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**INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS
OF RUSSIA'S DECLINE**

Throughout most of the Cold War era, U.S. and NATO military planners prepared and trained to fight a massive land war in Europe (and elsewhere) against the Soviet Union and its allies, with the specter of nuclear exchange ever present in the background. In testament to the skills and capabilities of those planners and to U.S. and NATO military forces as a whole, this preparation and planning successfully deterred conflict and maintained an uneasy peace until the collapse of the USSR brought the Cold War to its end.

Today, Russia poses new threats to the United States and its allies. These are not the traditional threats rooted in an adversary's military capabilities but rather the somewhat more amorphous dangers presented by military, political, and social decline in a strategically important state. They affect U.S. interests directly and indirectly, and even suggest the possibility that one day U.S. military forces will be called for service in or near the Russian Federation itself. Now, as then, U.S. and allied planning and preparation could mitigate that threat as well as guarantee the capability to respond effectively and quickly.

In this report, we discuss the form, extent, and implications of Russia's deterioration and identify its effects on U.S. interests generally and those of the U.S. Air Force in particular. We also consider what actions can be taken now to prevent (or limit) this decline from becoming a threat to U.S. interests.

DECLINING, FAILING, AND DYSFUNCTIONAL STATES

To argue that Russia is a failed state is premature at best, misleading at worst. To argue that Russia is a fully functional entity, however, is also not entirely accurate. Today's Russia has declined from the pinnacles of capability, status, and power attributed (rightly or wrongly) to the Soviet Union at its height to a level low enough to have serious implications. That said, Russia remains a state of real power and influence, although with enormous internal and external problems.

It is often argued that declining or failing states increase the risk of international conflict,¹ particularly in the case of states that are, have been, or hope to become great powers. The mechanisms by which decline translates into war are several. One is that a state that sees itself as declining in power relative to others may seek to wage preemptive war, to fight while it can still win in hopes of retaining control of assets and power. Joseph Nye raises several historical examples of this phenomenon: Thucydides wrote that the Peloponnesian War was precipitated by a declining Sparta's fear of Athens' rise. Hundreds of years later, German fear of growing Russian strength led officials in Berlin to advocate war in 1914 rather than wait until the Russians grew even stronger. Britain entered that same conflict because it hoped to halt German growth, having been unable to reach accommodation with Germany as it had with other powers.²

Increasing domestic political disorder and chaos is another factor that can render a state more war-prone. It has been argued convincingly that political transition generally, whether to a democratic or an autocratic regime, is inherently unstable and increases the likelihood of war. In a democratizing state, the rise of groups and individuals who compete for power in part by appealing to ethnic or nationalist symbols and allegiances can promote conflict. If these symbols apply to only a portion of the population, antagonisms between

¹Thomas Graham and Arnold Horelick, *U.S.-Russian Relations at the Turn of the Century*, Report of the U.S. Working Group on U.S.-Russian Relations, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, May 2000.

²Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Basic Books, New York, 1990. For more on how the decline of great powers can result in conflict, see A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, 2nd ed., Knopf, New York, 1968; and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1981.

groups within and outside the state are created or exacerbated.³ Internal political dissent, whether or not ethnically based, may also lead a state to seek war as a means of fostering unity against a common foe and thus overcoming internal strife.⁴ In Russia's case, aspects of the 1999 invasion of the renegade province of Chechnya may fit such a pattern.

Finally, a declining state's weakness may invite attack from other states who see a window of opportunity to increase their own power through victory and/or conquest.⁵ Geoffrey Blainey points out that wars are fought because combatants believe they can win. The decline of an adversary may well foster such a belief, while the declining state may not realize the extent of its weakness and fail to capitulate.⁶ A variety of factors of regime transition—revolution, for instance—can lead outsiders to see a state as weak and vulnerable (rightly or wrongly).⁷ Decline and state failure are less ambiguous in telegraphing weakness than is regime transition, and therefore might be considered even more likely to spur aggression on the part of others. If the states involved are great powers, their actions tend to have a significant impact throughout the international system, and the dangers of spreading conflict are similarly increased.⁸

If the general fact of Russia's decline raises concern, the specifics of it are no less important. Although Russia cannot be described as a "failed" or "failing" state, it does exhibit several attributes that have been associated with the processes of state failure. Insofar as these

³Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and the Danger of War," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Summer 1995, pp. 5–38. While Mansfield and Snyder demonstrate that transitions as a whole are unstable, they find the fact that this pertains also to transitions to democracy particularly interesting, hence the title of their piece.

⁴See Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, The Free Press, 1988 edition, New York, pp. 72–86.

⁵For an argument on how and why conquest continues to be advantageous to the conqueror, see Peter Liberman, "The Spoils of Conquest," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Fall 1993, pp. 125–153.

⁶See discussion in Blainey, *The Causes of War*, pp. 72–86, 123.

⁷Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1996, p. 32.

⁸On the rise and decline of great powers and resulting proclivities to conflict, see Organski, *World Politics*; and Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*.

processes, and not merely the fact of failure itself, make a state a danger to its own people and the international community, it is worth considering the relevant literature as it applies to Russia.

A state might be thought to be headed toward failure when there are significant concerns about its ability to function as a cohesive and effective centrally governed entity. Civil war and political disintegration may be the results of state failure, but some key indicators that the processes are under way include:

- The absence of a functioning economic system;
- The emergence of rampant corruption and a criminal economy (that takes the place of the absent legal economy);
- The emergence of privatized institutions for personal security; and
- The disintegration of military morale, capability, and command and control.⁹

In short, a state fails when basic rationales for why people come together under a central government—guaranteed personal security, enforcement of the rules of economic transactions, and a reasonable sense of protection from external threat—cease to be effectively served by existing institutions.

While these factors all serve as indicators that a state is declining in particularly dangerous ways, their presence does not necessarily indicate that the state has already failed or even that it will fail in the future. While we can recognize a completely failed state—central control is absent, law and order is nonexistent, and militaries, if they exist, are privatized—there is no clear understanding of what point along the path to decline marks irreversibility, or the greatest danger. It is, however, clear that these indicators serve not only as signposts

⁹It should be noted that state failure is not synonymous with territorial disintegration. On state failure see, Steven R. David, "Saving America from the Coming Civil Wars," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 1, Winter 1999, pp. 103–116; Gerald Helman and Steven R. Ratner, "Saving Failed States," *Foreign Policy*, No. 89, Winter 1992–1993, pp. 3–20; David Hoffman, "Yeltsin's Absentee Rule Raises the Specter of a 'Failed State,'" *Washington Post*, February 26, 1999, p. A1.

of possible state failure but also as dangerous developments in their own right.

Because the dangers posed by a state's decline are often not limited by the borders of that state, outside actors may seek to take steps to halt or reverse the decline (even as, as noted above, others may try to take advantage of it). In addition to the increased risk of conflict, other effects of state deterioration can worry neighbors and others. Internal or international conflict can create refugee problems for nearby states, straining resources and potentially exporting political instability. In today's interdependent world, an increasingly criminalized economy in one state contributes to the rise of criminal activity globally. Thus, when a failing or weak state is unable to respond to crises that affect other states' security interests, its neighbors or other parties may take matters into their own hands.

IS RUSSIA IN DECLINE?

To what extent are the processes of decline and the dangers they embody present in Russia? In this report, we argue that there exist real concerns about the direction of trends in political and economic development, the health and well-being of the population, the state of the Russian military, and the condition of Russia's nuclear power plants and its nuclear-related sector. Moreover, the regional variation in these problems creates additional concerns about the potential for internal unrest and division.

We focus on a few key areas in which recent trends suggest significant decline. These areas do not comprise the sum total of Russia's problems, but we believe they do include the problems that are most likely to lead to crises that affect U.S. interests and might escalate to involve U.S. forces.

First, the continuing evolution of Russia's political and economic structures and institutions is moving in some potentially disturbing directions. It is unclear as yet to what extent President Vladimir Putin and his administration will be able to reverse the processes of political decentralization that gathered force during his predecessor's tenure. Although the current administration has taken a number of steps to reassert central control, the divergence in regional economic, political, and demographic indicators suggests that ad-

ministrative changes may be insufficient to stem this trend and that efforts to do so may even backfire. Moreover, the costs to public and press freedoms that Putin's other reforms appear to be engendering create additional concerns for Russia's future.

The prevalence of corruption and the "routinization" of crime or force in economic life are further symptoms of decline, as is the trend toward the demonetization of Russia's economy. Although recent indicators of economic growth in Russia are positive, their basis in high oil prices and a weak ruble suggests that without comprehensive reform they are likely not sustainable.

Russia's shrinking population suffers from low fertility as well as from high rates of disease and shockingly high levels of mortality among working-age males. If these trends continue, Russia will face a continued graying of its population, which will place added strain on its economy. It will also raise concerns about Russia's ability to man its military. Finally, insofar as demographic factors, no less than economic and political factors, affect regions and ethnic groups differently, they have the potential to play into efforts to mobilize parts of the population in ways that increase the risk of interethnic or interregional conflict, although this is not highly likely.

The Russian military is affected not only by the problems of the country as a whole but by difficulties of its own. The demographic downtrends mean that each year the young men who report for duty are sicker and fewer. The collapse of law and order means that many have criminal backgrounds. The existing military structures are not immune, and tales of corruption and crime extend to the highest levels. Underfunding and poor maintenance continue to take their toll. Equipment ages unrepaired, and troops are sent into battle without adequate training. Soldiers and officers go without pay for months at a time and are increasingly dependent on local governments for political, financial, and other support. In this environment, order and discipline must be questioned, with potentially terrifying implications especially for Russia's nuclear weapons arsenal and related infrastructure, although the impact on the conventional forces alone is sufficient grounds for serious concern.

Finally, there is the decline in Russia's transportation and industrial sectors, including the civilian nuclear power sector. There are mixed

reports about the state of Russia's road, rail, and other transport networks. Although the networks appear to be functioning, they are far from a peak condition of efficiency and safety. In the industrial sectors, including nuclear power, production and efficiency are low, workers are unpaid for months at a time, and facilities are aging. The risk of accidents and the difficulties of responding to such accidents quickly and effectively are thus increased.

These factors, singly and together, increase the likelihood of crisis and demonstrate the extent of Russia's decline as a great power. While Russia's relative weakness makes it unlikely that it will wage aggressive war against another great power, the theory and experience of both declining states and those undergoing complex and uncertain transitions suggest the possibility of Russia lashing out against a neighbor or a weaker state. The possibility of internal conflict rooted in ethnic tension within Russia or its political devolution is also increased.

Both increased conflict propensity and Russian infrastructure deterioration in turn increase the likelihood of a humanitarian catastrophe, whether from war itself, from an industrial or nuclear accident, from a health crisis, or from physical and economic isolation of parts of the country. Whether the result is refugees; hunger and mass starvation; spread of radiation; or an epidemic, the situation is unlikely to be limited to Russian soil alone. Moreover, Russian weakness makes it more difficult for its own security and emergency forces to effectively respond, aggravating the problem. There are those who would argue that while this bodes ill for Russia, it has little impact on the United States. Such an argument ignores several key U.S. interests that are directly affected by Russia's future.

- **The security of Washington's European and Asian allies who are directly affected by what happens in and near Russia and by stability on Russia's periphery.** Whether the threat is from radiation or refugees or involves the spread of violence, U.S. allies have excellent reasons to fear an increased Russian propensity to crisis.

- **The secure and reliable export of energy resources from the Caspian basin.**¹⁰ Most of the export pipelines from the Caspian basin go through Russia. Furthermore, Russia's strong interests in the Caspian ensure that it will remain deeply involved there, even if more non-Russian pipelines are built.
- **The assurance of nuclear security and prevention of nuclear use, either sanctioned or otherwise.** Insofar as Russian deterioration increases the risks that portions of its nuclear weapons stockpile (or other materials) could be employed or diverted into dangerous hands, the United States has a vital interest in these events.
- **The prevention of the rise, growth, maintenance, or acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by terrorist groups.** The growth of criminal activity in Russia combined with the potential for failure of central control in parts of the country create a real danger of cooperation between criminals and terrorist groups in ways that can hurt the United States and/or its allies. The threat of diversion or acquisition of nuclear or other WMD material by either criminal or terrorist groups also cannot be ignored.
- **The alleviation of mass human suffering wherever it may occur.** The United States has set precedents of willingness and ability to help when a wide range of states have faced humanitarian catastrophes. Washington could well feel a similar imperative to assist Russia in a crisis situation.¹¹

In succeeding chapters, we discuss these key factors of Russia's decline and how continuing deterioration could lead to crisis in ways that affect U.S. interests. We then present a set of notional scenarios for how events could unfold such that the United States might face

¹⁰U.S. officials have repeatedly described Caspian energy resources as a key strategic interest, some even going so far as to call it a vital interest (see, for example, Federico Peña, then U.S. Secretary of Energy, in his testimony on the "U.S. Role in the Caucasus and Central Asia," before the House International Relations Committee on April 30, 1998).

¹¹Operation Provide Hope airlifted food supplies to Russia and other post-Soviet states when the Soviet collapse hampered food and medical distribution throughout the area. Other historical cases of U.S. assistance to various Russian governments include the sending of troops to the Far East in 1918 to guard the railways and assistance under Lend-Lease during World War II.

an imperative to respond with military forces and assets. Finally, we consider the implications for U.S. planning and lay out some recommendations for the future.

