

Evaluating Russian Strategy in Its Near Abroad

A Comparison of the Conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine

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Abstract: Since the turn of the millennium, Ukraine and Georgia have experienced reform movements aimed at rooting out corruption and integrating with Western institutions. Unfortunately, both also suffered wars with Russia intended to stifle their democratic aspirations. Although both conflicts were precipitated under different conditions, there may be some useful conclusions to be drawn from a comparison of the two. If the United States is to continue to support security in Europe, we must understand Russia's strategy, and both the Georgian and Ukrainian conflicts provide a critical window into the Russian approach.

Keywords: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, hybrid war, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, European Union, Eastern Europe, EU, little green men, color revolutions, Maidan Revolution, Euromaidan, Orange Revolution, Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili, Petro Poroshenko, Viktor Yanukovych, separatism, Crimea, Donbass, Luhansk, Donetsk, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Vladimir Putin

In February 2014, the world watched with a mixture of horror and awe as Ukraine, geographically the largest country within continental Europe and a historic gateway between East and West, underwent a deadly revolution.

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It resulted in the overthrow of its authoritarian president and the installation of a reform-minded, Western-looking regime. Amid the chaos in Kyiv's central square, Russian proxy forces began to appear in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.¹ Taking advantage of preformed misconceptions about the Ukrainian government and appealing to a pan-Slavic, anti-Western, Russo-centric cultural identity, Russia and its proxies illegally annexed Crimea and instigated a war that has claimed more than 10,000 lives and that continues today.² Outright conflict on the doorstep of NATO has increased tensions in the region and caused Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to request an increased presence from their NATO allies.³ The conflict in Ukraine has clear repercussions for the security regime that the United States and its allies have painstakingly constructed in the decades following World War II. Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, in a 2018 speech, noted the threat:

We see the Russian Federation as the nation closest to us in nuclear parity, and [it has] proven willing to use conventional and irregular power in violation of international norms. For the first time since World War II, Russia has been the nation that has redrawn international borders by force of arms in Georgia and Ukraine, while pursuing veto authority over their neighbors' diplomatic, economic and security decisions.⁴

Russia's actions in Ukraine were a surprising breach of international law, and as Secretary Mattis notes, Ukraine is not the only recent victim of Russian ambitions. Russia instigated a similar conflict in Georgia in 2008, and it has pursued a strategy of expansion since at least 2004. The tactics employed by the Russians in Georgia were then refined and reapplied, to much greater effect, in Ukraine. To obtain a more holistic view of Russia's strategic direction, we must thoroughly examine the conflicts that have defined its path in recent history. Comparing both conflicts may provide valuable insights and allow us to come to accurate and useful conclusions regarding the ongoing struggle for stability and security in both NATO's European member states and Eastern Europe as a whole.

This article provides a brief history of the Georgian and Ukrainian conflicts. Then, it will explore the ways in which the conflicts differ and the implications of those differences. Finally, the article will offer a broader analysis of Russian strategy in its near abroad and a projection of its future strategies.⁵

The Ukrainian Conflict

Ukraine is a diverse country with a tumultuous history. The landmass of modern-day Ukraine has been part of several different empires, and although the country has not been independent for more than 40 years in its entire his-

Map 1. Map of modern-day Ukraine



Source: courtesy of *On the World Map*, adapted by MCUP.

tory, its central role in European and Eurasian history cannot be overlooked. The modern conflict in Ukraine is both a consequence and a casualty of the turbulent history that brought it to its current station.

The Slavic peoples of the Dnieper River lived in small, fragmented communities for many years, but the arrival of the Vikings in the eighth century brought a governing structure to the land for the first time. The Viking state created in Ukraine eventually became one of the most powerful early medieval European states, Kyivan Rus'.⁶ Modern-day Ukrainian activists often refer to Kyivan Rus' to underline the historical importance of Ukraine. Following the dissolution of Rus' in the twelfth century, Ukraine's lands shuffled hands between the rulers of the Golden Horde, Lithuania, Poland, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Crimean Khanate. The 1654 Pereyaslav Agreement sealed Ukraine's fate as a country divided between Russia in the east and Poland in the west.⁷ With the border cleanly demarcated by the Dnieper River, many of Ukraine's modern-day frustrations arise from the centuries of separation that began after the Pereyaslav Agreement (map 1).

The modern history of Ukrainian independence begins with the fall of the Russian monarchy in 1917. As the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks fought for control of Moscow, Ukraine gained its independence for a brief period.⁸ However, after Bolshevik consolidation in the Kremlin, war came to Ukraine, this time to ensure Russia's neighbor would cooperate with the political changes sweeping

the country. As a result, the Ukrainian state merged with the Soviet Union, becoming one of its founding members.⁹ Soviet promises to uphold Ukrainian culture were quickly forgotten as Russification became policy in the 1930s. Then, Holodomor, a man-made famine caused by Soviet policy during the shift to Russification, claimed the lives of between 2.5 and 7.5 million Ukrainians.¹⁰ Ukrainian nationhood continued to be subjugated throughout Soviet rule. After the dissolution of the union in 1991, Ukraine finally received its independence.¹¹ In the 1991 referendums for independence, there was broad support throughout the mainland for separation from the Soviet Union. The situation in Crimea was more complicated, as Crimean authorities initially declared their independence from Ukraine then immediately amended the constitution to declare the peninsula a largely autonomous region of Ukraine. Crimea's legal status was finally settled in 1998 as the Ukrainian parliament ratified a version of the Crimean constitution that surrendered more control to Kyiv.¹²

The current conflict is the second of two major political movements that swept Ukraine in the period following Soviet rule. In 2004, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian protesters came to Kyiv's central square, *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* (Independence Square), to protest the fraudulent election of the prime minister and heir apparent to the Kuchma regime, Viktor Yanukovich, to the office of president. The nonviolent Orange Revolution, as it came to be known, was successful, and a second round of elections found Viktor Yushchenko victorious. However, political infighting between Yushchenko and Yuliya Tymoshenko, his prime minister, destroyed the political alliance that rose to power in the revolution. Capitalizing on the weaknesses of the pro-European coalition, Yanukovich was then reelected in the presidential race of 2012.¹³ In the 2014 crisis, rising doubt in the regime of Viktor Yanukovich again came to a head as he refused to sign an association agreement with the European Union (EU). A small student-led protest arose in Kyiv's central square, but when the protesters were brutally beaten by the police, the movement grew exponentially until hundreds of thousands of protesters marched on the streets in late November.

Although the protests started as a response to the decision not to sign the association agreement, they became more generally focused against Yanukovich and his corrupt practices. As more protesters joined the movement, Ukrainian security forces continued employing heavy-handed tactics, shocking many in both Ukraine and the Western world. This eventually gave way to outright revolution, as the streets of Kyiv became the site of daily clashes between police and protesters. The situation came to its conclusion on a cold night in February, when the disgraced president fled the country after his security forces unleashed a murderous force of snipers on unarmed protesters the previous day, killing dozens.¹⁴

Map 2. Ukraine contact line as of October 2016

Source: courtesy of Ministry of Defense, Ukraine, adapted by MCUP.

As Kyiv was dealing with revolution and the world was watching the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, soldiers in Russian military camouflage, yet without insignia, quietly began to infiltrate key government structures in Crimea, and Russian disinformation began to stoke anti-Ukrainian sentiment in the eastern portion of the country.¹⁵ Before the end of the crisis, Russia would illegally annex Crimea with the help of irregular military forces supported by the Russian naval base in Sevastopol, and the situation in eastern Ukraine would devolve into war. Independent reporting and analysis confirmed the presence of Russian troops and military equipment in eastern Ukraine, and in 2015, analysts placed the number of Russian troops in the country at approximately 12,000 (map 2).¹⁶

The front line of the war in eastern Ukraine went as far west as Mariupol, a prominent Ukrainian port city, but eventually stalemated at a line roughly coincident with the capital cities of Donetsk and Luhansk late in 2014.¹⁷ While the international community brokered a number of cease-fire agreements, fighting still intermittently rages along the contact line. An independent monitoring mission commissioned by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has estimated that there have been more than 35,000 casualties, including more than 10,000 deaths, both civilian and military.¹⁸

Map 3. Modern-day Georgia



Source: courtesy of United Nations Cartographic Section, adapted by MCUP.

The Georgian Conflict

The Republic of Georgia is a small country in the Caucasus mountains (map 3). Nestled into a beautiful mountain range well-known for skiing and wine production, the country has been a vacation destination of Russia's most influential businessmen and politicians throughout much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Joseph Stalin himself was Georgian, and international condemnation of his actions has not completely penetrated his native land. Even today, there is a museum to Stalin in his mountainous Georgian hometown, Gori. Ironically, it lies only a few miles from the Georgian National Defense Academy, one of the Georgian military's intellectual centers.

Georgia is a nation with a proud history. At its height during the early Middle Ages, its territory encompassed a large percentage of the Black Sea's shoreline, and the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the oldest churches in the world.¹⁹ Today, there are nearly 5 million people in Georgia who participate in a vibrant democracy with overwhelming aspirations to join the EU and, to a lesser extent, NATO.²⁰

Throughout its history, independent Georgia has struggled with a number of ethnically charged conflicts. There are three autonomous regions in Georgia: Adjara, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Adjara is home to a popular beach city,

Batumi, and after a 2004 crisis there in which an authoritarian regional leader was pressured to resign, it has been firmly under Georgian control.²¹ However, there is a long history of ethnic tension, fueled by Russian incitement, especially in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Throughout a series of wars there in the 1990s, it became clear that a special solution was needed for these regions.²²

The situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was never resolved, however, and the path toward war with Russia began with Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2004. In a series of events like those in Ukraine, the 2004 presidential election in Georgia was considered fraudulent to many. The incumbent regime clung to power despite evidence that Mikheil Saakashvili had been victorious. The general populace, exhausted by years of perceived corruption centered around the regime of Eduard Shevardnadze, came to the streets to protest his continued grip on power. Shevardnadze tried to consolidate his hold on the Georgian presidency, but much of the military refused to support him. Out of options, he resigned, and Saakashvili assumed the presidency.²³

Saakashvili was decidedly in favor of greater Georgian integration with NATO and the EU, and his party was openly anti-Russian. As his government took a number of steps to increase their cooperation with the EU and participation in NATO's primary conflicts, Russian opposition to Georgia's new political direction crystallized. Soon after Saakashvili assumed the presidency, the Georgian military began a period of heavy cooperation with NATO that continues today. Defense cooperation with Georgia includes both training and operational support, and the Georgian military has fought alongside the United States and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2003. In fact, of all the countries that have participated in the Afghanistan War, Georgia has suffered the most—it has lost more soldiers killed in action per capita than any other country in the world.²⁴ The strong NATO-Georgia relationship was, and continues to be, unacceptable to Russia.²⁵ After Georgia started down this path, conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia may have been inevitable as Russia sought to assert its dominance over its neighbor and send an unequivocal message—that Georgia did not belong in the EU and NATO.

In the years following Saakashvili's election to the presidency, tensions escalated in Georgia's breakaway regions. Russia and Georgia agreed to establish a joint peacekeeping force under Russian command, but the international community was not invited, and UN and OSCE monitoring efforts were limited.²⁶ Russia, meanwhile, began improving its military infrastructure in the region, preparing to quickly shuttle troops and supplies to the Caucasus if necessary.²⁷ The situation remained relatively stable, however, until NATO's 2008 summit in Bucharest, Romania.

There, NATO's member states, conflicted on how to approach Ukraine and

Georgia's applications for membership, decided to defer the decision until later in the year, opting instead to publicly claim that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO."²⁸ This was a shock for Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was preparing to pass the presidency to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. He argued that NATO could provide a direct threat to Russian political sovereignty if it continued to expand eastward.²⁹

A couple of weeks later, a Georgian drone was shot down by a Russian fighter jet, and Russia had begun to surreptitiously build up troop concentrations in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, claiming that the increase was justified by the threat of an impending Georgian attack.³⁰ In early August, a Russian military column advanced through the Roki Tunnel, one of the major thoroughfares through the Georgian Caucasus. President Saakashvili, upon receiving the call from his commanders that conventional Russian forces were making a hostile advance into Georgian territory, ordered an artillery strike. After hanging up the phone, he turned to look at his senior advisors and said, "It has started. Do you think we will end up as Israelis or Palestinians?"³¹

After the Georgians fired on the Russian convoy, the Russian side began a campaign of maneuver warfare that eventually split the country in half. At the southern limit of the Russian advance, it covered the main highway connecting eastern and western Georgia, as well as the primary oil pipeline between the Caspian and the Black seas. While the Russians split the country in half, the government evacuated Tbilisi and prepared to defend the capital. Despite rumors that the Russian army would take the capital, Putin opted to limit his troops' advance to the Georgian administrative boundaries of South Ossetia, which gave the highway and pipeline back to Georgia.³²

Following the cessation of hostilities a few days after the Georgian artillery strike, the Russian forces withdrew to the borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia's government adopted a measure to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and in response President George W. Bush issued a formal denunciation of the move.³³ However, no sanctions or further international action were taken. In the years following the end of the conflict, the Russian military frequently encroaches farther into Georgian territory.³⁴

A Comparison of the Conflicts: Georgia, Ukraine, and the Competition between NATO and Russia

Georgia and Ukraine share several important characteristics. They stand on a similar geographic footprint—and they both share borders with two competing powers, Russia and NATO. There is a developing sense of shared understanding between Ukraine and Georgia. They have taken a similar path toward modern-

ization and integration with the Western world, particularly with NATO, and they have consequently been regarded with the same suspicion by the Kremlin. Today, Ukrainians vacation in Georgia's bustling beach getaway, Batumi, and Georgians watch with pride as Ukraine's newly reformed police force—the brainchild of Georgia's former internal minister, Ekaterine Zguladze—wins back the trust of a Ukrainian nation accustomed to corrupt policing practices.³⁵

Most significantly, however, Georgia and Ukraine share parts of their borders with both Russia and at least one significant NATO ally—Turkey in Georgia's case, and Poland and Romania for Ukraine—yet neither are currently a member of any security agreement. Without an alliance, countries are vulnerable to the vagaries of larger neighbors, and Georgia and Ukraine are no exception.³⁶ Because of this vulnerability, Ukraine and Georgia found themselves in increasingly precarious standing with Russia. Given their stated objectives of Euro-Atlantic integration and Russia's interest to prevent the growth of the pan-Atlantic alliance and the European Union, conflict may have been inevitable.

There are some interesting similarities in Russia's battle plan leading up to conflict in both Ukraine and Georgia. During the peacekeeping phase in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia would issue its passports to any citizen of a breakaway region who could claim to be ethnically Russian.³⁷ In this way, when hostilities intensified, the government could claim that it was invading the regions to protect the Russian people living there. A similar strategy is being employed in Ukraine today.³⁸

Additionally, Russia's powerful information warfare capability was first put on display during the run-up to hostilities in Georgia. Hackers found vulnerabilities in Georgian government websites, and when the conflict turned hot, they struck. For example, on the home page of the Georgian foreign ministry, the contents were replaced by images of Saakashvili and Adolf Hitler superimposed onto one another.³⁹

However, observers have noted that Russia's foreign influence campaigns have evolved considerably since the turn of the millennium. For example, during the 2004 presidential election in Ukraine, masked men came to polling booths to intimidate voters, and voter rolls were significantly and obviously modified to support the pro-Kremlin candidate. In 2014, during another presidential election, in place of masked men and overt voting fraud, pro-Russian hackers infiltrated the computer systems of the voting commission. The hackers installed malware and reported fake results intending to show that an ultranationalist, far-right group had won the presidency in an attempt to discredit the pro-EU factions of Ukraine's government. The breach was only discovered one hour before the official results were announced, but Russian state media continued to report the fake results.⁴⁰

The Georgian conflict provides an interesting case study in the development of Russia's foreign influence strategy. Using a combination of physical and informational effects from the development of new military infrastructure to widespread propaganda proliferation, Russia succeeded in convincing many residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that Russia was their protector against a rapacious, untrustworthy Georgian government.⁴¹ The use of crude cyber-tactics, such as the foreign ministry website hack, demonstrates an early interest in cyber as a domain of political warfare.

Additionally, statements made by Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of Russia's principal propaganda outlet, RT, confirm that the Georgian conflict was a turning point in the development of Russia's information warfare strategy. Noting the importance of preconflict messaging, in a 2013 interview, she said, "Of course, the Defense Ministry can't start training soldiers, preparing weaponry and generally making itself from scratch when the war already started. If we don't have an audience today, tomorrow and the day after, it'll be the same as in 2008 [in Georgia]."⁴² By comparing her news outlet to the military, Simonyan indicates that she believes RT is an arm of Russia's coercive international apparatus, ready to be employed in the service of government objectives. This undermines the credibility of RT and highlights the whole-of-government approach that Russia takes to foreign influence operations.

During the conflict with Russia, pro-Kremlin propaganda focused heavily on claims of Georgian "genocide" against the indigenous population to justify the sudden appearance of more Russian peacekeeping troops. However, in independent investigations conducted after the conclusion of hostilities in 2008, the claims of genocide or ethnic oppression were disproven.⁴³ There were acts of criminal significance conducted by the Georgians and their opponents, to be sure, but to claim that Georgian actions in the area amounted to systematic oppression or genocide do not stand up to reality. Despite this, decades of ethnically charged conflict created a ripe atmosphere for Russian manipulation, exposing Georgia to the onset of war in 2008.

There is little indication in Ukraine's history of government-sponsored oppression against the Russian-speaking minority. While there is a significant Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, claims from the Russian government that the Ukrainian government had systematically oppressed them are simply false. Under Ukrainian law, a region is permitted to establish its own official language through an open democratic process.⁴⁴ In practice, many Ukrainians use the Russian language daily, and there is little to no animosity between speakers of the different languages. One of Ukraine's most popular television shows, *Sluga Naroda*, features a Russian-speaking president of Ukraine who wins the hearts of the citizenry through his sweeping efforts to eliminate corruption. Its widespread popularity demonstrates the in-

significance of language as a point of contention between most Ukrainians.

There was also a large disparity in the degree of international exposure and response to the two conflicts. When the Russian armored column advanced through the Roki Tunnel and the Georgians fired upon them, most Western organizations offered no significant response.⁴⁵ However, when Crimea was illegally annexed and the war kicked off in the Donbass region, Ukraine was suddenly under the international spotlight to a degree not enjoyed by the Georgians. The threat of a disruption in the supply of gas to Western Europe, much of which is delivered from Russia via Ukrainian pipelines, provided an immediate, concrete incentive for governments to become involved.⁴⁶ The shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine's conflict zones with Russia also contributed immensely to the West's interest in this conflict as opposed to the Georgian conflict with Russia.⁴⁷

It is important to note that there are critical differences in the Russian perception of both countries. Georgia held a position of prominence during the Soviet Union as the birthplace of its greatest leader, Joseph Stalin, and as a mountain getaway for the governing elite. However, Georgians are Caucasians, not Slavs, and Ukraine holds a very different place in the Russian national memory. Kyiv is the historical home of Kyivan Rus', a state that both Ukrainians and Russians consider to be their historical predecessor, and Ukrainians and Russians are linked by a history of thousands of years.⁴⁸ This legacy has given many Russians a big brother feeling over Ukraine, which has been noted by Western observers: "Driven by perceptions of shared history, religion, and culture, much of the Russian elite is incapable of thinking about Ukraine other than as a suzerain client."⁴⁹

The final major difference is in Western perceptions of the kindling of both conflicts. Saakashvili was regarded by Western powers, most notably Germany, as a hothead who could not be trusted.⁵⁰ This reputation was confirmed in their eyes when he ordered the artillery strike that kicked off hostilities in 2008.⁵¹ An independent investigation conducted after the conflict concluded that Georgia's president acted rashly and shared responsibility with Russia for the onset of war.⁵² Ukraine has no political leader with a similar reputation. There is little doubt in the eyes of Western observers that the conflict in Ukraine was instigated by powers outside of its boundaries, and it would be difficult to place the blame for the conflict on the shoulders of any pro-Ukrainian politician. The Ukrainian military suffered from desperately low levels of readiness and was largely unprepared for the war. In fact, much of the early fighting was done not by government forces but volunteer battalions composed of armed civilians and funded by Ukrainian oligarchs.⁵³ This lack of an organized response is, ironically, one of Ukraine's biggest advantages in its struggle for territorial integrity. It demonstrates that Ukraine is the victim of a Russian plot against its territorial

integrity, and comments made by Putin in the subsequent years have confirmed this perspective.⁵⁴

The Way Forward

In Ukraine and Georgia, Russia experienced both strategic gains and setbacks. Although the military equilibrium was shifted in Russia's favor in both instances, neither conflict could extinguish the liberal, pro-European political movements that had been the genesis of Russian grievances from the start. Russia was spurred to action in both Georgia and Ukraine by the establishment of regimes that hoped to increase their countries' integration with Western institutions. As a result of the conflicts, Russia increased its geographical influence and likely assured its ability to project power from the Black Sea region for decades to come. In response, however, NATO has become much more focused on the Russian threat, and both Georgia and Ukraine have continued the path of reform and integration, albeit slowly and imperfectly.

Specifically, in the case of Ukraine, Russia's actions have laid bare the brutality of Russia's intentions. Many were shocked to witness the rapidity with which Russia was able to incite neighbor-on-neighbor violence in the Donbass. This has led to the entrenchment of a severe sense of betrayal among moderate Ukrainians, many of whom accepted an ethnic and historical linkage between the two countries before the conflict. According Wood et al., the conflict has only increased feelings of patriotism and anti-Russian sentiment among Ukrainians: "although only a minority of Ukraine's population was anti-Russian before the crisis, Moscow's resort to war has created a genuine sense of nationhood in parts of that country where previously it had been weak."⁵⁵

The United States and its allies should take every available step to support legitimate governance in the entire region. The continued high level of support that the United States exhibits for its key allies in the region like Romania, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia must remain a priority. If Russian military activity in Eastern Europe continues to escalate, it will be critical to stand firm with our NATO allies in support of stability in the region. Continuous presence is critical, and United States European Command's (EUCOM) many ongoing security cooperation initiatives, such as Atlantic Resolve, Saber Strike, and Marine Rotational Force–Europe should remain a cornerstone of this strategy.

Additionally, the United States should continue its support of the Ukrainian military. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence has come under heavy scrutiny for its low level of readiness. While NATO integration is not an immediate objective, the United States should spearhead the effort to develop the Ukrainian military into a modern, responsible security force capable of containing the crisis and standing as a bulwark against further destabilization in Europe.

The Ukrainian conflict is larger, more deadly, and more shocking than the

war in Georgia. Russia's actions in Ukraine stepped beyond its strategic intent as we knew it at the time. Few observers of Eurasian geopolitics were able to predict the speed and coordination with which Russia would annex Crimea and instigate insurgency in the Donbass. It was a precise and well-executed operation, and its boldness and audacity went beyond most estimates of Russian intention. With Central and Eastern Europe becoming one of the most rapidly militarizing regions on the planet, the future is uncertain and potentially dangerous.⁵⁶

A significant challenge that Western institutions will face as the Ukraine conflict continues is that of strategic patience. Putin was recently reelected, ensuring an approximate continuation of Russian policy for the next six years. Ukraine faces a presidential election in 2019 and the EU suffers a high rate of turnover and political inertia. From the point of view of the ordinary Ukrainian who only desires peace and stability, Russia's influence may become more appealing as the conflict drags on without resolution. Russia is sure to use the full force of its information capabilities to attempt to sway the Ukrainian populace to its side and discredit the Western narrative. Employing a whole-of-government approach and relying on its strategic patience, Russia will likely benefit from conflict fatigue in Ukraine.

Many authors have claimed that the West's unwillingness to unambiguously sanction Moscow for the Georgian war may have emboldened the Kremlin to extend its destabilization operations to Ukraine.⁵⁷ In truth, the United States and its allies offered no concrete challenge to Russia's actions in Georgia. Saakashvili's reputation as a demagogue led many Western governments to come to his aid only slowly, and many policy makers believed that a reset in relations with Russia was more important than punishment. However, the experience in Ukraine has demonstrated the opposite. Considering the failure of deterrence following the Georgian war, NATO and its allies should be ready to quickly update force posture if hostilities were to arise in another buffer state such as Moldova.

One of the main lessons of both Georgia and Ukraine is that Russia can rapidly degrade the security situation before we can react. In both conflicts, Russia had achieved most of its tactical objectives before many Western governments could come to a consensus on what was happening on the ground. Slow response is unacceptable in irregular warfare, and the synchronization of efforts both within and across national governments is a critical step toward achieving an appropriate response framework.

Ultimately, the conflict in Ukraine will likely persist until there is regime change in Moscow or Kyiv. However, the United States and its allies should continue to display a unified front and promote stability in Europe as a whole. NATO's nuclear and conventional deterrent has so far been successful in containing Russian military activity to buffer states. Despite this, Putin and his

security apparatus will take advantage of any perceived weakness in the U.S.-led status quo. If the United States and its European allies desire a peaceful future for Europe, it must be enforced through a strong stance at its eastern doorstep, expressed through both diplomatic and military means.

Conclusion

In closing, it is critical to note that the war of ideas provides the first line of defense. In an increasingly connected world, the battlefield can be shaped through information operations well before a conflict goes kinetic. As we prepare for a more uncertain future, we must continue to emphasize democratic values and international integration in the region. According to Secretary of Defense Mattis,

Putin seeks to shatter NATO. He aims to diminish the appeal of the Western democratic model and attempts to undermine America's moral authority. His actions are designed not to challenge our arms, at this point, but to undercut and compromise our belief in our ideals.⁵⁸

The secretary of defense is right; our center of gravity is not a weapons system, a formation of troops, or a command and control network, but our belief in the defining principles of our democracy, such as freedom of expression, respect for the law, and support for the development of democratic ideals. As the key terrain of the ongoing great power competition, this belief should continue to serve as the defining characteristic of our security policy in Eastern Europe and throughout the world.

Notes

1. Ukraine's capital has two different spellings: Kyiv and Kiev. Kyiv is the official Ukrainian transliteration of the name and is used most frequently within Ukraine, while Kiev is an outdated Russian transliteration from Soviet times.
2. *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine 16 August to 15 November 2017* (Geneva, Switzerland: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017); and Pavel Polityuk and Anton Zverev, "Why Ukrainian Forces Gave up Crimea Without a Fight—and NATO Is Alert," *Reuters*, 24 July 2017.
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4. Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, "Remarks by Secretary Mattis at the U.S. Naval War College Commencement, Newport, Rhode Island," Department of Defense, 15 June 2018.
5. Steven Erlanger, "The World; Learning to Fear Putin's Gaze," *New York Times*, 25 February 2001. The term *near abroad* encompasses the former countries of the Soviet Union.
6. Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 41.
7. Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 103.
8. A Bolshevik is member of a wing of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party, which, led by Vladimir Lenin, seized control of the government in Russia (October

- 1917) and became the dominant political power; a Menshevik is a member of the non-Leninist wing of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party, which evolved into a separate organization.
9. Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 219.
 10. LtCol Donald Thieme, USMC, "A Brief History of Conflict in Ukraine," *USNI News*, 11 March 2014.
 11. Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 315.
 12. J. Gordon Hylton, "Understanding the Constitutional Situation in Crimea," *Marquette University Law School Faculty Blog* (blog), 16 March 2014.
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