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# HOW WE GOT HERE WITH RUSSIA: THE KREMLIN'S WORLDVIEW



By Nataliya Bugayova

**ISW**  
INSTITUTE FOR THE  
STUDY OF WAR







Nataliya Bugayova

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## **THE KREMLIN'S WORLDVIEW**

Cover: Russian President Vladimir Putin delivers a speech while attending the Forum of Small Towns and Historical Settlements in the town of Kolomna, south of Moscow, Russia January 17, 2018. REUTERS/Alexander Nemenov/Pool

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## HOW WE GOT HERE WITH RUSSIA: THE KREMLIN'S WORLDVIEW

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# HOW WE GOT HERE WITH RUSSIA: THE KREMLIN'S WORLDVIEW

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Kremlin's increasingly assertive foreign policy, including its illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014 and its intervention in Syria in 2015, came unexpectedly to many in the West. These events were nonetheless mere extensions of the worldview held by Russian President Vladimir Putin. This worldview was built on more than two decades of compounded dissatisfaction with the West as well as Putin's cumulative experiences in his ongoing global campaigns to achieve his core objectives: the preservation of his regime, the end of American hegemony, and the reinstatement of Russia as a global power. Some of these ambitions were tamed, and others expedited, by external events, yet their core has remained the same and often at odds with the West. The U.S. believed that a brief period of non-assertive foreign policy from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s had become the new norm for Russia. This period was not the norm but an anomaly. Putin's foreign policy has always been assertive, similar to Russia's historic foreign policy. The U.S. may thus find itself once again surprised by Putin. This paper examines the evolution of Russia's foreign policy worldview since the collapse of the Soviet Union to help understand the likely next priorities of the Kremlin.

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. has routinely attempted to reset relations with Russia since the rise to power of Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2000. The Soviet Union's collapse led legions of scholars and policy-makers to pivot towards the new issues of a post-Soviet Middle East, Europe, and Asia. An entire generation of Americans hardly thought about Russia. The Russian Federation was seen as a former foe that could be integrated—albeit uneasily—into the international system led by the U.S.

Yet Russia did not view the slate as clean. The Kremlin's foreign policy narrative, by contrast, soon focused on America's disregard for its interests and the need to achieve a multipolar international system free of U.S. hegemony. Putin has remained clear on these goals since his ascent to the Kremlin. Russia needed to recover from its weakened state,

reestablish itself as a global power, and achieve a new world order that held up the Kremlin as an equal—not a dependent—to the U.S.

**Putin's twenty-year tenure in power has had a cumulative effect on his worldview.** His assertiveness has grown in step with his strengthened grip on domestic power and his growing perception that he faces only limited international pushback. His personal resentment of geopolitical slights has grown and fed back into Russia's national security dialogue. The influence of other forceful national security leaders has also grown. Putin has responded to internal challenges by seeking foreign policy distractions. The direction of his aims has always been consistent even if the vigor and rancor with which they are pursued has increased.



### **Putin's public tone has mirrored this evolution.**

In 2000, Putin “did not see reasons that would prevent ... cooperation with NATO under the condition that Russia would be treated as an equal partner” with the West.<sup>1</sup> By 2007, he was openly attacking the unipolar world order of the post-Cold War: “It is a world in which there is one master, one sovereign ... This is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within ... The model is flawed because at its basis there is and can be no moral foundations for modern civilization.”<sup>2</sup> By 2014, Putin was justifying action against this system: “There is a limit to everything ... and with Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the line.”<sup>3</sup> The core concepts of his policy remained stable even as his rhetoric shifted from cautious outreach to direct criticism.

### **Putin's worldview is Russia's foreign policy.**

The Kremlin's foreign policy views largely predate the rise of Putin. Putin's two decades in power, however, have enshrined his worldview as Russia's. Putin's Russia—unlike its predecessors—has no state machine or elite capable of balancing out his instincts and narratives. The Soviet Politburo typically served as a counterbalance to the rulers of the Soviet Union with the exception of Joseph Stalin. Imperial Russian had a base of influential elite that frequently shaped policy ideas with notable exceptions such as Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible. Putin's intimate circle of advisors is comparatively small with a contingent of military and security service leaders who have climbed with him for twenty years. Not all Russians accept (let alone support) all of these foreign policy ideas but their

disagreement matters little among a population by-and-large focused on day-to-day issues. Putin's and Russia's foreign priorities, at least for the moment, are the same.

### **The line between narrative and belief has blurred over the last twenty years.**

The Kremlin's talking points are propaganda and it is easy to dismiss them as such. However, these narratives have been repeated and amplified for two decades. They have become self-sustaining and rebounded back into the national security debate. Even if Putin's inner convictions differed from his rhetoric, he has imbued an entire generation—indeed, an entire national psyche—with a sense of grievance against the West. These narratives will thus inform the overall arc of the Kremlin's foreign policy for years to come.

*Putin's Russia—unlike its predecessors—has no state machine or elite capable of balancing out his instincts and narratives.*

The following sections trace the articulation and evolution of this worldview since the fall of the Soviet Union. Americans tend to group the major events and thoughts of the past two

decades into a series of historical periods such as the Cold War, the 1990s (prior to 9/11), and the administrations of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Russians hold a different view of recent events. These divergent interpretations of history—often reflected in rhetoric—are crucial to understanding the antagonistic worldview of Putin vis-à-vis the U.S. and NATO.

## THE KREMLIN'S *Narrative About the U.S.*

*"We have left behind the period when America and Russia looked at each other through gun sights."*

**1991-1999:**

1992: Russia should cooperate with the U.S.  
1996: Russia must focus on its interests  
1999: The U.S. acts as a global hegemon

**2000:** Russia must fight to exist

**2003:** The U.S. overthrows legitimate governments

**2004:** The U.S. fuels "color revolutions"

**2005:** The U.S. interferes in Russia's internal affairs

**2007:** Russia is simply defending itself

**2008:** The U.S. encroaches on Russia's borders

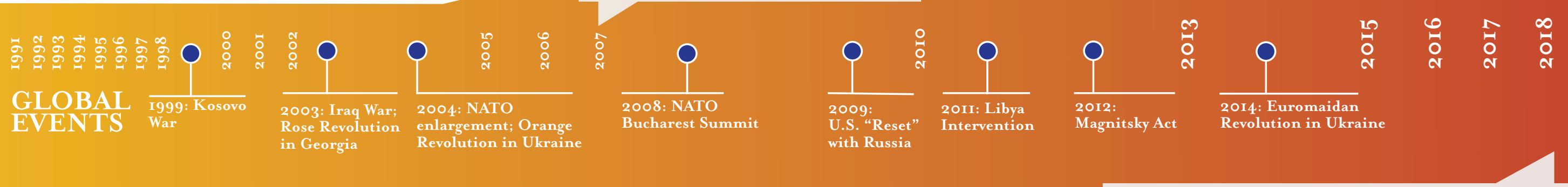
*"The United States has overstepped its national borders in every way."*

**2012:** The West punishes Russia through sanctions

**2014:** The West uses Russia as a scapegoat to justify its failures

**2016:** The West is in decline

**2018:** The world is becoming multipolar



**2000-2003:** Crackdown on oligarchs  
Control over Chechnya regained  
Former Soviet states start being pressured

**2006:** Most of Russia's Western debt paid off

**2007:** Cyber attacks on Estonia

**2008:** Invasion of Georgia

**2010:** Creation of Eurasian Customs Union

**2012:** Foreign Agent Law signed and NDI expelled from Russia

**2014:** Crimea illegally occupied; military campaign begins in Ukraine

**2015:** Military operations start in Syria

**2016:** Interference in U.S. Presidential Elections; attempted coup in Montenegro

**2018:** Sergei Skripal poisoned with a nerve agent in the U.K.; attack on Ukrainian sailors in Sea of Azov

*"Everything is being restored, the world is becoming, if it has not already become, multipolar."*

## THE KREMLIN'S *Foreign Policy Actions*

## 1991–1999: THE YELTSIN PERIOD

*Russian President Boris Yeltsin's tenure focused on establishing post-Soviet Russia and putting it on a democratic trajectory amidst enormous internal challenges. Yeltsin became the first president of the newly-created Russian Federation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. Russia's economy soon collapsed from the shock of a rapid attempted transition from centralized control to the free market. Millions fell into poverty. State structures, including law enforcement and the military, were greatly weakened. Criminality spread across the former Soviet Union. An economic oligarchy emerged as a small number of individuals rapidly accumulated vast wealth, often taking advantage of the privatization of undervalued state assets. Russia suffered several terrorist attacks originating from groups in the North Caucasus, particularly the Chechen Republic. Yeltsin launched a largely failed military campaign to regain control over these territories in 1994. Communist hardliners meanwhile continued their efforts to regain control of Russia. They attempted to seize power violently in 1993 and then peacefully in the 1996 Russian Presidential Election. They failed both times—but both failures came too close for comfort.*

Russian President Boris Yeltsin worked to improve the relationship between Russia and the U.S. during his two terms in the Kremlin. However, assertive foreign policy narratives had already begun to reemerge in Russia by the mid-1990s.

**Yeltsin initially prioritized strategic partnership with the U.S. and broader integration with the West.** “We have left behind the period when America and Russia looked at each other through gun sights,” Yeltsin said in his historic 1992 Address to the U.S. Congress.<sup>4</sup> Yeltsin's Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev advocated for Russia to join the club of developed civilized democracies and practice equal cooperation with the former Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Russia and the U.S. signed numerous bilateral cooperation agreements.<sup>6</sup> Russia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace, which aimed to build trust between NATO and the former Soviet Union. Russia withdrew all of its troops from Germany by 1994.<sup>7</sup> Russia also engaged the West for help with its economic reforms.

**Assertive foreign policy rhetoric began to reemerge in the context of the 1996 Russian Presidential Election.** Economic turmoil continued to grip Russia and Yeltsin's political opponents blamed the West for the failure of liberal economic reforms. These voices argued that **Russia had disregarded its national interests in its attempts to cooperate with the U.S.** and

that Yeltsin's administration had made too many concessions—such as agreeing to curb its arms sales to Iran or failing to oppose the initial expansion of NATO—with little to show in return.<sup>8</sup> Yeltsin, likely influenced by electoral pressures, appointed Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Yevgeny Primakov as Russian Foreign Minister in 1996. Primakov criticized his predecessor for pursuing a “toothless” foreign policy that subordinated national interests to a desire to join the so-called “civilized world.”<sup>9</sup> He claimed that Russia had become the “led” rather than the leader in foreign affairs.<sup>10</sup> The Kremlin repeats these accusations to this day.<sup>11</sup> Yeltsin also oversaw the passage of eased citizenship requirements for Russians outside of the Russian Federation that set the stage for later confrontations with neighbors in the former Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

**Primakov refocused the conversation on national interests and introduced one of Russia's first narratives regarding a multipolar world order.** He advocated for a multipolar international system that would not be dominated by the U.S.—a concept later embraced by Putin. He promoted a diversified foreign policy that called for expanded ties with India and China. Russia joined the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1998. Primakov also stressed the need for Russia to abandon the role of a “junior” partner to the U.S. Current Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov

*Even if Putin's inner convictions differed from his rhetoric, he has imbued an entire generation—indeed, an entire national psyche—with a sense of grievance against the West.*

credited the establishment of Russia's independent foreign policy to Primakov in 2014, asserting that historians would ultimately term it the Primakov Doctrine.<sup>13</sup>

**The Kremlin adopted a new and more assertive National Security Concept in 1997.** The document identified “NATO expansion as a national security threat” and warned that “other states are activating their efforts to weaken” Russia.<sup>14</sup> The document also outlined more paternalistic policies towards the former Soviet Union. It included a passage prioritizing the “proclamation of the Russian language as the state language and the language of international communication of the people of Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States as a critical factor towards unifying the people of multinational Russia.” The document nonetheless concluded that the main threats to Russia's national security were predominantly domestic and non-military challenges.

**Yeltsin and the U.S. suffered their biggest diplomatic divide over the intervention of NATO in Yugoslavia in 1999.** Yeltsin opposed airstrikes by NATO against Serbia during the Kosovo War and called on the U.S. President Bill Clinton not to “take this tragic step” in the Balkans.<sup>15</sup> NATO nonetheless launched the operation in order to end human rights abuses by Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic—an ally of Russia—against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. It occurred without authorization from the UN and over the protests of Russia. Yeltsin nonetheless responded within the framework of NATO by insisting upon the inclusion of the Russian Armed Forces in the subsequent international NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR).

*“We have left behind the period when America and Russia looked at each other through gun sights.”*

*— Russian President Boris Yeltsin, 1992*

**Yeltsin and Primakov nevertheless recognized the continued importance of dialog with the U.S. and NATO.** Yeltsin's disagreement with the U.S. on Yugoslavia did not fundamentally affect other areas of relations between the U.S. and Russia. He signed several additional agreements with NATO including the 1997 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security.<sup>16</sup> He continued to stress the importance of cooperation with the U.S. and Russia's aspiration to join the Group of Seven (or G7) in his national security address to the Russian Federal Assembly in 1996.<sup>17</sup> Russia joined the G7 in 1997. Yeltsin maintained a warm personal relationship throughout his two terms in office with U.S. President Bill Clinton.<sup>18</sup> Primakov also advocated throughout his life for international integration and cooperation with the West and NATO.<sup>19</sup>

**Yeltsin and his foreign policy team did not yet operate within the framework of a grudge against the West.** They were largely pragmatic, sometimes confrontational, and increasingly assertive—but rarely bitter.<sup>20</sup> Primakov laid out some of the most important theoretical bases of the policy later pursued by Putin but neither he nor Yeltsin acted on them seriously while in office. Russia remained too weak to pursue any of its emerging ambitions, especially after it suffered a major financial crisis in 1998.<sup>21</sup> Yeltsin regardless was unlikely have turned hard against the U.S. His tenure was marked by a determination to build democratic institutions, integrate with the West, and prevent the return of the Communists.

## 1999–2002: THE EARLY PUTIN YEARS

*Yeltsin resigned and appointed Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as Acting President on December 31, 1999. Russia was still recovering from its financial collapse in 1998. Economic oligarchs were actively influencing the political processes of the Kremlin. Putin was leading a second campaign in Chechnya which started in 1999. Russia continued to suffer from deadly terrorist attacks, including a major hostage crisis in Moscow in 2002 that killed 130 individuals.*

Russian President Vladimir Putin had already formed one of his key foreign policy narratives—the **critique of American global hegemony and its disregard for Russia after the Cold War**—before his rise to power. Referring to the 1999 Kosovo War, then-Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Putin argued that “a group of countries is actively trying to change the world order that was established after World War II ... The U.N. is being removed from the process of solving of one of the most acute conflicts” in Europe.<sup>22</sup> Putin would continue to accuse “the so-called ‘victors’ in the Cold War” of trying to “reshape the world to suit their own needs and interests” throughout his terms in the Kremlin.<sup>23</sup>

**Putin nevertheless focused on domestic affairs during his first years in office and revealed little animus against the West.** Putin viewed the weakness of the state and its internal economic turmoil as existential threats to Russia. “For the first time in the past two hundred to three hundred years, [Russia] is facing a real danger of sliding into the second and possibly third echelon of world states,” Putin wrote the day before his appointment as Acting President.<sup>24</sup> He focused on rebuilding the economy and the strength of the government as well as consolidating his own grip on power. He prioritized strengthening law enforcement and security services, taming the oligarchs, eliminating political opponents, and regaining federal control over the Chechen Republic.

*Putin would continue to accuse “the so-called ‘victors’ in the Cold War” of trying to “reshape the world to suit their own needs and interests” throughout his terms in the Kremlin.*

**Putin’s initial advisory team would ascend to key roles in Russia’s national security and foreign policy debate.** Putin’s close circle of trusted military and intelligence officials brought with them a specific set of grievances and goals—first and foremost the restoration of domestic control and internal influence lost during the 1990s. Some of these early political officials would later play a key role in the development of foreign policy in the Kremlin:

- **Nikolai Patrushev** replaced Putin as FSB Director in 1999. Patrushev currently heads Russia’s Security Council—the equivalent of the U.S. National Security Council (NSC).
- **Sergey Chemezov** worked for Putin in Yeltsin’s Kremlin. Chemezov is currently the CEO of Rostec, a major state-owned defense-industrial conglomerate.
- **Igor Sechin** served as Putin’s Chief of Staff when Putin was First Deputy Mayor of St. Petersburg. Sechin is currently the Executive Chairman of Rosneft, the state oil company.<sup>25</sup>
- **Sergey Naryshkin** worked with Putin in the KGB and St. Petersburg. Naryshkin has held various roles in Putin’s Kremlin since 2004 and currently serves as SVR Director.<sup>26</sup>
- **Sergey Ivanov** served as the head of Russia’s Security Council in 1999. Ivanov held various prominent roles in Putin’s Kremlin including Minister of Defense, First Deputy Prime Minister, and Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration.

**Putin viewed the Kosovo War as a precedent that threatened the sovereignty of Russia.** He feared that the West could support a similar unilateral declaration of independence by breakaway regions such as Chechnya and force a halt to military operation against extremists launching attacks in the heart of Russia. Putin was convinced that this threat would “not stop with Chechnya’s independence” and that “Chechnya would be used as a platform to attack the rest of Russia.” He warned that the precedent could spread to other territories such as Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Tatarstan, and ultimately threaten the core of the Russian Federation. “If we do not stop the extremists [in Chechnya], we are risking a second Yugoslavia across the entire territory of the Russian Federation—the Yugoslavization of Russia,” Putin asserted in 2000.<sup>27</sup>

The idea that **Russia must “fight to exist”**—one of the key tenets in Putin’s foreign policy—also emerged at this time. Putin believed that the U.S. provided covert support to terrorists in Chechnya in order to destabilize Russia.<sup>28</sup> The West in turn criticized the ongoing military campaign in Chechnya for its brutality and high levels of civilian casualties.<sup>29</sup> Putin believed that if he conceded to calls to decrease the intensity of his military operations, Russia would face disintegration. His broader narrative reflected a core fear of state collapse and loss of territory. This rhetoric also tied back into earlier sentiments within the Kremlin that Russia was weak after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and risked losing sovereignty to external forces—in particular, the U.S.<sup>30</sup> It followed, according to this view, that Russia must assert itself on the global stage to maintain its independence. The Kremlin began to view a less active foreign policy as another sign of lost sovereignty, a view that persists to the present day.

*The idea that Russia must “fight to exist”—one of the key tenets in Putin’s foreign policy—also emerged [between 1999–2002].*

**Putin’s early relationship with the U.S. nevertheless largely followed the path set by Yeltsin and Primakov.** Putin noted the prospect of cooperating on an equal basis with NATO in 2000.<sup>31</sup> He supported the U.S. counter-terrorism mission against al Qaeda after 9/11 and signed an agreement in 2002 establishing the NATO-Russia Council.<sup>32</sup> He emphasized the pursuit of democracy and stressed that “Russia is a part of European culture.” He criticized the unilateral withdrawal of the U.S. from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002 but still signed a bilateral Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty in 2003 (later superseded by the New START Treaty in 2011). He largely readopted Yeltsin’s 1997 National Security Concept in January 2000.<sup>33</sup>

Putin later adopted a new **Foreign Policy Concept** in June 2000. The document continued a trend of assertive rhetoric toward the former Soviet states. It called for creating “a friendly belt on the perimeter of Russian borders.”<sup>34</sup> It also stressed the need to “strengthen Russian sovereignty and achieve firm positions in the world community, consistent with the interests of the Russian Federation as a great power, as one of the most influential centers of the modern world.”

## 2003–2004: ACCELERATION

*Putin's foreign policy experienced an inflection in 2003 and 2004. A series of external and domestic factors accelerated Putin's ambitions and foreign pursuits. He became more assertive on the international stage as he began to solidify his grip on domestic power.*

### **Putin established in this period a firm grip on the internal affairs of Russia.**

Russia quickly repaid its outstanding debts to the West, meeting its obligations to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by 2005 and the Paris Club by 2006.<sup>35</sup> Both of these payments occurred ahead of schedule. The debt repayment was a point of personal pride for Putin that demonstrated the regaining strength and independence of Russia.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, Russia was gradually restoring control over Chechnya after a military campaign that largely destroyed the regional capital of Grozny. Chechnya passed a constitution in 2003 that ostensibly granted broad autonomy to the Chechen Republic but preserved firm control from the Kremlin.

Putin also eliminated or otherwise subordinated rival powerbrokers during this period, mainly oligarchs with influence over the political process.<sup>37</sup> Boris Berezovsky—one of Russia's most powerful tycoons—fled to Britain in 2001. Mikhail Khodorkovsky—another powerful and influential oil baron—was imprisoned in 2003. The remaining oligarchs largely accepted Putin's demand that they should not interfere in politics. Putin expanded the reach of the security services and strengthened the power of state. He further centralized power by eliminating the direct elections of regional governors in favor of presidential appointments in 2004.<sup>38</sup>

**Putin began efforts to reintegrate former Soviet states into some form of political grouping led by Russia.** Putin pressured Ukraine to join the Common Economic Space—an integrated market for the former Soviet states that would later evolve

*Putin held up the 'color revolutions' as an object lesson and a warning, stressing that the Kremlin "should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia."*

into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).<sup>39</sup> Ukraine entered the deal alongside Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2003.<sup>40</sup> Ukraine later distanced itself from this process under pro-Western Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko. The Kremlin also applied similar pressure to Georgia under Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze.<sup>41</sup> Shevardnadze had exercised a more independent foreign policy, including a stated intent to join NATO, which threatened the

continued influence of Putin's Russia.<sup>42</sup>

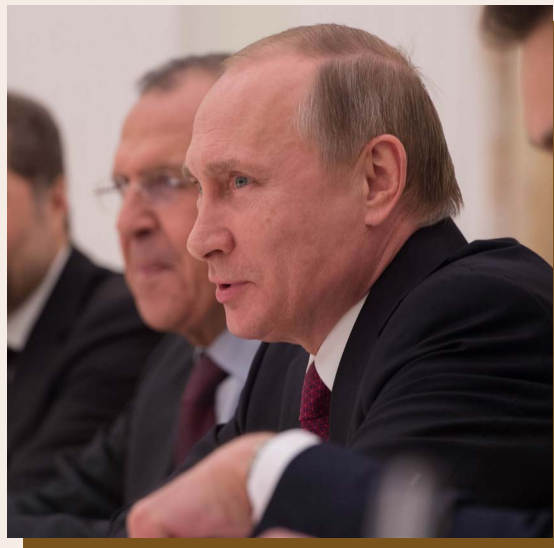
**Putin's ambitions to regain control over his perceived rightful sphere of influence accelerated after a series of global events in 2003 and 2004.**

- The **2003 U.S. Invasion of Iraq** and overthrow of Saddam Hussein struck several nerves with Russia. Putin held a strong aversion to forced regime change given his concerns about preserving his own regime. He was upset about a loss of influence in the Middle East due to the destruction of a former Soviet ally. He also resented the U.S. for acting over his objections and without explicit authorization by the UN (similar to the Kosovo War).
- Putin was even more concerned by the "**color revolutions**" that saw a wave of peaceful protests against corrupt regimes in several former Soviet states, including Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution and Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution. Putin accused the U.S. of instigating the revolutions and imposing "external governance" over these states.<sup>43</sup> This perceived threat was deeply concerning to the Kremlin. It undermined the stated national security goal of creating a "friendly belt of neighbors" and presented a potential

challenge to the regime itself. Putin held up the ‘color revolutions’ as an object lesson and a warning, stressing that the Kremlin “should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia.”<sup>44</sup> Putin internalized the notion of the “color revolution” as a method of covert destabilization by the West.

- The Kremlin also criticized the expansion of NATO in 2004, when the alliance accepted seven new states in Eastern and Southern Europe. Russia remained more concerned, however, about its loss of control over the states of the former Soviet Union than the potential military threat from NATO. Putin stated at the time that the enlargement was “not a threat” to Russia but called it a “counterproductive” step that could not “effectively counter the main threats that we are facing today.”<sup>45</sup> The Kremlin ultimately feared the emergence of widespread “anti-Russian rhetoric” as former Soviet states and clients moved towards NATO.<sup>46</sup>

**The Kremlin nonetheless remained relatively moderate in its rhetoric against the West.** “It was difficult for us when the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty. It was difficult for us when, bypassing the UN Security Council, they started the war in Iraq. Nonetheless, our countries have managed ... to prevent a return to confrontation ... [through] common sense and the understanding that common strategic interests ... outweigh any tactical differences,” stated Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov in 2004.<sup>47</sup> Putin also stated at the time that the U.S. remained a priority partner of Russia on some of the most pressing global problems, such as the War on Terror.<sup>48</sup> The relative calmness of this rhetoric belied the fact that Putin was preparing to start speaking and acting openly to counteract what he perceived as a growing disregard for his interests.



## VLADIMIR PUTIN IN HIS OWN WORDS

*“Sometimes I think, maybe it would be better for our bear to sit quiet, rather than to chase piglets in the forest, and to eat berries and honey instead. Maybe they will leave [our bear] in peace. They will not. Because they will always try to put him on a chain ... They will rip out its fangs and its claws. Once they’ve ripped out its claws and fangs, the bear is no longer needed. They will make a stuffed animal out of it ... It is not about Crimea. We are protecting our sovereignty and our right to exist.”*

*– Putin, December 2014*



## 2004–2012: OPEN CONFRONTATION

*Putin easily won reelection in the 2004 Russian Presidential Elections. Russia benefitted from high oil prices. Putin later (due to term limits) accepted the post of Russian Prime Minister in 2008. He nonetheless continued to largely dictate the policies of the Kremlin and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. The Russian Constitution was modified to change the length of presidential terms from four to six years, effective after the departure of Medvedev.*

*“The United States has overstepped its national borders in every way”*

*— Russian President Vladimir Putin, 2007*

Putin increasingly pushed his foreign policy campaigns towards open confrontation in this period. He escalated his rhetoric against the U.S. and NATO. He simultaneously limited the civil liberties of Russians, presenting the measures as necessary to defeat subversion by the West.

The Kremlin launched **a set of campaigns to regain control over former Soviet states.**

- Russia launched a major information campaign to restore its diminished political influence in Ukraine after the 2004 Orange Revolution. This campaign evolved into a decade-long effort to inflame domestic grievances and fuel popular sentiments against the West and the central government in Kyiv. The Kremlin would tap into this groundwork to launch its subversion campaign in Eastern Ukraine in 2014.
- Russia also started a subversion campaign against the Baltic States following their accession to NATO. Russia launched a wave of cyberattacks on banks, media outlets, and government organizations in Estonia in 2007 shortly after the Government of Estonia decided to relocate a memorial to the Soviets from World War II. The Kremlin argued that the move dishonored the memory of Russia’s victory over Nazi Germany. Russia also applied other diplomatic pressures on the Baltic States, including a ban on certain imports from Latvia in 2006.<sup>49</sup>
- The Kremlin framed the continued engagement of the U.S. and NATO with Ukraine and Georgia as national security threats to Russia.<sup>50</sup> Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008—four months after the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit in which NATO signaled its ultimate intent to incorporate Georgia into NATO. Putin carved off the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and subsequently recognized their unilateral declarations of independence from Georgia (made possible by the continued presence of the Russian Armed Forces).
- Russia continued to expand the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which now includes Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan as well as a free trade agreement with Vietnam. Putin also attempted to coopt Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia into the EEU, although all three countries ultimately chose instead to sign association agreements with the European Union. Russia is still attempting to use the EEU as a tool to build regional influence and global credibility through agreements with states outside of the former Soviet Union such as Egypt.

Putin expanded on his **narrative criticizing American hegemony and advocating for the return of a multipolar world.** Putin stated that “attempts to rebuild modern multifaceted civilization, created by God, according to the barracks-room principles of a unipolar world are extremely dangerous” during a visit to India in 2004.<sup>51</sup> Putin later elaborated

on this narrative at the 2007 Munich Security Conference. “We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law ... The United States has overstepped its national borders in every way.”<sup>52</sup> He accused the West of using international organizations as “vulgar instrument[s] designed to promote the foreign policy interests of one or a group of countries.” This rhetoric would become a central line of argument for the Kremlin. “The ambitions of one group have grown so much that they are presented as the opinions of the entire world community, which they are not,” Putin stated in 2014.

**Putin also started to introduce aggressive rhetoric against NATO.** Putin stressed at the 2007 Munich Security Conference that NATO’s expansion was intended to encircle Russia.<sup>53</sup> This statement was a departure from his initial reaction three years prior, in which he claimed that the enlargement of the alliance did not pose a national security threat to Russia. The context of this statement highlighted the increasingly combative tone adopted by Putin.

**The intervention of NATO in Libya in 2011 further fueled Putin’s resentment of the West.**

Putin condemned international support for the intervention as a “medieval call for crusades.”<sup>54</sup> He nonetheless ran into disagreement with then-Russian President Medvedev, who asserted that “all that is going on in Libya is connected with the outrageous behavior of Libya’s authorities and crimes that were completely against their own people.”<sup>55</sup> Russia, possibly as a result of this internal debate, did not veto a resolution by the UN Security Council to impose a “no-fly zone” over Libya in 2011. The intervention eventually escalated into a full-blown military campaign that resulted in the overthrow and death of Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi.

Putin interpreted this incident as a betrayal at the hands of the West. Putin accused the U.S. and NATO of cynically manipulating the international system to impose regime change in Libya. “[The West] was [initially] saying ‘we do not want to kill Gaddafi’ and now even some officials are saying ‘yes, we are aiming to destroy Gaddafi.’ Who allowed [them] to do this? Was there a trial? Why have they decided to take up this right to execute a person?” Putin asked shortly before the death of Gaddafi in October 2011.<sup>56</sup> The Kremlin also regretted its loss of political influence and multi-billion dollar industrial contracts in Libya.<sup>57</sup> Medvedev later articulated the resulting

grudge, stating that the shift from a limited intervention to protect civilians to the destruction of a sovereign government was “a cynical deception on the part of those who claim to be the world’s moral and political leaders ... The cynical deception occurred at the [UN] Security Council’s roundtable. Its decisions were distorted and violated, while the so-called temporary military coalition usurped the powers of the United Nations.”<sup>58</sup> Putin determined not to repeat this mistake and Russia began to consistently vote against UN Security Council resolutions

aimed at addressing similar conflicts in Syria and the Middle East.<sup>59</sup>

**The Kremlin also intensified its narrative about U.S. inference in the affairs of Russia.** Russia accused the West of using non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as covert means to orchestrate ‘color revolutions’ in the former Soviet Union.<sup>60</sup> Putin claimed that external actors were financing political activities in Russia in 2005.<sup>61</sup> He signed a new law on NGOs in 2006 that aimed to “deny registration to any organization whose goals and objectives...create a threat to the sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity, national unity, unique character, cultural heritage, and national interests of the Russian Federation.”<sup>62</sup>

*The 2014 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine... represented Putin’s fundamental fear of a loss of control over his neighbors – but also presented an opportunity for him to realize his long-standing foreign policy goals...*

The Kremlin criticized democratization aid to the former Soviet Union—ironically at a time when the U.S. was considering cuts to such aid.<sup>63</sup>

Putin may have held genuine fears of a ‘color revolution’ in Russia but his public accusations also aimed to justify domestic oppression in the face of an external threat from the West. The Kremlin accused the U.S. State Department of interfering with its judicial system after the U.S. voiced concerns about the arrest of Khodorkovsky in 2003.<sup>64</sup> This idea of malign foreign interference itself was not new. The 1997 Russian National Security Concept mentions the threat of “purposeful interference by foreign states and international organizations in the internal life of Russia’s peoples.” Russia’s assertion that foreign press statements constituted itself an interference in sovereign affairs, however, aligned

with Putin’s larger effort to redefine state sovereignty as forbidding even international commentary on the internal affairs of Russia.

**Putin was thus unimpressed by the announced “reset” of relations with Russia by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009.** U.S. President Barack Obama stated that the U.S. would abandon plans to build a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe in September 2009.<sup>65</sup> Putin praised the decision but rejected the idea of any reset in relations. “We are not talking about ‘reset’ ... The U.S. Administration offered us this term,” Putin stated in 2009 and 2012.<sup>66</sup> The divergence in worldviews between the U.S. and Russia remained stark despite outreach from the West.

## 2012–2018: PUTIN’S COUNTEROFFENSIVE

*Putin was reelected as Russian President in 2012. He continued to crack down on civil liberties and protests against his reelection. Russia’s economy was stabilizing. Russia was accepted to the World Trade Organization in 2011. The World Bank labeled Russia a high-income country in 2013.<sup>67</sup> In 2014, Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich suspended the signing of an association agreement with the European Union—sparking the Euromaidan Revolution. A series of protests forced Yanukovich to flee Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Syrian Revolution—part of the wider Arab Spring—descended into the Syrian Civil War. Russia interfered in both countries. The West began to impose sanctions on Russia for its violations of international norms. The Russian ruble collapsed due to the sanctions as well as a drop in global oil prices.*

Putin won a third term as Russian President 2012. He moved quickly to regain and expand his domestic control and global influence.

Putin soon faced one of the most serious anti-regime protests during his time in office as mass demonstrations rallied against perceived electoral manipulation in the 2011 Russian Legislative Elections and 2012 Russian Presidential Elections. Thousands protested against Putin’s inauguration to a third presidential term in Bolotnaya Square in Moscow in May 2012. The Kremlin in turn detained hundreds of protesters and

prosecuted dozens of them in what became known as the ‘Bolotnaya Square’ Case. Street protests continued but largely died out by July 2013.

*Putin’s core objectives remain constant—the preservation of his regime, the end of American global hegemony, and the restoration of Russia as a mighty and feared force...on the international stage.*

**Putin continued to pressure civil society in the name of defending Russia against the West with the 2012 Foreign Agent Law.** The law, which granted him the authority to expel a number of American NGOs from Russia, was one of the first acts of his third term. The law was partly a response to the passage of the Magnitsky Act by the U.S. in 2012. The Magnitsky Act aimed to punish officials responsible for the death of Sergey Magnitsky, who died in

*“No one listened to us then. So listen now” – Russian President Vladimir Putin, 2018*

prison in Moscow after investigating fraud involving Russian officials in 2009.

**The 2014 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine was a major accelerant of Putin’s aggressive international agenda.** Euromaidan represented Putin’s fundamental fear of a loss of control over his neighbors—but also presented an opportunity for him to realize his long-standing foreign policy goals in the former Soviet Union. In February 2014, Putin deployed Russian Armed Forces to occupy the Crimean Peninsula of Ukraine. Russia subsequently organized an illegal referendum to annex Crimea. Putin sought in part to protect strategic naval basing for the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea, which had nowhere to go if Kyiv cancelled its deal with Russia. Putin also feared that the new Government of Ukraine would push to join NATO. He therefore engineered a separatist insurgency and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine aimed at asserting control over the politics of Kyiv. Putin framed external support to the protests as “crossing the line” by the West. **“They have lied to us many times,”** Putin said in his address on Crimea joining Russia to the Russian Federal Assembly in 2014. “[They have] made decisions behind our backs, informed us after the fact. This happened with NATO’s expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders. They kept telling us the same thing: ‘This does not concern you.’”<sup>68</sup>

**Putin also launched a military intervention in Syria in September 2015.** He aimed to prevent a repeat of Iraq and Libya, where Russia inaction resulted in a loss of valuable clients in the Middle East. Putin did not intend to lose yet another one of Russia’s remaining allies whose ties dated back to the Soviet Union. He also sought the practical benefits of strategic air and naval basing on the Eastern Mediterranean Sea as well as expanded diplomatic leverage in the Middle East. The U.S. was not coherently pursuing a regime change

against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, focusing instead on the narrow fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Yet Putin rejected the nuances of this policy. He deployed combat aircraft and special forces to sustain an air campaign and ground assistance mission in support of Assad and his allies in Iran (including combat forces from the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Lebanese Hezbollah). He framed his campaign as a fight against terrorism, posturing as an effective regional partner and peace-broker.<sup>69</sup> The Kremlin nonetheless emphasized that Assad was the “only legitimate power” in Syria and legitimized its own military intervention as a formal request from the sovereign Government of Syria.<sup>70</sup>

**Putin continued to frame his actions as a requirement for Russia’s sovereignty: “Sometimes I think, maybe it would be better for our bear to sit quiet, rather than to chase piglets in the forest and to eat berries and honey instead.** Maybe they will leave [our bear] in peace. They will not. Because they will always try to put him on a chain ... They will rip out its fangs and its claws [i.e. nuclear weapons]. Once they’ve ripped out its claws and fangs, the bear is no longer needed. They will make a stuffed animal out of it... It is not about Crimea. We are protecting our sovereignty and our right to exist.”<sup>71</sup> This sentiment reflects one of Putin’s earliest and core narratives—Russia must assert itself to maintain its sovereignty. Putin has similarly framed sanctions as an **effort by the West to punish the growing “might and competitiveness” of Russia.** The Kremlin often asserts that Russia has historically been punished when it “rose from its knees.”<sup>72</sup> It argues that Putin is the subject of international scorn not because of his foreign interference but because of his resistance to the West. Putin also continued to accuse the U.S. of **systematic interference** in the domestic affairs of Russia. The latest Russian National Security Strategy identified “intelligence activity by special services

and organizations of foreign states” as one of the top national security threats facing Russia.<sup>73</sup> The U.S. is “all over our domestic policy, they’re sitting on our head, dangling their feet and chewing bubble gum,” Putin told Megan Kelly on NBC in 2017.<sup>74</sup>

**Putin has argued that his regime is being scapegoated for domestic failings in the U.S. and Europe.**

The Kremlin accuses the West of using Russia to justify additional defense spending or their domestic and foreign policy failures.<sup>75</sup> Putin condemned NATO for inventing “imaginary and mythical threats such as the Russian military threat ... It’s pleasant and often profitable to portray yourself to be defenders of civilization from some new barbarians, but Russia doesn’t plan to attack anyone.”<sup>76</sup> Putin has framed the passage of the Magnitsky Act as driven by a constant domestic pressure in the U.S. to adopt laws targeting Russia.<sup>77</sup> He more recently has claimed that the U.S. used Russia as an excuse to justify its own unilateral and long-planned decision to suspend its participation in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019.<sup>78</sup>

**Putin has pushed a narrative of the accelerating decline of the West.** Putin attributes global trends, such as the rise of populism, to the failure of the current governance models in which citizens lose trust in their leaders and the value

of democracy.<sup>79</sup> “Even in the so-called developed democracies, the majority of citizens have no real influence on the political process and no direct and real influence on power,” Putin stated in 2016.<sup>80</sup> He added that “it is not about populists ... ordinary people, ordinary citizens are losing trust in the ruling class.” The Kremlin reinforces these attacks on democratic processes as part of its effort to protect its regime against an internal revolution as well as its global campaign to undermine rival democratic institutions in the West.

*“Everything is being restored, the world is becoming, if it has not already become, multipolar.”*

*– Russian President Vladimir Putin, 2018*

**The Kremlin frames all of its campaigns as defensive measures that are part of an attempt to restore balance to international relations.** The Kremlin justifies its actions as a response to any number of provocations, escalations, and parallel actions by the U.S. and NATO.<sup>81</sup> “Of course we should react to [NATO’s military buildup].

How? Either the same as you and therefore by building a multi-billion-dollar anti-missile system or, in view of our present economic and financial possibilities, by developing an asymmetrical answer ... I completely agree if you say that the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) is not directed against us, just as our new weapons are not directed against you,” Putin stated in 2007.<sup>82</sup> Putin often stresses that Russia is open to partnerships and never seeks confrontation with its “partners in the East or West.”<sup>83</sup>

## 2019 AND BEYOND

*Vladimir Putin won his fourth term as Russian President in March 2018.*

“No one listened to us then. So listen now,” he stated in his address to the Russian Federal Assembly in 2018 while showing a video of the new nuclear capabilities developed by Russia.<sup>84</sup>

Putin’s core objectives remain constant—the preservation of his regime, the end of American global hegemony, and the restoration of Russia as a mighty and feared force to be reckoned with on the international stage. Some of his foreign policy pursuits are purely pragmatic and aimed at gaining resources. Others are intended for domestic purposes and have nothing to do with the West.

***The West’s behavior has not altered the fundamental principles guiding Putin’s foreign policy thought, which has remained largely unchanged since 2000.***

Most are justified, however, as responses to alleged threats, aggressions, lies, and interference by the West.

Putin may believe that he is approaching his goal of a multipolar international system. “Everything is being restored, the world is becoming, if it has not already become, multipolar,” he stated in 2018.<sup>85</sup> He has not yet offered the vision for his next goals in this new order, but they will almost certainly involve further reductions in the global operations of the U.S. and its allies.

## CONCLUSION

Putin's assertiveness has been accelerated or dampened by various factors over time, including his confidence in his domestic grip on power, his economic stability, his dependence on the West, and his perception of the available latitude to act freely on the world stage without major pushback.

The West's actions were a factor—but not the core driver—in Putin's foreign policy. The U.S. tried to improve relations with Russia several times after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin nonetheless became arguably most assertive during the Obama Administration even as the U.S. took strong steps to make amends with Russia, including a halt to plans to build a missile defense shield in Poland. The West hesitated for years to impose penalties on Russia for its repeated violations of international laws and norms including its invasion of Georgia and its cyberattacks on Estonia. The West only gradually started to impose sanctions on Russia after persistent human rights violations such as the death of Sergey Magnitsky or undisputable aggression such as the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula. It wasn't until the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election that most Americans finally became cognizant of the full threat posed by Russia.

While the U.S. largely focused elsewhere, Putin escalated his global military posture, scapegoated his internal problems on the West, and used the myth of foreign interference to justify tighter controls over Russians in Russia. Putin notably has almost never used similar rhetoric against China, which arguably presents one of the biggest national security challenges to Russia. China continues to expand its influence in places that Putin claims are beyond his 'red lines'—the former Soviet Union and Russia itself. Yet Putin continues to condition his population to

defend against NATO—an alliance that is currently struggling to persuade its members to devote two percent of their gross domestic products to military spending.

The West's behavior has not altered the fundamental principles guiding Putin's foreign policy thought, which has remained largely unchanged since 2000. Putin believes that Russia is a great power that is entitled to its own spheres of influence and deserves to be reckoned with in all key decisions. He asserts that the true deviation from the norm was Russia's moment of weakness in the 1990s and that Russia is merely reemerging to its rightful place in the international system.

Many of Putin's principles are incompatible with the rules-based order and worldview of the West.

Putin's concept of national sovereignty, for example, is often at odds with the sovereignty of other nations. European states enjoy the sovereign right to join NATO. Many of them hold legitimate security concerns about a resurgent Russia. Putin, however, does not view many of these states as truly sovereign. The Kremlin often describes smaller states as externally governed or too weak to hold foreign policy agency. For this reason, it often perceives revolutions or significant internal inflections in the former Soviet Union and beyond as subversive actions by the West rather than popular movements fueled by legitimate grievances. The Kremlin believes that it must maintain

control over its neighbors and preserve or expand its historic spheres of influence. Its rhetoric against NATO is less about its fear of a direct military threat and more about its fear of a loss of its power and influence. Putin often frames violations of others' sovereignty as a defense of his own.

*Putin is no mere opportunistic predator. He may not always have a clear plan and acts expediently at times, but he knows what kind of world he wants and ... what kind he does not.*

Putin also aims to delegitimize the concept of humanitarian intervention as articulated by the West. He places his principles of state sovereignty above humanitarian concerns and asserts that legitimate governments have the right to resolve their internal affairs independent of external pressure. The Kremlin often frames any Western attempts to criticize Russia's human rights record or those of its allies and clients as interference in sovereign internal affairs.

Putin sometimes reverses this rule and justifies his external interference on general human rights grounds. Russia often reserves the right to act against foreign governments in order to protect ethnic Russians. A key example is the Crimean Peninsula. Russia intervened militarily and organized an illegal referendum to annex Crimea to Russia under the boot of the Russian Armed Forces. The referendum and subsequent occupation did not change Crimea's status under international law—to this day, Crimea remains a legal part of Ukraine. Putin nonetheless defends his intervention as a necessary action to “defend” an “oppressed” population of Russians.

Putin's seemingly facile and convenient rhetoric can be easy to dismiss as cynical. His rhetoric is not empty, however. It is a declaration of his key foreign principle, one that is at odds with the fundamental basis of the rules-based international order — namely, that **only the mighty are truly sovereign**.

It is also easy to imagine that miscommunication is the source of conflict between Putin's Russia and the West. This idea is false. Bush, Obama, and Trump have all reached out to Putin, sought to accommodate his interests as they understood them, and tried to soften policies and language that might offend him. Yet the Kremlin has responded with increasingly resentful language and actions.

Putin does not trust statements from the White House. He views the U.S. as dismissive of Russia's vital interests regardless of any changes in administrations or rhetoric. Putin fundamentally views the shape of the current international order as the primary challenge to his interests. He believes, as he has said over and over, that a global hegemony, by which he means a world order led by America, is unacceptable to Russia.

Putin is no mere opportunistic predator. He may not always have a clear plan and acts expediently at times, but he knows what kind of world he wants and, even more so, what kind he does not. He seeks a world without NATO, with the U.S. confined to the Western Hemisphere, with Russia dominant over the former Soviet Union and able to do what it likes to its own people without condemnation or oversight, and with the Kremlin enjoying a literal veto at the UN Security Council over actions that any other state wishes to take beyond its borders. He has been working towards such a world since the moment he took office. His most recent statements suggest that he thinks he is getting closer. If the West aims to avoid further strategic surprise and preserve the rule-based international order, it must understand this divergent worldview and accept that Putin, when it comes to his stated foreign policy goals and priorities, is often a man of his word.



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