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## **FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BOLD: THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA'S ACTIONS IN THE NEAR ABROAD**

Maj Nicolas Forsyth

**JCSP 44**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

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## **FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BOLD: THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA'S ACTIONS IN THE NEAR ABROAD**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In February 2014, Russia began a bold military intervention in Crimea, Ukraine that saw it take control of key government buildings and strategic sites across the peninsula using unmarked Special Operations Forces (SOF) troops. In the weeks that followed, it installed a pro-Russian government in the region. On March 16<sup>th</sup>, Russia oversaw a referendum that called for the separation of Crimea from the Ukraine in order to join the Russian Federation. The results of the referendum favoured Crimean independence, and within days, Russia accepted Crimea's request to join the Russian Federation, thus completing the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> Russia's actions quickly drew international condemnation from Western nations such as the United States (US) and the European community. However, the sanctions they imposed had little effect on Russia's behaviour. In a show of international defiance, it continued to maintain pressure on the Ukraine by removing the Ukrainian Armed Forces elements from the Crimean peninsula, massing Russian forces along the Ukrainian border, and providing arms and resources to separatist elements operating in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> The situation in the Ukraine further strained Russia's relations with the West and soon created another "frozen conflict" in Russia's former sphere of influence, known as the Near Abroad.

When comparing Russia's aggressive behaviour in the Ukraine to its other military interventions in the post-Cold War Near Abroad, evidence suggests that Russia's more recent

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<sup>1</sup> Carnegie Europe, "Revisiting the 2014 Annexation of Crimea," last accessed 10 April 2018, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/03/15/revisiting-2014-annexation-of-crimea-pub-68423>.

<sup>2</sup> Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 85.

actions were representative of a trend that has seen Russia grow more bold in the face of Western opposition. One may ask why have Russia's military actions in the Near Abroad grown bolder since the end of the Cold War? To answer this question, careful consideration must be given to the difficult international environment that Russia faced as well as the evolution of its leadership and military capabilities. When examining both the international and internal settings, one will see that Russia's increasingly bold actions resulted from its perceived international marginalization, its increasingly hostile leadership, and its improved military capabilities.

This paper will argue this by first highlighting three key events that contributed to Russia's sense of international marginalization and formed the basis of its negative outlook towards the West following the Cold War. The key events were: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) continued expansion, NATO's bombing of Kosovo, and Western interference in implementing the Kozak plan in Moldova. The paper will then explain the evolution of Russia's leadership from being more liberal and open to the West to conservative and confrontational through a comparison of its key Presidents: Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin. The final argument of the paper will analyze how Russia's ability to employ its military resources improved following its failure in the first Chechen War to a point where it was able to successfully conduct a complex operation as demonstrated in the Ukraine.

## **INTERNATIONAL MARGINALIZATION**

### **The Continued Eastward Expansion of NATO**

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's relationship with Western nations has been strained due to its perceived marginalization at the international level. A root cause of this belief

was NATO's eastward expansion, which became a point of discussion between the West and the Soviet Union in February 1990, prior to Germany's reunification. During this timeframe, US and West German officials worked closely with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to negotiate the removal of Soviet troops from East Germany to enable its reunification with West Germany.<sup>3</sup> In return, the US agreed to not expand NATO beyond Germany's eastern borders, though it never signed a formal agreement with the Soviet Union. This lack of a formal agreement ultimately left the option of expanding eastward open to NATO.

In the years that followed German reunification, NATO actively pursued eastward expansion despite Soviet and later Russian opposition. In 1999, it welcomed the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, and in 2004 underwent its largest enlargement when it accepted Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia into the alliance.<sup>4</sup> The alliance's actions intensified Russia's mistrust of the West as it believed the US, as the de facto leader, had "manifested double standards and hypocrisy in international politics worldwide."<sup>5</sup> Russia's Foreign Policy Concept 2016 further reinforced this outlook by viewing NATO eastward expansion as a "violation of the principle of equal and indivisible security...[that has led] to the deepening of old dividing lines in Europe and to the emergence of new ones."<sup>6</sup> This outlook makes it reasonable to state that Russia's international marginalization regarding NATO's eastward expansion was a contributing factor to its actions in the Near Abroad. The

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<sup>3</sup> Foreign Affairs, "A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion," last accessed 12 April 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-11/broken-promise>.

<sup>4</sup> NATO, "NATO Member Countries," last accessed 8 April 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_52044.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52044.htm?selectedLocale=en).

<sup>5</sup> Dmitry Adamsky, "Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy," *Proliferation Papers*, no. 54 (Autumn 2015): 19.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2016," last accessed 15 April 2018, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

precedent set by the US and other Western countries gave Russia the justification for its increasingly bold military interventions.

### **NATO Bombing of Kosovo**

Russia's disdain of the West following the Cold War became increasingly more pronounced during the Kosovo conflict in 1999. During this conflict, Russia and NATO were once again on opposing sides: Russia staunchly supported the Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic while NATO believed he was responsible for the killing of thousands of Kosovar Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo. To stop him, NATO was prepared to intervene using military force.<sup>7</sup> By late March 1999, the diplomatic efforts of the West and Russia had failed to stop the killing and displacement of Kosovar Albanians. In response, NATO began launching air strikes against Serbian military targets to force the Serb military to stop its attacks on innocent civilians.<sup>8</sup> Much like NATO's eastward expansion, these actions were met with heated resistance from Russia. It condemned the bombing, calling it unlawful as it had not been authorized by the United Nations (UN) Security Council. The Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, then called on the Security Council to stop the air strikes by introducing a resolution that would order an end to the bombing. However, due to the number of NATO members in the Security Council, his resolution was defeated by a vote of twelve to three.<sup>9</sup>

Russia's opposition to the NATO bombing of Kosovo was also driven by domestic factors that went beyond its Security Council authorization argument. It was concerned that Kosovo would set a precedent for future "humanitarian interventions." This was based on

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Roberts, "NATO's 'Humanitarian War' over Kosovo," *Survival* 41, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 104.

<sup>8</sup> John Norris, *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Norris, *Collision Course...*, 14.

Russia's belief that a conflict with an ethnic dimension within its territory or Near Abroad could make it the target of NATO military intervention.<sup>10</sup> This perceived lack of options against NATO action further consolidated the anti-NATO sentiment in Russia.<sup>11</sup> At the international level, the National Security Concept for the Russian Federation issued in 2000 articulated the possible implications of NATO's unchecked power on a global scale by stating that "NATO's shift to the practice of using military force outside its zone of responsibility and without UN Security Council authorization is fraught with the danger of destabilizing the entire strategic situation in the world."<sup>12</sup> This outlook once again reinforced Russia's suspicion of NATO.

When analyzing Russia's actions during NATO's bombing campaign in Kosovo, it is once again clear that Russia faced international marginalization from the UN community as it did little to support Russia's case. In Russia's opinion, NATO also appeared impervious to legal challenges of its military intervention, despite the fact that it contravened general international law.<sup>13</sup> Russia's experience during this conflict likely contributed to the increasing boldness of its interventions in its Near Abroad as it felt it could no longer rely on the UN to support its cause. It would also need to act strongly to counter NATO actions as diplomacy was futile.

### **Intervention in Moldova**

Russia was once again subjected to international marginalization when the US and two European organizations, the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), intervened during a conflict in Russia's own Near Abroad, the

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<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Baranovsky, "The Kosovo Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 4 (Autumn 2015): 258.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> MFARF, "National Security Concept of the Russian Federation 2000," last accessed 15 April 2018, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/589768](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/589768).

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, "NATO's 'Humanitarian War'...", 107.

state of Moldova, in 2003. The conflict in Moldova centered on the Transdnestrian region's desire to separate from Moldova to form its own republic. In the early summer of 1992, the conflict had escalated to a full-scale military struggle between the newly created Moldovan military and the Transdnestrian Separatist militias.<sup>14</sup> The Russian 14<sup>th</sup> Army, which had been stationed in Moldova since 1956, also participated in the conflict as a stabilization force, though it was believed that its secondary role had been to support the separatists.<sup>15</sup> On July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1992, the fighting ended when the Moldovan President Mircea Snegur signed a cease-fire with Russian President Yeltsin that would create a peacekeeping force composed of Moldovan, Transdnestrian, and Russian forces.<sup>16</sup> The extreme violence of the conflict had been reduced, though a political resolution had still not been reached.

In 2003, Moldova's new president, Vladimir Voronin, proposed the federalization of Moldova and a joint re-writing of Moldova's Constitution with his Transdnestrian counterparts. Russia then used this initiative to unilaterally negotiate a settlement, known as the *Kozak Memorandum*, between the Moldovan and Transdnestrian parties. The Kozak Memorandum, developed by Russian constitutional expert Dmitri Kozak, supported federalization but also gave Russia increased influence through Transdnestrian representation in the Moldovan government and even allowed for the extended stationing of Russian forces in Moldova.<sup>17</sup> When the time came for the Moldovan and Transdnestrian parties to sign the settlement, the Western community, led by the US, EU, and OSCE, displayed strong opposition to the Kozak

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<sup>14</sup> William H. Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transdnestrian Conflict* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), 51.

<sup>15</sup> Trevor Water, "Russian peacekeeping in Moldova: Source of stability or neo-imperialist threat," in *Regional Peacekeepers: The Paradox of Russian Peacekeeping*, ed. John Mackinlay and Peter Cross (New York: United Nations University Press, 2003), 144.

<sup>16</sup> Water, "Russian peacekeeping in Moldova...", 147.

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Chamberlain-Creanga and Lyndon K. Allin, "Acquiring Assets, Debts and Citizens: Russia and the Micro-Foundations of Transnistria's Stalemated Conflict," *Demokratizatsiya* (Autumn, 2010): 344.

Memorandum and effectively forced President Voronin to withdraw his support for the settlement.<sup>18</sup>

The failure of the Kozak Memorandum was another example of Russia's international marginalization as its interests had once again been thwarted by the West. Unlike its difficult interactions with NATO regarding its expansion or the bombing of Kosovo, the Western intervention in Moldova was significant for Russia because it occurred within the Near Abroad, an area "where Moscow considers Russian influence ought to be unchallenged."<sup>19</sup> Russia's experience in Moldova likely contributed to its bolder approach to military interventions as diplomacy alone had once again failed to yield favourable results.

### **Russia's involvement in International Organizations**

Russia's troubled relations with the West in Kosovo and Moldova illustrated the level of international marginalization Russia faced in regional affairs. This marginalization likely provided a basis for its negative outlook toward the West and was a factor in its increasingly bolder actions in the Near Abroad. However, despite Russia's anti-Western approach to diplomacy, it can be argued that Russia did still actively engage in multilateral conflict resolution and benefitted from its relations with Western powers. As articulated in its Foreign Policy Concept 2016, Russia preferred collective action by the international community as it believed "conflicts can only be resolved through inclusive dialogue and negotiations involving all sides rather than by isolating any of them."<sup>20</sup> In practice, Russia attempted to build closer relations with NATO through the establishment of the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997, and then the

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<sup>18</sup> Hill, *Russia, the Near Abroad and the West...*, 152.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> MFARF, "Foreign Policy Concept 2016..."

NATO-Russia Council in 2002.<sup>21</sup> Russia was also involved in the Council of Europe and OSCE as it believed these organizations would help it “advance its own national security and economic goals.”<sup>22</sup>

The joint councils with NATO and economic affiliations with the European community were an indication that despite the marginalization it experienced, Russia sought closer relations with the West. However, when analyzing Russia’s reasoning for maintaining these relations, it is evident that they were more out of necessity than desire. Russia needed to keep open relations with NATO to ensure that it would not be the target of unilateral action. Russia also used its relations with European nations to bolster its economy and “Great Power” identity but was not willing to conform to European norms.<sup>23</sup> From a strategic standpoint, these ties to the West were likely utilized to reduce the regional opposition to Russia’s planned or reactive actions in its Near Abroad, in turn giving it more leeway to increase the boldness of its actions.

## **EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA’S LEADERSHIP**

### **Mikhail Gorbachev**

A close examination of Russia’s internal environment and how it related to the boldness of its actions in the Near Abroad requires focus to be placed on its leadership. At the end of the Cold War, the most important leader of the time was Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Though much of what he accomplished occurred prior to the end of the Cold War, his actions

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<sup>21</sup> NATO, “NATO enlargement and Russia: myths and realities,” last accessed 10 April 2018, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/Russia-Ukraine-Nato-crisis/Nato-enlargement-Russia/EN/index.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Olga Oliker *et al.*, *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications* (Arlington: RAND Corporation, 2009), 106.

<sup>23</sup> Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith, “Russia and Hybrid Warfare: Going Beyond the Label,” *Aleksanteri Papers* (Winter 2016): 19.

still resonated in the post-Cold War era and served as a good contrast with the Russian leadership that followed him. As the leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev espoused an open and cooperative view towards the West. A central tenet of his foreign policy was his “New Thinking” principles, which focused on the “ability of cooperative measures to provide for Soviet security and the declining utility of military force in world politics.”<sup>24</sup> In 1990, he proposed a pan-European security arrangement that would have linked both NATO and the Warsaw Pact through a united Germany. Gorbachev then suggested that the Soviet Union join NATO, a notion that was quickly refused by the US.<sup>25</sup> Gorbachev’s close relationship with US President Ronald Reagan also slowed the arms race through the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty, which was signed in 1987. This treaty significantly reduced nuclear weapons stock piles for both the Soviet Union and the US, and introduced “extensive verification measures, including intrusive inspections” to ensure compliance.<sup>26</sup> These displays of cooperation were all indications that Gorbachev wished to make the Soviet Union more open and less of a military threat to the West.

Gorbachev’s West-leaning foreign policy was complementary to another of his reformist ideas, *demokratizatsiya*. Under *demokratizatsiya*, or democratization, Gorbachev hoped to make the Soviet Union more progressive by allowing the public to elect government officials through multi-candidate elections and bring about more political liberalization.<sup>27</sup> This effort eventually brought about great change in the Soviet Union when in 1988 at the United Nations, Gorbachev announced that he would allow Soviet countries in Eastern and Central Europe to politically

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<sup>24</sup> Glenn P. Hastedt and Kay M. Knickrehm, *International Politics in a Changing World* (London: Longman, 2002), 334.

<sup>25</sup> Foreign Affairs, “A Broken Promise?...”

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of State Archive, “Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty 1987,” last accessed 17 April 2018, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/rd/104266.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Hastedt and Knickrehm, *International Politics...*, 330.

“choose their own course without outside influence.”<sup>28</sup> As an additional measure, he agreed to significantly reduce Soviet troop dispositions in these countries. When the Communist regimes in many of the Eastern European countries fell the following year, Gorbachev refrained from interfering.<sup>29</sup> This show of restraint in Eastern and Central Europe along with his efforts to reduce military hostilities with the West were recognized by the international community and won him the 1990 Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>30</sup> This demonstrated that Gorbachev was a progressive leader who wished to build a better international community that included the Soviet Union. Though much of the reform he tried to undertake eventually failed domestically, his external efforts ultimately ended the Cold War and reduced the Soviet, and eventually Russian, sphere of influence. However, to those that followed Gorbachev, this reduction in the Russian sphere of influence became something they hoped to reverse, through military intervention if needed.

## **Boris Yeltsin**

Gorbachev was succeeded by the President of the Russian Republic, Boris Yeltsin, following a failed coup by Communist Party hardliners in 1991. Upon gaining power, he led the dissolution of the Soviet Union and replaced it with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).<sup>31</sup> As President, Yeltsin dealt with Russia’s move away from Gorbachev’s liberal ideals to a more conservative outlook on foreign policy. The rise of nationalists in the Russian government revived the anti-Western and neo-imperialist rhetoric to restore the “Great Russian

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<sup>28</sup> History Channel, “Perestroika and Glasnost,” last accessed 20 April 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/perestroika-and-glasnost>.

<sup>29</sup> Hoover Institution, “From Yeltsin to Putin,” last accessed 20 April 2018, <https://www.hoover.org/research/yeltsin-putin>.

<sup>30</sup> Nobel Prize, “The Nobel Peace Prize 1990,” last accessed 21 April 2018, [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1990/press.html](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1990/press.html).

<sup>31</sup> History Channel, “Boris Yeltsin”...

state.”<sup>32</sup> It also increased Russia’s need to retain influence in its Near Abroad and former republics, and made it more likely to intervene if conflicts arose. This was best exemplified by Yeltsin’s order to invade Chechnya, a Russian republic seeking independence. Strategically, Russia viewed Chechnya as vital as it was the gateway to the remainder of the Caucasus. Politically, Russia wished to stop the anti-Russian movement as it feared it would spread to other Russian republics in the region.<sup>33</sup> Though it was a military failure, the intervention nonetheless demonstrated the level of force Russia was willing to use within its geographic region.

The need to retain influence in the former Soviet sphere also led to a significant disruption in relations with the West. During the 1999 Kosovo crisis, Russia and NATO were at odds on how to stop Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic’s killing of Kosovar Albanians. NATO wished to intervene militarily while Russia “tried to capitalize on its role as mediator, looking for a peaceful solution to the crisis and a way to make Russia’s engagement indispensable to all parties involved.”<sup>34</sup> As mediator, Yeltsin hoped to avoid a confrontation with the West while still showing support for the Orthodox Serbs. When his efforts failed and NATO proceeded with the bombing, Yeltsin’s view towards the West became more apprehensive and led him to introduce changes to his National Security Concept. The changes sought to develop a conceptual response to a “conceivable” intervention by the West, a reflection of Russia’s “re-emerging concerns about ‘increasing external military threats’, as well as its readiness to react to them with all available means (including nuclear weapons).”<sup>35</sup> Yeltsin’s actions in Kosovo and the follow-on changes in foreign policy were an indication of Russia’s

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<sup>32</sup> Hastedt and Knickrehm, *International Politics...*, 337.

<sup>33</sup> Timothy Thomas, “The Russian armed forces in Chechnya, 1994,” in *Regional Peacekeepers...*, 113.

<sup>34</sup> Baranovsky, “The Kosovo Factor...”, 262.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

move away from strong relations with the West. These were then built upon by his successor, Vladimir Putin.

## **Vladimir Putin**

Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999 after being handed the presidency by an ailing Yeltsin. He had served under Yeltsin as the Prime Minister of Russia and was well positioned to assume power. Since 1999, he has been the most influential leader in Russia based on his multiple terms as president, with the exception of 2008-2012, when he served a term as Prime Minister to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. As a proud Russian and ex-KGB leader, Putin advocated Russian core values that “emphasized patriotism, Russia’s great power mission, and social solidarity.”<sup>36</sup> He also viewed the collapse of the Soviet Union as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century” and was determined to restore the empire’s greatness.<sup>37</sup> These strong nationalist and neo-imperial beliefs drove Putin to focus on improving his security apparatus to make it more capable both internally and externally. In 2004, he proposed budget increases of which “more than one third were allocated to the Ministries of the Interior and of Defence.”<sup>38</sup> The improvements in military and intelligence capabilities then provided Putin with the means to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy.

Putin’s approach to dealing with the Near Abroad was stronger and more decisive than his predecessors.<sup>39</sup> His actions clearly demonstrated an intent to “reinstate and maintain its

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Rywkin, “Russia and the Near Abroad Under Putin,” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 37, no. 4 (2015): 234.

<sup>37</sup> Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin’s Wars: The Rise of Russia’s New Imperialism* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 61.

<sup>38</sup> Paolo Calzini, “Vladimir Putin and the Chechen War,” *The International Spectator* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 25.

<sup>39</sup> Rywkin, “Russia and the Near Abroad Under Putin...”, 234.

[Russia's] position as the dominant regional actor, by military force if necessary."<sup>40</sup> This was most evident during the two main interventions in the Near Abroad that occurred during Putin's terms as Prime Minister and President: Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. The conflict in Georgia saw Russia deploy close to 35,000 Russian and allied forces to defend the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia during their call for independence from Georgia. Russia's pretext for the action had been to provide additional security measures following attacks on Ossetian separatists by Georgian forces.<sup>41</sup> However, a more likely reason for the intervention was to establish Russia's primacy in the region by warning both NATO and former Soviet states to respect Moscow's interests.<sup>42</sup> Putin's actions in the Ukraine followed a similar approach. He used support for separatist elements in Crimea and Donbas as a pretext for intervention and annexed the Crimean peninsula through a limited deployment of military forces.<sup>43</sup> Putin's goal, as in Georgia, was to dissuade the West, namely the EU, from continuing talks with the Ukraine, and to place pressure on the Ukraine to maintain its economic relationship with Russia.<sup>44</sup>

Russia's military interventions in both Georgia and the Ukraine drew strong international condemnation. Despite the severity of these responses, Putin displayed little remorse for his actions, an indication of his views towards the West. Unlike his predecessors, his desire to restore Russia as a "great power" made him less susceptible to Western coercion, especially when taking action in "zones and spheres of privileged interests, where Moscow considers it has

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<sup>40</sup> Renz and Smith, "Russia and Hybrid Warfare...", 18.

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Rodrigue Pare, *The Conflict Between Russia and Georgia* (Ottawa: Parliamentary Information and Research Service, 2009), 5.

<sup>42</sup> Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars...*, 233.

<sup>43</sup> Renz and Smith, "Russia and Hybrid Warfare...", 6.

<sup>44</sup> Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine...*, 75.

hegemonic rights.”<sup>45</sup> This has provided him with the motivation to pursue bolder forms of intervention and test the limits of Western reactions.

## IMPROVEMENTS IN RUSSIA’S MILITARY CAPABILITIES

### Chechnya

The evolution of Russia’s leadership contributed greatly to the increasing boldness of its actions in the Near Abroad. Complementing this evolution was an improvement of its military capabilities, which allowed it to achieve greater effects in the theatres it wished to influence. Since the end of Cold War, Russia’s military interventions guided the evolution of its military, beginning with its failed intervention in Chechnya in 1994. The failure in Chechnya was the result of a number of factors. The first was Russia’s poor evaluation of the Chechen separatists’ strength and capacity for victory. According to the assessment of Defence Minister Pavel Grachev, “only a small show of force would be enough to take Grozny.”<sup>46</sup> This assessment led President Yeltsin to disregard potential peacekeeping options and order a full invasion of Chechnya in December 1994.

Another factor that led to failure in Chechnya was the condition of the Russian Army. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, it had been “reduced in numbers, underfunded, undertrained, and deeply corrupt.”<sup>47</sup> This made the army less capable of fighting as a cohesive unit, and the leadership more likely to seek profits through the sale of equipment.<sup>48</sup> During the military campaign, the fighting centered on controlling Grozny, which Russia’s poorly trained conscript

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<sup>45</sup> Adamsky, “Cross-Domain Coercion...”, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas, “The Russian armed forces in Chechnya, 1994,” in *Regional Peacekeepers...*, 117.

<sup>47</sup> Van Herpen, *Putin’s Wars...*, 161.

<sup>48</sup> Hoover Institution, “From Yeltsin to Putin...”

army only achieved after three months, and through the use of a heavy bombing campaign that generated thousands of civilian casualties. The war then shifted to the countryside where Chechens fought a guerilla campaign and further eroded the Russian will to continue the war. In March 1996, Yeltsin proposed a cease-fire, ending the fighting by the end of the year.<sup>49</sup> The performance of the military clearly highlighted how poorly planned campaigns executed by poorly trained and corrupt units would end in failure.

In September 1999, Russia once again opened hostilities with Chechnya after Chechen militants launched attacks in the neighbouring Russian republic of Dagestan. However, under the leadership of President Putin, Russia's approach was more decisive and brutal. It began with a massive bombing campaign against rebel locations and Grozny which was followed by the deployment of waves soldiers and security personnel.<sup>50</sup> Russia also hired *kontraktniki*, or contract soldiers, who were more capable than the average, poorly trained conscript and often worked alongside Special Forces in the conduct of ruthless operations.<sup>51</sup> Much like the previous Chechen war, the fighting was intense until the fall of Grozny in 2000, after which it became a counter-insurgency that eventually ended in 2009. Though the results of the second Chechen war were similar to the first, the way in which it was fought demonstrated an evolution in Russia's military capabilities. Russia boosted the performance of its poorly trained conscript army through the hiring of contract soldiers. It also made more effective use of aerial bombardment, though with disastrous consequences to Chechnya's infrastructure and population. The use of these methods was an indication that under Putin, Russian interventions would be well-planned, bold, and ruthless if required.

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<sup>49</sup> Hastedt and Knickrehm, *International Politics...*, 349.

<sup>50</sup> Calzini, "Vladimir Putin and the Chechen War...", 22.

<sup>51</sup> Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars...*, 190.

## Georgia

The next significant military intervention that demonstrated an evolution in Russia's military capabilities was Russia's small invasion of Georgia in 2008. During this conflict, Russia intervened on behalf of two Georgian territories, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, who wished to secede from Georgia. Though its response appeared reactive, evidence has indicated that Russia had been planning to move into Georgia for upwards of two years if not longer. It increased troop numbers for peacekeeping missions and exercises in the region and even deployed elements to repair a railway in Georgia that would eventually be used to move Russian troops.<sup>52</sup> Russia also made extensive use of disinformation and cyber warfare to make its motives for intervention more humanitarian in nature. It claimed the Georgian military had committed atrocities against its people in South Ossetia. Russia then limited the spread of factual information through blocking Georgian government and media websites.<sup>53</sup> These actions demonstrated a level of premeditation and improvement in capabilities that was likely driven by the need to assert stronger control in the Near Abroad.

The actual fighting in August 2008 lasted five days yet still saw the involvement of upwards of 40,000 Russian and allied forces. Much like Chechnya, these forces used overwhelming firepower and mass-mobilization to attack Georgian forces.<sup>54</sup> On August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008, a cease-fire was signed to end the intense fighting. Despite its success, the execution of Russia's military campaign in Georgia signaled a need for reform within the military. Among the many issues in Georgia were poor command and control structures, technologically inadequate equipment, and poorly trained soldiers. The success of the non-kinetic operations in

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<sup>52</sup> Athena Bryce-Rogers, "Russian Military Reform in the Aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War," *Demokratizatsiya* 21, no. 3 (2013): 348.

<sup>53</sup> Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars...*, 206.

<sup>54</sup> Bryce-Rogers, "Russian Military Reform...", 349.

Georgia also made Russia focus on improving new generation warfare tactics, electronic warfare, and Command, Control, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems.<sup>55</sup>

Russia's intervention in Georgia combined Soviet era tactics with a well-conceived plan and non-kinetic operations. This approach allowed Russia to achieve its objectives, despite the international backlash it received for its excessive use of force and breach of Georgia's sovereignty. The conflict also reinforced Russia's need to reform its military establishment in order to make it a more technically proficient force that was not always reliant on a numerical overmatch. Through improvements in these areas, Russia would be capable of bolder actions, as was witnessed in the Ukraine six years later.

## **Ukraine**

Russia's boldest intervention in the Near Abroad was its annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Not only were Russia's actions a contravention of international law, they also represented the degree to which Russia's military had evolved since its failed attempt at intervention in Chechnya in 1994. In the Ukraine, Russia had not relied on large groupings and firepower overmatch to defeat its enemy. Instead, it effectively used "non-military means in addition to limited military force to achieve political objectives."<sup>56</sup> Russia's ability to coordinate such a complex operation was also an indication of its ongoing transition from a "mass-

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<sup>55</sup> Adamsky, "Cross-Domain Coercion...", 41.

<sup>56</sup> Renz and Smith, "Russia and Hybrid Warfare...", 5.

mobilization Soviet army used for fighting large-scale wars to a high-readiness force for local and regional wars.”<sup>57</sup>

The military intervention in the Ukraine was a well-planned and well-executed operation that drew on many lessons from past interventions. It began with an information campaign that had the goals of “discrediting the new government in Ukraine, emphasizing the grave danger to Russians in Ukraine, and ensuring the display of broad support for Crimea’s “return home” to the safety of Russia.”<sup>58</sup> This built support for Russia’s actions both in the Ukraine and in Russia itself. Concurrently, Russia conducted intelligence collection operations through its local Black Sea fleet to define Ukrainian troop dispositions. When Russia was prepared to begin its operation in late February 2014, Putin ordered the conduct of large scale military exercises along the Ukrainian border to serve as a diversion while large groupings of SOF were inserted into Crimea.<sup>59</sup> Once in Crimea, the SOF troops seized the local parliament, Ukrainian military headquarters, and a number of airfields and ports.<sup>60</sup> The seizure of these sites allowed for the establishment of a pro-Russian local government and inflow of additional Russian ground, air, and naval forces. Within a week, the Ukraine had lost control of Crimea and Russia had suffered no direct casualties from the conflict.

Russia’s effective use of information operations, intelligence gathering, and SOF were keys to its success in Crimea. However, what allowed Russia to achieve maximum effect from these capabilities was its ability to coordinate them simultaneously. This task belonged to the Russian National Centre for the Management of Defence, an organization that had been created

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<sup>57</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “The Use of Russia’s Military in the Crimean Crisis,” last accessed 23 April 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/13/use-of-russia-s-military-in-crimean-crisis-pub-54949>.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Kofman *et al.*, *Lessons from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), 13.

<sup>59</sup> Carnegie EIP, “The Use of Russia’s Military...”

<sup>60</sup> Renz and Smith, “Russia and Hybrid Warfare...”, 28.

as a means of improving coordination between agencies due to the problems experienced during previous interventions.<sup>61</sup> Russia's investment in improving coordination across capabilities as well as its enhancement of those capabilities has "demonstrated [Moscow's] aptitude for organizational and conceptual learning and transformation, and scale of improvisation that are rather unorthodox for the post-Soviet Russian military practice."<sup>62</sup> The operation in the Ukraine also demonstrated Russia's "will to use force against its neighbors and against perceived Western challenges to its security interests,"<sup>63</sup> a representation of its increasing boldness in the Near Abroad.

### **Ideal Conditions in the Ukraine**

Russia's annexation of Crimea was a clear demonstration of the level of boldness it had reached in terms of military interventions in its Near Abroad. It capitalized on recent improvements in its capabilities and successfully executed a complex operation. However, it can be argued that despite the strong performance of its non-kinetic operations and SOF elements, much of Russia's success in Crimea was a result of a number of enabling factors. It did not face significant local protest as a large majority of the Crimean population was pro-Russian. There were also a number of Russian military installations in Crimea due to the basing of its Black Sea fleet, which gave it a military footprint on the peninsula. When the operation began, these local Russian forces were able to pressure Ukrainian forces into submitting to their actions without

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<sup>61</sup> Renz and Smith, "Russia and Hybrid Warfare...", 7.

<sup>62</sup> Adamsky, "Cross-Domain Coercion...", 41.

<sup>63</sup> Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine...*, 105.

any resistance.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, from both a civilian and military perspective, the environment in Crimea was ideal for Russia's aggressive actions.

The international environment also favoured Russia as Western organizations, most notably the EU and NATO, had not managed to establish firm relations or a presence in the Ukraine when its political turmoil began. This meant that they were caught by surprise when Russia moved into Crimea and did not have the means to counter its actions beyond sanctions. These restrictions then proved to be ineffective as they targeted "individuals in Putin's circle, and not key sectors of the Russian economy."<sup>65</sup> Despite a number of enabling factors, it is clear that Russia's success was a result of its military evolution. Its improved coordination and at times improvised actions depicted an agile and aggressive Russia that has grown in capability and will likely resort to bold action if its interests are challenged.

## CONCLUSION

The annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia caught the world by surprise in early 2014. Russia's actions were a clear attack on Ukrainian sovereignty and its refusal to acknowledge Western condemnation for such actions was an indication of a more confident and exceedingly defiant Russia. The operation to gain control of Crimea also represented an evolution in Russia's military capabilities, among others. It relied heavily on SOF elements as opposed to the Soviet tactic of massing and overwhelming firepower. Russia also utilized non-kinetic operations to rally the pro-Russian base in Crimea to its cause and provide it with an

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<sup>64</sup> Renz and Smith, "Russia and Hybrid Warfare...", 6.

<sup>65</sup> Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine...*, 122.

internal ally. The end result was military and political control of Crimea, and the start of yet another frozen conflict in the Near Abroad.

Russia's annexation of Crimea was its boldest military intervention in the Near Abroad since the end of the Cold War, which may lead one to question why has it grown so bold? To answer this question, this paper examined both the external and internal factors that made it resort to bolder action. Within the external environment, Russia was subjected to international marginalization when its appeals to stop NATO's eastward expansion or its bombing of Kosovo were ignored by the world's superpowers and even the UN. During the Moldova conflict, Russia's attempt to resolve the conflict unilaterally was obstructed by Western alliances, even though Russia believed it had hegemonic rights over Moldova. Together, these instances of international marginalization perpetuated the divide between Russia and the West, and made bolder action a more effective option to achieve its objectives in the Near Abroad.

A key internal factor that contributed to Russia's boldness in the Near Abroad was its increasingly hostile leadership. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's leadership evolved from the liberal minded Gorbachev to the nationalist Putin. Throughout this timeframe, Russia's relations with the West also changed from being open and cooperative to suspicious and hostile. Though this never led to a direct confrontation, Russia's growing boldness in the Near Abroad triggered repeated international condemnation and strained relations with the West. The final internal factor, Russia's military evolution, encompassed the changes in its military from the failed intervention in Chechnya in 1994 to its successful annexation of Crimea in 2014. Throughout those 20 years, Russia's military capabilities changed from relying on the Soviet tactic of mass mobilization to the use of more agile forces, such as SOF, and non-kinetic operations. Combined, the hostile leadership and improved military capabilities gave Russia the

intent and the means to conduct bolder military interventions in the Near Abroad. The West should not be surprised by Russia's evolving approach to interventions in the Near Abroad. Western actions have in many cases been the catalyst for these changes. Understanding the motivation, nature and consequences of these changes will provide the West with its best opportunity to deal effectively with future developments.

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