



THE RENEWAL OF THE RUSSIAN CHALLENGE IN EUROPEAN SECURITY: HISTORY AS A GUIDE TO POLICY

Mary Elise Sarotte

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Cover photo: A memorial with bronze heads of George W. Bush, Helmut Kohl, and Mikhail Gorbachev in Berlin.

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MARY ELISE SAROTTE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper argues that, to understand and deal with the renewal of the Russian challenge to European security today, it is necessary to re-examine the legacy of the end of the Cold War. Drawing on the author's historical scholarship, it argues that during the upheaval of 1989–1991, U.S. and West German leaders worked closely together to ensure that NATO, and not any of the proposed pan-European alternatives, would be the bedrock of post-Cold War European security. There were obviously many compelling reasons to follow such a strategy, not least the enormous burden of developing a credible alternative in a short time frame, but it did have fateful consequences: By design, Russia was left on the periphery of post-Cold War European security arrangements.

The subsequent strategy of the West was the assumption, or hope, that Russia would gradually accommodate itself to this new post-Cold War reality. At first too weakened by the end of the Cold War to respond, Russia did not push back strongly, and Western leaders began to work on the assumption that Russia had in fact developed a long-term willingness to accept this outcome. The worrisome events of the past years, however, show that Russian President Vladimir Putin was ultimately unwilling to do so, and now tensions reminiscent of the Cold War have returned.

Because the Western strategy perpetuated pre-existing Cold War structures, it perpetuated old tensions as well. As a result, the current status of tense relations with Russia has a strong *déjà vu* element to it. Once again, NATO worries about the Russian bear menacing its neighbors to the East. Once again, Western allies huddle in consultations over how best to deal with Moscow. Once again, the nuclear

specter threatens Europe, Russia, and the United States. As a result, given that the threats are familiar, the policy prescriptions are familiar — if disheartening — because they are in many cases the same policy prescriptions that guided U.S. policy during the Cold War. Of course, it remains to be seen whether the Trump administration will be able to develop a coherent, sustained policy approach to Russia in the face of multiple investigations into contacts between Donald Trump's associates and Moscow. Using history as a guide to policy could help it to do so, this paper argues.

1 INTRODUCTION

On November 20, 1983, millions of TV viewers watched a Soviet thermonuclear attack on Kansas unfold. Fortunately, it was not real; Americans were viewing a made-for-TV movie entitled “The Day After.” The film offered a frightening depiction of the impact of a thermonuclear exchange on the residents of Kansas unfortunate enough to live near targeted missile silos. Video footage from actual nuclear testing appeared in the film, intercut with fictional images of the gruesome fates of the characters in the film. Viewership in the United States was subsequently estimated at over one hundred million people. One particularly notable viewer was President Ronald Reagan. The president, reportedly inspired in part by the movie, subsequently began the outreach to Moscow that would culminate in 1987 in a significant nuclear arms reduction treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Accord (now one of the many of the U.S.–Russian arms-control accords under threat). “The Day After” subsequently received worldwide distribution — including, once relations began thawing under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, in the Soviet Union itself.

After the end of the Cold War, the film lived on as a historical document in classrooms, helping a younger generation understand just how dangerous the superpower thermonuclear standoff was. The whiplash-inducing developments in Western relations with Russia in recent years, however — most notably Moscow’s annexation of Crimea, its role in the violence in eastern Ukraine, and the ongoing sensational revelations about its covert involvement in the 2016 U.S. election and interactions with associates of U.S. President Donald Trump — have moved the sense of threat out of the realm of history classes and back

into current headlines. It is clear that successful management of the Western relationship with Russia has once again become one of the biggest challenges facing the West in the 21st century.

How did the Russian challenge return? And how might U.S. and German policymakers best counter the most deleterious aspects of this development, in order to maintain “The Day After” in its status as a historical relic? This paper will offer one approach at answering these questions. It will first summarize portions of the historical background from the end of the Cold War that continue to shape contemporary challenges. Second, it will highlight some of the more worrisome developments in Western relations with Russia in the 21st century. Finally, the concluding section will consider implications for policy. Although it is too simplistic to say that the West is in a “new Cold War” with Russia — the ideological aspect, to name just one, is significantly different — it will unfortunately be necessary to repeat some of the policy behavior from the Cold War, so an understanding of that conflict and its end is necessary for policymakers today.

One aspect of the history of the Cold War that is particularly important for international relations today is the way that U.S., German, and other Western policymakers dealt with its ending. Put simply, the U.S. strategy in responding to the collapse of the Berlin Wall was *not*, despite numerous public pronouncements to the contrary, to institute a “new world order,” or even a truly new European security order. Rather, the framing of the post-Cold War era — which emerged swiftly in response to the upheaval of 1989 — perpetuated institutions and conflicts from the past into the present day, with fateful consequences.

Although it is too simplistic to say that the West is in a “new Cold War” with Russia, it will unfortunately be necessary to repeat some of the policy behavior from the Cold War.

Put bluntly, despite the occurrence of an ordering moment, the West did not actually develop a new world order in response to it, public proclamations to the contrary notwithstanding.

In understanding how this dynamic developed, it is useful to consider the theoretical concept of an ordering moment. Such a moment may be defined as a crucial but limited time period when previous authorities, identities, norms, and structures lose their dominance and multiple new paths to the future become feasible. The precise phrase “ordering moment” originates in the work of the political scientist John Ikenberry, although many other scholars have published similar concepts (the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, for example, used the term “punctuational moment” and spoke of history as consisting mainly of periods of equilibrium, punctuated by periods of dramatic change.)¹ Though Ikenberry applied this phrase only to the events immediately following a major war, the concept has greater usefulness. It can help us to understand multiple kinds of transitions, such as those identified by the University of Chicago political theorist William Sewell as “moments of accelerated change,” even if those transitions do not follow bloodshed.² It is worth revisiting the ordering moment presented by the end of the Cold War, because many of the challenges in Western relations with Russia today trace their roots back to decisions made during that ordering moment.

Put bluntly, despite the occurrence of an ordering moment, the West did not actually develop a new world order in response to

it, public proclamations to the contrary notwithstanding. Rather, Washington’s strategy in that moment was one of extending the pre-existing, or *pre-fabricated*, Cold War institutions, most notably NATO, into the East and into the future. In other words, although *the revolution from below* in Central and Eastern Europe caused dramatic change in those regions, *the reaction from above* perpetuated essential elements of the Cold War order in the post-Cold War era. As I have argued elsewhere, this U.S. “prefabrication policy” achieved swift success, blocking alternative visions for the future of European security. As a result of this strategy, the transatlantic world of the 21st century held on to the structures designed for the divided world of the late 20th century. This achievement, authored jointly by the United States and West Germany, thus became an example of the conundrum highlighted by former Secretary of State James Baker: “almost every achievement contains within its success the seeds of a future problem.”³

¹ John Ikenberry has defined such moments as times when “the rules and institutions of the international order are on the table for negotiation and change.” See G. J. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 12; and S. J. Gould, *Punctuated Equilibrium* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 49-50.

² W. H. Sewell, Jr., “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” *Theory and Society* Vol. 25 (1996), 843, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/657830>.

³ M. E. Sarotte, 1989: *The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009; new and updated edition, 2014); see also M. E. Sarotte, “A Broken Promise?” *Foreign Affairs* (Sept.-Oct. 2014): 90-97, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-11/broken-promise>. Baker quotation from J. A. Baker with T. A. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), p. 84.

Chronology of Key Events

December 1991

Soviet Union ceases to exist; Boris Yeltsin, as leader of Russia, emerges as dominant political figure of the post-Soviet space

March 1999

Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland join NATO; NATO intervenes militarily in Kosovo conflict without UN Security Council authorization

March 2004

Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia join NATO

February 2007

Putin speech at Munich Security Conference raises tensions with West

August 2008

Russian and Georgian conflict over disputed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia erupts into violence; becomes frozen conflict, lasting until today

February 2010

Yanukovich elected president of Ukraine

Winter 2013/2014

Disputes over EU Association Agreement prompt Ukrainian "Euromaidan" protests; Yanukovich flees country after shootings of protestors; Russian troops take control of Crimea without public acknowledgement by Moscow of its role

July 2014

Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 from Amsterdam shot down over eastern Ukraine

November 2016

Donald Trump elected U.S. president

May 1997

NATO-Russia Founding Act

March 2000

Vladimir Putin elected president of Russia, remains de facto leader (as either prime minister or president) to present day

November 2004-January 2005

Orange Revolution in Ukraine; Viktor Yushchenko defeats Viktor Yanukovich in re-vote

April 2008

NATO Bucharest Summit signals that Georgia and Ukraine will become members of NATO, though stops short of taking actual steps toward an accession plan

March 2009

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gives Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov "reset" button in symbol of Obama administration policy

December 2011

Moscow sees large protests following parliamentary elections of questionable validity; Putin accuses U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of instigating protests

March 2014

Crimea is annexed by Russia; EU and United States impose sanctions against Russia and suspend Moscow from G8; conflict erupts in eastern Ukraine

September 2015

Russia intervenes militarily in Syria in support of Assad regime

February 2017

Trump's first National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn, forced out by revelations of dishonesty over contacts with Russians; broader investigations of role of Russian attempts to influence U.S. election continue

2 THE ORDERING MOMENT AT THE END OF THE COLD WAR

The West German chancellor at the time, Helmut Kohl, together with the then-U.S. president, George H.W. Bush, moved quickly to ensure that Bonn and Washington would shape the emerging European security order.

At first glance, the argument above seems paradoxical. How, despite the dramatic upheavals of 1989–90, did a new world order not, in fact, emerge? The answer lies in the details. After the unexpected opening of the Wall on November 9, 1989, political leaders found themselves pressed to react. The West German chancellor at the time, Helmut Kohl, together with the then-U.S. president, George H.W. Bush, moved quickly to ensure that Bonn and Washington would shape the emerging European security order. Together they made certain, above all, that it would be possible for NATO not only to survive the end of the contest with the Soviet Union — and, later, the end of the USSR itself — but also to expand eastwards beyond its 1989 borders. Meanwhile, on the European level, Kohl, French President François Mitterrand, and their fellow heads of state and of government similarly sought to perpetuate their own institutional strategy, as the work of Frédéric Bozo and others has shown.⁴ They sought and found ways to expand the European Community (EC), later the European Union (EU), eastward — although the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, was less than happy about what was unfolding. Her ouster in 1990 by members of her own party, however, removed her from the equation.

⁴ F. Bozo, “The Failure of a Grand Design: Mitterrand’s European Confederation, 1989–1991,” *Contemporary European History*, 17, no. 3 (2008): 391–412, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/contemporary-european-history/article/the-failure-of-a-grand-design-mitterrands-european-confederation-19891991/0A1CE288D231D8A1A30F198B857ED730>. See also, by the same author: *Mitterrand, The End of the Cold War, and German Unification* (New York: Berghahn, 2009). For more on European integration and, specifically, the development of European monetary union, see H. James, *Making the European Monetary Union* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

On the domestic level, Bonn decided, together with the new East German leaders elected in a free vote on March 18, 1990, to extend the provisions of its pre-existing “Basic Law,” its *de facto* Constitution, into the East. The Basic Law was originally meant to be a provisional document for the western part of divided Germany (and for that reason was not named a “Constitution” when adopted in 1949, because its framers intended for it to seem temporary, as they hoped the division of Germany would be). Rather, the Basic Law called for a constitutional convention to occur only after the reunification of Germany, at some unknown future date. But, when that date unexpectedly arrived in 1990, a way was found to extend the Basic Law’s reach, rather than to open the Pandora’s box of a constitutional rewrite. Kohl had the political leverage needed for all of these measures because his party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), had done very well in those March 18 elections in East Germany. Kohl also acted quickly out of a desire to unify his country before the historic opportunity created by the opening of the Wall passed. The chancellor would refer to his haste as a way of gathering his harvest before the storm. Before what kind of storm exactly was usually left unspoken, but it seemed to mean before an adverse change in leadership in Moscow could take place.⁵

⁵ This section summarizes and paraphrases some of my earlier publications on this topic; readers interested in more details may wish to consult the following publications: M. E. Sarotte, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall* (New York: Basic Books, 2014) – this section is drawn from the conclusion to that book – and F. Bozo, A. Rödder, and M. E. Sarotte, eds., *German Reunification: A Multinational History* (London: Routledge, 2017). For more on the end of the USSR, see S. Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). On the period from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the present, see S. Charap and T. J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (London: IISS, 2017) – I am grateful to the authors for providing me with a draft manuscript of the book to read in advance of publication.

Meanwhile, on foreign policy level, the decisions made and implemented by Bush, Kohl, Gorbachev, Mitterrand, and other leaders in the wake of the opening of the Berlin Wall similarly perpetuated existing Cold War institutions, most notably NATO.⁶ Many dissidents, both from the GDR as well as other Warsaw Pact countries, responded with dismay to the shape of that era. In the view of some of the activists — and despite their revolution — the post-Cold War era had turned out to be one very much still dominated by the Western institutions of the Cold War, rather than, as they would have preferred, new structures created in response to the revolutionary events. As the political scientist Wade Jacoby has memorably phrased it, Central and East Europeans found themselves “ordering from the menu.”⁷

In particular, as pacifists who had opposed the deployment of missiles by both the Warsaw Pact and NATO, former dissident leaders had hoped that Central and Eastern Europe would withdraw from all military blocs and demilitarize completely.⁸ And it was not just former opposition leaders who lamented the lack of a new, truly pan-European organization for addressing security concerns. This lack became particularly apparent in the course of

the 1990s, after the disintegration of Yugoslavia into violence, when no effective European response emerged.⁹

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⁶ M. E. Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward? Bush, Baker, Kohl, Genscher, Gorbachev, and the Origin of Russian Resentment toward NATO Enlargement in February 1990,” *Diplomatic History* 34/1 (January 2010), 119-140, <https://academic.oup.com/dh/article-abstract/34/1/119/379802/Not-One-Inch-Eastward-Bush-Baker-Kohl-Genscher?redirectedFrom=fulltext>; and “Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: The 1990 Deals to ‘Bribe the Soviets Out’ and Move NATO In,” *International Security* 35 (July 2010), 110-37, http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/ISEC_a_00005.

⁷ W. Jacoby, *The Enlargement of the European Union and NATO: Ordering from the Menu in Central Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁸ Sarotte, 1989, p. 187.

⁹ On Yugoslavia and the lacking European response, see J. Glaurdić, *The Hour of Europe: Western Powers and the Breakup of Yugoslavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), and B. Simms, *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (London: Allen Lane, 2001).

3 WORRISOME DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

As the largest of the former post-Soviet republics other than Russia, and one that shared an extensive border with Russia, Ukraine's decisions with regard to its security arrangements were of no small importance to Moscow.

The U.S. prefabrication strategy meant that the post-Cold War security order as developed in the 1990s neither created a new world order, nor instituted a new pan-European security order, nor even defined a clear place for Russia in post-Cold War Europe.¹⁰ Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer have recently offered a similar view; as they phrase it, “the entire post-Cold War European political and security architecture was built on the foundation of two institutions — the EU and NATO — which did not include Russia.”¹¹ Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton find this argument “a worthy one.” As they paraphrase it, Western leaders essentially built their strategy on the hope, or the assumption, that “Russia would eventually accept these institutions; that was clearly a bad wager.” The year 2004 marked the high-water point of this prefabrication strategy. In that year, the so-called “big bang” moment occurred, expanding the membership of both the EU and NATO significantly — most notably, into former Soviet territory itself, by way of the Baltic States. By that point, Charap and Colton argue, “the best opportunity to forge a new, inclusive order for Europe and Eurasia had passed.”¹²

The consequences of these developments became starkly apparent in the way that Moscow pushed back against the developments in both Georgia and Ukraine, which saw the two most prominent of the early 21st century “color revolutions.” That pushback was, for example, violently on display in 2008, when Russia used direct military intervention in Georgia to escalate a territorial dispute into a

major crisis, and to quash that state’s hopes of joining NATO.¹³ The Bucharest NATO summit earlier that year had indicated that Ukraine and Georgia would become member states at some point.¹⁴ While meant as a delaying tactic — the actual step that NATO should have taken, if it had wanted to start the process of making Georgia and Ukraine members, would have been to offer individualized “Membership Accession Plans” or MAPs to both countries — the message received in Moscow appears to have been the opposite: NATO was moving farther east. Russian President Vladimir Putin responded, it appears, in a way he found appropriate: with force. And, while aimed specifically at Georgia, Putin’s 2008 intervention also served as a symbolic response to all of the color revolutions — notably Ukraine’s.

As the largest of the former post-Soviet republics other than Russia, and one that shared an extensive border with Russia, Ukraine’s decisions with regard to its security arrangements were of no small importance to Moscow. While the 2010 presidential victory of an ally, Viktor Yanukovich, heartened Moscow, popular Ukrainian interest in cooperation with Western institutions, most notably the EU, remained a strong source of concern for Russia. When Yanukovich, under pressure from Moscow, put an end in late 2013 to efforts by Brussels to negotiate and sign an Association Agreement with Kyiv, dramatic popular protests resulted. These in turn led to the well-known

¹⁰ Sarotte, 1989, Conclusion.

¹¹ R. Menon and E. Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order* (Boston: MIT Press, 2015), p. 162.

¹² Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, quotations at p. 26 and p. 73.

¹³ For more on this conflict, see R. D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). See also C. Miller, “Why Russia’s Economic Leverage is Declining,” *Transatlantic Academy*, April 2016, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/why-russias-economic-leverage-declining>.

¹⁴ For the official text of the Bucharest Summit Declaration, see http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm.

and tragic sequence of events in February 2014 and beyond. Summarized briefly, after Yanukovych fled in the face of protests over the shootings of demonstrators, Putin decided once again to violate the post-Cold War norm that borders should not be changed by force. Concealed as irregulars, Russian forces moved into Crimea, leading to Russian annexation of the territory. They also became involved in combat in eastern regions of Ukraine. The two “Minsk protocols” of September 2014 and February 2015 (organized under joint Franco–German leadership, with U.S. backing) and the sanctions imposed on Moscow by the EU, United States, and their allies have (at least somewhat) decreased levels of violence in eastern Ukraine. They have provided a minimal form of political, rather than violent, interaction – though they have failed to solve the conflict in any significant way.

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Because the Western strategy perpetuated pre-existing Cold War structures, it perpetuated old tensions as well.

To recap: during the critical ordering moment at the end of the Cold War, U.S. and West German leaders worked closely together to ensure that NATO, and not a new pan-European alternative, would remain the bedrock of European security. There were obviously many compelling reasons to follow such a strategy, not least the enormous (and, indeed, perhaps insurmountable) burden of developing a credible alternative in a short time frame. The point here is not to argue the merits of that strategy, but rather to shine a light on its consequences: By design, Russia was left on the periphery of post-Cold War European security arrangements. The strategy of the West was the assumption, or hope, that Russia would gradually accommodate itself to that reality. At first too weakened by the end of the Cold War to respond, Russia did not push back strongly, and Western leaders began to work on the assumption that Russia had developed a long-term willingness to accept the prefabrication policy.¹⁵ The worrisome events in this century, however, show that Putin was ultimately unwilling to do so, and now tensions reminiscent of the past have returned.

A debate has emerged over whether to call what has now emerged a new Cold War, or something different. The dispute is somewhat of a semantic one. As Dmitri Trenin, the head of the Moscow office of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has recently written, the name applied to the new U.S.–Russian tensions is not as important as the fact that they exist: “the situation in Western-

Russian relations may now be as bad, and as dangerous, as at any time during the Cold War, but it is bad and dangerous in its own new way.”¹⁶ Similarly, Kimberly Marten, a professor at Barnard College and the head of Columbia University’s Harriman Institute, has also offered a frightening assessment of the current status of relations between the former superpower foes: “Putin’s aggression makes the possibility of a war in Europe between nuclear-armed adversaries frighteningly real.” Marten argues that there are, in fact, a number of scenarios that could result in actual conflict, whether an accidental encounter between aircraft, or renewed attempts by Putin to claim territory for Russian control.¹⁷

Because the Western strategy perpetuated pre-existing Cold War structures, it perpetuated old tensions as well. As a result, the current status of tense relations with Russia has a strong *déjà vu* element to it. Once again NATO worries about the Russian bear menacing its neighbors to the East. Once again, Western allies huddle in consultations over how best to deal with Moscow. Once again, the nuclear specter threatens Europe, Russia, and the United States. As a result, given that the threats are familiar, the policy prescriptions are familiar — if disheartening — because they are in many cases the same policy prescriptions that guided U.S. policy during the Cold War. Of course, it remains to be seen whether the Trump administration will be able to develop a coherent, sustained policy approach to Russia in the face of multiple investigations into contacts

¹⁵ For more on the history of Russian military strength and weakness, not just in this time period but beyond, see the work of Brian Taylor, including his books *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and *State Building in Putin’s Russia: Policing and Coercion after Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ D. Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?* (London: Polity Press, 2016), p. 2.

¹⁷ K. Marten, “Reducing Tensions Between Russia and NATO,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 2017, <http://www.cfr.org/nato/reducing-tensions-between-russia-nato/p38899>, p. 4.

between Trump's associates and Moscow. If it can, however, the following reflections could provide historically informed guidance:

Pursue as much dialogue as possible while building up as much strength as necessary. Put bluntly, regardless of their nationality, Western policymakers are once again in a position where they need, as during the Cold War, to continue active dialogue, but also bolster their own capabilities. This strategy served Western policymakers well during the Cold War and, sadly, has become newly relevant. It is for this reason that President Trump's on-again, off-again attacks on NATO's relevance — as of the time of writing, he had most recently declared NATO to be no longer obsolete — come at a particularly unfortunately moment. Now is the time to reaffirm, not to undermine, NATO's unity.

Go back to basics. NATO is already going back to Cold War concepts — such conventional deterrence against Russia — in its establishment of a rapid reaction force ready to undertake air, land, sea, and special operation tasks on minimal notice. In so doing, it has to respect the language of the NATO–Russia Founding Act, whereby the United States pledged not to have a “permanent” military presence close to Russia's borders. NATO policymakers have come to the realization, however, that, if not permanent, a “persistent” presence is both possible and necessary. The reaction force is one manifestation of that view. And, on a larger scale, the pledge made by European NATO member states at the Wales summit of September 2014 under former President Barack Obama to move toward the goal of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense, is now being followed — if not by immediate fulfillment

(an admittedly impossible goal), then at least by genuine movement in that direction by many member states, including Germany. U.S. policymakers need to be careful, however, to avoid giving the impression that they, and not the elected parliamentarians of the relevant European states involved, are the ones who set national defense budgets. Such perceived “arm-twisting” could feed already high levels of anti-Americanism. Rather, the focus should be on actual capabilities, not on numbers divorced from the practical consequences of such increased spending.

“Preconsult” consultations. As mentioned above, after the Ukrainian violence of 2014 the Germans, together with the French, spearheaded the contacts that resulted in the Minsk accords. Such efforts by Germany, France, and the United States need to be continued, ideally in consultation between the Trump administration and its European partners.¹⁸ German policymakers worry that the Trump team may be willing to enter into bilateral agreements on a case-by-case basis without prior consultations with the EU in general and Germans in particular. Such “unconsulted” developments could be extremely dangerous. If the Trump administration took, say, unilateral action on missile defense; or made unilateral statements about Ukraine which could be interpreted as a deal codifying the seizing of Ukrainian territory or Ukraine belonging to a Russian sphere of influence; or, in a worst-case scenario, offered to talk about Baltic security in a bilateral way as part of other deal-making;

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¹⁸ On this topic, see M. Kimmage, “Getting Beyond Minsk: Toward a Resolution of the Conflict in Ukraine,” Transatlantic Academy, May 2017, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/getting-beyond-minsk-toward-resolution-conflict-ukraine>.

In seeking to begin this dialogue, both U.S. and German negotiators should capitalize on, without overtly referring to or offering approval for, a sense in Moscow that it is achieving some of its goals in the security arena.

then the damage to transatlantic relations and European security could be profound and irreparable.

Create confidence-building measures. U.S. and German policymakers need to emphasize that a dialogue with Russia must be a priority, both to maximize chances of success and minimize chances of harm to transatlantic and inner-NATO relations. High-level U.S.–Russian contacts under Obama, despite initial enthusiasm about a “reset” in U.S.–Russian relations, tapered notably by the time Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 and foundered after Russia gave safe haven to Edward Snowden. President Obama canceled a bilateral presidential summit in Moscow, citing “not enough recent progress in our bilateral agenda” as the reason.¹⁹ Such contacts were largely eliminated following the invasion of Crimea in 2014 (among other things, the U.S.–Russian Presidential Commission was terminated at that time).²⁰ But, despite frosty relations, high-level dialogue remains essential. If need be, it could focus on practical matters, such as developing upon the de-confliction procedures already in place for operations in Syria. Trump’s unexpected Tomahawk missile strikes on Syria in April 2017 in response to a chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime show just how important such measures are. There also remain a number of practical issues to discuss with regards to the Baltic and Black Sea regions. For example: would it be possible to agree that aircraft in those regions will

consistently enable their transponders while in flight to avoid such accidents? Are there other areas of mutual interest where consultations could begin, such as establishing the possibility for Russian inspections of the missile defense sites under construction in Central and Eastern Europe? In this regard, Marten goes even further. She has suggested that Western policymakers should publicly link the planned deployment of a ballistic-missile defense interceptor system in Poland to Iran fulfilling its commitments in the nuclear nonproliferation deal reached in 2015: “To demonstrate that this BMD system is indeed designed against a threat from Iran and not Russia, the United States should reach agreement with Poland that missiles will be stored on U.S. territory” unless an Iranian violation of the accord necessitates their installment.²¹ In essence, negotiations need to rely on another Cold War concept: creating confidence-building measures.

Instrumentalize Russian self-regard. In seeking to begin this dialogue, both U.S. and German negotiators should capitalize on, without overtly referring to or offering approval for, a sense in Moscow that it is achieving some of its goals in the security arena. Putin is now certain that no other state can achieve any significant outcome in contested areas such as Syria or Ukraine without his consent. And, the imminent NATO accession of Montenegro notwithstanding, Putin has stopped the forward movement of the alliance into the former Soviet space indefinitely and, most likely, permanently. These goals, which count as major victories in Moscow’s view, have been achieved with violence and at tragic cost. Given that there are few good options

¹⁹ D. Robert and A. Luhn, “Obama cancels meeting with Putin over Snowden asylum tensions,” *The Guardian*, August 7, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/07/obama-putin-talks-canceled-snowden>.

²⁰ The author is grateful to Michael Kimmage for making many of these points, along with other helpful suggestions.

²¹ Marten, “Reducing Tensions Between Russia and NATO,” p. 35-36.

for reversing the tragedies that have unfolded, however, acknowledging the fact that Moscow has to be consulted on such issues might open up possibilities for progress in areas where progress is still possible. In essence, Putin's goal is, to use a German phrase, to be at Augenhöhe, or eye-level, with senior Western partners; if he feels that he is being treated as such, the chances of success in dialogue increase. As Marten has argued, treating Russian leaders as heads of a major, rather than a regional, power, might also help facilitate diplomacy. This is admittedly a matter more of style than of substance, and so a small one, but diplomacy has entered an era where every effort will be necessary to achieve even limited goals.²²

Manage perceptions and self-perceptions.

While it is still early days in the Trump era, the importance of the self-perception of this president, while never small in any administration, has become a factor to consider in policymaking. Professional policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic will need to factor in, and account for, the self-perception needs of not just the Russian but also of the American president. As one former NATO official has said off the record, government officials in the area of European security need to find a way to let Trump take credit for developments that are in fact the result of long-term work on both sides of the Atlantic. In other words, let the president take credit for the movement toward increased defense spending on the part of European NATO member states and claim that it started only under his presidency. This is hardly an unusual procedure in a large organization, but is particularly important now. Policymakers will also, sadly, need to manage

their own perceptions of what is possible. An era of diminished possibility has dawned, and wise public servants will accordingly diminish their expectations for themselves and others, if only to preserve their sanity.

Recognize particular challenges for Germany.

The recommendations above apply largely to policymakers in both the United States and Europe. It is worth mentioning, however, the particular challenge facing German policymakers. On the one hand, Germany under Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership has evinced strong support for NATO, both under the former Obama administration and the Trump administration. As indicated above, Merkel has already indicated a willingness to work on burden-sharing concerns by moving Germany closer to spending 2 percent of its GDP on defense. Such a build-up, if it does occur, would not be without political consequences in Europe. Neighbors might not welcome such a military build-up uncritically, as recent media accounts have pointed out.²³ And, although such an increase would in theory be occurring in response to a desire from Washington, the build-up would take place in an era of rising tensions and would therefore hardly represent uncritical acquiescence to the wishes of Washington. As a recent poll noted, by early 2017 Germans had become more worried about Trump's policies than Putin's.²⁴

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²² Marten, "Reducing Tensions Between Russia and NATO," p. 33.

²³ A. Faiola, "In the era of Donald Trump, Germans debate a military buildup," *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-the-era-of-trump-germans-debate-a-military-buildup/2017/03/05/d7fc2ef6-fd16-11e6-a51a-e16b4bcc6644_story.html?utm_term=.184d4ca33f4e.

²⁴ A. Faiola, "Poll: Germans are More Concerned about Trump's Policies than Putin's," *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/02/17/poll-germans-are-more-concerned-about-trumps-policies-than-putins/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.6aa5f8417cba.

There are no easy answers to this conundrum. The dictum that Germany should seek to attain both as much strength as necessary and as much dialogue as possible still applies, but it will be a particular challenging strategy to implement, and Germany will need to emphasize inter-European consultation in particular as it does so.

The fact that these kind of policy recommendations are once again current is a sad and sobering development. At the end of the Cold War, it seemed as if a new era of partnership between the West and Russia might begin. But that era never fully emerged; instead, a situation of sustained tension, punctuated by crisis, now prevails. This is, obviously, a problem — and, put bluntly, one that United States or German or European policymakers cannot solve, only manage. The need to do so is pressing, however, because the potential risks involved are enormous. The challenge now is to avoid returning to a geopolitical situation in which the threat of that catastrophic conflict could arise again — in other words, a situation in which the film “The Day After” would become more than just a historical curiosity.

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