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## PUTIN'S USE OF HARD POWER AS FOREIGN POLICY

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JCSP 43 DL

*Exercise Solo Flight*

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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## **PUTIN'S USE OF HARD POWER AS FOREIGN POLICY**

The Cold War has been over since 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union disbanded. The former super power that challenged the United States (U.S.) for decades was reduced to Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), some of which were very quick to assert their independence and distance themselves from Moscow's influence. The Russian government and its financial institutions spent the better part of the next two decades floundering, suffering three financial crises and turbulent leadership. It was not until late 1999, when Putin stepped into power following Yeltsin's resignation, that the country had a strong, permanent leader. However, the international community may not have been fully prepared for the authoritarian rule and brinkmanship style of Putin. Under his direction, Russia has waged a limited war in Ukraine to claim territory, reinserted itself into Middle East politics, boasted new nuclear weapons capability, and has instilled fear into its bordering neighbors. This paper discusses Putin's ever-increasing power-grab by discussing his rise to power and his foundational motivations. This paper will focus on two of Russia's most recent foreign relations quagmires by addressing the foreign relations surrounding the annexation of Crimea by Russia as well as the Kremlin's involvement in Syria. The Soviet construct is firm in Russia's history, but the allure of a strong personality remains part of Russian's psyche. Putin is the strong figure Russians seem to crave, and the country's foreign relations are a direct reflection of his authoritarian style.

## Putin's Rise to Power

Vladimir V. Putin's family was well connected to the secret police at the height of the Soviet Union. After graduating from university, he was accepted into law school where he excelled both academically and in sports. Putin started his government service as a KGB officer, eventually getting stationed in West Germany running operations with the secret police. After almost 16 years of service to the KGB and achieving the rank of lieutenant colonel, he was recalled to Moscow in 1990 to help a Soviet government that was in chaos.<sup>1</sup>

Two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, President Boris Yeltsen publicly lamented that Russia did not have a grand strategy. Throughout Russia's history, there has been some guiding light: monarchism, totalitarianism, perestroika, or a democratic path of development. But when Russia's brain trust was given a mandate in the 1990s to develop a unifying goal, they came up with nothing.

When Putin won 52% of the vote, he became Russia's first constitutionally elected president.<sup>2</sup> His mandate was to economically and politically stabilize Russia. He did so by the late 2000s by increasing the price of crude oil, the major basis of the Russian economy,<sup>3</sup> which caused the Russian economy to grow at seven percent annually, more than doubling the GDP in

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<sup>1</sup> Ariel Cohen. "The Rise of Putin: What It Means for the Future of Russia." *The Heritage Foundation* 28 (2000). <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/the-rise-putin-what-it-means-the-future-russia> . Accessed May 21, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Anton Barbashin, and Hannah Thoburn. "Putin's brain." *Foreign Affairs* 31 (2014). [http://bpi.enschool.org/ourpages/auto/2014/4/11/38578950/Putin\\_s%20Brain.pdf](http://bpi.enschool.org/ourpages/auto/2014/4/11/38578950/Putin_s%20Brain.pdf) Accessed May 21, 2018.

just a decade.<sup>4</sup> With a rapidly stabilizing country and a successful historical election, he could now focus on the direction of Russia.

The relatively unknown president and his team would have a defining effect on Russia for at least the next decade. Though the Russian people did not favor a communist-style government, they favored a strong state.<sup>5</sup> A strong state comes with a strong leader and even prior to his first election, Putin's actions were reason for international community to be concerned.

## Foreign Policy

The Russian Federation Foreign Policy Concept states that one of its main goals is “to consolidate the Russian Federation’s position as a centre of influence in today’s world.”<sup>6</sup> This influence can be seen in some areas of the world – Ukraine and Syria – but Putin is arguably still far behind the United States, Germany, and China in being a true international influencer. Russian government documents are especially well crafted and are very deliberate in their meaning; the *type* of influence Russia wants to have in the world is not overtly stated. Russia has surely influenced – albeit negatively – Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and Scandinavia, such that many of these countries believe they are closer to a threat of war than they have been for

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<sup>4</sup>Stephen Kotkin. "The Resistible Rise of Vladimir Putin: Russia's Nightmare Dressed like a Daydream." *Foreign Aff.* 94 (2015): 140 <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1658668623?pq-origsite=gscholar>. Accessed May 20, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Ariel Cohen. "The Rise of Putin: What It Means for the Future of Russia."

<sup>6</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016. [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkKB6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkKB6BZ29/content/id/2542248) Accessed May 24, 2018.

decades.<sup>7</sup> Putin has even influenced the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, such that Russia is considered one of the top five threats to the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Putin's Foreign Policy Concept covers what one would expect of a public facing document on foreign policy. The language is strong, sending forceful messages to several audiences. There are some noteworthy items on the Foreign Ministry website that are reflective of Russia's relationship with the international community and their foreign relations. However, there is a readily apparent detachment from reality on other topics. First, there is an entire section dedicated "legal problems of international cooperation." A cursory review of this section is Russia's response to policies by the United Nations, to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and to moves by Denmark regarding the Arctic.<sup>9</sup> Russia seems to take exception with any policy that could potentially effect anything that might impact the Russian sphere of influence. Secondly, there is another section of the Ministry's site for "Russia's position in reinforcing the legal grounds of world order." The section appears to ensure visitors to the site are reminded that Russia is dedicated to international law and the treaties thereof. However the section of this site is sorely outdated, with just a handful of updates since 2010.<sup>10</sup> Russia has

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<sup>7</sup> Rick Noack. "New government leaflets tell Swedes to be prepared for war." *The Washington Post*. May 22, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/05/22/new-government-leaflets-tell-swedes-to-be-prepared-for-war/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.60f433b40537](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/05/22/new-government-leaflets-tell-swedes-to-be-prepared-for-war/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.60f433b40537) Access May 22, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Clark. "CJCS Dunford Calls For Strategic Shifts; 'At Peace Or At War Is Insufficient'" *Breaking Defense*. September 21, 2016. <https://breakingdefense.com/2016/09/cjcs-dunford-calls-for-strategic-shifts-at-peace-or-at-war-is-insufficient/> Access May 24, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Foreign policy, Legal problems of international cooperation, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/legal\\_problems\\_of-international\\_cooperation](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/legal_problems_of-international_cooperation) Accessed May 26, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Foreign policy/Russia's position in reinforcing the legal grounds of world order/[http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/position\\_word\\_order](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/position_word_order) . Accessed on May 26, 2018.

annexed the Crimea, taken military action in Syria, and has a continual issue with the push eastward by NATO. The Russian government, with Putin at the helm, is very deft at crafting public statements and staying on topics – but the absence of information is just as telling as the presence of it. The foreign policy of Russian is taking an approach of *hard power*, as defined by Joseph Nye.<sup>11</sup> Coercion of all manner – financial, political, and military – appear to be Russia's starting point and only get more serious as talks progress. Putin's hard power approach to foreign policy can be best illustrated using Ukraine and Syria as examples.

## **Ukraine**

Russian and Ukraine have a long, sordid history that frames their present day relationship. Ukraine (a Russian word which literally translates to *border* in English) and Russia both trace their roots to Kievan Rus more than 1,000 years ago. After the fall of Kievan Rus, Lithuania and Poland dominated most of the area until Imperialist Russia claimed almost all of present day Ukraine. It wasn't until the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 that Ukraine asserted it is independence as a country. However, the independence was fleeting as the country was incorporated into the Soviet Union. The constant power struggle left Ukraine's economy in shambles, yet Ukrainians refused to join farm collectives under the Soviet rule of Stalin. This resulted in the systematic execution of over ten million Ukrainians in the 1930s. The Ukrainian region was repopulated by millions of Russians and others from around the Soviet Union. It was not until 1991, when the Soviet Union was dissolving, that Ukraine claimed its full

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<sup>11</sup> Nye Jr, Joseph S. "Get smart: Combining hard and soft power." *Foreign affairs* (2009): 160-163.

independence. Despite its newly asserted sovereignty, however, Russian continued to politically insert itself into Ukrainian affairs.<sup>12</sup> This scene-setter history helped to create a frame of reference for Russia's biggest foreign relations blunder of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the annexation of Crimea.

The United States, under the President George W. Bush administration began a push for NATO to push further east, which was vehemently resisted by the Putin Regime. NATO's mission was to court Georgia and Ukraine for membership in the alliance. While the detailed fate of Georgia cannot be covered in this paper, it was invaded by Russia in 2008 to keep the country off balance and prevent NATO membership.<sup>13</sup> This invasion was a foreshadowing of what would transpire in Ukraine just six years later.

The Russian Foreign Ministry is very clear about their views on NATO by writing:

Systemic problems in the Euro-Atlantic region that have accumulated over the last quarter century are manifested in the geopolitical expansion pursued by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) along with their refusal to begin implementation of political statements regarding the creation of a common European security and cooperation framework, have resulted in a serious crisis in the relations between Russia and the Western States. The containment policy adopted by the United States and its allies against Russia, and political, economic, information and other pressure Russia is facing from them undermine regional and global stability, are detrimental to the long-term interests of all sides and run counter to the growing need for cooperation and addressing transnational challenges and threats in today's world.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Theunis Bates. "Ukraine's fraught relationship with Russia: A brief history." *The Week*, March 8, 2014. <http://theweek.com/articles/449691/ukraines-fraught-relationship-russia-brief-history> Accessed May 24, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin." *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014. 2-5.

<sup>14</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016. [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248) Accessed May 24, 2018.

Given the invasion Georgia and the clearly espoused views of NATO, what transpired in 2014 should have come as no surprise. The Russian Federation invaded the Crimea of Ukraine on August 22, 2014.

In 2016, the International Criminal Court (ICC) stated that the invasion was a crime. Yet despite its actions and the ICC proclamation, Russia states in its Foreign Concept that it aims to “pursue neighbourly relations with adjacent States, assist them in eliminating the existing conflicts and prevent the emergence of the new hotbeds of tension and conflicts on their territory.”<sup>15</sup> And yet, the Federation is causing the very tension and conflict they say they want to help their border states avoid.

The occupation of Crimea is one of the Putin’s worst foreign relations failures since he has taken office. Putin has masterfully crafted the message of Crimea’s annexation by supporting the people’s right of self-determination. The Kremlin has still not taken responsibility for sending in Russian Special Forces and annexing part of a sovereign country. Putin has neither acknowledged this clear violation of international law nor accepted it as the reason for the sanctions levied against Russia. These actions have proven Putin to be an unreliable international partner and have stymied meaningful foreign relations with developed countries.

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<sup>15</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016. [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248) Accessed May 24, 2018.

## Syria

Syria and the Soviet Union have an interesting and tense history as well, though not nearly as long as the Ukrainian – Russian relationship. Damascus and Moscow have had their own challenges, including the frequent inability of Damascus to repay its debts. Shortly after Putin was elected and Russia was getting back on its feet, Putin forgave US\$9.7 billion of Syria's debt – amounting to 75% of the total debt owe to Russia; a lot of money for Russia at the time.<sup>16</sup>

The Syrian Civil War under the dictatorship at Bashir al-Asad has been well chronicled in the world's free press. From chemical weapons and bombed civilian centers, life in the majority of the country had become unbearable, triggering a mass exodus in which over five million Syrians have fled the country.<sup>17</sup> In September 2015, the Syrian government requested Russian assistance in fighting both the rebels and extremist groups. However, Russia is not the only country to carry out military operations in Syria – the U.S. is there, too. Whether Putin sees Syria as proxy war against the U.S., an altruistic measure to help the Syrians, or an opportunity to expand Russia's footprint, the world may never know. What is clear, however, is Putin's signal to the international community that Russia is prepared to venture further than its border states.

Even with the long standing relations between the two countries, Putin's actions do not set well from a foreign policy perspective. Assad is an authoritarian and brutal leader. He has not hesitated in using force against those would rise up against him, including his own citizens.

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<sup>16</sup> Ilya Bourtman. "Putin and Russia's Middle Eastern Policy." *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. no. 2 (2006)

<sup>17</sup> Syrian Arab Republic, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, <http://www.unocha.org/syria>. Accessed May 26, 2018

Assad is a leader that is to not be trifled with. Assad is relatable to Putin, their similar styles have forge an alliance (perhaps out of necessity for both parties). Putin is spending his time and energy on helping Syria beat back the anti-government forces because the scenario is all too reminiscent of Chechnya. And when discussing, or perhaps justifying, Russia's involvement in Syria, Putin characterizes the civil war as a continuation of a decades old Sunni extremist war against secular states.<sup>18</sup> And in 2017, the Russian military announced that it would permanently maintain a base in Syria.<sup>19</sup> Putin is masterful at redirection and burry true intentions, the truth of Russia's involvement is difficult to ascertain.

All aspects of foreign policy at play for Russia in Syria cannot be possibly covered here. However, there are two main themes that are likely at play for Putin. First, having a foothold in a country with access the Arabian Gulf is a major coup for Russia. This allows Putin to pursue another avenue in the oil market, making Russia an even larger petrochemical powerhouse. Secondly, Russia presence now and permanent basing agreement helps Putin control the narrative of the semiautonomous regions within Russia. Russian support to the Assad regime movement will telegraph to the international community Putin is tough on insurrection and will stop at nothing to put it down – whether in Russia or a loosely allied country that sought his help.

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<sup>18</sup> Fiona Hill. "The real reason Putin supports Assad." *Foreign Affairs* 25 (2013).

<sup>19</sup> Ilya Bourtnan. "Putin and Russia's Middle Eastern Policy."

## Summary

Putin's foreign policy can easily be characterized as hard power. As discussed in this paper – directly and indirectly – Putin has been brought up in a world of hard power since he graduated from law school. Coercion, the very definition of hard power, is how Putin got promoted to lieutenant colonel and why he was head of the FSB before becoming Yeltsin's heir apparent. Putin has been very heavy-handed with continual meddling in the Ukrainian political affair leading up to the annexation of Crimea. He has shown hard power in Syria by forgiving billions in debt which set the stage for military intervention a decade later, resulting in a permanent base in Syria. Putin's influence of hard power can be seen in the Baltic countries' own actions to ensure they are as protected as possible from a Russian invasion (the need for which was only reinforced by the press release in early 2018 regarding a Russian nuclear submarine that could launch a missile and used a graphic of the U.S. state of Florida being obliterated). Putin has stepped down once as president so he did not violate the term limits but this will likely not happen again. The Putin regime is firmly in power and thriving in their element, and he will be in power for many more years to come. The international community needs to remain on guard and to expect Putin and his team to start negotiations with hard power and continue to escalate.

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