russia would not consider the diplomatic and economic components of the DIME⁴⁶ model as primary COAs, as the compressed timetable makes such tools

⁴⁶ The DIME paradigm includes the diplomatic, informational, military and economic instruments of policy.

inadequate for achieving Russia's minimum goals once the crisis has reached the stage outlined in the opening scenario. Information operations are also insufficient, except in a supporting role. The **focus is thus on the military component of the DIME**, either through a coup led by security services or, if that proves unfeasible or fails, an outright invasion.⁴⁷

Russian vulnerabilities

Much as in the Baltic scenario, Russia will face a number of vulnerabilities if it decides to intervene in Belarus. Most significantly, the prospect of a full-scale military intervention in Belarus will run up against the reality that the Russian military remains in an experimental phase, with reorganizations and changes to force structure continuing through the present day. Although military operations in Ukraine and Syria and snap exercises throughout the force have resulted in an increase in readiness levels over the last five years, the Russian military will still face a number of challenges, especially at the command level, in pursuing a high-end intervention in Belarus.

The intervention will be made even more difficult by Russia's lack of allies. At the present time, Belarus is Russia's only defense partner in the Western theater, so in the event of a pro-Western shift in Belarus' government, Russia will be left to fight alone. While it can undoubtedly prevail in a one-on-one conflict with the Belarusian military, it will be concerned about the possibility of military assistance being provided by NATO or by some of its more anti-Russian members, such as Poland.

Russia will seek to prevail in the conflict as quickly as possible and then withdraw as much as possible, both to forestall NATO intervention and because of likely difficulties in sustaining its forces in Belarus. Low energy prices, structural limitations, and mismanagement of the major government-owned corporations that form the bulk of the economy will push Russia to prefer lower-cost approaches to achieving its goals while limiting its ability to sustain an occupation of Belarus.

Concerns about the impact of a lengthy intervention on domestic support for the Russian government will also encourage Russia to attempt to conclude its intervention as quickly as possible. As with the Baltic scenario, Russian leaders will be concerned that high casualties or economic costs will turn the Russian population against the intervention, potentially threatening the regime.

⁴⁷ Non-military components of the DIME would play a significant role in efforts to keep Western actors from intervening either in support of the opposition in Belarus or against Russia.

Russian red lines and escalation/de-escalation drivers

Given the high stakes for Russia in this scenario, the failure to achieve the minimum goals spelled out above would push Russia toward escalation. As already noted, **Belarus' withdrawal from Eurasian institutions and consequent potential for joining Western institutions is a red line for Russia** that sets in motion the process toward launching a robust intervention. The second escalation driver for Russia is the failure of the intermediate option (the coup), which, according to the logic described in the previous section, would result in the launch of an invasion in order to achieve an acceptable end state for the crisis.

Direct entry by Western powers, especially the United States, into the conflict is a potential escalation driver, as it would present Russia with the difficult dilemma of whether to risk the unacceptable strategic loss of Belarus or face the possibility of a military conflict with the West. While Russia would be well positioned to win a limited conventional war with NATO forces, such a conflict would pose the risk of a wider war and even the possibility of a nuclear conflict. The dynamics of Russian decision-making on whether to escalate or de-escalate in such a scenario are discussed in a subsequent subsection of this report.

Russia would also be concerned that its intervention in Belarus might result in a prolonged conflict or extended occupation of Belarus. In such a quagmire scenario, Russian leadership would be concerned about facing an unsustainable drain on national resources and the loss of popular support for a continued intervention due to casualties, economic costs, and losses in international reputation. This might lead Russian leaders toward de-escalation of the conflict, even without achieving minimum goals.

In addition to these drivers, Russia also faces a significant constraining factor: the potential high costs of international blowback. These costs would be particularly significant in the security and economic realms, where the presence of Russian boots on the ground is expected to generate a much stronger international response than arming rebel groups. Russia has shown in past crises that it is willing to bear the costs of international sanctions and expects NATO member states and NATO partners to focus more on their security in the immediate aftermath of the Russian use of troops abroad. The goal is to keep the engagement short in the hope that once the crisis is over, political pressure can be brought to bear to reduce the consequences. An extended or open-ended intervention would thus be seen as more painful, as it would be far more difficult to reduce or cancel the sanctions while the crisis was still under way (as demonstrated by the continuation of sanctions over eastern Ukraine while the conflict there has remained unsettled over the last three years).

Theory of defeat

There are three ways in which the Russian strategy in response to the Belarus crisis could fail.

1. The coup could fail. Success of a coup is highly contingent. Even if the Belarusian security services are coopted and a good leader/figurehead is found, circumstances could lead to failure, with the pro-Western government remaining in place and possibly even strengthening its position as it cleans house after defeating the coup.
2. The Russian invasion of Belarus could fail. The Russian invasion could fail in various ways. The most straightforward is that Russia would simply get bogged down and fail to take control of the entire territory of Belarus. A second possibility is that Russia would succeed in taking control of the country, but would be faced with armed guerrilla resistance that would prevent the withdrawal of Russian forces and require a prolonged occupation of Belarusian territory. As discussed earlier, a prolonged occupation would be judged a failure because of the financial and reputational costs of maintaining a Russian military occupation force in Belarus.
3. The United States and NATO could launch a military intervention in response to Russian actions in Belarus. This would be a failure for Russia since it would dramatically escalate the potential costs and risks to Russia, while making holding on to Belarus as a Russian client state a far more difficult endeavor. Russian leaders are very cognizant of the relative strengths of the two sides' military forces and will have thought through the consequences of a Western military intervention in Belarus.

Exit/Escalation strategies

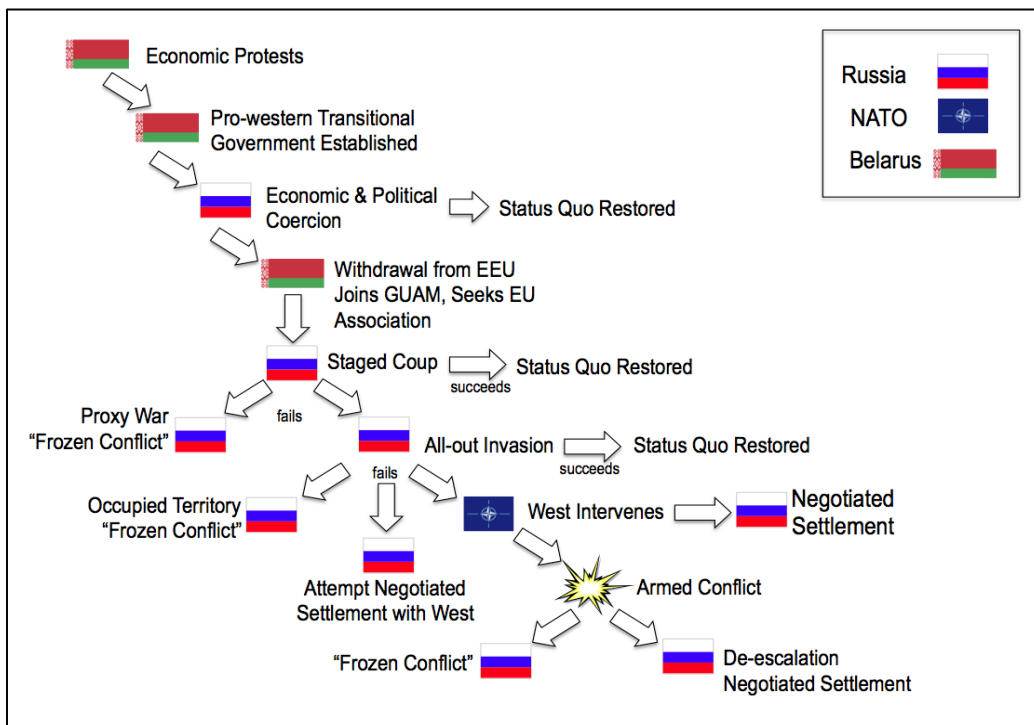
Russia has developed strategies to deal with each of these forms of failure. If Russian leaders perceive that the coup option is failing, they would have several options to pursue. Figure 12 provides a graphical representation of these strategies.

1. Escalate to an invasion strategy. This option has been discussed in previous sections. Since Russia would already have forces massed on Belarus' border as part of the coup strategy, it could relatively quickly switch to a full-scale invasion of Belarus. While this option would increase the risk to Russia and would bring potentially dire international and domestic consequences, such a move would follow from the perception that the stakes in Belarus are so high for Russia that it effectively has no choice but to continue to press on and

raise the stakes if the intermediate strategy is failing (much as the initiation of the intermediate strategy can be described as the response to the failure of the low strategy of threats and influence operations that occurs prior to the start of the scenario).

2. Bring in proxy forces to create a frozen conflict scenario a la eastern Ukraine. This option may be taken if the circumstances of the coup failure and/or the international environment make Russian leaders believe that an invasion would also be unlikely to succeed. The goal in this strategy would be similar to the goals pursued in 2014-15 in eastern Ukraine: to destabilize the country and to make it less attractive as a partner for the West, with the long-term hope that the pro-Western government would fall and be replaced by a more pro-Russian one.

Figure 12. Belarus strategy and exit/escalation flowchart



Source: CNA

If a Russian invasion was failing, Russia would either seek to hold on to the territory it had been able to take in the early stages of the conflict or look for exit options, most likely through some form of negotiated crisis settlement. Holding on to territory would follow the logic set out in the frozen conflict scenario above. The goal of any negotiated settlement would be to create a situation that was somewhere

in the space between Russia's minimum and maximum goals. These exit options could take one of two forms:

1. Institutional option (less likely): Russia would look to international organizations for a multilateral settlement. It would try to leverage its position in the UN Security Council or work through the OSCE to reach a settlement that met its minimal goal while reducing the costs (in terms of both finances and reputation) of a failed invasion of a neighboring state.
2. Realist option (more likely): It would negotiate a bilateral or multilateral settlement with the West. The goal would be to reach a settlement with the West that allowed both sides to save face. Russia would be happy to allow the West to appear to be the power broker in this situation, while making every effort to ensure that Russia retained the dominant role in Belarusian politics in the settlement. If the negotiations appeared to be failing to produce an outcome that would meet Russia's minimum goals, Russia might consider agreeing to withdraw all forces—but then not moving them, or bringing in proxy forces, to ensure that it retained influence, regardless of the terms of the settlement.

If a Russian invasion resulted in a Western military intervention, Russia would be likely to escalate initially, though it would be willing to shift to a negotiated settlement if the escalation threatened to get out of hand and if its minimum goals appeared to be within reach. Russia would be willing to engage in a conventional conflict with NATO in Belarus, despite the risk of nuclear escalation, because it would perceive an asymmetry of interests and capabilities and resolve in its favor. In the early stages of a conflict, Russia would have the preponderance of forces in theater. Its leaders would also believe that because Russian interests were more directly affected by the situation in Belarus, Russia would have greater resolve to continue and escalate the conflict. In essence, Russian leaders would consider that the likely losses they would incur from backing down would exceed the likely losses of taking action.

Once Russia had established its willingness to fight NATO over Belarus, it would seek to de-escalate the situation in a way that allowed it to achieve its goals without risking a global conflict with the United States. Russia would want to conclude the fight quickly, recognizing that while it had the advantage in any short conflict, in the long term it would be likely to lose any fight against the United States and NATO. The de-escalation could proceed along the lines of either of the exit options described above in the discussion of a failed Russian invasion.

If the Western intervention were done by a neighboring state (such as Poland) without full NATO support, Russia would have more options for continuing the military conflict and would be less concerned about the consequences of a prolonged

fight. It would still consider negotiated solutions, but would hold out for a better deal than if it were facing all of NATO.

Overall, if Russia's courses of action started to fail, its strategy would be predicated on the assumption that the balance of stakes and capabilities favors Russia. If the West came off as weak, Russia could afford to be aggressive. But if the West acted aggressively, Russia would need to be more aggressive in order to convince the world that it was not bluffing and to avoid a scenario where its foreign policy was completely discredited.

Black swans

While black swans by their very nature are impossible to predict, Russian planners would consider several more likely potential unexpected scenarios and their consequences and impacts.

While Russia will have considered the possibility of a planned Western invasion of Belarus in response to Russian intervention, the possibility of an **unplanned military incident** involving Russian and NATO forces could have serious consequences for how the crisis situation develops. An unintended exchange of fire with Western forces resulting in casualties could quickly exacerbate the situation. Polish and Lithuanian troops would be on high alert during a Russian invasion of Belarus, while politicians in those countries would be very worried that Russian troops would not stop at the border. An unexpected incident with Western forces could increase fears in Poland and Lithuania that Russia intends to attack their territory, while simultaneously galvanizing public opinion in the West in favor of an intervention. The result could move the situation into the third of Russia's possible defeat scenarios, where Russian forces are faced with a Western military intervention and need to decide whether to escalate or back down.

A second possibility involves **intervention in the conflict by Ukraine**, either with regular forces or with proxy forces. The goal of such an intervention would be to complicate the ability of Russian forces to achieve victory. While a Ukrainian intervention would do little to thwart a Russian invasion of Belarus, it could help thwart a Russian-sponsored coup attempt and it could also help anti-Russian Belarusian groups organize an underground resistance or guerrilla warfare campaign. Both situations would significantly increase the costs of victory for Russia. In the first case, the failure of the coup would force Russia to escalate to an invasion. In the second case, the armed resistance could prevent Russia from withdrawing its forces and thereby trigger the second defeat scenario described above.

Russian plans could also be upended by **internal actors within Belarus**. Local actors supposedly working for a foreign patron tend to follow their own agendas that sometimes fail to coincide with those of their patron. The local figurehead put in

power by the coup could turn out to be less pliant than expected. Or local security officials who were supposedly suborned by the FSB might refuse to carry out orders to overthrow the pro-Western Belarusian leadership. These actions would force Russia to intervene directly to ensure that its goals were achieved. Similarly, in the aftermath of an invasion, Belarusian political elites might seek to avoid excessive dependence on Russia, preventing Russia from pulling out in a timely manner.

The final black swan scenario relates to **Russian domestic politics**. Public opinion at home might shift against Russian intervention, either because an invasion was not going well and casualty rates were high or because of fears of high economic costs due to international sanctions. If Russian public opinion turned against Russia's intervention in Belarus before Russia was in position to achieve its minimum goals, Russian leadership would be in a very difficult position. Withdrawing without achieving the goals would have catastrophic strategic implications, as discussed above, but staying the course would threaten the leadership with the loss of legitimacy at home. If a populist leader (such as Alexey Navalny) were able to consolidate the population in opposition to Russian intervention and launch mass protests, the Russian leadership would fear the possibility of regime change and might need to focus on stabilizing the domestic situation even at the cost of giving up on its goals in Belarus.

Russian Intervention in Ukraine

Scenesetter

In the spring of 2017, Ukraine's imposition of an economic blockade on the Donbas region, together with the confiscation of Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov's assets by the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic (DPR/LPR), results in a new flare-up of tension in eastern Ukraine. In retaliation, Akhmetov invests significantly in Ukrainian paramilitary forces, strengthening their capabilities and their resolve to expel the Russia-allied separatists from Ukrainian territory. Over the next several months, Ukrainian paramilitaries build up their forces, culminating in a new offensive in eastern Ukraine in July 2017. The paramilitaries make some initial gains, increasing political pressure on the Ukrainian government to back their efforts by engaging regular military units so as to regain full control of Ukrainian territory. As the initial paramilitary offensive begins to stall, the government determines that it has no choice but to commit forces or face a loss of domestic political support in Kiev. The combined offensive that begins in August 2017 makes rapid progress, with Ukrainian forces surrounding Donetsk and cutting it off from Luhansk.

Having learned some important lessons from the failed summer 2014 offensive, Ukrainian forces avoid overextending themselves this time around. Instead, they focus primarily on retaking Donetsk while making gradual progress toward Luhansk. In response, DPR/LPR leaders appeal for Russian assistance in repelling the Ukrainian attack. The U.S. government and NATO leadership indicate that they consider this conflict to be an internal Ukrainian matter, while warning that outside interference would result in serious economic and political consequences, together with an increase in military assistance for Ukraine.

The Russian government is faced with the choice of losing the Donbas along with its remaining leverage in Ukraine, increasing its covert support for separatist forces (perhaps in combination with efforts to destabilize the Ukrainian government), or intervening openly in eastern Ukraine.

Strategic assessment

Despite the inconclusive, drawn-out conflict that has taken place in eastern Ukraine between pro-Russian separatist forces and the Ukrainian military since 2014, Moscow has nevertheless gained significant leverage over Ukraine at the strategic level. But all this leverage would be lost should separatist forces be routed in this new military offensive. Prior to the conflict, Ukraine underwent a significant political upheaval, which threatened the close relationship the two countries had enjoyed for decades via overlapping economic, political, technical, and socio-cultural ties.

Following the success of the Maidan rebellion in overthrowing pro-Moscow president Yanukovich, the Ukrainian military nearly defeated Donbas separatists in the initial round of fighting, which lasted from April through August 2014. The separatist region of Donbas, composed of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR), represents populations who wish to pursue closer integration with the Russian Federation (Figure 13). They reject the pro-Western leanings of the Kiev government as foreign and antithetical to the two countries' shared history and culture that stretches back through the centuries. Many have died defending DPR and LPR from Ukrainian aggression, which is backed by NATO, the United States, and the West.

Figure 13. Russian annexed/occupied territory in Ukraine



Source: Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine shown in red.
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2015/05/21/10-maps-that-explain-ukraines-struggle-for-independence/>.

In August 2014, Russia regular forces intervened in eastern Ukraine to halt Ukraine's "Anti-Terrorist Operation," (ATO) which had been making substantial progress in defeating the pro-Russian rebel forces in eastern Ukraine. As a result of Russia's defense of Donbas in the face of Ukraine's ATO, Kiev has been weakened economically, politically, and militarily. Despite international sanctions imposed on Russia by Ukraine and its Western backers, Russia's economy did not break—in fact, it is now starting to register growth as import substitution mechanisms are finally bearing fruit albeit unevenly. In 2016, the ruble exchange rate remained stable; the Central Bank decreased the interest rate by 1 percent, from 11 to 10 percent to encourage growth; the budget deficit stopped growing; and the government put large-scale support behind industries other than energy extraction.⁴⁸

In contrast, Ukraine's economic outlook remains weak, as the state depends on foreign donors to keep the economy afloat—in 2014 alone, the European Union committed EUR 11 billion, followed by almost EUR 2 billion in additional aid proposed in 2015.⁴⁹ Politically, the new American administration is at best lukewarm to the idea of fully backing Ukraine against the Russian Federation in the Donbas. Even recent developments in granting Ukrainians short-term visa stays within the EU will not alleviate the domestic situation; rather, this has contributed to a significant outflow of its best and brightest to the West.

Additionally, the current state of conflict in the Donbas necessitates that Kiev spend much of its sparse earnings on the military, siphoning funds away from key civilian sectors of the economy. Although the conflict in eastern Ukraine was effectively "frozen" between February 2015 and the recent resumption of hostilities, Moscow enjoyed the benefit of a weak, divided, and increasingly poor Ukraine unable to fulfil the promises that drove the Maidan coup, which overthrew a lawfully elected government in December 2013–February 2014. The separatist Donbas region has served to maintain Russia's strategic influence in Ukrainian politics and its strategic orientation, keeping Ukraine away from practical alliance-building steps with NATO and EU, and focused on resources needed to counter DPR and LPR forces.

Should Russia's strategy of backing DPR and LPR collapse in the face of the combined Ukrainian/paramilitary offensive, the separatist region would risk being overrun, thereby erasing any gains Russia made in 2014–2016. Ukraine would then be able to bring all of Donbas fully under its control; extend its political and military influence all the way to the Russian border; and, having established peace and control over its

⁴⁸ Stanislav Tkachenko, "How the Russian economy changed in 2016," December 29, 2016. <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/how-russian-economy-changed-2016>.

⁴⁹ "How the EU is supporting Ukraine," European Commission Fact Sheet. May 22, 2015. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-5035_en.htm.

territory, re-initiate the process of joining Western institutions such as the EU and NATO. This course of events would place the second largest former Soviet republic—in terms of population, economy, and military strength—in a set of alliances directly competing with the Russian Federation on the international stage.

Such a course of events would represent a major political defeat for Moscow on three levels: domestic, regional, and international. Domestically, it would indicate to the Russian population, including various political and nationalist forces inside Russia, that the Russian state's ability to support ethnic compatriots and pro-Russian allies in its near abroad was weakening. It would also effectively undermine the efforts and political capital expended by Moscow on protecting and integrating ethnic Russians living abroad by defending their rights and desires to maintain a pro-Russian (though not necessarily anti-Western) outlook. Moreover, the population would see President Putin and his government as weak, and its political and military establishments as increasingly unable to enforce their will, thereby negating the economic and personal sacrifices made by the Russian population in the wake of Western-imposed sanctions.

Regionally, the loss of Ukraine would signal to Russia's allies and friendly states across the former Soviet Union that they had greater latitude to pursue their own political, economic, and security arrangements, many of which might not dovetail well with Moscow's—for example, they might attempt to join organizations such as the EU or even NATO, which Russia still considers as having hostile intentions towards Russia. The complete loss of Donbas and defeat of pro-Russian forces there would demonstrate Moscow's inability to defend its interests and primary position in the former Soviet space, effectively crippling the political, economic, and security arrangements propagated by Russia over the past 22 years aimed at ensuring that Moscow's interests remained central and inviolate.

Moreover, countries that are starting to waver in their pro-Russia commitments—Belarus, Armenia, and possibly others—would likely take the defeat of pro-Russian forces and Kiev's joining NATO/EU as a result as a strong signal that they too might succeed in walking away from the commitments and arrangements they have made with Moscow through various bilateral and multilateral agreements such as the EEU and CSTO. Russia's Central Asian allies might opt instead for their own political, economic, and security guarantees with China, India, Iran, or even the United States. Caucasus states such as Georgia and Azerbaijan would likely redouble their efforts to join NATO and the EU, disrupting decades of progress made by Moscow in discouraging them from such actions.

Internationally, **Kiev's victory would be disastrous for Russia's status as a global power**, standing as a clear example of Moscow's inability to follow through on its commitments to back its two Donbas protectorates. It would also showcase to existing and aspiring major powers that the former Soviet space could be successfully contested and potentially even incorporated into their own respective

spheres of influence, disregarding the Russian Federation's economic, political, and security needs. The loss of the Donbas and Kiev's re-establishment of full control over Ukraine's borders would also indicate to Russia's international partners in Syria, Iran, and elsewhere that Moscow might not be able to protect them either when they needed it most, especially in the face of open Western-backed military support.

Additionally, given three years of open hostilities between DPR, LPR, and the Kiev government, the loss of the Donbas would likely result in the killing or imprisonment of members of Russia's proxy forces—including military, political, or civilian representatives. The fear of such reprisals—which would be sure to follow, given the openly hostile rhetoric directed at ethnic Russians by Ukrainian political and nationalist organizations and forces— would likely result in substantial new refugee flows into Russia. Many in the Donbas are already apprehensive of displays of open hostility by hardline pro-Ukrainian groups such as the “Azov Battalion” and other openly anti-Russian organizations.

Should significant additional refugees suddenly flee across Russia's border with Ukraine, that would exacerbate the already significant humanitarian and security situation which has developed in Western Russia as result of previous fighting in the Donbas region. Local and regional Russian governments and entities would be forced to expend additional resources to house, feed, and otherwise provide basic services for these additional refugees, putting increased financial strain on the government.

The big picture for Russia is that losing eastern Ukraine would make Russia's entire foreign policy strategy for Ukraine non-viable. As a result, the Kremlin simply could not allow the Donbas to be overrun by Akhmetov's militias and Ukrainian military forces.

The following internal and external drivers would influence Moscow's decision-making in this crisis:

1. **Ethnic Russian nationalists** that Russia mobilized for fighting in Donbas—including self-styled Novorossiia supporters, armed Cossack formations, and biker gangs—as well as veterans of the 2014-2015 conflict at home, who would be less than sanguine about the loss of DPR and LPR to Kiev. They would see their personal sacrifices as having come to naught, and would view Moscow's loss in the most personal, anti-Kremlin terms possible.
2. Additionally, **various elite opinions** would need to be considered as well, since certain high-profile political and business elites openly supported the rebellion in the Donbas against the Maidan and Ukraine's Western drift. Such elites still wield considerable influence in the Russian government, economy, and society, and their looming frustration with the Kremlin's loss of Ukraine would receive close scrutiny.

3. Russian leaders would look for evidence across Ukraine that the **not-so-secret hand of the United States** was behind the renewal of conflict, as part of its continuing bid for Ukraine and the rest of Russia's near abroad. The financial, political, and (to a lesser extent) military backing of Kiev by the United States and Europe appear to have emboldened pro-Western factions to take direct steps aimed at expelling the remaining Russian influence from the country. Should all of Ukraine fall to the intensely anti-Russian government in Kiev, other former Soviet states could potentially fall like dominos, gravely undermining Russia's strategic position across the former Soviet space.
4. The loss of the Donbas would effectively mean the **collapse of the Minsk Agreements**, which for the past three years have led to a rough stalemate in eastern Ukraine that has nevertheless been favorable to Moscow at the strategic level, with a weak and divided Ukraine unable to join Western geopolitical frameworks.

Strategic objectives

The main strategic objective for Moscow in this crisis is to **retain influence in Ukraine and restore the viability of Russia's strategy to prevent Ukraine's drift towards Western institutions and security frameworks**. Therefore, Russia must ensure that the following goals are met:

- Prevent the defeat of allied/proxy separatist forces at the hands of the Ukrainian military and Kiev-aligned paramilitary forces, which would allow Ukraine to leave Russia's sphere of influence and join NATO, the EU and other pro-Western institutions.
- Avoid political defeat, because of the consequences in domestic politics and the international arena should DPR and LPR be lost to Kiev.
- Seize the opportunity to break out of the Minsk framework, which has never fully met Russia's goals and desired outcomes, and force Ukraine to fully implement its obligations under Minsk II to federalize and decentralize governmental authority in Ukraine, giving the Donbas (and hence Russia) a veto over Ukraine's future direction.

Thus, while this situation represents a critical threat to Russia's strategy for both Ukraine and for the former Soviet region in general, it also presents Russia with a fresh opportunity to achieve substantial geopolitical gains if handled appropriately. However, in pursuing its strategic objectives in Ukraine, Moscow must be careful to avoid a costly, protracted conflict that would draw greater economic and military

resources into the fight, thereby raising the costs for Russia to an unacceptably high level.

This crisis presents Moscow with a **dilemma of “time vs. intensity”**: the current situation in the Donbas presents an inverse relationship between these variables. Ukraine has a sizable military that can put up a fight over short geographic distances while proxy separatist forces in the Donbas have small militaries and limited supplies that require them to either win quickly or face a rapid deterioration of their fighting capability followed by eventual defeat.

Moreover, as Moscow develops and pursues its strategy for the conflict, it will be cognizant of domestic political constraints and costs, outlined briefly above, should the situation in the Donbas deteriorate quickly.

Strategy

Russia’s strategy for Ukraine will be calibrated to fit the circumstances, taking into account a variety of geopolitical and military factors. As was the case in the preceding scenario involving Belarus, the stakes for Russia in the current scenario could not be higher, as Moscow is facing both the loss of its proxy-controlled region in the Donbas and the probable permanent loss of Ukraine to the West with all of its attendant consequences. Given the enormity of the situation, and the fact that Ukraine and its paramilitary partners have already escalated the crisis to the level of a direct and overt military conflict, the **Kremlin is likely to adopt a vigorous, military-centric strategy right from the outset**. While Moscow will not neglect to supplement its military campaign with an array of economic, diplomatic, informational, and cyber-based measures, military power will play the central role in achieving its objectives in this case.

Russia’s strategy will therefore be shaped primarily by its assessment of the military balance in Ukraine. In this scenario, the military risk to Russia is relatively high. Of course, the risk of Western military intervention in the conflict remains low compared to a potential crisis in the Baltics, because Ukraine is still not a NATO member. However, Ukraine itself represents a significant military challenge for Russia. Even in 2014 and 2015, the Ukrainian military, despite all of its many shortcomings, nearly managed to overrun LPR and DPR, and only Russian military assistance prevented its allies’ defeat in the Donbas.

Since that time, Ukrainian military capability has only gotten better, and its forces, despite facing a number of significant issues, have become more professional.⁵⁰ They have benefited as well from limited Western military aid and training. Kiev has also been busily absorbing the lessons learned from its previous and ongoing campaigns against separatist and Russian forces in the Donbas, and has so far managed to avoid the kinds of tactical and strategic errors that stalled its forces' progress in the summer of 2014 and winter of 2015. At the same time, Russia's allies in LPR and DPR have been exhausted by the ongoing standoff with Ukrainian forces, which has now lasted for more than three years, and the socio-cultural fabric of these regions is starting to fray under the pressure of the conflict.⁵¹ This time around, Russia may no longer be able to count on the kinds of limited, short-duration, pulsed military strikes it used to achieve previous victories in Ilovaik in 2014 and in Debaltseve in 2015.

Russia's strategy will also be shaped by the geographical and physical realities prevailing in Ukraine. Geographically, Ukraine remains the largest country in Europe after Russia itself, making an overt Russian military intervention a difficult task. Ukraine's sheer size as well as the sheer magnitude of its indigenous military capacity would essentially rule out the kind of outright conquest and occupation of the country described in the preceding scenario regarding Belarus. Russia simply does not have the ground force and logistical capacity to seize and hold Ukraine in its entirety. Thus, Russia's use of force will need to be tailored to the circumstances and limited to what it can effectively support.

Russia's strategy will also take into account the continuing instability in Ukraine. On the one hand, Kiev has demonstrated a significant level of resilience. Despite immense difficulties and uneven results, Kiev's efforts at political, economic, and military reforms have endured even in the face of ongoing opposition by various segments of the Ukrainian population. However, as noted above, Ukraine continues to face significant economic, political and social problems, and considerable disillusionment among its populace, all things that Moscow can potentially exploit to influence the outcome.

⁵⁰ Paul Shinkman, "Training Ukraine: Turning a Soviet Army Into a Modern Force", August 2, 2016. <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-08-02/training-ukraine-turning-a-soviet-army-into-a-modern-force>; Cami McCormick, "'Re-tooling an army from scratch,' as it fights a war," February 1, 2016. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-ukraine-army-re-tool-troops-training-russia-backed-rebels/>

⁵¹ "Moscow keeping LPR and DPR from going to war — against each other, Mitrokhin says," *Euromaidan Press*, August 26, 2016. <http://euromaidanpress.com/2016/08/26/moscow-keeping-lnr-and-dnr-from-going-to-war-against-each-other-mitrokhin-says/>

Russia's strategy will also be shaped by Ukraine's lack of formal allies. As mentioned above, Ukraine is neither a NATO or EU member, and thus cannot rely on another country to come to its aid militarily. Of course, this does not mean that Ukraine will have to go it alone entirely. At a minimum, it can count on Western economic and political support. Moscow may face additional sanctions for example if it elects to intervene militarily. The West may also be more willing in this case to funnel lethal military aid to the Ukrainian military. Nor can Moscow completely rule out the possibility that NATO or a NATO member state acting unilaterally, i.e., Poland or the United States, might even intervene militarily this time around. While the United States may currently want to spend its political capital elsewhere, Washington's elites still maintain a strong pro-Kiev stance.

Given the limited means at its disposal, and the high risks involved, Russia will seek to keep its costs as low as possible while still achieving its objectives, and this will also help to shape its strategy. In determining its overall strategy, goals and consequent courses of action, the leadership is likely to consider the following centers of gravity:

- **Ukrainian government.** The current government is attempting to maintain a unified posture towards Russia and anti-Ukrainian forces in DPR and LPR. However, regular infighting and political competition among various party leaders is complicating Ukrainian political unity, resulting in an ongoing crisis of confidence in Kiev's leadership.
- **Ukrainian oligarchs, strongmen, and regional politicians.** Such people exert outsized influence on the country's political life, at times openly breaking with the Poroshenko administration's leadership and running affairs in their regions independently of the capital. While such outright independence has diminished, there are many wealthy, relatively independent individuals in the country who have been unhappy with Ukraine's direction for the past several years.
- **Military/paramilitary forces.** There are numerous paramilitary formations which often seem to conduct operations outside of official Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MOD) control. Such formations tend to be nationalistic, anti-Russian, and highly aggressive in attempting to reach their goals. Though they have had relatively few military successes, their political popularity far exceeds their on-the-ground experience.
- **State of the economy.** The Ukrainian economy has been weak since the start of the conflict in 2014 and has only gotten worse in 2017. Various attempts to prop it up with Western aid have been unsuccessful, while anti-Russian sanctions have deprived Ukraine of its largest trading partner. Although Ukraine has managed to reduce its dependence on natural gas imports from Russia over the last three years, Kiev continues to rely heavily on transit fees

associated with the transport of Russian gas sales to Europe.⁵² The current state of the economy is hurting practically all strata of the population, contributing to the ongoing crisis of confidence in government.

- **Infrastructure.** Ukrainian civil and economic infrastructure remains an Achilles' heel for the country, and is unable to fully support the country's economy and population. Major infrastructure modes are outdated while demand often exceeds capacity.
- **Geography.** Ukraine is the largest country in Europe after Russia, and its size and diversity together present a serious obstacle to any quick and conclusive military engagement.
- **External actors** (United States, EU member states, Western security and political institutions). Officially, Western leaders support Kiev against Russia's allies in DPR and LPR, but actual support has been limited to small-scale military aid and occasional small-scale training of the Ukrainian military. The much-anticipated lethal weapons package from the United States and NATO has not materialized, and the current administration in Washington is trying to build better relations with Moscow by not using Ukraine as an anti-Russian foil. The European Union's response has been largely limited to use of economic and diplomatic tools against Russia. Russian leaders are prepared to withstand such pressure, so they do not expect the EU to play a critical role in this crisis.
- **The Ukrainian population.** The population is instrumental in putting pressure on the leadership. However, it is split along geographical and ethno-linguistic lines, with most anti-Russian sentiment coming from its western and central provinces. The Ukrainian population is unhappy with the current state of affairs and the pace of reforms across the country, and anti-government sentiment is strong even among the most nationalistic elements. This state of affairs gives Russia a distinct advantage—however, the bulk of the Ukrainian people may unite against Moscow if they perceive that their country is directly threatened by Russian military actions.

Weighing all the foregoing factors, the key centers of gravity for Russian operations in Ukraine include the Ukrainian government, its military and paramilitary forces, and Ukraine's geographic territory. Moscow's strategy needs to focus on pressuring the Ukrainian government to first cease and desist from its ongoing efforts to destroy the Donbas rebels. It then needs to restore its influence over the Kiev

⁵² Tim Daiss, "Ukraine Celebration: One Year Without Russian Gas," *Forbes*, November 27, 2016. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timdaiss/2016/11/27/ukraine-celebration-one-year-without-russian-gas/#5045127562f4>

government, first by demonstrating anew Russia's continuing ability to dominate the battlefield in eastern Ukraine, second, by recapturing most if not all of the territory seized by Ukraine in the interim, and third by inflicting sufficient damage on Ukraine's forces coupled with fear of potential future damage to come, so as to restore Moscow's influence over Kiev's decision-making to achieve the required withdrawal. Since only Kiev can make the kinds of concessions demanded by Moscow, the Ukrainian government in Kiev will constitute the primary center of gravity for Russia's strategy. However, in order to achieve the requisite leverage over Kiev, Russian forces will have to defeat Ukrainian military forces and recover lost territory, making them both important centers of gravity in their own right.

In short, **Russia's strategy will seek to gain leverage over the Ukrainian government** by degrading the fighting ability of the military and paramilitary forces marshalled by Kiev, by inflicting defeat on them, by maintaining control over Ukrainian territory, and by coercing Kiev to change its behavior towards Russia. Ultimately, Russia's "land ownership" will allow Moscow to shape and influence Ukrainian and external actors, as well, such as the Ukrainian population at large, giving Russia tactical and strategic advantage in the country.

Minimum and maximum goals

The minimum and maximum goals for Russia in Ukraine are driven primarily by the negative factors that would accrue to Russia's strategic situation should Ukrainian forces defeat LPR and DPR forces, regain full control of the Donbas, and re-initiate the processes leading to Ukraine switching to the Western camp and its constituent frameworks and alliances.

In this environment, the **minimum** goal for Russia is to restore control over the break-away Donbas republics and restore its influence over the Ukrainian government in Kiev to force it to accept a return to the status quo ante. Moscow would seek to achieve this by repulsing Ukrainian military and paramilitary troops, by actions similar to those taken by Russia actions in 2014-2015 and by inflicting sufficient tailored damage on those troops to force Kiev's hand. This would push back Kiev's ambitions, solidify LPR and DPR as Russia-aligned territories inside Ukraine, and maintain Moscow's leverage over Ukraine's future geopolitical direction, prompting further potential weakening of Ukrainian government's overall domestic and international efforts.

The **maximum** goal is to increase Russia's influence over Ukraine by not only restoring the status quo ante, but also forcing Kiev to fulfill its obligations under the Minsk II accords to create a federalized system in the country that devolves substantial power to the regions, especially the two pro-Russian republics in eastern

Ukraine. This would give these two proxy republics veto power over Ukraine's future direction, thereby cementing Russia's de facto control over the country.

Achieving this goal would require Russia to move beyond the current political and military stalemate in eastern Ukraine, which has enabled Ukraine to stall its implementation of Minsk II while continuing to pressure the Donbas region. It would also necessitate inflicting or threatening to inflict an even more serious military defeat on Ukrainian forces, in order to coerce Kiev's political, economic, and military elites into making such concessions in order to avoid a fresh round of crises in its government. Such a crisis could prompt another round of Maidan-style upheavals that would further degrade Ukraine's ability to function as a fully independent entity in the former Soviet space. In this situation, Russia would emerge once again as a powerful broker in Ukraine, giving Moscow even greater influence over decision-making in Ukraine.

Two major strategies can be employed to achieve Moscow's objectives, but they both carry a high cost:

1. **Cost imposition.** Employ limited military power to deny Ukrainian forces the ability to win and compel Kiev via military means, thereby shaping the political decision-making process and leadership calculus in Kiev. A military campaign in support of DPR and LPR forces is viable and would allow Moscow to retain control of Ukrainian territory and thereby of Kiev's overall strategy. This path would restore Russia's ability to pursue the preexisting strategy to control Ukraine's strategic orientation on its own terms.
2. **Compellence.** The key to this strategy is to coerce Kiev into making even greater concessions by using high-intensity military force (albeit for limited duration and in a controlled manner) to demonstrate Russia's continuing military dominance over Ukraine, to inflict consequential losses on the Ukrainian military, and most importantly to instill substantial fear in the minds of Ukrainian leaders that further major losses could be forthcoming. These conditions would permit Moscow to compel Kiev to make significant political concessions going well beyond those likely to be obtained solely through use of a cost imposition strategy.

In the next section, we describe in greater detail the courses of action that Russian planners would undertake for both of these options.

Courses of action (COAs)

In this scenario, the Kremlin would devise two distinct courses of action (COAs) designed to allow Russia to achieve the minimum and maximum goals specified

above. These COAs are designed to be executed sequentially, starting with the minimum course of action and then escalating to the maximum course of action if the first COA proves insufficient to achieve the desired goals.

The **minimum course of action** in this scenario is intended to restore the status quo ante. Under this COA, the Kremlin would **deploy significant regular Russian ground forces along with supporting units into the Donbas region**. These forces, together with separatist rebel forces already in the Donbas area, would conduct military operations designed to halt the Ukrainian offensive by raising the costs of gaining additional territory thereby denying them their desired objective. Russian forces would seek to stall Ukrainian troops across the Donbas and inflict enough casualties so as to offer them “outs” by withdrawing at this stage with minimal losses and resource expenditures. Failing this, Russian forces would launch a counter-offensive to recover lost territory while inflicting significant damage on Ukrainian and paramilitary forces. The majority of Russian regular forces would then be withdrawn rapidly to avoid leaving them in an exposed position and to maintain deniability regarding their presence in Donbas.

This approach is founded on the cost imposition strategy described above. It requires an economy of force approach, in which Russian military forces are used sparingly to inflict increasing damage to Ukrainian forces. To achieve the desired outcome, Russia would have to leverage force multipliers, such as auxiliaries in the DPR and LPR. Moscow would also add economic and political pressure into the mix in order to bring additional pressure to bear; Ukraine has been hurting economically and steadily losing revenue since the imposition of Western and bilateral sanctions against Russia.

Essentially, under this COA, Russia seeks to replicate the kinds of operations conducted previously in Ilovaisk in 2014 and Debaltseve in 2015, when Russian regular forces and their proxy rebel allies routed Ukrainian forces while inflicting significant damage on them in the process. Those operations also yielded substantial geopolitical gains for Russia in the form of the two Minsk agreements.

Like those operations, this COA is intended to restore Russian and separatist primacy over the Donbas region, while also demonstrating Moscow’s continuing dominance of the battlefield, in order to realize its desired political gains. Specifically, Russia seeks to inflict significant though tailored damage on Ukrainian forces in order to deter future attacks, compel Kiev to accept the desired restoration of the status quo, and set back Ukraine’s efforts to build up its military, while at the same time maintaining a relatively small footprint in the Donbas to avoid provoking unwanted escalation. In essence, the damage inflicted on Kiev by Russia, along with the implicit threat of even more damage to come, would be instrumental in coercing Kiev into ceasing further offensive operations and agreeing to return to the status quo ante.

The **maximum course of action**, involving a higher-risk/higher-reward formula, is designed to compel Kiev to not only restore the status quo ante, but to make even greater concessions through heavier use of Russian military force. This COA represents a significant escalation of the conflict in Ukraine and would only be invoked if the minimum course of action had failed to yield the necessary results or if the Kremlin believed that conditions were favorable for it to achieve an even greater share of its goals at a relatively low cost.

Under this COA, Russia would engage in high-intensity conventional military operations designed to **compel** Kiev to concede Moscow's maximum goals. Specifically, Russian armored forces, supported by motorized rifle and other supporting units, would launch offensives both north and south of the Donbas region to outflank Ukrainian forces massed around the DPR and LPR. As shown in Figure 14, these Russian forces would then link up west of Donbas to "create two powerful pincers to flank and strategically encircle the main group of the Ukrainian army in . . . Ukraine."⁵³

At the same time, Moscow would also mass forces on the northern border of Ukraine in order to directly threaten Kiev itself. In this way, Russia would seek to exert even more pressure on Ukraine by threatening regime stability while simultaneously **detering** a potential Western intervention. Currently, Russian maneuver forces are based at eight locations near the Ukrainian border: Yelnya, Klinty, Valuyki, Boguchar, Millerovo, Persianovskiy, and bases called Rostov-1 and Rostov-2. Along Russia's border with northern Ukraine, Russia would deploy three major groupings "capable of, if the need arises, mounting a rapid attack in the direction of Kiev, which is only 270 kilometers from the border through [the northern Ukrainian city of] Chernigov."⁵⁴

Economic and political tools would take a back seat to use of military force at this juncture of the conflict, however, as they will not work fast enough to shift the situation in Russia's favor. Nonetheless, information operations (IO) would be used extensively by Moscow to shape international and domestic opinion about this conflict. Russia has had success with its information operations in Crimea in 2014 and in eastern Ukraine in 2014-2015, as well as in shaping public perceptions of its actions in Syria and in other international situations.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Victor Vladimirov, "Russian Troop Buildup Along Ukraine Border Raises War Fears." *Voice of America*, August 4, 2016. <http://www.voanews.com/a/russia-troop-buildup-ukraine-border-raises-war-fears/3450445.html>.

Figure 14. Potential Russian military strikes against Ukraine



Source: CNA

This approach is founded on the compellence strategy described above. It calls for Russia to employ high intensity military power to inflict a major defeat on Ukrainian

forces, letting Kiev suffer unacceptable losses that would precipitate major crises domestically and internationally. Moscow could then threaten Ukraine's political stability through further use of military force to potentially take over larger portions of the country and/or impose regime change on Kiev. Despite the growing competence of its forces, the Ukrainian military is still no match qualitatively or quantitatively for Russian troops. The involvement of the Russian military at this level would essentially compel a ceasefire at gunpoint, on conditions favorable to Moscow.

If properly executed, this COA would give Russia substantial additional leverage to negotiate a new cease fire on terms that lock in significant new gains for Moscow. Specifically, Moscow could leverage both the threat of further damage to the encircled Ukrainian troops in eastern Ukraine as well as the threat of fresh new offensives to compel Ukraine to do what it failed to do under the Minsk II Agreement, namely establish the federalized, decentralized system that Moscow craves to gain a permanent veto over Ukraine's future direction.

Therefore, **coercing** Ukrainian military and decision-makers is possible if Russia can make them fear that the maximum course of action is credible, with the consequences greatly unwelcome to Kiev. The full occupation of the country and the resulting pro-Moscow regime change are not actually realistic right now, but will be used for "show," given Kiev's concern with potential and possible Russian actions in Ukraine. Russian leaders have observed that every time the Russian military stages an exercise or a snap drill/readiness check near Ukrainian border, Kiev and the West immediately conclude that Moscow is planning to invade Ukraine. Such a heightened state of near-paranoia plays into Russian hands.

For this approach to succeed, however, Russia will also have to successfully deter the West from intervening in the conflict. In addition to massing troops on the border, this could be further accomplished by leveraging the West's fear that the conflict could expand across the rest of Ukraine, and possibly spill over to other countries such as Belarus and Moldova, and potentially even the Baltics. Despite public examples of basing their forces across several neighboring NATO countries, Western militaries are unprepared and unwilling to commit fully to defend all of Ukraine against Moscow, as they recognize that Russia would maintain escalation dominance in the country, at least over the short term. This should not be lost on Kiev, which would probably bank on ending the new conflict quickly and on its own terms before the full brunt of Russian military force could be brought to bear.

Moscow would also seek to minimize the possibility of Western intervention by keeping the campaign relatively short. Ideally, the Kremlin would seek to complete operations within an approximately two-week window in order to avoid direct involvement of the West and its potentially strong response in the form of additional political and economic pressure on Russia. In such a scenario, Russian leaders would seek to minimize all military, political, economic, and socio-cultural costs.

Finally Russia would seek to leverage the significant advantages it has in terms of rapid decision-making—the West’s decision-making cycle would likely be too slow to affect this strategy, considering the multitude of steps required for NATO or some other potential “coalition of the willing” to arrive at a final decision (e.g., deliberations at the multiple parliamentary bodies, discussions over rules of authority, political disagreements, and uncertainty over how to properly counter Russian actions). Should Russia chose to act, it would seek to shape the outcome before the West—and the United States in particular—could react and come up with their own COAs.

Russian vulnerabilities

If Russia should choose to expand the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, it would face an extensive list of vulnerabilities. Most of these vulnerabilities would parallel those in the other scenarios discussed in this report, but some are unique to the Ukraine scenario.

Most importantly, the Russian military’s manpower limitations would play an important role in constraining Russian military options in Ukraine. Russia simply does not have the number of combat troops it would need to conduct a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At the present time, Russian troop strength in a contingency situation is likely to be limited to 50,000 combat troops and the required additional 40,000 to 50,000 support troops. This force would be sufficient to conduct moderately sized military operations but not to seize and hold a large territory such as Ukraine. Additional troops could be brought into the theater after several weeks, but this would be too long a time horizon for this campaign because of the other vulnerabilities discussed below. Reserve forces would not help in this regard either, as Russia’s ability to mobilize reinforcements from the general population is highly limited and still in the rebuilding phase. The size of the Russian ground force thus places limits on the types of offensive operations Russia could conduct in Ukraine.

As in the Belarus scenario, Russia’s ability to conduct offensive operations would be further limited by the ongoing reorganization and modernization of its military. The military command would find it challenging to lead this force into a potentially high end fight such as would be likely to develop if the conflict in eastern Ukraine expanded beyond the Donbas region. As in the other scenarios, Russia would not be able to receive meaningful assistance from allies in this contingency. Belarus has refused to get involved in the Ukraine conflict, and Russia’s other CSTO allies are neither interested in getting involved nor able to contribute to the effort in any meaningful way. If Russia should choose to expand the conflict in Ukraine, it would have to engage on its own the Ukrainian military and any of its allies that chose to come to its aid.

Sustaining a high-intensity combat operation would also prove challenging, largely for the same economic reasons as in Belarus. In fact, the problems would likely be more severe, as the fight would be more difficult and would likely go on for longer, given that Ukraine is a much larger country with a more capable military force that could extend the campaign well beyond the time frame envisioned in Belarus. The impact on Russian domestic politics would also potentially be more severe. In addition to economic consequences and casualties among Russian soldiers, Ukraine has the capacity of bring the fight to Russian soil through a combination of shelling bordering Russian areas with artillery and conducting terrorist attacks inside Russia by sending cells to infiltrate major Russian cities.

These constraints and vulnerabilities are likely to make Russian leaders cautious about over-extending Russia's forces in a renewed Ukraine conflict and would lead them to attempt to keep renewed hostilities limited, and as brief as possible.

Russian red lines and escalation/de-escalation drivers

As mentioned above, the stakes for Russia in this crisis are very high, meaning that it can ill afford an unfavorable outcome. Consequently, while Moscow will certainly try to limit both its costs and its exposure to risk by attempting the minimum COA first, it is likely to escalate quickly and forcefully to the maximum COA at the first signs that its preferred strategy is failing.

There are several scenarios that would cross Russian "red lines" and present Russia with highly unwelcome and undesirable outcomes potentially leading to escalation. It is important to list them here, even if there is a low likelihood of their occurrence.

- **If Ukrainian forces proved successful on the battlefield in Donbas, Russian progress might stall, resulting in a failure to meet its operational objectives.** If Russian forces stalled, that might buy Kiev more time to attain political, economic, and military support from the West, which would view Russian actions as necessitating additional rounds of sanctions. This situation could even result in harsher action from the international community, rallied by Washington, Brussels, and Kiev. In this case, Russia would almost certainly escalate to the maximum course of action since accepting a significant military defeat in the Donbas would essentially destroy Russia's strategy for Ukraine, with all of the negative consequences described above. However, the Kremlin might decide to de-escalate instead if it perceived that the geopolitical situation had evolved in a way that threatened the likelihood of success of the maximum course of action or threatened to raise the associated costs to an unacceptably high level. In that case, Moscow might attempt to negotiate a new

cease fire using the potential threat of further escalation to gain leverage and obtain the best terms it could.

- **Ukrainian forces inflict high casualties** on the Russian military in Donbas. However unlikely that is—considering the current state of readiness of Russian troops, following multiple exercises, snap drills and readiness checks—Ukraine today possesses much more capable and professional military forces, multiple issues notwithstanding. Should Ukraine inflict unexpectedly high casualties on Russian forces, this might result in a **much bigger war** than currently anticipated. In such case, Russia could well decide to pull greater numbers of Russian forces and equipment into the Donbas region. Or it could elect to escalate to the maximum course of action in order to avoid casualties caused by attacking well dug-in Ukrainian positions around DPR and LPR. In either case, this could trigger Ukraine’s neighbors and NATO into action against Russian troops. Such a widening conflict scenario might effectively result in clashes between Russia and NATO—a highly undesirable outcome for Moscow.
- Ukrainian forces might counter Russian military action by **firing on Russian land targets and cities**, resulting in civilian casualties and unintended domestic consequences. Currently, Ukraine has a variety of long-range ballistic missiles, as well as long-range artillery that can potentially reach deep into Russian territory. Such action would necessitate Russia’s own harsh response if Ukrainian missiles and artillery shells were to start landing on Russian territory and population centers. Already, Russia is experiencing dissent driven by opposition political figures targeting the Russian leadership. An attack on Russian soil in response to Russian actions has the potential to trigger a domestic political crisis. Such an action would definitely result in greater horizontal escalation by Russian forces against Ukraine— action that could result in enormous military, political, and economic costs to Russia.

Theory of defeat and resulting exit/escalation strategies

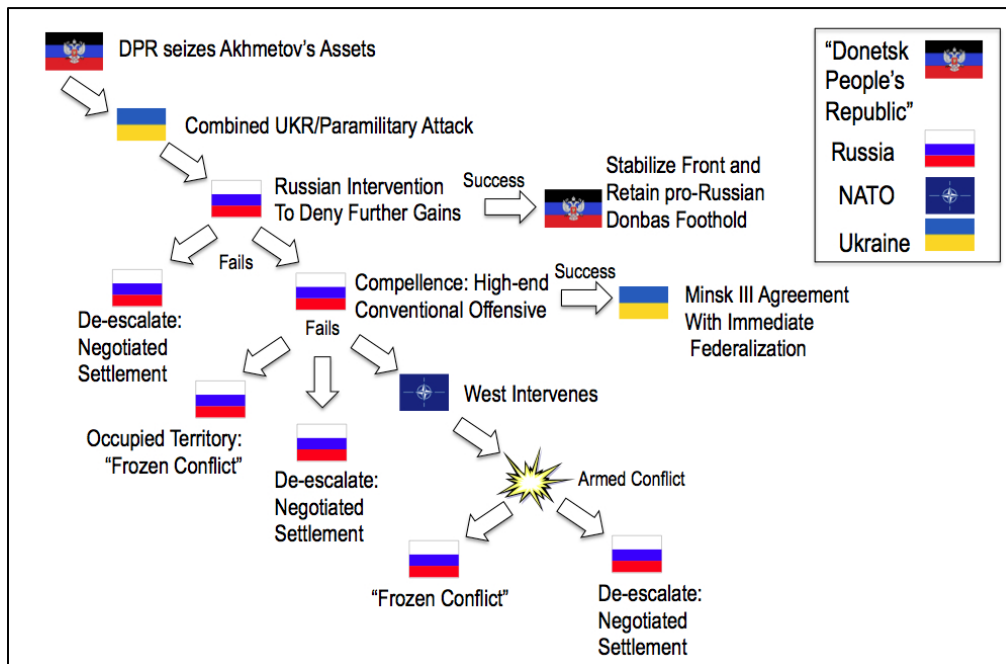
In this scenario, Russia’s victory in Ukraine is far from certain. Its goals can be thwarted if either the cost imposition or compellence strategy fails. The situation would be particularly dire for Russia if both failed. Failure could also result from other conditions. The following lists the kinds of conditions that could cause Russia’s efforts in Ukraine to fail leading it to abandon its strategy. Figure 15 provides a graphical representation of Russia’s strategy and its escalation and de-escalation options for this scenario.

- **The Ukrainian military makes gains** through a rapid offensive against Russian and Donbas rebel forces, taking over most of DPR and LPR. Such an action would effectively present Moscow with a Ukrainian fait accompli across most of the Donbas region. This case represents a failure of Russia's denial strategy which could lead Moscow to either escalate to its maximum course of action or abandon its strategy altogether depending on circumstances.
- **Russia's cost imposition and compellence strategies both fail to achieve their intended political-military objectives.** In such case, Russia's military strategy has failed either because it suffered military reverses on the battlefield or otherwise failed to inflict enough loss or damage on Ukraine to force it to make the desired concessions. This represents a failure of Russia's military strategy and would likely lead Russia to abandon its efforts and de-escalate the crisis.
- **Western forces intervene in the crisis before Russia has achieved its main objectives.** If NATO or the U.S. or other powers either acting independently or in concert with one another were to move substantial forces into Ukraine and/or conduct actual military attacks against Russian forces (or Russia itself), Russia would likely reconsider its strategy. Given the stakes involved for Russia in Ukraine, Moscow might elect to continue pursuing its strategy in Ukraine despite the presence of Western military forces. Moreover, if attacked, Russia might well decide to escalate the conflict even further by directly confronting Western forces that stood in its way. In the latter case, Moscow would still seek to contain the ensuing conflict with the West in order to eventually reach a negotiated settlement, much in the same manner described in the Belarus scenario above. Depending on circumstances, Russia might also elect to de-escalate the crisis in the face of Western intervention, in which case it would seek to negotiate a settlement to obtain the best terms possible under the circumstances.
- **Moscow fails to keep the conflict contained to the Donbas region.** The best case would be a geographic containment of this crisis, so that the spread of the crisis beyond the Donbas would be seen as a failure, resulting in vertical or horizontal escalation. For Russia, escalation would mean the following:
 - Vertical escalation with aerial and/or naval missile attacks against Ukrainian forces and targets in other parts of the country. Such action would almost certainly activate an international response aimed at limiting Russia's reach and targeting its domestic and international standing.
 - Horizontal escalation would mean deep strikes and infrastructure hits on political and economic targets across all of Ukraine. Such action would also pit international opinion against Russia, resulting in potentially harsh and unforeseen action.

- Should the operation require more forces than originally planned, it would create a waterfall effect on operational objectives, requiring higher costs related to military, logistics, and weapons, and all resulting economic costs of this endeavor.

All of this highlights the major problem that Russian actions are operationally driven —i.e., they depend on responding to successful Ukrainian military attacks and counter-attacks—rather than being strategically driven to compel Kiev to act according to Russian wishes and principles, preferably without using military force to any great extent.

Figure 15. Ukraine strategy and exit/escalation flowchart



Source: CNA

If Russia were to become mired in this conflict and its actions were not achieving desired outcomes, the Russian leadership could activate one of several strategies that would allow Russia to withdraw while saving face with its Donbas allies, Russian citizens, and allies across the former Soviet Union and around the world.

- **Negotiate a settlement** that meets several key criteria necessary for Russia to emerge victorious or at least with a "saved face." Depending on circumstances, such negotiations could include:

- Ceasefire along the line of combat that would effectively allow Russia to regroup and rebuild, as well as to develop a new strategy going forward. Although such an action would grant Ukraine a reprieve as well, it would simultaneously deprive it of the complete victory it is seeking. This would increase the likelihood that various political factions in Kiev would devolve back to infighting.
- Lessening sanctions on Russia. Currently, there is no unified consensus on the future of such sanctions, with EU members rigorously disagreeing with each other on this issue. Even members of the American administration are in disagreement on whether such sanctions are working and whether they should continue in the present form. In return, Russia could lift sanctions it in turn imposed on Ukraine and Baltic nations, improving their economic situation.
- Bargain for autonomy for LPR and DPR. Although these territories already enjoy de-facto autonomy from Kiev, solidifying their status de-jure would weaken Kiev by emboldening radical Ukrainian elements to challenge their government, effectively escalating political chaos across the country; while demonstrating to Russian allies the seriousness of Russia's approach in protecting and defending them.
- Attempt to **trade some land for a ceasefire**, which would allow Russia to save face and yet still retain control over portions of the Donbas.
- Offer **withdrawal of Russian forces in return for guarantees**, such as de-escalation and cessation of hostilities against DPR and LPR. Such action would allow Russia to buy time in order to strengthen its position while its leadership develops a successor strategy.
- **Allow a multinational peacekeeping force** to enter the combat zone in order to restore peace and initiate rebuilding and humanitarian programs. Such a force could be under UN, OSCE, or another international organization's auspices. Putting trust in international frameworks would elevate Russia's international status, while ultimately saving face with allies and constituents.

Black swans

There are various unknown scenarios and events that can greatly influence Russia's strategy and decision-making calculus. Although it is not possible to correctly envision all such outcomes, it is useful to propose several likely scenarios. They include:

Ukrainian nationalists carry out terrorism against Russia: There is no lack of hatred for Moscow among Ukrainian nationalists, be they in the Rada, on the street, or in the Ukrainian military. There have been numerous public statements and calls for violence against Russia, including from ultra-nationalist fringe elements such as the Azov Battalion. Therefore, if the conflict across the Donbas widened and led to a significant refugee flow across the border into Russia, the Ukrainian government or non-government political and paramilitary formations might attempt to organize a small cell to slip through in order to conduct terrorist attacks on Russian military, civilian, and economic targets. Such attacks might be difficult to prevent and might impose substantial costs, although Russian security services are working on interdicting exactly this type of activity at present. The most notable case of Kiev's desire to strike at Russian targets was the 2016 capture of a Ukrainian intelligence cell targeting Russian installations in Crimea. Should the Donbas conflict unfold in a way that was unfavorable to Kiev, it might sponsor such attacks to weaken Russian resolve.

Ukrainian political collapse: A successful Russian military campaign could create a “catastrophic success.” Already, Ukrainian politics and its economy are reeling in the aftermath of their 2014-2016 ATO operation against separatist forces in the Donbas. Constant infighting in the Ukrainian parliament, inability to forge a consensus on a variety of key issues, a weakening economy that is prompting millions of Ukrainians to emigrate—all of these factors exacerbate Kiev's inability to govern effectively. Should its government fall, Ukraine would be thrust into chaos, with tens of millions of people suddenly finding themselves without a government, money, or even basic services. While this might prompt many to flee, it might also cause millions to cross the border into Russia or even Belarus, creating a massive humanitarian crisis. Russia would be left having to re-establish control and governance in pro-Russian parts of the country— although it would probably not be the only country seeking to do so, as NATO might want to take advantage of Ukrainian collapse to introduce “peacekeeping” forces in the hopes of establishing a pro-Western government in Kiev or at least across the western regions of the country. This might risk potential clashes with other forces seeking to establish partial or full control over Ukraine. Moreover, should the Ukrainian government fall, certain parts of the country and its regions might fall under control of local authorities, effectively devolving Ukraine into several fiefdoms controlled by oligarchs or local strongmen. This might precipitate a guerilla war on multiple fronts—between and among local forces, and against Russian or other foreign forces. Such a scenario is the least desirable option for Moscow, even if it means that Ukraine would eventually be Russia's for the taking.

We should also not discount the possibility of **Ukraine's neighbors taking action** as well. Should Russian forces intervene, Poland and/or Lithuania might seek to prop up the ailing Kiev regime with increased military assistance, along with political or economic aid. Recently, Poland has been making overtures to the Ukrainian defense

establishment, seeking closer ties and attempting to co-produce military equipment. Already, some Ukrainian military units are equipped with Polish light unmanned aerial vehicles. Lithuania, for its part, has been a vocal anti-Russian advocate in NATO and the EU, and has publicly voiced concerns over Russian actions in the Donbas. Additionally, Russia's direct involvement in Ukraine might precipitate unwelcome action in Belarus, where anti-Russian political and civil society forces might try to topple the Lukashenko government, or at least initiate enough unrest to distract Russia from dealing with Ukraine.

Russia should also not discount an **aggressive US unilateral response**: If Washington decided that Ukraine could serve as a quick political victory that would placate various competing elites in the United States and across NATO/EU, Russia could expect American forces to back Kiev with weapons, trainers, and military units, including armored infantry, air force and other combat components. Such a scenario would place Russia directly on a collision course with the United States and potentially the rest of NATO.

Conclusion

The framework highlights a number of commonalities across the potential scenarios we have analyzed. Russian thinking across scenarios prioritized the desire to avoid losses, rather than pursue opportunities. Some had a stronger affinity towards employing non-military instruments of power, while others lent themselves to overt use of force either for coercion or compellence on the battlefield. As posited, Russia was not the initiator of conflict, but was principally reacting to a crisis. However, in most cases Moscow sought to seize the initiative, set the agenda, and establish leverage in the crisis.

Despite a primal drive to avoid loss of strategic position, the framework as applied showed that Russian leadership sought out opportunities to improve its strategic position. Russia's maximalist goals tended towards not just preventing losses but also securing gains. The approaches varied in terms of mixing political warfare, irregular warfare, conventional military power, and the roles each played in terms of playing the supporting versus supported role. Application was iterative, as quick cycles of decision-making, flexibility, and an emergent strategy lent themselves towards rapid adaptation. Moscow sought to minimize cost, mitigate risk, and apply the reasonably sufficient level of force to achieve desired effects.

Asymmetry of capability and interests played a consistent role as Moscow sought to shape adversary decision-making. In cases where the balance of capability and resolve was decidedly on Russia's side, low cost options backed by high end threats proved attractive. Conversely in cases where NATO was involved, risk mitigation was a higher priority, as gains were weighed negatively against the prospect of conflict.

The strategic assessment and initial strategic objectives guided what Moscow wanted to do, whereas the strategy was shaped by a drive for leverage. In Latvia the threat of conflict with NATO was persuasive against adventurism, as was the prospect of a reduced strategic position at the end of the crisis. Meanwhile in Belarus both the desire to retain influence and the potential ease of doing so pushed the scenario towards more forward leaning actions including the risky use of force. Ukraine's size and military strength resulted in a balanced approach intended to compel while managing costs. Escalation management was an important consideration, and in some cases policy failure led to withdrawal rather than doubling down. Potential indirect or attendant costs were also important, including Western sanctions, the

prospect of catastrophic success that results in state fragmentation of a neighbor, and other adverse effects beyond the immediate military contest.

The framework developed in this report is not meant to be predictive of Russian responses in a real-world conflict situation, as Russian responses will depend on a host of specific factors present at the time of the crisis. It is a guide for emulation not a model of prediction. However, it substantively helps inform the user on Russian decision-making, providing an emulation tool and a method for walking through a hypothetical scenario. Thus, the framework is meant to be used as a guideline for modeling Russian behavior in a crisis situation. It allows its users to formulate decision-trees for Russian decision-making on the basis of reasonable assumptions about how Russia might act in various situations. It can be further developed and refined on the basis of specific inputs, such as accounting for the role of other actors, a dynamic blue and green, or sub-state factors such as domestic politics. Most importantly the framework needs more cases and simulations with participants to be further 'road tested' and improved.

Using this framework, simulation of Russian decision-making can move beyond the model of putting subject-matter experts in a room and asking them to react to prompts from a white cell. Instead, these experts can be made familiar with the framework and then asked to develop its components based on a particular scenario. Multi-move simulations can be accommodated by having the participants reengage with the framework after receiving new information at the start of each move.

The framework can also serve as the first step in developing a more detailed model that allows for better emulation of key decision-makers within the Russian government. As a next step, the framework presented here can be combined with previously completed analysis of the constellation of key decision-makers in the Russian government on various security and foreign policy issues. By incorporating what is known about the interests and worldviews of the most influential Russian leaders, and the goals of the agencies and organizations they lead, into a framework modeled on the one presented in this report, emulators can go further in modeling internal decision-making within the Russian state. When they role-play decision-making processes within the state, emulators can combine biographical information with a modified version of the framework in order to develop a better understanding of the various actors' goals in a particular scenario.

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