

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 53
Number 3 *Volume 53, Number 3 (2023) Autumn
Issue*

Article 13

8-25-2023

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Recommended Citation

Caitlin P. Irby, "US-Russia Foreign Policy: Confronting Russia's Geographic Anxieties," *Parameters* 53, no. 3 (2023), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3243.

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US-Russia Foreign Policy: Confronting Russia's Geographic Anxieties

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ABSTRACT: The United States must place Russia's focus on geographic concerns at the center of future strategy development to build a constructive relationship with Russia and achieve US regional goals. This article analyzes Russia's geography and historical impact on Russian foreign policy, outlines Moscow's current foreign policy goals, and highlights underlying concerns for US policymakers and military practitioners. By pursuing policies that support Russian goals of economic integration, mitigation of demographic concerns, and security of national borders, the United States can set the foundation for productive engagement on critical issues.

Keywords: US-Russian relations, geopolitics, military strategy, demographics, diplomacy, geography, economic investment

Russia has an old proverb: “The past is a lighthouse, not a port.”¹ American foreign policy on Russia has steered toward a metaphoric lighthouse for decades and failed to prevent the invasions of Ukraine and Georgia three times in the past 15 years.² Prudence requires an analysis of the causes of these failures to avoid repeating them in the future. While significant academic research has considered the relevance of geography in Russian defense thinking, US policy does not engage with the Russian preoccupation with geographic circumstances. Where Russia derives significant anxiety from the geographic insecurity of its borders, its unpredictable access to global trade routes via waterways and ports, and its demographic fragility, the United States primarily focuses on engaging Russia on topics of interest to the United States, such as democracy, human rights, and cybersecurity.³

To shape a Europe and Eurasia conducive to US policy goals, the United States must place Russia's geographic position at the center of its Russia strategy.

1. “Russian Proverb,” Goodreads (website), accessed June 3, 2023, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/8252550.Russian_proverb.

2. Natia Seskuria, “Argument: Russia Is Reenacting Its Georgia Playbook in Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy* (website), February 22, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/22/russia-ukraine-invasion-georgia-2008-south-ossetia-tskhinvali/>.

3. Tim Marshall, “Russia and the Curse of Geography,” *Atlantic* (website), October 31, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/russia-geography-ukraine-syria/413248/>; and “Briefing Room: U.S.-Russia Relations: ‘Reset’ Fact Sheet,” White House (website), June 24, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet>.

This article first analyzes the key role of geography in Russia's military strategy and approach to foreign policy. The second half of the article draws on this analysis to advance three avenues that the United States and its partners and allies should consider in shaping future interactions with Russia. These policies address Russia's underlying concerns and establish a foundation for future engagement in accordance with US interests in the region.

Geography and Strategy

Richard M. Medina and George F. Hepner of the Geospatial Intelligence Research Lab argue that “the need for geographical knowledge and understanding is greater than ever and ignoring that need will eventually lead to extreme failures in policy.”⁴ Geography as a discipline has two major categories: physical geography and human geography. Physical geography consists of the spatial distribution of physical phenomena, such as biology (flora and fauna), hydrology, climatology, geology, and terrain. Human geography consists of the spatial distribution of human characteristics, such as industry, demographics, political features (borders or alliances), and military forces.⁵

Within physical geography, certain subdisciplines influence Russia and its foreign policy. Regarding hydrology, navigable waterways allow for the safe, cheap, and abundant transportation of materials and people. Good ports allow for the same across larger bodies of water. Access to water and the ability to transport goods across water serve as the basis for today's globalized economy.⁶ As such, Russia routinely applies political pressure to gain access to hydrographic features, especially warm-water ports. Geology also heavily influences Russia's actions. A phenomenon known as “the resource curse” frequently occurs when countries that rely on exporting raw materials (including geologic resources) suffer from economic and political instability due to fluctuations in the market.⁷ This instability creates unrest that manifests in coups, civil wars, or other forms of violence, which have historically afflicted Russia.⁸ In terms of terrain, the relatively flat, indefensible North European plain has seen frequent military campaigns due to the ease

4. Richard M. Medina and George F. Hepner, “A Note on the State of Geography and Geospatial Intelligence,” National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (website), March 11, 2015, https://www.nga.mil/news/A_Note_on_the_State_of_Geography_and_Geospatial_In.html.

5. Caitlyn Finlayson, *World Regional Geography* (self-pub., 2016), LibreTexts (website), 1.7.1–1.7.2.

6. Peter Zeihan, *The Accidental Superpower: The Next Generation of American Preeminence and the Coming Global Disorder* (New York: Twelve, 2014).

7. Natural Resource Governance Institute (NGRI), “The Resource Curse: The Political and Economic Challenges of Natural Resource Wealth,” *NGRI Reader*, March 2015, https://resourcegovernance.org/sites/default/files/nrgi_Resource-Curse.pdf.

8. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

with which armies can move across it, as evidenced by repeated invasions of Russia originating in Western Europe.⁹

Historically, scholars and military strategists focused on Russia's physical geography, but its human geography plays an equally important role. The distribution of economic activity (for example, oil pipelines) to various countries shapes its policy goals and objectives. Demographics, consisting of many characteristics, including ethnicity, age, gender, and more, influence many different types of government policy. The average age of a population determines the number of working- or military-age people.¹⁰ The distribution of military resources can enable or deter conflict. The sales of military equipment can often serve as a proxy for a country's political might, so much so that Russia earned the moniker "arsenal of autocracy."¹¹ Borders, the most obvious expression of political geography, changed frequently throughout Russian history and remain contested in parts of the former Soviet Union.¹² All of these geographic factors influence Russia's foreign policy.

Geography Is Key to Russia's Perspective

Geography looms large in the consciousness of Russia's leaders and their perceptions of Russia's advantages and disadvantages on the global stage. History punished Russian leaders who failed to account for their geography and has rewarded those who attempted to tame the human and physical geography of the region.

The impact of geography on the Russian state dates back to the mid-thirteenth century when the Mongol invasion across the largely unobstructed European plain nearly destroyed the Slavic people. The Slavic peoples spent the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reconsolidating in Moscow and began their expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the Russian Empire expanding across Siberia. During this period, Russia faced few obstacles regarding native populations but recognized the importance of ethnic distribution and pushed Slavic migrants to populate the desolate regions of northern Siberia.¹³ This strategy of changing the human geography to suit Russian

9. Marshall, "Curse of Geography."

10. Bradley A. Thayer, "Considering Population and War: A Critical and Neglected Aspect of Conflict Studies," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 364, no. 1532 (October 2009): 3081–92, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2009.0151>.

11. Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Why America Should Really Fear Russia's Armata T-14 Tank," *National Interest* (website), May 8, 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-america-should-really-fear-russias-armata-t-14-tank-12836>.

12. David Lewis, "Strategic Culture and Geography: Russia's Southern Seas after Crimea," George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (website), July 2019, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/de/node/1177>.

13. Joel Quam and Scott Campbell, "Russian Domain," in *The Western World: Daily Readings on Geography* (College of DuPage Digital Press, 2020).

political objectives continued in the form of the Russification policies practiced by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.¹⁴ After conquering Siberia, Russia finally consolidated enough strength to challenge the Ottoman Empire to the south in the eighteenth century, and Catherine the Great secured Sevastopol on the Black Sea in 1783.¹⁵ Sevastopol provided Russia its first true warm-water port and cemented Catherine among the pantheon of great Russian leaders.¹⁶ Following Catherine, Russia struggled to defend itself during the nineteenth century. Napoleon threatened Russian security with the 1812 invasion, as did multiple European powers in the Crimean War of the 1850s.¹⁷ Threats, which continued into the twentieth-century wars with Germany in World War I and World War II, reemphasized the geographic vulnerability of Russia.¹⁸

The history of the Russian Geographical Society provides a useful allegory for the impact of geographic thinking on Russian leaders. The organization was founded in 1845 by Russian Admiral Fyodor Petrovich, Count (Graf) Litke, as “the free corporation that is open for people who love their homeland and have indestructible belief in the future of Russia and the Russians.” This founding highlights the early linkages between the Russian military, nationalism, and geographic thought. The first two presidents of the society were grand dukes of Russia, who were senior members of the Romanov family. Under the Soviet Union, the organization expanded to include 17 regional offices. Today the chairman of the board of trustees is Vladimir Putin, and the society’s president is Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu.¹⁹ Clearly the ideological ties between geography and security of the state remain and feature significantly in leadership decisions.

14. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Russification Policies,” n.d., accessed May 24, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russian-Empire/Russification-policy>.

15. Quam and Campbell, “Russian Domain.”

16. Tanvi Chauhan, “Why Are Warm-Water Ports Important to Russian Security?: The Cases of Sevastopol and Tartus Compared,” *Air Force Journal of European, Middle Eastern, and African Affairs* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 57–76, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JEMEAA/Journals/Volume-02_Issue-1/Chauhan.pdf.

17. “Jun 24, 1812 CE: Napoleon Invades Russia,” National Geographic Society (website), n.d., last updated May 20, 2022, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/napoleon-invades-russia/>; and *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Crimean War,” n.d., accessed May 24, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Crimean-War>.

18. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *World War I: Historical Map of the Eastern Front during World War I*, accessed May 24, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Eastern-Front-World-War-I-history#/media/1/668465/236180>; and History.com Editors, “Operation Barbarossa,” History (website), n.d., last updated November 14, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/operation-barbarossa>.

19. “History,” Russian Geographical Society (website), n.d., accessed May 22, 2023, <https://www.rgo.ru/en/society/history>.

Today Putin's public statements echo a philosophy shaped by Russia's geographic realities. In 2021, Putin published his essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," in which he claimed that Ukraine and Russia share a human and physical geographic history and that any differences between the two groups are the result of foreign interference. He reiterated this point in the buildup to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, stating that Ukraine was "entirely created by Russia."²⁰

The most significant geographic feature that causes anxiety for Russian leaders involves a lack of defensible geography. Russia's location on the European Plain leaves it vulnerable to attack. Historically, Russia has fought to defend its territory from various invaders across this plain, first from the Mongols and, most recently, from the Germans in World War II. Even during the Cold War, while Russia concentrated on facing a threat from NATO, tensions with China in 1969 resulted in massive militarization along its border, a brief border skirmish, and the threat of nuclear war.²¹ The flatness and general lack of significant terrain of the European Plain create an environment with few impediments to military operations.²²

While Russia's large land mass serves as a source of national pride, its limited access to water is a source of national angst. Russia's navigable rivers exist entirely west of the Ural Mountains, leaving large swaths of territory without the cheap and easy access to economic markets provided by bulk riverine transportation. Additionally, while Russia has approximately 23,000 miles of coastline, the majority sits along the Arctic Ocean, to which ice restricts access during much of the year.²³ With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia lost control of nearly 2,000 miles of Black Sea coastline, its sole access to warm-water transit routes.²⁴ While the Black Sea provides critical warm-water port access for Russia, it is susceptible to disruption because access into and out of the sea is restricted by the maritime choke points of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus Strait controlled by Türkiye (a NATO member). The challenges associated with transporting goods internally to Russia

20. Max Fisher, "Word by Word and between the Lines: A Close Look at Putin's Speech" *New York Times* (website), February 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/putin-speech-russia-ukraine.html>.

21. Allen S. Whiting, "Sino-Soviet Hostilities and Implications for US Policy," August 16, 1969, in *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, 1969: U.S. Reactions and Diplomatic Maneuvers*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book, no. 49, ed. William Burr (National Security Archive, 2001), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.9.pdf>.

22. Zeihan, *Accidental Superpower*.

23. "Russia," Arctic Institute (website), n.d., last updated August 1, 2022, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/countries/russia/>.

24. Lewis, "Russia's Southern Seas."

and exporting goods to the global market increase the costs of basic economic activities and limit Russia's potential growth and global influence.²⁵

Part of why access to global markets remains critical for Russia lies in its geographic resources. Russia's economy suffers from the "resource curse" of relying on exports, particularly oil and natural gas. For the last 20 years, the health of the Russian economy has reflected the global price of oil and natural gas. Additionally, because Russia cannot access ocean shipping routes, it must rely on pipelines and agreements with the countries those pipelines cross to export its oil and natural gas. Increasingly, global concern regarding climate change and the associated move toward renewable energy sources leaves Russia with a shrinking market for its primary exports, threatening economic growth and its standard of living.²⁶

The final geographic factor that strategically concerns Russia consists of human geography and demographics. Russia's population has declined by approximately 2 million people since 1991, and its current birth rate of 1.5 children per woman of childbearing age means the trend will likely continue.²⁷ A declining population means Russia will have a smaller working-age population to run its economy and a smaller military to defend its borders, threatening the government's stability and the nation's sovereignty. More acutely, the faster decline of the Ukrainian population relative to the Russian population created a temporal window where Russia maintained an advantage over Ukraine. This decline led Ukraine to pursue EU and NATO integration aggressively to deter Russian hostility. Ultimately, this action antagonized Russia by increasing the Russian perception that NATO poses a threat.²⁸

These geographic factors drive Russia's end states for its foreign policy. Russia seeks defensible borders like those they had during the Soviet era when they controlled the Baltic Sea, the Carpathian Mountains, the Black Sea, the Caucasus Mountains, and the Tien Shan Mountains. Russia wants to maintain and expand access to global markets

25. Rob Bailey and Laura Wellesley, *Chokepoints and Vulnerabilities in Global Food Trade*, Chatham House Report (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2017), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/06/chokepoints-and-vulnerabilities-global-food-trade-0/2-chokepoints-global-food-trade>.

26. Eleonora Sokolsky, "Russia's Resource Curse: The Effects of Oil on Democracy 1998–2008," *Undergraduate Journal of International Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 69–84, <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/ujis/article/view/31932/35851>.

27. Cyrielle Cabot, "Population Decline in Russia: 'Putin Has No Choice But to Win' in Ukraine," France24 (website), May 24, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220524-population-decline-in-russia-putin-has-no-other-choice-but-to-win-in-ukraine>; and "Fertility Rate, Total (Births per Woman)," World Bank (website), n.d., accessed August 31, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN>.

28. Lyman Stone, "The Demography of War: Ukraine vs. Russia," *Institute for Family Studies* (blog), March 22, 2022, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-demography-of-war-ukraine-vs-russia>.

by controlling warm-water ports and oil and natural gas pipelines to support its economy. Russia also seeks to expand its working-age population to support the economy and military. Russian aggression in the former Soviet Union in the past 20 years illustrates how Russia seeks to achieve these aims.²⁹ In order to forge new productive relationships with Russia and improve stability in the region, the United States must develop policies that acknowledge these concerns and interests.

A Russia-centric Policy for the Future

History demonstrated that Russia's geographic condition has heavily influenced Russian foreign policy. The current war in Ukraine reflects the same Russian anxieties that drove foreign policy for centuries. While the spectrum of outcomes could range from complete Russian victory to partial victory to outright defeat, the war's outcome seems unlikely to address the underlying geographic realities.

Despite the variations in outcomes of the current war, the geographic conditions that contributed to the Russian threat perception will remain unchanged, and the history of Russian leadership indicates that physical expansion to control more of the European Plain, warm-water ports, or young workers would remain politically desirable for any leader. Currently, Putin and Western leaders seem unwilling to engage diplomatically about the future of Russia, but Russia retains too much national power to ignore forever. While the conditions under which a change in power occurs (including who replaces Putin) might dictate when and how the United States and its allies engage with a future Russian state, the geographic anxieties of Russia remain, including the insecurity of Russia's borders, the Russian economy's ability to export goods globally or regionally without access to warm-water ports, and an accelerated decline in the Russian population. Geographically, climate change could affect Russia in mostly positive ways in the future. Estimates suggest that Russian agricultural land could quadruple by 2080, and the melting of polar sea ice could open Russian ports to trade along the Arctic trade route.³⁰

Unless the United States departs from policy precedent with Russia, we can expect the behaviors of Russia's leaders to continue to detract from US interests through aggressive military action, disruptive political influence operations in the United States and allied countries, and closer relations with China. Shifting to a policy that acknowledges

29. Marshall, "Russia and the Curse of Geography."

30. Abrahm Lustgarten, "How Russia Wins the Climate Crisis," *New York Times* (website), December 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/16/magazine/russia-climate-migration-crisis.html>.

and addresses Russia's geographically derived anxieties over time through iterative trust-building exchanges could set the stage to alter over 100 years of mistrust and aggression. The United States should prepare to reestablish productive diplomatic relations with Russia to achieve this goal. While rapprochement with Russia will likely remain politically impossible as long as Putin remains president, the United States should prepare to engage as soon as Putin departs office, regardless of who replaces him and the status of the Russia-Ukraine War at that time.

Russian Access to Trade without Ports

A successful US strategy must address Russia's lack of global economic integration. Greater economic integration will alleviate some of Russia's anxieties about its lack of warm-water port access. The United States should pursue two investment areas to improve Russian economic integration.

First, the United States should invest in efforts to diversify the Russian economy away from dependence on oil and natural gas exports.³¹ The simplest transition could involve a shift from oil and natural gas to renewable energy sources. Assessments suggest that Russia has the potential to become entirely self-sufficient in domestic renewable energy and an exporter of renewable energy based on a combination of wind, solar, geothermal, and biomass sources.³² Current technology for the distribution of renewable energy does not rely on port access and therefore offers Russia an export supportable by its geography.³³ Transitioning away from energy export dependence is particularly urgent for Russia, given estimates that Russian oil production will drop by 42 percent by 2035 and that demand in Western Europe and the United States (which combined currently make up Russia's second-largest market) will decline with their green-energy transition.³⁴ Additionally, since electricity markets tend to have a more limited reach, Russia can concentrate on its regional market and worry less about competition there than in the globalized oil and natural-gas market.

31. Yuri V. Simachev et al., "Industrial Policy in Russia: How to Open a New Window of Opportunity?" (conference paper, XIX April International Scientific Conference of National Research University Higher School of Economics on Economic and Social Development, Moscow, September 2018), <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Yuri-Simachev/publication/327836905>.

32. Ephraim Bonah Agyekum et al., "Decarbonize Russia – A Best-Worst Method Approach for Assessing the Renewable Energy Potentials, Opportunities and Challenges," *Energy Reports* 7 (July 2021): 4498–4515, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egy.2021.07.039>.

33. Brett Smith, "How Electricity Can Travel Long Distances with Minimal Power Loss," *AZoMaterials* (website), July 10, 2019, <https://www.azom.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=18258>.

34. Alex Kimani, "Analysts Predict 42% Decline in Russian Oil Production by 2035," *OilPrice.com* (website), February 5, 2023, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Analysts-Predict-42-Decline-In-Russian-Oil-Production-By-2035.html>; and "Energy Insights Outlook Overview: Global Oil Supply & Demand Outlook to 2035," *Energy Solutions*, McKinsey and Company (website), n.d., accessed May 25, 2023, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/oil-and-gas/how-we-help-clients/energy-insights/global-oil-supply-demand-outlook-to-2035---removed>.

Russia's highly educated population, robust industrial base, and abundant natural resources present an opportunity to invest in advanced manufacturing and technological development.³⁵ Russia's history of machine manufacturing combined with the world's fourth-largest reserves of rare-earth metals and other raw materials makes the country a logical location for high-technology development, which would retain global relevance for decades.³⁶

Additionally, the expansion of Russian agricultural land caused by climate change could allow Russia to increase its share of global food production as agricultural land closer to the equator becomes increasingly less productive.³⁷ These economic sectors provide viable alternatives to the export dependence on oil and natural gas and alleviate concerns about warm-water port access.

In support of these efforts, Russia will require financial investment in meaningful infrastructure projects that expand Russia's ability to ship commercial goods from the country's interior to global or regional markets.³⁸ These investments could include high-speed railroads across eastern Russia and port investments along the Arctic coast.³⁹ These investments increase the price competitiveness of products produced in Russia and reduce the country's dependence on port access.

US and allied investment would have to confront the obstacles presented by the war and earlier sanctions. Many European allies will financially commit to rebuilding Ukraine and strongly oppose providing money to bolster the Russian economy.⁴⁰ Encouraging investment in Russia will also require a reversal of post-2008 US policy sanctions based on Russian military actions in Georgia and Ukraine. Unfortunately, many of these sanctions further isolated the Russian economy, and instead of forcing Russia to the negotiating table, they increased Russia's perceived urgency to secure territorial gains. A continuation of sanctions to induce concessions or liberal reforms in Russia is unlikely to succeed even after Putin's eventual departure because Russia has spent the years since 2014 (when the sanctions were first enacted) insulating its economy and finding alternative sources of finance.

35. Howard J. Shatz, "Commentary: Russia's Tragic Failure to Reform Its Economy," *RAND Blog*, RAND Corporation (website), April 7, 2022, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/04/russias-tragic-failure-to-reform-its-economy.html>. First published in *Moscow Times*, April 7, 2022.

36. Ashleigh Cotting, Toby Woodall, and Jose Miguel Fidel Javier, "Russia Struggling to Capitalize on Rare Earth Reserves," S&P Global Market Intelligence (website), July 3, 2019, <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/russia-struggling-to-capitalize-on-rare-earth-reserves-52525919>.

37. Lustgarten, "How Russia Wins."

38. "Russia's Physical and Social Infrastructure: Implications for Future Development," National Intelligence Council, December 2000, <https://irp.fas.org/nic/russia.html>.

39. Lustgarten, "How Russia Wins."

40. Pavel K. Baev, "Research: Time for the West to Think about How to Engage with Defeated Russia," Brookings (website), November 15, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/time-for-the-west-to-think-about-how-to-engage-with-defeated-russia/>.

These alternative sources include China, and the deepening of this relationship runs additional risks.⁴¹ If Russian dependence on China increases, China could demand access to oil, natural gas, mineral resources, and agricultural products that China currently lacks or purchases for higher prices.⁴² Low-cost Russian resourcing of the Chinese economy and military would decrease US leverage over China and potentially prolong the period of strategic competition between China and the United States.

The United States should commit to providing the primary financing of Russian projects while relying heavily on European allies to support diplomatic initiatives despite significant domestic opposition to these policies. The rising prospect of conflict with China would force the US government to allocate resources between rebuilding a future with Russia and preparing for military escalation with China. Despite this seeming competition for resources, a weakened Russia remains diplomatically, economically, and militarily vulnerable to Chinese expansion in the East, where China could seek control of Russian oil, natural gas, and agricultural land.⁴³ As such, investment in Russian economic strength supports America's goals of countering Chinese malign behavior.

East Asian allies such as Japan and South Korea could provide additional financial support. They will face heavy domestic pressures, however, as they also suffer from poor demographics and contracting economic growth.⁴⁴ There are opportunities to promote mutual gain with East Asian allies by enabling Japan and South Korea to focus on high-end technological capabilities with a smaller, more specialized workforce while supporting the growth of mid-tier technological development in Russia.⁴⁵ This supporting infrastructure could lie on top of exportable Russian natural resources via Russia's eastern ports and cut the length of maritime supply lines to Japan and South Korea.⁴⁶ While Japan and South Korea could

41. Anatoly Kurmanaev and Stanley Reed, "How Russia Is Surviving the Tightening Grip on Its Oil Revenue," *New York Times* (website), February 7, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/07/business/russia-oil-embargo.html>.

42. Ishaan Tharoor, "Today's Worldview: China Has a Hand in Sri Lanka's Economic Calamity," *Washington Post* (website), July 20, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/20/sri-lanka-china-debt-trap/>.

43. Jonathan E. Hillman, *China and Russia: Economic Unequals*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (website), July 15, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-russia-economic-unequals>.

44. Jung H. Pak and Ethan Jewell, "Commentary: South Korea and Japan Have More in Common Than They Think," Brookings (website), September 5, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/south-korea-and-japan-have-more-in-common-than-they-think/>.

45. "Market News: Trends in Japan's Manufacturing and Machinery Industry," Insights, Market Prospects (website), June 8, 2021, <https://www.market-prospects.com/articles/trends-in-japan-manufacturing>.

46. Yuka Obayashi, "Explainer: How Will Japan Resolve Shipping Insurance for Russian LNG Imports?," Reuters (website), December 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/how-will-japan-resolve-shipping-insurance-russian-lng-imports-2022-12-29/>.

attempt to build supporting relationships with countries in Southeast Asia, Southeast Asia does not provide the wealth of natural resources accessible via Russia's large landmass.⁴⁷

Addressing Demographics through Technology and Governance

While Russia derives significant anxiety from its physical geographic conditions, it is perhaps the human geographic conditions of demography that pose the greatest threat to long-term stability in Russia. American economic investments could also help Russia address these issues. Automation, artificial intelligence, and machine learning can potentially decrease the skill level and number of people required to work in high-profit industries.⁴⁸ American and allied private businesses, particularly Japanese or German companies facing similar demographic challenges, could partner with Russian companies to address multiple Russian concerns stemming from their demographic circumstances. The US government could utilize public-private partnerships, government contracts, oversight requirements, and conditional clauses, to induce private companies to further these initiatives.⁴⁹

Diplomatically, multiple US and allied initiatives could assist Russia in optimizing gains from economic investments. Multiple studies have identified Russian centralized government control of the economy as a hindrance to Russian economic advancement. American and allied good governance initiatives, particularly those partnering with other former Soviet states that have successfully modernized their economies (such as Estonia), could provide a “post-Putin” Russian government with the tools to govern the country and economy more effectively.⁵⁰

In recent decades the United States focused on promoting democracy and human rights, which has created limited opportunities for engagement with Russia. In the 2002 *National Security Strategy*, the Bush administration wrote, “We are also increasingly united by common values. Russia is in the midst of a hopeful transition, reaching for its democratic future”⁵¹ Even after Russia's invasion of Georgia, President Obama's 2009 speech

47. Satsuki Kaneko, “Japan and ASEAN to Study Data Sharing on Supply Chain Risks,” *Nikkei Asia* (website), January 5, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-and-ASEAN-to-study-data-sharing-on-supply-chain-risks>.

48. Hiroaki Sasaki, “Growth with Automation Capital and Declining Population,” *Economics Letters* 222 (January 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2022.110958>.

49. Sebastian Backup and Dominic Waughray, “Argument: How to Reverse the World's Trust Deficit Disorder,” *Foreign Policy* (website), January 16, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/16/public-private-partnership-wef-davos-world-trust-deficit-disorder/>.

50. Sergey Aleksashenko, “Commentary: Rebuilding the Russian Economy: Is a Lack of Policy the Right Policy?,” Brookings (website), September 25, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rebuilding-the-russian-economy-is-a-lack-of-policy-the-right-policy/>.

51. George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, September 2002), <https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2002.pdf>.

in Moscow highlighted “a system where the universal rights of human beings are respected, and violations of those rights are opposed” and in the 2010 *National Security Strategy* stated that “We support efforts within Russia to promote the rule of law, accountable government, and universal values.”⁵² These efforts ignored Russian geographically derived concerns and ultimately failed to create meaningful engagement with Russia, resulting in the invasions of Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2014.

Working on anti-corruption and administrative efficiency and competence with a focus on economic output instead of exclusively focusing on democracy and human rights will build trust and goodwill with whatever Russian government comes after the war by acknowledging their concerns and enabling the Russian government to address those concerns more effectively without resorting to violence. While some will argue that neglecting democracy and human rights undermines the values of the United States, the United States cannot press the Russian government to improve the lives of the Russian people without a standing relationship. The United States must establish a relationship and garner influence before appeals will make any difference in the lives of ordinary Russians.⁵³ Furthermore, a more competent and less corrupt government will improve the lives of Russian citizens even without advances in democracy and human rights.

Securing Russian Borders

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States engaged in a strategy of expanding NATO, in part justifying the move by claiming the possibility of future Russian aggression and thereby reinforcing Russia’s perception that NATO existed specifically to wage war against Russia.⁵⁴ In April 2008, the United States stated in conjunction with NATO regarding Georgia and Ukraine that “these countries will become members of NATO.”⁵⁵ These actions again reinforced Russia’s perception that NATO sought to encircle and destroy Russia. Expanding NATO membership to Ukraine after this conflict would continue the cycle of grievance for Russia and decrease the likelihood of future engagement on any subject.

52. Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, May 2010), 44, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.

53. Thomas Graham, “Let Russia Be Russia: The Case for a More Pragmatic Approach to Moscow,” *Foreign Affairs* (website), October 15, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2019-10-15/let-russia-be-russia>.

54. Sarotte, “How to Enlarge NATO,” 7–41.

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

During the buildup to the war in Ukraine, Russia requested a legally binding security agreement but offered unacceptable terms to NATO member states.⁵⁶ While Russia remains unlikely to trust security guarantees from NATO, nonaggression treaties with individual NATO members that border Russia (such as Finland, Norway, and the Baltic states) could provide assurances about the security of Russia's western border. Alternatively, policies rejected during the original NATO expansion debate, such as the "NATO-Russia Charter," Partnership for Peace, and the "alliance with an alliance" construct for Ukraine, Russia, and other former Soviet states, could allow the United States to acknowledge Russia's concerns about continued NATO expansion and engender opportunities for future engagement.⁵⁷

Most of the policies outlined in previous sections would offer US and allied assistance to Russia. In exchange, the United States should demand denuclearization and a degree of demilitarization. As part of the demand for demilitarization, the United States would have to provide security agreements similar to the guarantees made to Japan after World War II. While Japan wrote a new constitution banning an offensive military, Russia should retain a small military force, and restrictions on size and capability should ease over time.⁵⁸ With nonaggression pacts signed with countries along its western border, Russia could reposture its remaining forces toward securing eastern border regions with China. While Russia will likely retain transactional relations with China, their historical animosity and competition for resources on the East Asian landmass make them uncomfortable partners, and increasing Russia's ability to prioritize its eastern security provides another area for cooperation between the United States and Russia.⁵⁹

The most notable difference between this scenario and the post-World War II period lies in the assumption that Russia will not be conquered. Even if Russia loses the war in Ukraine, it remains highly unlikely that a foreign army will threaten the Russian government in Moscow.⁶⁰ Given this assumption, Russia will naturally oppose any agreement to disarm

56. Steven Pifer, "Russia's Draft Agreements with NATO and the United States: Intended for Rejection?," Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University (website), December 21, 2021, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/russia%E2%80%99s-draft-agreements-nato-and-united-states-intended-rejection>. First published in the *Order from Chaos* blog, Brookings (website), December 21, 2021.

57. M. E. Sarotte, "How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 7–41, <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/44/1/7/12232>.

58. Kirk Spitzer, "Japan Ends Ban on Military Self-Defense," *Time* (website), July 1, 2014, <https://time.com/2946076/japan-ends-ban-on-military-self-defense/>.

59. Editorial Board, "Opinion: What's America's Winning Hand If Russia Plays the China Card?" *New York Times* (website), July 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/21/opinion/russia-china-trump.html>.

60. Peter A. Wilson and William Courtney, "How the War in Ukraine Could End Sooner Than Expected," *RAND Blog*, RAND Corporation (website), January 17, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/01/how-the-war-in-ukraine-could-end-sooner-than-expected.html>.

and make itself more vulnerable. Russia would not agree to denuclearization and demilitarization overnight but could potentially agree after a series of trust-building initiatives that provide small to modest amounts of economic investment and political engagement in exchange for decreases in nuclear stockpiles and military capacity. American initiatives could mirror the US approach during the Cold War when a détente led to a series of nuclear weapon and missile treaties over the course of a decade.⁶¹ The most significant step would involve meeting with a potentially objectionable successor to Putin with an offer that did not simply demand concessions from Russia. While the United States could disengage and allow military and economic isolation and demographics to decay Russian state power, this course of action risks Russia weaponizing its remaining capabilities, including cyberattacks on US and allied interests, inciting uprisings in nearby countries, and selling arms to US adversaries.⁶²

Conclusion

While many aspects of the future Russo-US relationship remain in flux and will depend on the outcome of the current conflict, the motivations for Russia's actions will not disappear.⁶³ The United States has historically pursued a Russia policy focused on a narrow set of US interests, resulting in a lack of engagement and influence on Russian decision making.⁶⁴ The consequences of this lack of engagement include over \$2.8 trillion lost from the global economy, hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded, and millions of Ukrainians displaced from their homes due to the war.⁶⁵ Russia's focus on geographic concerns will remain unchanged regardless of who ultimately replaces Putin. If the United States continues

61. "1949–2021 U.S.–Russia Nuclear Arms Control" (timeline), Council on Foreign Relations (website), n.d., <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-russia-nuclear-arms-control>.

62. Robert S. Mueller III, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, March 2019), <https://www.justice.gov/archives/sco/file/1373816/download>; and Chris Massaro, "US Warns Russian-Linked Actors Seeking to 'Foment Manufactured Insurrection' in European Country," Fox News (website), March 10, 2023, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/us-warns-russian-linked-actors-seeking-foment-manufactured-insurrection-european-country>; Lama Fakih, "Russia Makes a Killing Off Its Military Support to Assad," Human Rights Watch (website), March 13, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/13/russia-makes-killing-its-military-support-assad>. First published in *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council (website), March 12, 2018.

63. John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Kristin M. Bakke, "To Russia with Love: The Majority of Crimeans Are Still Glad for Their Annexation," *Foreign Affairs* (website), April 3, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2020-04-03/russia-love>.

64. Obama, *NSS*.

65. Paul Hannon, "Russia's War in Ukraine to Cost Global Economy \$2.8 Trillion, OECD Says," *Wall Street Journal* (website), September 26, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-war-in-ukraine-to-cost-global-economy-2-8-trillion-oecd-says-11664177401>; "Ukraine War: US Estimates 200,000 Military Casualties on All Sides," BBC (website), November 10, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63580372>; and Erol Yayboke, Anastasia Strouboulis, and Abigail Edwards, "Critical Questions: Update on Forced Displacement around Ukraine," CSIS (website), October 3, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/update-forced-displacement-around-ukraine>.

to fail at productively engaging the Russian government, it increases the risk of the collapse of territorial control within Russia and the continuation of asymmetric threats emanating from Russia. Within Russia, central government control can mitigate global threats, such as terrorist groups operating out of the Caucasus Mountains and the proliferation of nuclear weapons.⁶⁶ Externally, even a weakened Russia could continue to mount covert campaigns to destabilize neighboring countries and US alliances through cyberattacks and information warfare.⁶⁷ Given these threats, attempts at addressing Russia's geographically derived anxieties sooner rather than later would best promote US interests in the region.

Russia will retain relevance in the future due to its size, natural resources, conventional and irregular military capacity, and historical relationships with US allies.⁶⁸ If the United States pursues policies that support Russian goals of economic integration, mitigation of demographic concerns, and securing national borders, US leadership can set the foundation for productive engagement on issues critical to American interests. The United States spent decades enacting foreign policy that resulted in an aggressive Russia. Without addressing Russia's geographically derived anxieties, the United States will continue crashing into the lighthouse of the past.

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66. Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, "What If Russia Loses? A Defeat for Moscow Won't Be a Clear Victory for the West," *Atlantic* (website), March 4, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/what-if-russia-loses>.

67. Alexander Tanas, "Moldovan Government Quits amid Economic Turmoil, Russia Tensions," Reuters (website), February 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldovan-prime-minister-announces-government-resignation-2023-02-10/>.

68. Editorial Board, "Opinion: After War, After Putin, What's Next for Russia?," *Washington Post* (website), October 12, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/10/12/russia-future-after-putin-ukraine/>.

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