



America's Losing Game Against Russia in the Near East

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OUTFOXED BY THE BEAR?

America's Losing Game Against Russia in the Near East

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Executive Summary

For centuries, American policymakers have likened Russia to a large, clumsy bear—a state whose power relies not on skill and appeal, but on brute force and the ability to intimidate. The unsuccessful Soviet invasion in Afghanistan seemed to confirm policymakers' belief that Russia's boorish foreign policy would fail among its Muslim neighbors to the south. However, this experience was an anomaly. Russia has since proved its agility in the Near East and outmaneuvered the United States. Moscow retained the loyalty of the Central Asian republics upon the Soviet Union's disintegration. It prevailed in the Caucasus by cooperating with local Muslims. It turned the tide in the Syrian Civil War. And perhaps most remarkably, it drove a wedge between the U.S. and its formerly stalwart NATO ally, Turkey. While the clumsy bear caricature simplifies American planning, it leads to misguided policies. The past decades have shown that it is time for Washington to cast away this caricature and to study Russia with greater care and greater humility.

For over three centuries, Westerners have likened Russia to a bear.¹ The comparison is not generally flattering. Although bears are large and powerful, the metaphor is commonly deployed to suggest a lumbering and clumsy creature. Hunters and woodsmen who risk encountering bears, however, are rarely inclined to indulge in such smugness. They know bears are clever, agile, and fast.

What hunters once knew, American policymakers have forgotten. Since the end of the Cold War and up until quite recently, Americans reassured themselves that Russia was like a big, awkward bear, and irredeemably so. Russia, the caricature went, owed its historical status as a great power not to skill or appeal, but only to its sheer bulk and ability to intimidate smaller neighbors. Many perhaps feared Russia, but no one in her neighborhood liked it.

The Soviet Union was the bear's largest and most fearsome incarnation. Consolidated in 1922, it spanned one-sixth the earth's surface, from Europe to East Asia, had Eastern Europe firmly under its control, possessed the world's largest war machine, boasted a nuclear arsenal to rival America's, projected power and influence around the globe, and proclaimed that its revolutionary socialist society was a model for the world. Russia was just one part of the Soviet Union, albeit the largest. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 left the Russian Federation still the largest country in the world in terms of territory, but just half the size of the USSR in terms of population and greatly diminished in economic potential and geographic reach. And whereas the USSR generated global appeal through revolutionary socialism, Russia after 1991 dropped any pretense to a world-historical mission and today exerts no attraction comparable to the USSR's.

In short, Russia's decline from its Cold War peak was steep. Many Western analysts went beyond noting Russia's decline to predicting its demise.² This view became mainstream in the West. Former U.S. President Barack Obama, for example, dismissed the country as a mere "regional power" that is "isolated" with an economy in tatters that "doesn't



Cold War Political Cartoon

make anything." Not least, Obama compounded his contempt with ignorance when he asserted that, even as its population falls, Russia is incapable of attracting immigrants. The fact is that Russia is one of the largest destinations of immigrants in the world.³ His Vice President, Joseph Biden, had a similarly blistering opinion of Russia, declaring that the Russians "have a shrinking population base, they have a withering economy, they have a banking sector and structure that is not likely to be able to withstand the next 15 years."⁴ Democrats are not the only Americans who predicted that Russia was destined for demise.⁵ Senator John McCain declared that "Russia is a gas station masquerading as a country."⁶ As an expression of contempt, it is brilliant. As a basis for formulating statecraft, it is reckless.

The conviction that Russia's power relies primarily on crude coercion has long colored American perceptions.

1 See, the report from the Munich Security Conference held in February 2018. It carries the section header, "Russia: Bearly Strong?" *Munich Security Report 2018: To the Brink and Back* (Munich, 2018), p. 28.

2 For some examples, see, Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Dying Bear: Russia's Demographic Disaster," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December, 2011, pp. 95-108; Ilan Berman, *Implosion: The End of Russia and What It Means for America* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2013); Paul Sinkman, "The Inevitable Decline of Putin's Russia," *U.S. News and World Report*, May 18, 2016; and Joseph Chamie and Barry Mirkin, "Russian Demographics: The Perfect Storm," *Yale Global Online*, December 11, 2014. Available at <https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/russian-demographics-perfect-storm>.

3 Mary Elizabeth Malinkin, "Russia: The World's Second-Largest Immigration Haven," *The National Interest*, August 10, 2014. Available at <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-the-worlds-second-largest-immigration-haven-11053>.

4 Peter Siegel, "Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to U.S.," *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2009. Available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124848246032580581>.

5 Peter Feaver, "Biden Commits a Truth about Russia," *Foreign Policy*, July 26, 2009. Available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/07/26/biden-commits-a-truth-about-russia/>.

6 "John McCain: Russia is a 'gas station masquerading as a country,'" *The Week*, March 16, 2014. Available at <http://theweek.com/speedreads/456437/john-mccain-russia-gas-station-masquerading-country>.

During the Cold War, Americans believed that whereas knocking heads in the crude Russian bear-like style could intimidate and subdue Europeans, it would fail among the peoples to the south of the Soviet Union, a rougher and tougher part of the world where vengeance is a code of life. This suspicion followed not from careful study, but instead derived from an oversimplification of a Eurocentric perspective on Russian history that reduced the long and complex story of Russia's interaction with the Caucasus, Central Asia, and other southern lands to a one-dimensional tale of violent confrontation and conquest. It overlooked Russia's extensive experience dealing with Muslims and others on its southern and eastern peripheries. Moscow, for example, had been ruling Muslim populations for two centuries before the U.S. had even declared its independence. It assumed a fundamental continuity between Tsarist Russia and the USSR and took for granted that the Muslims of the Soviet Union were fundamentally restive.

The hope that sparks will fly when Russian power encounters the Middle East met its test in 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. American policymakers, such as National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and officials at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), relished the chance to use Afghanistan to "suck the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire."⁷ Indeed, they may even have provoked the Soviets to invade.⁸ The scenario largely played out as those Americans had hoped. After ten years of war, the Soviet Army withdrew from Afghanistan in defeat. Americans accordingly framed the Soviet experience in Afghanistan as a morality tale of how the stubborn and clumsy brutality of the Soviets generated a vigorous resistance among the fanatical and indomitable Afghans and ineluctably concluded in failure.

There is a good deal of truth in this simple depiction of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, but it is not the whole truth. That experience was as much a civil war as a war of popular resistance to foreign occupation. The Soviet effort was ultimately ineffectual, but it was not one-dimensional. The Soviets did pursue economic and social development projects.⁹ And although referred to as the "Soviet Vietnam," the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan never rivaled American involvement in Vietnam in scale. Whereas the Americans had roughly half a million troops deployed in Vietnam at the peak of that war, the

Soviets never had more than 140,000 in Afghanistan.

A more fundamental error of the popular American mythology of the Soviet intervention, however, was to represent it as a template for future Russian failure in the greater Middle East. In fact, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan was a deviation from a record of success in Muslim Central Asia. To be sure, the record of Communism in Central Asia was one of political repression, spiritual despoilment, economic waste, and ecological calamity, as it has been virtually everywhere. On the other hand, in the judgment of Central Asians themselves, Soviet rule delivered positive developments such as near universal literacy and schooling, transportation, modern cities, health care, and industry.

At the end of the Soviet era, the Central Asian republics proved more loyal to the Soviet Union than others.

Again, these same achievements also bequeathed forbiddingly dark legacies. A cotton monoculture, radioactive contamination of large swathes of land, and the depletion of the Aral Sea are just three such examples. Nonetheless, most Central Asians regarded Soviet development as a reasonable—and desirable—simulacrum of modernity. At the end of the Soviet era, the Central Asian republics proved more loyal to the Soviet Union than the others. It was the withdrawal of the Slavic republics of Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia that brought down the Soviet Union. The Central Asians remained loyal.

American Sovietologists expected the opposite. In the 1970s, a small circle of specialists with expertise in Sovietology and Islam concluded that Central Asia was a time bomb inside the Soviet Union. Whereas the birth rates of Slavs were declining, those of Central Asians were robust. That the expanding proportion of Central Asians would destabilize Moscow's rule soon became conventional wisdom.¹⁰ George Ball, a former Under Secretary of State but no Russia expert, confidently wrote in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* in 1980, "Since the minorities hate the Russians," the fact that "the 40 million Muslims of Central Asia" have a "rate of annual increase . . . several times that of the Russians" is sowing deep unease in the Kremlin.¹¹

These observers also fixated on Central Asia's Muslim identity. If global trends in Muslim communities were any indication, the CIA surmised in 1990, the youth

⁷ Robert Gates, *From The Shadows* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 145.

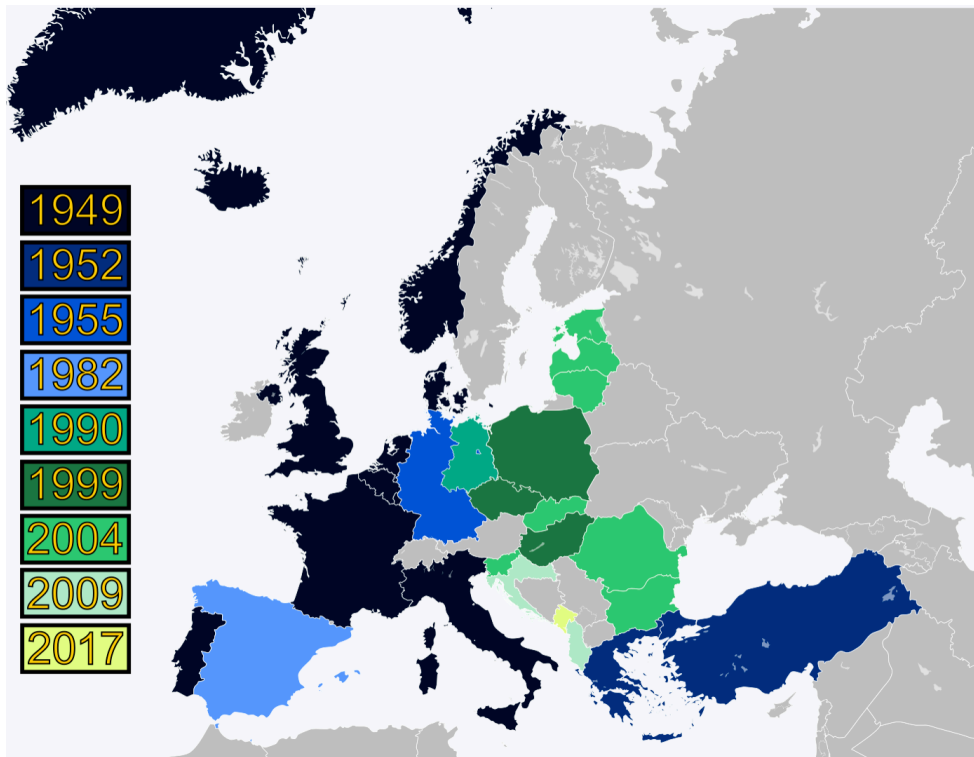
⁸ See, the interview with Brzezinski, "Les Révélations d'un Ancien Conseiller de Carter: 'Oui, la CIA est Entrée en Afghanistan avant les Russes...'" *Le Nouvel Observateur* [Paris], January 15-21, 1998, p. 76; and David N. Gibbs, "Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Retrospect," *International Politics* vol. 37, no. 2 (June, 2000), pp. 241-242.

⁹ Roderic Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 146-168.

¹⁰ Michael Rywkin, "Religion, Modern Nationalism and Political Power in Soviet Central Asia," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* vol. 17 no. 2 (1975), pp. 271-285.

¹¹ George W. Ball, "Reflections on a Heavy Year," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 59 no. 3 (1980), p. 480.

NATO expansion through the years (Source: Partick Neil/ Wikimedia Commons)



bulge in Soviet Central Asia portended social unrest.¹² Islam's fundamental incompatibility with communism added an explosive element to the ethnic rift between Slavs and Central Asians. As Central Asians grew conscious of their growing demographic heft, they would assert themselves. Then, under the influence of their faith, they would plunge Soviet Communism into crisis. U.S. intelligence operatives in the 1980s sought to accelerate this looming confrontation by supporting the penetration of Afghan mujahidin into Central Asia. They supplied these raiders with translations of the Quran out of a naïve assumption that it would trigger resistance inside Soviet borders.¹³ However, religious discontent in Central Asia did not bring down the Soviet Union. But it did contribute to disorder in post-Soviet Central Asia.

America's Post-Cold War Dream World

The 1990s were a heady time for American geopoliticians. The end of the Cold War vindicated the grand strategy of containment and made the United States the world's undisputed heavyweight. American intellectuals debated whether history had culminated in liberal democracy. Defense planners drafted a new

grand strategy to secure perpetual global supremacy.¹⁴

Although Washington ultimately did not adopt this strategy of benevolent domination, it did resolve to block Russian predominance in the former Soviet space. To counter Russia in its western borderlands, Washington proposed expanding NATO eastward and relying on the Alliance's power projection capabilities. Never mind that America's leading diplomats and Russia experts strenuously warned that NATO expansion was a dangerous gambit. George Kennan, the doyen of American diplomacy and architect of containment, called it "the most fateful error of American foreign policy in the entire post-cold-war era."¹⁵ Jack Matlock, Ronald Reagan's ambassador to Moscow, warned the Senate that NATO expansion "could go down in history as a profound strategic blunder."¹⁶ Another Reagan administration official and famous Soviet hawk, Harvard Professor Richard Pipes, also objected to the expansion. Then, in 1997, 50 prominent Republicans and Democrats—including Paul Nitze, Fred Iklé, Bill Russell, Sam Nunn, and Gary Hart—wrote an open letter to U.S. President Bill Clinton, calling expansion

¹² "USSR: Demographic Trends and Ethnic Balance in the Non-Russian Republics," Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, April 1990, p. 9.

¹³ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 90.

¹⁴ Patrick Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop: A One-Superpower World," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

¹⁵ George Kennan, "A Fateful Error," *New York Times*, May 2, 1997.

¹⁶ United States Congress Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Debate on NATO Enlargement* (Washington, D.C., 1998), p. 231.

unnecessary, undesirable, and ill-conceived.¹⁷ As Strobe Talbott, Bill Clinton's "Russia hand" recalled, "It seemed that everyone I knew from the world of academe, journalism, and the foreign policy think-tanks was against enlargement."¹⁸ But the Alliance added 13 new members despite these warnings.

Unlike Eastern Europe, the remoteness of Central Asia made countering Russia's influence to the south more challenging. The breakup of the Soviet Union put Central Asian geopolitical affiliations into play. At the beginning of the 1990s, Moscow was ideologically adrift, in economic free fall, and politically unstable. The People's Republic of China, then with an economy smaller than Brazil's, was only beginning its rapid ascent. Some feared that the overnight disappearance of communism would create an ideological vacuum ripe for Islamic extremism. After all, the Islamic Revolutionary Republic of Iran bordered Turkmenistan. Much of Central Asia had historically been in Iran's political and cultural spheres, and Iran's mullahs sought to build ties with their newly independent neighbors. Meanwhile, next door in Afghanistan, the Taliban and other Islamist movements were on the march.

The irony that just a few short years earlier American intelligence backed Islamist raids into Central Asia escaped public commentary. Indeed, Tajikistan experienced an armed Islamist movement and succumbed to civil war. An odd coalition of democratic reformists and Islamists, some who drew support from inside Afghanistan, attempted to overthrow the Tajik government in 1992. Moscow intervened in support of Dushanbe. With the aid of Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh soldiers, the Tajik government loyalists eventually prevailed in 1997—but at the cost of 40,000 to 100,000 lives.¹⁹

During the 1990s, Brzezinski, among others, championed the idea of using Turkey to pull the Central Asian republics away from Russia and Iran.²⁰ Turkey possessed several relevant virtues. As a NATO ally for over four decades, it had a track record of close diplomatic and military cooperation with the West. Turks shared a Sunni Islamic identity and ethno-linguistic roots with a majority of Central Asians, but they were also fierce exponents of secular democratic

government. This combination of alignment with the West and shared ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties with Central Asians made Turkey an ideal partner.

As it was, Iran's revolutionary Shi'i Islam failed to generate much interest among the predominantly Sunni and largely secularized Central Asians. That was fortunate because although Turkey's political spirit was willing to compete in Central Asia, its economy remained anemic through the 1990s. While Ankara used its geographic and cultural proximity to establish preferred ties with the Central Asian states, it never displaced Russia. Ironically, at Ankara's Summits of the Heads of the Turkic Speaking States, Russian, not Turkish, functioned as the *lingua franca*. Central Asian elites were comfortable in Russian, and modern Anatolian Turkish felt foreign.

Bear Revival

A decade after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia—led by its then-new president, Vladimir Putin—began to recover from its extraordinary decline. However, Moscow's goal of restoring Soviet-like influence across the former republics remained out of reach—even in comparatively isolated Central Asia. When St. Petersburg hosted the signing of a regional security charter in 2002, it was for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO got its start in 1996, bringing together Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to cooperate on reducing and regulating military deployments in their border regions. A more ambitious agenda, however, lay under the surface. The next year, China and Russia declared a common commitment to preserving a multipolar world in which no state could impose its rules on others. It was a clear rebuke to the U.S. and a classic illustration of geopolitical balancing.

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Moscow successfully impeded the advance of U.S. influence in Central Asia, but to do so, it had to partner with China. With vast, sparsely populated territories on China's northern border, Russia is perhaps most vulnerable to its neighbor's rise. Facilitating China's entry into Central Asia, therefore, would appear extremely shortsighted. Yet, the SCO has expanded its membership since 2002 and deepened its influence. The precipitation of this anti-American partnership in the heart of Eurasia is one of the great American foreign policy failures of the past quarter century.

Thus, Moscow managed to retain some influence in Central Asia, unlike in Eastern Europe. In the Caucasus, the revival of Russian power has been even more significant. The Chechen War of 1994-1996 marked

17 "Open Letter to President Clinton," June 26, 1997. Available at https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1997_06-07/natoletc.

18 Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 219-220.

19 Tim Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), p. 2.

20 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geopolitical Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), pp. 135-139; and Graham Fuller, *Turkey's New Geopolitics: From the Balkans to Western China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).



Vladimir Putin and Ramzan Kadyrov in 2015. (Source: Kremlin.ru)

the nadir of Russian power and prestige. In a largely spontaneous rebellion, barely one million Chechens managed to fight off the Russian Army and achieve *de facto* independence. The need to wage war against legal Russian citizens confused an already dispirited Russian Army, and the defeat stung. After losing its Warsaw Pact allies and the constituent Soviet Republics, Moscow now ceded control over a chunk of the Russian Federation's territory. That the entire Caucasus region might slip Moscow's grasp was not inconceivable. Meanwhile, the U.S. began lobbying the independent republics of the South Caucasus to build a pipeline that would bypass Russian energy networks to deliver Caspian and Central Asian oil to Europe. At a stroke, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline would deprive Russia of both income and leverage over its southern neighbors.

Global jihadists were among those who smelled opportunity in Russia's decline. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan emboldened extremists to dream of exporting jihad farther. The Russian retreat from Chechnya (like the much smaller American debacle in Somalia in 1992) reinforced the lesson that faith in God and a determination to fight were sufficient to smite even major powers.

Using Chechnya as a base, jihadists prepared for an expanded fight, building training camps, recruiting young men, and extorting money via hostage taking and crime. In 1999, they invaded the Russian province of Dagestan. The resumption of large-scale fighting in the North Caucasus catapulted Vladimir Putin from an obscure deputy prime minister to the Russian president.

Putin immediately distinguished himself by his determination to prevail in Chechnya. The Russian Army in 1999 was underfunded, poorly trained, and demoralized. It retained, however, ample stocks of ammunition and arms from the Soviet era, which Putin authorized his generals to employ in suppressing the rebels. Mounting offensives in urban environments is challenging even for well-trained armies. So in the battle to retake Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, Putin's generals compensated for lack of skill by adding firepower. Pummeling the city for weeks, they reduced Grozny to a cinder.

Russia's obliteration of its own city provided another example for the Western stereotype of the clumsy and brutish Russian Bear. Western reporters had employed this trope during the war in Afghanistan and the first Chechen War, and commentators on the second Chechen War recycled it. Revulsion at the cruelty of the Russians' tactics combined with scorn for their intellect, as if to say, "What the primitive Russians in their zeal to annihilate their Muslim opponents cannot grasp is that their use of force is excessive and counter-productive, and will only sow embitterment and the desire for vengeance."

This narrative of shortsighted Russian cruelty is incomplete. Violence can generate alienation, resentment, and resistance. It can also eliminate existing enemies and cow potential ones. In Chechnya, it has done both. What many Western commentators chose to overlook was Putin's successful implementation of

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a “Chechenization” program.²¹ Far from reveling in the pain on ethnic non-Russians, Putin understood the need to cultivate local Chechen allies. His key ally was Akhmad Kadyrov, a Chechen religious figure who had been appointed “Chief Mufti” by rebel President Dzhokhar Dudayev in 1995. Kadyrov backed the struggle against Boris Yeltsin’s Russia and declared it a jihad, i.e., a righteous war in which male Muslims must fight. But he

came to see the foreign jihadis arriving in Chechnya as a greater threat than Russia. He found their puritanical and militant Salafi Islam alien and opposed their plan to transform Chechnya into a base for perpetual war. In 1999, Kadyrov threw his support to the Russians, fracturing the rebel front. Putin recognized Kadyrov’s value and appointed him as head of the administration of Chechnya in 2000. In 2003, Putin personally oversaw Kadyrov’s election as Chechen president.

After several failed assassination attempts, jihadists killed Kadyrov with a bomb in 2004. Putin recognized his son Ramzan as his successor, making him a deputy prime minister the day after his father’s death. In 2006, the younger Kadyrov became the republic’s prime minister, and he has remained at the top of Chechnya since. A devotee of social media, he has garnered substantial attention for his repressive rule, flamboyant lifestyle, and unswerving devotion to Putin.

In April 2009, Moscow declared victory and formally ended its “counter-terror” operation in Chechnya. Although Islamist militants continue to operate inside the republic, their numbers have dwindled. The number of jihadist terror attacks in Russia has also declined. Given the string of suicide bombings and other attacks on Russians in the early 2000s, the suppression of terror in Chechnya is no small achievement.

In shifting its emphasis from the human rights abuses of Russian security services to the wrongdoing of Kadyrov and his supporters, Western analysis has largely ignored Chechnya’s transformation. Granted, the North Caucasus remains the poorest and most violent region of Russia. The stunning reconstruction of Grozny—which introduced an enormous mosque in honor of Akhmad Kadyrov—was only possible with steady financing from Moscow. Kadyrov remains in office thanks to that financial support and his own ruthless

suppression of opposition.²² But the fact remains that Moscow did prevail in Chechnya, in significant measure because it cooperated with local Muslims. Putin’s defeat of jihadism in the North Caucasus made Russia more secure and dealt a blow to transnational jihadism at large.

The Bear Ventures Out of Its Den

Putin’s success in restoring Moscow’s control over the North Caucasus enabled him to project power beyond Russia’s borders. Reckless policymaking in Washington further handed Putin the opportunity to deliver a humiliating rebuff to the United States.

That chance came in 2008 in the South Caucasus. Few Americans noticed or cared because the fight took place in a faraway land. There was little about Georgia to compel Americans’ attention. The Georgians are an ancient Christian people with a rich literature and culture to rival any and best most, but their country is tiny, impoverished, and exceedingly distant. Russian dominance of Georgia during the Cold War did nothing to threaten U.S. security. Now that Georgia was independent, Americans could rightly wish it well, but with Russia half the size and incomparably weaker than the Soviet Union, there was less at stake, not more, for American security in Georgia.

Nevertheless, Washington decided to invest its prestige in the mountainous country, which it began to conceptualize as a sort of beachhead from which to project American influence through the region. Visiting the country in 2004, just a year after the so-called “Rose Revolution” that had swept the effusively pro-American Mikheil Saakashvili to power, U.S. President George W. Bush hailed Georgia “as a beacon of liberty” in a region that stretches “from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf and beyond.”²³ He reassured Saakashvili and the Georgians that as they travel the difficult path of freedom “the American people will stand with you.” Indeed, Bush now saw the Georgians as a key element in his freedom agenda. “Freedom,” Bush declared to them in their capital, Tbilisi, “will be the future of every nation and every people on Earth. By extending liberty to millions who have not known it, we will advance the cause of freedom, and we will advance the cause of peace.”²⁴

22 Kadyrov has demonstrated considerable innovation alongside ruthlessness in his rule, proving himself particularly adept with social media. See, Elena Rodina, “When a Dictator Goes Online,” Center for Digital Ethics and Policy, February 8, 2018. Available at <http://www.digitalethics.org/essays/when-dictator-goes-online-0>.

23 “Bush Hails Georgia as ‘Beacon of Liberty,’” *The Guardian*, May 10, 2005. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/may/10/georgia.usa>.

24 Knight Ridder News Service, “Bush: Georgia Beacon of Democracy,” *Denver Post*, May 8, 2016. Available at <https://www.denverpost.com/2005/05/10/bush-georgia-beacon-of-democracy/>.

21 For a thorough analysis of how this approach succeeded at the tactical level, see, Jason Lyall, “Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War,” *American Political Science Review* vol. 104 no. 1 (February 2010), pp. 1-20.

While Bush was proposing that Georgia become a stepping stone on a path to perpetual peace for the world, Saakashvili was cultivating a rather more prosaic aspiration: reconquering the tiny secessionist republic of South Ossetia, which had broken from Georgia during the tumultuous years of the Soviet collapse. Although American officials lauded Saakashvili in public as a brave, bold, and exemplary young democratic reformer, in private, they spoke rather differently. Then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice saw him as “capricious” and a “firebrand.”²⁵ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was even more scathing, describing the Georgian as an “aggressive and impetuous nationalist.”²⁶

Saakashvili had established an antagonistic personal relationship with Putin early on, but more important for Georgia’s fate was Washington’s determination to extend NATO membership to it and to Ukraine. The Germans and French failed to see the wisdom in bringing into NATO these two countries that lay directly on Russia’s borders. Backed by the British, they objected strenuously to the American proposal at the NATO summit in Bucharest in the spring of 2008. Although the French and Germans managed to block approval for an explicit timeline for membership, the Americans nonetheless prevailed in having NATO issue a pledge to grant membership.²⁷ “We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO,” the summit declaration plainly announced, and it further committed NATO to conduct a membership assessment already in December.²⁸

It was an insouciant, if not provocative, act, and the Kremlin lost little time in delivering a response. The Russians had ruled Georgia for nearly two centuries and knew the country and its vulnerabilities far more intimately than did the American tyros. When the Georgian Republic was born in 1918 as Imperial Russia collapsed into civil war, tensions between the Georgians on the one hand and the Abkhaz and Ossetians in the north of Georgia on the other flared into open confrontation. Applying the hoary imperial principle of divide and rule, Russia’s Bolsheviks then exploited those rifts and stoked the conflicts in order to weaken Georgia and undermine its sovereignty from within, thereby “softening up” Georgia for the Red Army’s invasion of 1921, which put an end to the Georgian Republic’s independent existence.

²⁵ Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), pp. 356, 691.

²⁶ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), p. 167.

²⁷ David Brunnstrom and Susan Cornwell, “NATO promises Ukraine, Georgia Entry One Day,” *Reuters*, April 3, 2008. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato/nato-promises-ukraine-georgia-entry-one-day-idUSL0179714620080403>.

²⁸ Bucharest Summit Declaration, April 3, 2008. Available at https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm.



President George W. Bush and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in 2005.
(Source: Whitehouse.gov)

When those conflicts re-ignited with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the re-emergence of an independent Georgia, Moscow again championed the Abkhaz and Ossetian causes and intervened to ensure that Abkhazia and South Ossetia successfully broke from Georgian rule. Moscow thereby preserved two footholds of Russian influence in the South Caucasus.

Russia’s relations with Georgia in the early 2000s were already contentious as Russia accused Georgia of turning a blind eye to jihadis moving from Georgia’s Kodori gorge into neighboring Chechnya. Russian aircraft periodically violated Georgian airspace and Russian ordnance occasionally landed on Georgian territory. Tensions along the border spiked in the spring of 2008 when a fighter jet downed a Georgian reconnaissance drone. Although Russia denied that one of its jets had been involved and claimed instead that the Abkhaz air defense forces had shot down the drone, a fact-finding team of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia concluded it was indeed a Russian jet that had fired the missile that destroyed the drone. The Russians had a good read on the volatile Saakashvili and were set on rattling the Georgian president.

Tensions along Georgia’s northern borders remained high through the summer with occasional exchanges of small arms and mortar fire and troop movements on both sides. Then, suddenly on August 7, 2008, while Putin was in Beijing on the opening day of the Olympic Games, Saakashvili heedlessly ordered an invasion of South Ossetia. Russian peacekeepers rebuffed the American-trained Georgian troops, and then a swift Russian counter-attack from Ossetia and Abkhazia scattered the Georgians and turned the operation into a rout. The road to Tbilisi was wide open to the Russian army. Having demonstrated their dominance, the Russians agreed to a cease-fire brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and brought the five-day war to a close. Later that month, Moscow officially recognized the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia as sovereign states.

The war was a disaster for Georgia. The possibility that either South Ossetia or Abkhazia (another secessionist republic to the north under Russian protection) will

ever be reintegrated into Georgia is now virtually nil. Less appreciated, however, is that Saakashvili's war was a calamity for U.S. foreign policy. As the crisis exploded, feverish calls to strike back at the Russians and make them pay were uttered in the White House. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley squelched those voices with a simple question, "Are we prepared to go to war with Russia over Georgia?"²⁹

It was a question that should have been addressed in Bucharest in the spring, not in Washington, D.C. in the midst of a Russo-Georgian war. Georgia was not a vital American interest. Indeed, Georgia was such a low priority for the United States that when Hadley relayed to the Director of the CIA, General Michael Hayden, an urgent request from a panicked and desperate Saakashvili for intelligence on the advancing Russian army, Hayden was not entirely certain that he had any staff tasked on Georgia. To gather the intelligence, he had to resort to dispatching some case officers to Georgia to drive up to the front, spot Russian armor visually, and phone in the coordinates. Vladimir Putin had understood more clearly than did the Bush administration how little importance the U.S. would assign to Georgia. When push came to shove, America balked. Washington's assistance to Georgia consisted of some humanitarian aid and the humiliating gesture of flying a Georgian brigade back home from Iraq, where they had been deployed to support Washington's pretense of leading a multinational coalition. As Hayden concluded about the war, the United States "came up short." Although the CIA had helped Hadley help Saakashvili avoid a meltdown, "We had not given Hadley or anyone else any warning of the conflict, even though it was our friends, the Georgians, who had precipitated it."³⁰

Georgia indeed had become a beacon from the Caspian to the Persian Gulf, but thanks to the debacle of the Russo-Georgian War, the message it broadcasted was not of the forward march of liberal democracy but rather of American over-extension and unreliability. As Robert Gates forthrightly conceded, "Trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching."³¹ Indeed, now the region and the world beyond could all see how just how badly America had overextended itself.

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Desert Fox? Russia in the Middle East

The lesson that the Bear could be agile in its own ecosystem proved difficult for American officials to assimilate, leading Washington to compounded

mistakes in the Middle East. In September 2015, Russia responded to the Syrian government's request for military support by undertaking a sustained aerial campaign and deploying limited ground forces. Notably, among the Russian military police deployed are Chechen units, in part out of the belief that their status as Sunni Muslims would reassure Syrian Arab Sunnis,³² and in part to underscore Russia's soft power among Muslims.³³

Predictably, Moscow's deployment caught American officials flat-footed. They responded by forecasting ruin for the Russians. Obama declared that Russian involvement will "get them stuck in a quagmire," and claimed, "Mr. Putin had to go into Syria not out of strength, but out of weakness."³⁴ He erroneously warned that Russia would repeat its experience in Afghanistan.³⁵ Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter confidently predicted that it was "doomed to failure."³⁶

To be sure, Russia's Syria adventure is not over. Nonetheless, Russian forces have suffered minor losses to date and have reversed the situation in favor of the Syrian government. This has yielded multiple benefits to Russia. The most obvious is the preservation of the Bashar al-Assad regime, against almost all expectations. In August 2011, Obama declared that Assad must go.³⁷ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan agreed, and the two countries collaborated to arm a "moderate" opposition to Assad. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries likewise began backing Assad's opponents.

With Russian (and especially Iranian) assistance, Assad turned the tide in Syria's civil war. Many advocates of Assad's ouster blame Obama for failing to intervene. This critique is only half true. Obama oversaw a semi-

32 See, the Instagram account of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Chechen Republic: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdpaFNEgAEE/?taken-by=dumchr>.

33 "Chechenskii spetsnaz v Sirii kontroliruet Aleppo," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kduPOq2b8Y8>. It is worth noting that Russia in 2005 became one of five countries with observer status at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

34 Alistair Bell and Tom Perry, "Obama Warns Russia's Putin of 'Quagmire' in Syria," *Reuters*, October 2, 2015. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-airstrikes/obama-warns-russias-putin-of-quagmire-in-syria-idUSKCN0R-W0W220151003>.

35 Edward-Isaac Dove, "Putin Risks a New Afghanistan, Obama Warns," *Politico*, December 1, 2015. Available at <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/12/obama-putin-risks-afghanistan-216312>.

36 "Russian Airstrikes in Syria: Pentagon Says Strategy 'Doomed to Failure' -- As it Happened," *The Guardian*, September 30, 2015. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2015/sep/30/russia-syria-air-strikes-us-isis-live-updates>.

37 Macon Phillips, "President Obama: 'The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way.'" Available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>.

29 Rice, *No Higher Honor*, pp. 688-689.

30 Michael Hayden, *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror* (New York: Penguin, 2016), pp. 310-312.

31 Gates, *Duty*, p. 157.

covert effort in which the Defense Department alone spent half a billion dollars to recruit and train Syrian rebels. The project was an abysmal failure. It resulted in the training of a handful of individuals.³⁸ The CIA ran a parallel effort at an undisclosed cost that also failed. Reports that former CIA Director David Petraeus urged the U.S. to arm members of an al-Qaeda subsidiary testified to the desperation of the Americans seeking Assad's overthrow.³⁹

Nonetheless, America's foreign policy establishment remained stubbornly blind to its failure in Syria. Speaking to Charlie Rose on August 8, 2016, Michael Morell, former acting director of the CIA, declared that the United States should make Russia "pay a price" by using Syrian rebels to kill Russians.⁴⁰ Morell's talk was as foolish as it was incendiary. It had become clear by the beginning of 2016 that the U.S. effort to back the rebels had failed. Assad was winning, and the Russian quagmire was "a Washington fairy tale."⁴¹ Russia managed not only to reverse the course of the war in favor of the government, but also neutralized Turkey. America now finds itself playing the unexpected role of spoiler, prolonging the conflict in order to prevent Assad and Iran from consolidating their victory. Having chosen the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) as its main local ally, the longer America stays in Syria, the more friction it will generate with Turkey.

Putin, the Wolf Whisperer? The Kremlin Tames Turkey

Russia's ability drive a wedge between the U.S. and its formerly stalwart NATO ally, Turkey, is one of Putin's most remarkable foreign policy achievements. Fear of Moscow, of course, is what brought Turkey and NATO together in 1952. It formed the basis of the U.S.-Turkish security partnership. The fall of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of a direct border between Russia and Turkey caused U.S.-Turkish security ties to slacken somewhat after 1991. Surprisingly, the resurgence of Russian power in Turkey's neighborhood has sapped, rather than reinvigorated, the Turkish-American relationship. Its deterioration has multiple causes,

including delusional thinking in Ankara and careless policymaking in Washington. By exploiting the decline in this relationship, Russia has displayed agility as well as cunning and intimidation.

In the wake of Russia's war against Georgia in 2008 and the feckless American response, Turkey began accommodating Russia at the expense of its American ally. Ankara blocked two U.S. Navy hospital ships from delivering humanitarian aid to Georgia by invoking its obligation under the Montreux Convention of 1936 to restrict the passage of foreign warships through the Black Sea straits.⁴² Whereas the convention did arguably tie Ankara's hands, Ankara's later proposal for a five-member "Caucasus Cooperation and Stability Pact" that would include Russia, Turkey, and the three South Caucasian states unambiguously signaled that Ankara sought to distance itself from Washington. The proposal made no progress, but Ankara had proven its willingness to shirk its Western ally to avoid conflict with Russia.

The Syrian uprising, however, placed Turkey and the U.S. side-by-side to bring down Assad. Tensions between Moscow and Ankara increased as Russian air units repeatedly bombed Turkish-backed anti-Assad forces. Then, in November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian bomber that violated its air space. The incident infuriated Putin, who personally vowed that Turkey would regret its actions.

Russia's leverage over Turkey was considerable. As an important market for Turkish exporters, Russia imposed painful economic sanctions. But Putin warned that his response would not be limited to a boycott of Turkish tomatoes. Indeed, Russia could damage Turkey in multiple ways. Moscow was in the driver's seat in deliberations over the future of Syria. Among the parties jockeying for autonomy on Syrian territory is the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Blocking such a development is imperative for Ankara, which continues to struggle with the Kurdistan Worker's Party's (PKK) three-decade-long fight for independence. As Kurdish success in Syria would portend more intense struggle in Turkey, Russia's long record of collaboration with the Kurds weighs heavily on the minds in Ankara.⁴³

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38 Paul Mcleary, "The Pentagon Wasted \$500 million Training Syrian Rebels. Its about to Try Again," *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2016. Available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/18/pentagon-wasted-500-million-syrian-rebels/>.

39 Catherine Philip, "Petraeus: US Must Fund al Qaeda," *The Times*, September 3, 2015. Available at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/petraeus-us-must-fund-al-qaeda-3s3nbbm0p0m>.

40 "Morell: We Need to Make Iran, Russia 'pay a price.'" *CBS News*. Available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/morell-we-need-to-make-iran-russia-pay-a-price-in-syria/>.

41 Joshua Landis and Steven Simon, "Assad Has It His Way," *Foreign Affairs*, January 19, 2016. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-01-19/assad-has-it-his-way>; and Michael Kofman, "The Russian Quagmire in Syria and Other Washington Fairy Tales," *War on the Rocks*, February 16, 2016. Available at <https://warontherocks.com/2016/02/the-russian-quagmire-in-syria-and-other-washington-fairy-tales/>.

42 John C.K. Daly, "Analysis: Naval Aspects of the South Ossetia Confrontation," *UPI*, August 21, 2008. Available at <https://www.upi.com/Analysis-Naval-aspects-of-the-South-Ossetia-confrontation/52431219349503/>.

43 Michael A. Reynolds, "Vladimir Putin: Godfather of Kurdistan?" *The National Interest*, March 1, 2016. Available at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-godfather-kurdistan-15358>.



Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2005. (Source: Kremlin.ru)

In June 2016, Erdoğan executed a stunning reversal and apologized for downing the Russian jet. The rapprochement has gone well beyond the restoration of normal relations. In December 2016, Erdoğan endorsed Putin's idea of hosting Syrian peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, thereby enabling Putin to eclipse the faltering UN negotiations in Geneva.⁴⁴ In December 2017, Turkey signed a contract to purchase four batteries of S-400 surface-to-air missiles from Russia.⁴⁵ The deal, worth \$2.5 billion, creates a dilemma that NATO has never faced before: a member state purchasing a major weapons system from the Alliance's primary adversary. The purchase has not yet occurred, and Washington is reportedly working to discourage the deal. At minimum, however, Moscow has already benefited from ratcheting up tension between the U.S. and Turkey, providing the latter with a bargaining chip to use against Washington.

Russia's demonstration of military might in Georgia and Syria, its considerable economic leverage over Turkey, and the threat of the "Kurdish card" were

foremost in the minds of President Erdoğan and his advisors when they decided to seek reconciliation with Moscow. But the Kremlin owes its triumph to more than just the ability to intimidate. As alien as it may sound to American observers, Russian "soft power" among Muslims in the post-Soviet space was critical to the success of Moscow's diplomacy.

According to well-known Turkish journalist Murat Yetkin, the process of rebuilding ties with Russia began in April 2016.⁴⁶ Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar suggested to Erdoğan that Cavit Çağlar, a textile manufacturer and former government minister, might be able to open a channel to Putin. While conducting business in Russia's North Caucasus in the 1990s, Çağlar had gotten to know the President of Dagestan, who in turn had close ties to Putin's foreign policy advisor, Yuri Ushakov. Using these conduits as a channel, Erdoğan's advisors broached the idea of an apology to the Kremlin. Putin was receptive. Erdoğan charged his spokesman and special advisor İbrahim Kalın with handling the effort.

The Kremlin's receptiveness was good news, and Kalın and his team began trading drafts of a letter of apology with their Moscow counterparts. On June 22, Kazakhstan's ambassador to Ankara rang Kalın and passed on an urgent message. President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev had just met with Putin in St. Petersburg and confirmed that Putin was ready to sign the letter. Finalizing the text of the letter, however,

⁴⁴ "Peregovory v Astane po uregulirovaniyu konflikta v Sirii [The Talks in Astana on the Settlement of the Conflict in Syria]," *RIA Novosti*, May 3, 2017. Available at <https://ria.ru/spravka/20170503/1493513888.html>. See, also, Dmitry Solovyov and Tom Miles, "U.N. to Join Syria talks in Astana, with Humanitarian Hopes," *Reuters*, December 21, 2017. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-talks-un/u-n-to-join-syria-talks-in-astana-with-humanitarian-hopes-idUSKBN1E-F1RP>.

⁴⁵ "Russia to supply Turkey with four S-400 missile batteries for \$2.5 billion: Kommersant," *Reuters*, December 27, 2017. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-missiles/russia-to-supply-turkey-with-four-s-400-missile-batteries-for-2-5-billion-kommersant-idUSKBN1EL0H6>.

⁴⁶ Murat Yetkin, "Türk-Rus krizini bitiren gizli diplomasinin öyküsü [The Story of the Secret Diplomacy that Ended the Turco-Russian Crisis]," *Hürriyet*, August 8, 2016. Available at <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/murat-yetkin/turk-rus-krizini-bitiren-gizli-diplomasinin-oykusu-40185705>.

proved tricky. It had to satisfy Putin, but not humiliate Erdoğan. Fortunately for the Turks, the Kazakh embassy made its translators available to offer assistance.

The next day, Nazarbayev sent notice to Kalin from Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where he had just arrived to participate in the Shanghai Cooperation Summit. He was scheduled to meet with Putin the next morning. If the Turks could deliver the letter before the conclusion of the summit at 1 P.M., Nazarbayev advised, it might be possible to end the crisis. Kalin, Erdoğan, and Akar conferred at 11 P.M. Summoning help again from the Kazakhs, Kalin put the final touches on the letter. Erdoğan signed it, and Kalin boarded a plane at 3 A.M. on June 24. Stopping in Istanbul to pick up Çağlar, his assistant, and a

translator, Kalin flew on toward Uzbekistan. During the flight, he communicated via Whatsapp with the Turkish Foreign Ministry, which worked on the fly to obtain permission from the Georgians, Azerbaijanis, and Turkmenis to pass through their airspaces. But as the airplane approached Uzbekistan, the Turks discovered that the Uzbeks had closed their airspace as a security precaution for the summit. Nazarbayev offered to send a helicopter into Turkmenistan to pick up the Turks and bring them across the border, but the Turks' aircraft was already running out of fuel. Nazarbayev appealed to President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov to personally allow the Turks to land. Nazarbayev and Karimov, both former first secretaries of the Communist Party in their respective republics, have known and worked with each other for decades. Karimov promptly obliged and issued permission for the Turkish jet to land.

Nazarbayev met the Turks as they touched down at 12:15 P.M. and from the airfield swiftly escorted them to a meeting room. He asked for the letter in Russian, read it, and declared it satisfactory. Informing, the Turkish delegation that Putin was in the adjoining room, Nazarbayev invited in Ushakov. Nazarbayev endorsed the letter as acceptable and handed it to the foreign policy advisor. Ushakov then took the letter to Putin. In the letter, Erdoğan described the downing of the jet as a mistake, emphasized his deep condolences to the family of the killed pilot, and asked them to forgive the error.⁴⁷ Although Putin remarked that the wording was in the Turks' favor, he was willing to accept it. Ushakov and Kalin agreed to a public

reconciliation procedure, and on June 27, the Kremlin announced Erdoğan's apology and the restoration of normal relations between the two countries.

Recall that in the late Cold War and heady 1990s, Western policymakers confidently expected Turkey to lure Central Asia out of Russia's orbit. Precisely the opposite has occurred: Moscow's Muslim former subjects pulled Turkey closer to Russia. One might, of course, downplay the significance of this episode as the gesture of fading Communist Party apparatchiks cum Central Asian autocrats. Time will tell. Central Asian youth do not have the ties to Russia and Russian culture that their parents did. Russia's influence in Central Asia rests in part on an unholy practice of repression, an inherently unstable and limited source of power.⁴⁸ But as the commander of U.S. Central Command lamented in his recent Senate testimony, Russia retains significant influence in Central Asia, and Kyrgyzstan, formerly a partner of the U.S. military, is shunning the U.S. and has thrown in its lot with Russia and China.⁴⁹ Moreover, there is no reason to assume that younger generations of Central Asians will be more pro-Western. The experience of Turkey is telling in this regard. Turkey has been integrated into key Western institutions, like NATO, for half a century. It was an earnest aspirant for European Union membership. Yet, its political elites—across all political parties—and younger generations have never been as resentful of America as they are today.

Time to Think Differently about the Bear?

Although Americans prefer to think of Russia as an ungainly and ailing bear, the past decade has demonstrated Moscow's ability to draw upon its resources and relationships to outmaneuver the United States. This should not surprise. Moscow is the heir to centuries of rule over vast lands and heterogeneous populations. Russian statecraft has never rested on brute coercion alone. It commands a broad repertoire of skills. Illusions about the clumsiness of the Russian bear, its inherent lack of charm and isolation, and its impending demise may have simplified planning for American policymakers. But these misconceptions promote heedless policies. To cite Robert Gates, "When Russia was weak in the 1990s and beyond, we did not take Russian interests seriously." He warned that "recklessly ignoring what the Russians considered their vital national interests" and making the "monumental provocation" of seeking to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO would lead to policy failure. Even so, at the end

47 "Vladimirov Putinyim polucheno poslanie Prezidenta Turtsii Redzhapa Taiipa Erdogana, [A Message from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was Received by Vladimir Putin]," *Prezident Rossii*, June 27, 2016. Available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52282>.

48 See, Mark Galeotti, "'RepressIntern': Russia's Security Cooperation with Fellow Authoritarians," *Open Democracy*, November 22, 2016. Available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/mark-galeotti/repressintern-russian-security-cooperation-with-fellow-authoritarians>.

49 Josh Kucera, "U.S. Military Giving Up on Kyrgyzstan," *Eurasianet*, March 16, 2018. Available at <https://eurasianet.org/us-military-giving-up-on-kyrgyzstan>.

of the George W. Bush administration, “nobody really cared” enough about Russia to pay it much attention.⁵⁰

The Obama administration was even more careless. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton flubbed her “reset” of relations, not least by presenting her Russian counterpart with a toy, or prop, button embarrassingly labeled with the mistranslation “Overload” in place of “Reset.” Obama’s transparent effort to cultivate then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev as way to undermine Putin, who had vacated the post of president and assumed that of prime minister in order to comply with the constitution’s limit of consecutive presidential terms to two, backfired, and the commencement in 2011 of NATO-led airstrikes and military operations in Libya that culminated in Muammar Gaddafi’s overthrow and death convinced Putin, always the real power in Russia, of the West’s “perfidy.”⁵¹ Obama’s handpicked ambassador to Moscow resigned in frustration, but not before succumbing to Russian psychological harassment that led him to insult the Russian people on camera by denouncing their country as “savage,” handing the Kremlin precisely the incident they desired.⁵² And then there was Obama, warning Russia of imminent failure in Syria as his own policy crumbled.

To be sure, the bear is not in the best of health. Russia’s weaknesses are real. Demographic and economic markers are not catastrophic, but they are anemic. Putin stabilized a wobbling state and restored vigor to post-Soviet Russia, but his almost two-decades long domination of Russian politics has stifled institutional development. Rule of law is still lacking. Russian political parties are facades. The succession process after Putin remains opaque. In the meantime, Russian influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia is fading over the long term.⁵³

More importantly, outside of a nuclear confrontation,

⁵⁰ Gates, *Duty*, pp. 256-257, 276.

⁵¹ Mikhail Zygar’, *Vsia kremlevskaia rat’: kratkaia istoriia sovremennoi Rossii* (Moscow: Intellektual’naia literatura, 2016), ch. 13.

⁵² For the video, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItQhRmZV1vc>. For background, see, Leon Aron, “A Tormenting in Moscow: Why is Russia harassing President Obama’s new ambassador?” *Foreign Policy*, April 12, 2012. Available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/12/a-tormenting-in-moscow/>; and Michael Weiss, “No More Mr. Nice Guy: The sad end of Ambassador Michael McFaul’s troubled tenure in Moscow,” *Foreign Policy*, February 5, 2014. Available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/05/no-more-mr-nice-guy/>.

⁵³ For example, see, Nodar Mosaki’s research on how the background of the diplomatic elite of Georgia has changed to Russia’s detriment. Nodar Mosaki, “Obrazovatelnyi bekgraund vlastnoi elity Gruzii i rossiisko-Gruzinskie otnosheniia, [The Educational Background of Georgia’s Power Elite and Russo-Georgian Relations],” *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia* no. 9 (2015), pp. 93-104; and “Georgia’s Diplomatic Elites,” *International Trends* vol. 2 no. 2 (June-September 2016), pp. 67-84.

Russia cannot present a decisive threat to the United States. The limited nature of Russia’s capabilities only further proves why reflexively pressing along its borders makes so little sense. These are precisely the lands where Russia, by virtue of geography and history, enjoys the most advantages and will resist most vigorously. They are also the areas where American interests are marginal and its commitment is limited. For Americans to court conflict in these regions without good cause is unwise.

The past decade of Russo-American relations has seen as much American overreach as Russian aggression.

The past decade of Russo-American relations thus suggests that American overreach, rather than Russian aggressiveness, have been the sources of U.S. foreign policy reversals. Donald Trump campaigned on the possibility of improved ties with Russia, but tensions have only increased since his election. Most worrisome is his foreign policy team’s continued blitheness to the ways in which Washington’s past policies toward Russia have compromised American interests. The 2018 National Defense Strategy touts NATO as a deterrent to “Russian adventurism.”⁵⁴ This overlooks that NATO adventurism led to America’s humiliation in Georgia in 2008 and helped provoke the ongoing standoff in Ukraine and Crimea. The Trump administration’s National Security Strategy correctly observes that “Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders.” This is unremarkable. The document then, however, goes on to posit that the “combination of Russian ambition and growing military capabilities creates an unstable frontier in Eurasia, where the risk of conflict due to Russian miscalculation is growing.”⁵⁵ Yet, it has been American miscalculations that have been steadily undermining our own increasingly tenuous positions in the Middle East and Eurasia. To borrow from everyone’s favorite cartoon member of the Ursidae family, Yogi Bear, Washington may not be smarter than the average bear. It is time for it to study Russia with greater care and greater humility. 🐻

⁵⁴ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), p. 9.

⁵⁵ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, December 2017), pp. 25-26.



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