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The Soviet legacy in Russian security policy

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After the Soviet Union broke apart in late December 1991 and the Russian Federation emerged as an independent country, Russian political leaders had to confront a wide range of foreign policy issues left over from the Soviet regime. The series of agreements codifying the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which led to the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and broad international recognition of 15 new states by the end of 1991, designated Russia as the ‘legal successor state’ to the USSR, a status that, for many Russian leaders (both then and now), has blurred Soviet and Russian interests. As the official successor state, Russia was given sole possession of the vast Soviet nuclear arsenal and was also awarded the USSR’s permanent seat on the United Nations (UN) Security Council.¹ In return, Russia took ultimate responsibility for the Soviet Union’s foreign hard-currency debt to both private and government creditors. These and other formal aspects of the Soviet inheritance were bound to affect Russian foreign policy after 1991.

Equally important have been the informal dimensions of the Soviet legacy. The sense of a ‘loss of empire’ and of a continuity with the Soviet ‘superpower’ past have influenced the orientation, methods, and goals of Russian foreign policy over time, particularly after the mid- to late 1990s. As Lev Gudkov notes in the epigraph to this essay, the institutions and mindsets of the Soviet era were so deeply engrained that they could not be eradicated in a single generation or two. Indeed, far from diminishing, they have gained ever greater tenacity in the wake of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and military intervention in Syria from 2015 on.

By now, nearly three decades after the Soviet Union disintegrated, some elements of the Soviet legacy have disappeared or abated, but others have endured. This essay briefly reviews the sundry aspects of the Soviet legacy, both formal and informal.² Russian foreign and security policy has departed from Soviet policy in numerous ways, but a good deal of continuity has also been evident.
The legacy of personnel and worldviews

One key reason for the relatively high degree of continuity with the Soviet past was the carryover of personnel. Many of the senior and mid-ranking Russian foreign policy officials, nearly all of the highest-ranking Russian military and intelligence officers, and a sizeable number of Russian political leaders got their start in public life during the Soviet era. Although all organs of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) ceased to exist after August 1991, most of the Soviet government bureaucracy, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), the diplomatic corps, the Ministry of Defence, the State Security apparatus (the KGB, which was preserved largely unchanged but separated into what became the Federal Security Service, or FSB, and the Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR), and other Soviet ministries and agencies handling foreign policy and national security were absorbed almost wholly intact by the Russian Federation after 1991 (Fedor, 2011).

The establishment of a presidential system in Russia, codified by the December 1993 constitution, meant that the highest policymaking organs in Russia were shaped and reshaped to conform to the post-Soviet era, but nearly all of the officials who served on these bodies got their start in the CPSU or the Soviet government (or both) (Gill, 1998). Although the passage of time has allowed for the emergence of younger elites who came of age after the breakup of the USSR, most of the officials on Russia’s highest foreign policymaking and security bodies as of 2018 worked for the Soviet regime prior to 1991. In part for this reason, their outlook on foreign policy issues and on Russia’s legitimate place in the world has tended to replicate some of the Weltanschauung of their Soviet past. Some, such as Vladimir Putin, Igor Sechin, Sergei Naryshkin, Nikolai Patrushev, Aleksandr Bortnikov, Viktor Zolotov, Andrei Belyaninov, Dmitrii Kochnev, Sergei Ivanov, and others who emerged from the KGB’s ranks, have tended to embrace many of the concepts that characterised Soviet foreign policy in the years before it was transformed by the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. The ‘new thinking’ in foreign policy under Gorbachev never took hold at the KGB.

During the first several years of the post-Soviet period, all of the mid-level and senior officials working in Russia’s foreign policy and national security-related ministries had begun their careers under the Soviet regime. With time, some younger officials have joined these agencies in significant capacities, but the majority of the most influential foreign policy advisers are still holdovers from the Soviet period. To varying degrees, they have adapted to the post–Cold War era and to Russia’s altered place in the world, but large bureaucracies are slow to change, and institutional outlooks tend to persist for years. Hence, it is not surprising that advice and inputs from the foreign policy and security agencies after 1991 have often reflected these bodies’ Soviet pedigree.

The impact of the Soviet institutional outlook on Russian foreign policy has perhaps best been reflected in the perennial emphasis on Russia’s status as a ‘great power’ and in the persistence of tensions with the West. Even in the mid- to late 1990s, when Russian leaders were acutely aware that Russia did not carry the same weight in the world that the Soviet Union did, many of them were wont to fall back on the precepts that guided Soviet foreign policy. This was evident, for example, when Yeltsin and Russian military commanders sent an armoured column to Pristina airport in Kosovo in June 1999 in a direct challenge to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) that nearly led to a military clash.

Under Putin, attempts to reassert great power status have become much more pronounced, especially in the years since he returned to the presidency in 2012 for his third
and fourth terms. When Putin told the Russian parliament in April 2005 that ‘the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century’, he was candidly summarizing his values and outlook, implying that his task as president is to undo that ‘catastrophe’ (Putin, 2005). The failure to make a complete break with the Soviet past helps to account for the difficulty that arose in the early to mid-1990s when some in Moscow hoped to integrate Russia more fully into the West (difficulty that was compounded by the durability of Cold War–era mindsets in some Western capitals and also by the deep concern in Poland and the Baltic states about potential threats from Russia, which spurred them to push relentlessly for NATO membership). Under Putin, officials in the key foreign policy and national security agencies have fallen back even more heavily on Soviet-era notions and principles, including an opportunistic reliance on anti-Westernism and xenophobia for internal control (Kramer, 2014b). These sorts of outlooks were present even before 2013–2014, but they have come to dominate Russian national security policy-making since the start of Russia’s armed intervention in Ukraine and the deep tensions it caused with Western countries.

After Putin introduced Russian military forces into Syria in September 2015, he and other Russian officials repeatedly depicted the intervention as the type of action taken by great powers to manage international crises (‘Rossiya pomogla Sirii’, 2016; ‘Rossiya – velikaya derzhava’, 2016; ‘Putin vernul Rossii’, 2017). The emphasis on Russia’s status as a great power in the wake of the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in Syria gave a strong fillip to Putin’s favourability ratings. Public opinion surveys conducted by the Levada Centre (a widely respected polling firm) from 2014 through 2018 have shown that the main reason for the sharp increase in Putin’s popularity from early 2014 was the Russian public’s belief that he had succeeded in ‘restoring Russia’s status as a respected great power’, an outcome most Russians viewed as Putin’s ‘greatest achievement’ (‘Velikaya derzhava’, 2016).

Having become accustomed to the status of a global superpower during the Soviet era, many Russians in the 1990s had felt disoriented by the status to which Russia was relegated after 1991. Even though domestic upheavals and priorities dominated most Russians’ attention in the 1990s, the loss of superpower status was frequently cited as a concern in opinion polls and focus groups (Analyticheskii Tsentr Yuriya Levady, 2006; Andreev, 2002; Bashkirova and Fedorov, 1999; Fedorov, Baskakova, and Zhirkova, 2017; Oslon et al., 2003; Popov, 2007). Hence, it is not surprising that Putin’s efforts to ‘return Russia to the position of a great power’—and thus to revive a key element of Soviet foreign policy—enjoyed widespread public backing.

The Soviet geographic legacy, Part 1: disputes inherited from the USSR

Another factor ensuring important strands of continuity with Soviet foreign policy is the impact of geography. Russia is one of only 15 countries that emerged from the Soviet Union, but it is vastly larger than any of the others and remains by far the world’s largest country. The territory of the Soviet Union was around 22.4 million square kilometres, whereas the Russian Federation is only 17.13 million square kilometres, but Russia still accounts for more than one-eighth of all inhabited land in the world. The territory of Russia, spread over 11 time zones, is nearly double the size of Canada, the United States, and China, each of which is just over 9.5 million square kilometres. The external border of Russia extends for nearly 57,800 kilometres, by far the world’s longest, including borders with 14 countries and lengthy borders on various seas and oceans.
Many of the geographic realities that helped to shape Soviet foreign policy are still present for Russia (Donaldson, Nogee, and Narkarni, 2014; Marshall, 2015, pp. 11–37). Russia, like the USSR, straddles both Europe and Asia, constituting a true Eurasian country. As in the Soviet Union, nearly 80 per cent of Russia’s population lives in the western (European) part of the country, but the sparsely populated Asian part is more than three times larger—much larger than any other country on earth. The immense plains in western and eastern Russia and the steppe lands in southern Russia are not easily defensible against possible incursions. The vast stretches of Russia’s boundaries cannot be protected in any ironclad way, especially in the Caucasus where formidable mountains severely complicate the tasks of border guards. Although Russia has lengthy borders with oceans and seas, the country possesses few outlets to open waters that are not frozen over for at least part of the year. These geographical circumstances are very similar to the ones that faced Soviet Communist Party leaders and helped to shape their decisions about foreign policy and national security. Geography does not determine everything, but the similar geographical constraints and endowments of the USSR and Russia are bound to cause Russian policymakers to approach many key issues in the same way Soviet leaders did.

For reasons of expediency, the Soviet Union dissolved along the borders of the 15 union-republics as they existed in 1991. This left Russia with borders that were challenged by some neighbouring countries, including former union-republics. In the Far East, Russia inherited the Southern Kurile Islands, which had been annexed by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. Those islands, called the Northern Territories by Japan, have been an acute source of acrimony between Moscow and Tokyo ever since. In 1992, after the Soviet Union broke apart, some observers in both Russia and Japan expected that President Boris Yeltsin might grant territorial concessions to entice the Japanese into making large investments in Russia. No such breakthrough ever occurred. In the face of domestic opposition, Yeltsin abruptly cancelled a planned visit to Japan in October 1992. When he did eventually travel to Japan a year later, the negotiations produced no results, and the same has been true of all other bilateral meetings in the years since. The territorial dispute has continued to forestall any major improvement of relations between the two countries. Even after Shinzo Abe became Japanese prime minister in 2012 and launched a vigorous effort to forge a solution with Putin, the Russian government did not alter its stance (‘Putin Urges Patience’, 2018). Laws adopted in Russia under both Yeltsin and Putin make it all but impossible for the Russian government to consider reviving a compromise proposed by the Soviet government in October 1956 (the return of the two smallest islands, an offer rejected by Japan), much less agreeing to transfer back all four of the islands (Hara, 1991; Rozman, 2017). The deadlock seems likely to continue for years to come.

Russia also inherited 4,300 kilometres of boundaries with China that were originally established by treaties imposed on China in the mid-nineteenth century and then reaffirmed by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s and early 1950s. The Chinese Communist regime headed by Mao Zedong expressed a strong aversion to these ‘unequal treaties’ from an early stage, and after a bitter rift emerged between the Soviet Union and China at the end of the 1950s a series of territorial disputes between the two countries culminated in large-scale armed clashes on the disputed Damanskii (Zhenbao) Island on the Ussuri (Wūsūlǐ) River in March 1969 and an even bloodier confrontation in Xinjiang province in August 1969. Violence did not recur after 1969, but the borders remained in dispute for several more decades. Four years of negotiations in the late 1980s and early 1990s led to the signing of a border agreement in May 1991 that settled numerous important issues (‘Soglashenie’, 1993, pp. 5–12). The Soviet government had not yet ratified the agreement by the time the USSR
broke apart, but Russia ratified it in 1992 and joined with China the next year to redefine the boundary line near Hunchun along the Hubutu River (Gu Liping, 2015, Item 14). Even then, however, several issues remained in contention. Some were resolved in 1998, and the remainder were settled in October 2004 and May 2008, when Russia proved willing to accept China’s position. Putin’s concessions were spurred by his desire to strengthen ties with China as a counter against U.S. hegemony. The resolution of the border dispute gained scant notice in most of the world, but in Russia several political commentators focusing on the Far East expressed concern that Russia had yielded too much, possibly tempting China to push for concessions on other matters such as labour migration (‘Kitaitsy privetstvuyut’, 2015; ‘Kitai zhdet ot Rossii peredachu Sahalina’, 2015; Masyuk, 2015, pp. 8–9).

The Soviet geographic legacy, Part 2: disputes resulting from the breakup

The borders Russia inherited with former Soviet republics at the end of 1991 also have had far-reaching effects on Russian foreign policy. The Crimean peninsula was part of the Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics until February 1954, when the Soviet government at Nikita Khrushchev’s behest transferred Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, ostensibly to mark the 300th anniversary of the Battle of Pereyaslav (Kramer, 2014a). At the time, the transfer seemed relatively insignificant because union-republic borders were of little importance in the highly centralised USSR. Only after the Soviet Union broke apart did the status of Crimea become a major source of friction between the two newly independent countries. During Leonid Kravchuk’s presidency in Ukraine from 1991 to 1994, the Russian and Ukrainian governments repeatedly quarrelled and exchanged threats over Crimea and the division of the USSR’s Black Sea Fleet (Kramer, 1998, pp. 253–333). The Russian government began actively helping the Crimean separatist movement headed by Yurii Meshkov, who wanted to return Crimea to its pre-1954 status, as part of Russia rather than Ukraine. The advent of Leonid Kuchma, who forged a much more amicable relationship with Russia after he won the Ukrainian presidency in July 1994, markedly reduced the degree of tension over Crimea.

Nonetheless, the issue continued to dog Russian-Ukrainian relations over the next two decades, particularly when the status of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet came up for renegotiation in 2010. When Viktor Yushchenko was elected president of Ukraine in late 2004, he promised to end the Russian Navy’s presence in Crimea once the existing lease for the Black Sea Fleet (signed in the early 1990s) expired in 2017. However, after Viktor Yanukovych was elected as Yushchenko’s successor in February 2010, he agreed to extend the lease by 25 years—to 2042—ostensibly in return for concessions on pricing of Russian natural gas (though the purported concessions on gas pricing seemed ethereal). The extension was denounced in many quarters of Ukraine, setting the stage for Putin’s actions in the wake of the Euromaidan Revolution of 2013–2014, an event that caught him off-guard (Kramer, 2014b, pp. 1–7). After the violent overthrow of Yanukovych in February 2014, Putin dispatched heavily armed troops to occupy and seize control of Crimea, which he then formally annexed to the Russian Federation at a Kremlin ceremony in mid-March 2014.

Russia’s borders with Estonia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and even Kazakhstan have also influenced Russian foreign policy. The border issue with Estonia has been at an impasse for almost the entire post-Soviet era. Because NATO had stipulated that prospective new members of the alliance would have to resolve border disputes with their neighbours before applying to join, the Russian authorities from the mid-1990s on deliberately refrained from trying to resolve the conflict with Estonia, hoping to derail the country’s chances of
gaining membership in NATO. The United States and other allied member-states, upon realizing what was going on, pledged that deliberate obstruction of border negotiations by another party would not affect the possible entry of the Baltic countries into NATO (Kramer, 2002, pp. 731–756). Yet, even after Estonia along with Latvia and Lithuania was invited to join the alliance in November 2002 (and was then formally admitted in 2004), talks on the Russian-Estonian border dispute remained stalled until May 2005, when the two countries signed a border treaty along with a separate bilateral agreement demarcating their maritime boundaries (‘Dogovor’, 2005). Soon thereafter, Russia abruptly rescinded its signature of both treaties and kept them in abeyance until February 2014, when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov signed a slightly modified version with his Estonian counterpart (‘Dogovor’, 2014). Nevertheless, neither country ultimately ratified the treaties, and the Russian government continued to exploit the border dispute as a source of pressure vis-à-vis Estonia and NATO.

Because NATO began secret planning in 2009 to expand the alliance’s Eagle Guardian ‘defence plan’ for Poland to cover the whole ‘Baltic region’ against an unspecified enemy, the problematic status of the Russian–Estonian border potentially could affect NATO’s relations with Russia. In 2010, after the alliance’s expanded defence planning for the ‘Baltic region’ came to light in documents released through Wikileaks (allusions to the planning had already surfaced in 2009, but the documents confirmed the new efforts), Russian officials declared that ‘hostile actions’ by NATO member-states would not deter Russia from defending its ‘legitimate territorial claims’ (Kramer, 2013, 2015).

The borders Russia inherited with Georgia have affected bilateral ties from the moment the Soviet Union broke apart. The Russian government backed separatist forces in two regions of Georgia adjoining Russia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. With military support from Russia, both regions established de facto independence from Georgia in 1992–1993 (Birch, 1996, pp. 150–189; Hewitt, 1996, pp. 190–225; Baev, Zürcher, and Koehler, 2005, pp. 259–298; George, 2009). Russian ‘peacekeeping’ forces remained deployed in the two regions long after the Georgian government demanded that they leave and long after 1999 amendments to the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty—to which Russia was a party until its withdrawal from the treaty in March 2015—required the Russian army to pull out all its forces. In August 2008, Russia finished the process that had begun in 1992–1993. Russian military forces were able to overwhelm the much smaller Georgian army after war broke out over South Ossetia (Cornell and Starr, 2009, pp. 143–185; Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, 2009; Allison, 2013, pp. 150–169). The war gave Russian authorities the opportunity to carve both South Ossetia and Abkhazia off from Georgia and to recognise them as independent states.

Although Moldova does not border on Russia, it has encountered similar problems involving Russian support for separatist forces in Transnistria, a region that was a legacy of the Soviet era. Russian forces intervened in Transnistria and Moldova in 1992 to protect the separatist government of Igor Smirnov, who aspired to sever Transnistria from Moldova and have it become part of the USSR again (King, 2000; Bomsheko, 2017; Coyle, 2018, pp. 157–178). Russian troops have remained deployed there ever since, despite repeated requests by the Moldovan government for them to leave and despite the 1999 amendments to the CFE Treaty (now renounced by Russia) requiring that they pull out. Although negotiations organised by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2016 and 2017 achieved some results, the net impact on the conflict was evanescent at best. The deadlocked status of Transnistria is not as acute an irritant in Russian–Moldovan relations as the occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is in Russian–Georgian relations, but until
the issue is resolved (which seems unlikely anytime soon), the dispute hinders an improvement of bilateral relations between Russia and Moldova and induces Moldova to look more to the European Union (EU) (Calus and Kosienkowski, 2018, pp. 111–148; Flenley and Mannin, 2018).

**The Soviet geographic legacy, Part 3: other key aspects**

Beyond the conflicts Russia has experienced with individual countries as a result of the borders left over from the Soviet Union, the sprawling expanse of Russia, with long borders stretching from the Kaliningrad exclave in the west to Sakhalin in the Far East, has had far-reaching effects on Russian foreign policy since 1992. As noted earlier, Russian territory includes huge areas that are difficult to defend, whether from China, from a spillover of Islamic extremism in Central Asia, or from NATO. To the extent that Russian political leaders and military commanders have seen their country as potentially vulnerable to attack from outside, they have sought to maintain a large army, a task that has imposed a considerable economic burden. Even in the 1990s, when precipitous cuts were made in military spending, the Russian armed forces were kept artificially large to defend Russia’s borders (Miller and Trenin, 2004). Under Putin, military spending has sharply increased, and both conventional and nuclear forces have been expanded and modernised (Cooper, 2016; U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017; Renz, 2018). Some economic officials, such as Aleksei Kudrin, have advocated cuts in military expenditures, but proposals for lower spending along with reductions in troop levels have been firmly rejected in recent years by senior figures who argue that Russia’s enormous land mass must be adequately defended against ‘hostile forces’.

Whether this is truly feasible is, of course, a different matter. The vast transportation and communications difficulties that would arise when deploying large contingents of troops from one remote part of the country to another would make it hard to defend against all potential adversaries no matter how large the armed forces are. Regardless, most Russian political leaders have come to believe that Russia, as the world’s largest country, must possess military forces of a commensurate size.

One final geographic circumstance of Russia that is redolent of the Soviet (and Tsarist) era is the question of whether the country should look more to Europe or to Asia. As the largest single entity on both continents, Russia, like the Soviet Union before it, has had to decide on the geographic orientation of its foreign policy. During the Cold War, the primary focus of Soviet foreign policy was always the United States, but within that context Soviet foreign policy shifted between Europe and Asia. From 1949 to 1959, the emergence of a Communist regime in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the establishment of a close Sino-Soviet alliance, the three-year war on the Korean peninsula (in which large numbers of Soviet military pilots were secretly involved), and the advent of a friendly government in India caused Soviet foreign policy to be oriented toward Asia. However, after a bitter Sino-Soviet split erupted at the end of the 1950s, Soviet foreign policy gravitated back toward Europe, in part because Soviet leaders wanted to ensure that the Warsaw Pact countries would side firmly with the USSR against the PRC. One Warsaw Pact country, Albania, did side with China and eventually left the Warsaw Pact, but all the others (with the partial exception of Romania from the mid-1960s on) remained staunchly loyal to Moscow. After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 solidified the East-West divide in Europe, Soviet leaders shifted even more of their focus to Europe, spurred on by the advent of West Germany’s Ostpolitik. The Soviet-West European détente that gathered pace in the 1970s survived
the breakdown of the U.S.-Soviet détente in the late 1970s and early 1980s, reinforcing the Soviet Union’s orientation toward Europe. Although Soviet leaders preserved close ties with Communist governments in Mongolia and Vietnam (and to a lesser extent North Korea) and made conciliatory overtures toward China starting in 1982, the primary orientation of Soviet foreign policy throughout the 1970s and 1980s, including the momentous six-and-a-half years under Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–1991), was still mainly toward Europe along with North America.

The Russian government under both Yeltsin and especially Putin has fluctuated between Europe and Asia. On the one hand, EU countries are still the dominant customers for Russian natural gas (a supply relationship that began in the 1980s and is reflected in the westward orientation of Russia’s gas export pipeline network), and Russia’s place in the Council of Europe makes European norms hard to ignore entirely (Neumann, 2017). On the other hand, Russia’s disaffection with NATO and especially with the United States have caused Russian leaders to emphasise, at least rhetorically, entities that link Russia with Asian countries such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (Allison, 2004, pp. 463–483; Kramer, 2008; Lukin, 2018). More generally, efforts to forge links with China and India as counterweights to U.S. power ensure that Russia, like the Soviet Union in earlier decades, will adhere to an orientation that best suits its interests at a given time.

**Perquisites of the ‘legal successor state’**

As noted above, Russia was designated the ‘legal successor state’ to the USSR via the international agreements that codified the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the creation of new countries. One of the perquisites of this status was Russia’s inheritance of the permanent seat on the UN Security Council that had been held by the USSR from the mid-1940s on (Blum, 1992, pp. 354–361). That position lent visibility to the USSR’s claim of being a dominant power in the world and a vantage point from which to try to obstruct U.S. and West European actions. Even though the East–West split on the UN Security Council (and the paralysis that often ensued) meant that both superpowers routinely bypassed the Security Council on key national security issues, the USSR’s permanent seat gave Soviet policymakers greater ability to try to affect important issues such as the Middle East.

Russia’s inheritance of the Soviet Union’s permanent seat on the UN Security Council has afforded Russian leaders many of the same levers at a time of greater opportunity to make use of them. With the end of the Cold War, the UN Security Council came to be a more prominent and functional body (especially in the early to mid-1990s), a body often depicted as the ‘legitimate’ forum for international discussions and decision-making. That factor alone ensured that Russia, by inheriting a permanent seat, would gain a key vantage point from which to try to influence and, when necessary, obstruct U.S. foreign policy. Because Russia still has fewer alternatives than the Soviet Union did to hinder and thwart U.S. actions, Russia’s permanent seat on the UN Security Council is considerably more important, in relative terms, for Russia than it was for the Soviet Union.

Russia’s veto within the UN Security Council did not prevent the United States from going to war against Serbia in 1999 and against Iraq in 2003, nor did it prevent most Western governments from recognising Kosovo as an independent country in 2008, a step vehemently opposed by Russia. But on many other key issues (the ongoing crisis in Syria, Iran’s nuclear weapons program, etc.), Russia has been adept at using the UN Security Council to stymie effective action and to ensure that any measures approved by the Security Council
will be conducive to Russia’s interests (Grishaeva, 2007; Belenkova, 2012, pp. 147–150). Hence, it is not surprising that Russian officials have vigorously promoted the UN Security Council as the only appropriate forum for deciding matters of war and peace (though Russia itself has used military force many times since 1991 without UN Security Council authorization).

The other major perquisite inherited by Russia as the successor state to the Soviet Union is control over the huge array of strategic and tactical nuclear forces, including land- and sea-based missiles and heavy bombers, as well as the nuclear armaments production complex that built all the weaponry (Blank, 2011). Although reductions in ex-Soviet strategic nuclear weapons were carried out after 1991 in accordance with U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Russian bilateral agreements, Russia has retained a vast nuclear arsenal capable of wreaking catastrophic destruction on the United States and its allies. Putin, in his March 2018 annual address to the Russian parliament, boasted about the ‘remarkable advances’ in Russian nuclear forces under his leadership that drew on but went beyond the Soviet legacy:

[Russia’s] newly developed strategic arms—in fact, new types of strategic weapons—are not the result of something left over from the Soviet Union. Of course, we relied on some ideas from our ingenious predecessors. But everything I have described today is the result of the last several years, the product of dozens of research organizations, design bureaus, and institutes.

(‘Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniu’, 2018, pp. 1–3)

Although it is certainly true that Russia’s nuclear weaponry has been significantly modernised over the past 15 years, the very fact that Russia is a nuclear weapons state and possesses a nuclear arms production complex that oversaw the modernisation is entirely a legacy of the Soviet era.

The preservation of the Soviet nuclear weapons legacy ensured that Russia remained high on the U.S. security agenda and a key global actor throughout the post-Soviet era, but the impact of the legacy did not always benefit Russian foreign policy. The carryover of the Soviet nuclear arsenal was part of the reason that Russian political and military leaders made only erratic progress with proposals for military reform for nearly two decades after the demise of the USSR (Gol’ts, 2014). Russia’s strategic nuclear power acted as a crutch or a cushion for Russian leaders to fall back on, giving them little incentive to stick with arduous reforms that were politically and bureaucratically costly.

To the extent that the cushioning effect of the ex-Soviet nuclear arsenal detracted from Russia’s non-nuclear capabilities, it limited some of Russia’s foreign policy options during Putin’s first two terms. Even against a very small country like Georgia in August 2008, Russian military performance was marred by crucial shortcomings (Bukkvoll, 2009, pp. 57–63; McDermott, 2009, pp. 65–80; Vendil Pallin and Westerlund, 2009, pp. 400–424). But that event proved to be a turning point for the Russian military. The defence minister at the time, Anatoly Serdyukov, was able to point to the Russian army’s lacklustre performance against Georgia to make the case for wide-ranging military reforms. These reforms were accompanied by significant increases in Russian military spending, which rose still further after Putin returned to the presidency in 2012. Although Serdyukov was forced out amid scandals in November 2012, the Russian armed forces continued to improve under his successor, Sergei Shoigu, who has enjoyed Putin’s full support. The major improvements in Russia’s conventional forces were very much evident during Russia’s seizure of Crimea and military operations in and near eastern Ukraine as well as the Russian air operations in Syria.

Even though Russia now has far more non-nuclear military options than it did during the 1990s, the nuclear inheritance from the Soviet Union will remain a dominant part of
Soviet legacy in Russian security policy

Russian national security policy. For Putin, as for Yeltsin, Russia’s nuclear forces are the key equaliser, guaranteeing not only Russian security against external threats but also the country’s great-power standing.

Conceptions of global and regional alignments

In part because of Russia’s own ambivalence and in part because of certain actions by NATO, many Russian officials and most high-ranking Russian military commanders after 1991 continued to see—or came to see—Russia as still being fundamentally at odds with NATO and even at odds with the EU. Even though most of them did not perceive NATO as a dire threat (the sort of image that prevailed during the Cold War), they did sense that Russia’s and NATO’s interests were incompatible and they continued to view the relationship between the two mainly in zero-sum terms.

This sense of an enduring conflict with NATO has spurred the Russian government’s frequent pronouncements under both Yeltsin and Putin about the desirability of a ‘multipolar world’ (Haynes, 2009). Such appeals are reminiscent of the Soviet Union’s efforts in the 1930s to fashion a ‘collective security’ arrangement that would constrain German power. The post-1991 rhetorical emphasis on the need for a multipolar world has been crafted with a similar goal—in this case, to limit and impede U.S. and NATO power. Even officials who do not perceive a military threat from the United States and its allies have assented to security arrangements that impede NATO’s actions.

The Russian government’s espousal of a multipolar world is designed to preserve a hierarchical global order based on spheres of influence, with Russia enjoying complete freedom of action in its own sphere, the CIS (Kramer, 2008). This conception is similar to the scheme the Soviet Union pursued in Europe during the Cold War. In much the same way that the Soviet Union maintained hegemony over Eastern Europe as codified in the Brezhnev Doctrine, so too has Russia sought freedom of action within the CIS. The hegemonic Warsaw Pact regional system of the Soviet era was at times explicitly cited by Russian officials in the 1990s when they thought about the sort of arrangement they wanted in the CIS, and this legacy of the past has been equally salient under Putin. After the Russian army defeated Georgian forces in the August 2008 war and facilitated the separation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia’s jurisdiction, Russian leaders proclaimed that ‘Russia, like other [great powers] in the world, has regions in which it enjoys privileged interests’ and can act with impunity (Kuzar, 2008, p. 1). Putin expanded on this notion in March 2014, declaring that Russia ‘must consistently defend [its] national interests’ in its sphere of influence and thwart ‘external interference’ there, or else ‘we will forever give in and retreat to who knows where’ (‘Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii’, 2014, pp. 1, 3).

Although Russian hegemonic power in the CIS does not have the same sort of ideological overlay that Soviet power did in the Warsaw Pact, Russian leaders have embraced their own version of the Brezhnev Doctrine. The notion of a regional hierarchy headed by Moscow—whether to protect orthodox Communist regimes or to safeguard the interests of ethnic Russian communities in neighbouring countries—is quintessentially the same. In both cases, it envisages a hegemonic state that enjoys an unfettered right to exercise dominance over its smaller neighbouring states.

Russian weapons supplies to the Third World

The Russian government inherited some 70–80 per cent of the huge Soviet military-industrial base. Although most of Russia’s military industries fell on hard times in the 1990s
amid steep reductions in military spending that sharply curtailed the quantity of new weapons procured by the Russian army, Russian weapons plants tried to make up part of the gap by selling more armaments abroad, albeit with mixed success. The Soviet Union from the late 1970s until the late 1980s had been by far the world’s largest supplier of weaponry to the Third World, but by 1989 the United States surpassed the USSR and became the dominant supplier to the Third World throughout the 1990s.

The decline in Russia’s arms exports to the Third World in the early 1990s stemmed in part from unfavourable conditions in the global arms market and in part from turbulence in the former Soviet weapons industry, but it also reflected a transactional shift that began in the late Soviet period (Kramer, 2011). By 1990, the Soviet government was no longer interested in providing armaments to developing countries via grants or highly concessionary loans and was seeking instead to be paid in hard currency. This emphasis on arms exports as a source of hard currency was continued by the Russian government. Russian arms supplies to the developing world fell during a period of adjustment in the first half of the 1990s, but by the latter half of the 1990s Russia had regained a firm footing as the world’s second largest supplier of weapons to the Third World. Under Putin, Russia has alternated with the United States as the leading exporter of armaments to developing countries (‘U.S., Russia Remain World’s Top Exporters of Weapons’, 2018; Theohary, 2016; Grimmett, 2010).

Russia’s continuation of the Soviet Union’s emphasis on selling arms to Third World countries in order to earn hard currency stems partly from the lack of other options. Although Russia’s energy exports are a lucrative source of hard currency (as they were for the Soviet Union), weaponry is Russia’s only manufactured export that generates hard currency revenues in appreciable quantities. Thus, Russia’s export structure, like the USSR’s, is based mainly on arms and energy (Rivlin, 2005; Blank and Levitzky, 2015; Broadshaw and Connolly, 2016). In 1990 and 1991, the Soviet Union made a vigorous (albeit unsuccessful) push to increase military exports to Third World states and energy exports to Western Europe in order to earn hard currency. The drive to sell more weapons and natural gas abroad continued all through the 1990s and into the Putin era, with varying success. The pressure to earn hard currency thus ensures that arms transfers will remain a salient instrument in Russian foreign policy in the years ahead.

Although the customer base for Russia’s weapons exports is more diversified than the Soviet Union’s was, an important carryover from the Soviet era is the willingness—even eagerness—of Russian leaders to supply weapons to countries hostile to the United States. Among the largest recipients of Russian-made arms throughout, the Putin era has been Venezuela under its stridently anti-American president Hugo Chavez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro (Beehner, 2006; Theohary, 2016; Connolly and Sendstad, 2017). Until Venezuela descended into a catastrophic socio-economic crisis in the 2010s because of Chavez’s and Maduro’s economic mismanagement and authoritarian abuses, the Venezuelan government was able to pay for its weapons imports promptly in hard currency, which made it an attractive customer for Russian armaments factories. However, even after the economic breakdown, mass unrest, and political instability in Venezuela deprived the country of its ability to pay in hard currency (or even via offsets) in a timely manner, the Russian government was still willing to supply large quantities of weapons. The ongoing shipments demonstrate that, for Putin, the main appeal of selling weapons to Venezuela is that Chavez and Maduro have flamboyantly defied U.S. power. Russian arms transfers to Venezuela have thus been reminiscent of Soviet weapons exports to far-left governments in Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s, to Iraq under Saddam Hussein, to Iran under the ayatollahs, to Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, to North Korea, and to Cuba.
Conclusion: weighing the Soviet legacy

The durability of the Soviet imprint on Russian foreign policy after 1991 is not surprising. After the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in 1917, they vowed they would make a fundamental rupture with Tsarist-era foreign policy. Crucial changes were indeed adopted, but Bolshevik leaders soon found that personnel and practices from the Tsarist era could not be discarded overnight. For post-Soviet Russia, departures from the Soviet era have been more gradual and less sweeping in most cases, and the legacy has thus been more evident. Apart from abandoning Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideology (which had already severely eroded in Gorbachev’s final years), Russian leaders moved more cautiously in rejecting the Soviet past. Large numbers of personnel and many specific policies were carried over from the Soviet period, and institutional outlooks persisted. On the whole, these circumstances resulted in greater continuity after 1991 than after 1917.

Geography also produced a considerable degree of continuity between Soviet and Russian foreign policy. The Russian Federation inherited more than three-quarters of the Soviet Union’s landmass and therefore also inherited both the advantages and the disadvantages of the USSR’s geographical configuration. Territorial disputes between the Soviet Union and Northeast Asian countries had to be dealt with by the Russian government, which almost always adopted the same positions the Soviet government had. Additional territorial disputes resulted from the way the Soviet Union broke apart, particularly along Russia’s western flank. The sheer immensity of Russia’s landmass and the extraordinary length of its external boundaries also had far-reaching effects on foreign policy, just as they did in the Soviet Union. Russian leaders, like Soviet leaders before them, have seen their country as a great power that must possess a large army suitable for its size.

Russia’s designation at the end of 1991 as the ‘legal successor state’ to the Soviet Union was another obvious contributor to the durability of the Soviet legacy. Russia’s inheritance of the USSR’s permanent seat on the UN Security Council, the Russian government’s acquisition of sole control over the former Soviet nuclear arsenal and nuclear weapons production complex, and Russia’s commitment to assume all of the Soviet Union’s obligations and responsibilities under a wide range of international treaties guaranteed a significant degree of continuity. The external circumstances of the USSR’s disintegration thus accentuated the Soviet legacy in Russia’s foreign policy.

Under Putin, continuity with the Soviet past has been increasingly conspicuous, despite the passage of time. Not only has he expressed deep regret at the demise of the USSR and spoken proudly about his years in the KGB, but he has also revived some of the sinister language of the Soviet era, launching a vigorous campaign in 2012 against ‘foreign agents’ (a designation he has applied mostly to non-governmental organisations working to promote democracy, free elections, and human rights) and denouncing a ‘fifth column of national-traitors’ in his March 2014 address (‘Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii’, 2014, p. 3). Putin’s pronouncements about foreign policy have also taken on some of the phrasing of the Soviet era, as in his March 2018 address to the Russian Federal Assembly:

Russia’s growing military power provides a solid guarantee of global peace. This [military] power has preserved and will continue to preserve strategic parity and the balance of forces in the world, which, as is known, have been and remain a key factor of international security after World War II and up to the present day.

(Putin, 2005)
This statement, with ‘Russia’s’ replaced by ‘the USSR’s’, could easily have been uttered by a Soviet leader like Leonid Brezhnev or Yuriy Andropov. In that same speech, Putin went on to warn that Russia would undertake full-scale nuclear retaliation against any ‘act of aggression’ that ‘threatened the very existence of the [Russian] state’. These sorts of warnings, too, are in line with Soviet-era statements. Putin’s prolonged hold on power has been another key facilitator of continuity.

On the other hand, some aspects of the Soviet legacy have gradually abated by now and will eventually disappear altogether, if only because of actuary tables. By 2031, four decades after the demise of the USSR, almost no personnel from the Soviet era will be left in high positions of political authority. Most likely, by then the major institutions dealing with foreign policy and national security will have less of the Soviet residue. The magnitude of Russia’s departure from Soviet foreign policy will ultimately depend in part on international events and trends that are not fully within Russia’s control. Of particular importance will be steps taken by the United States and its NATO allies and by the EU to accept Russia as a full-fledged partner or, alternatively, to counter it or, alternatively, to do neither. But to the extent that internal factors continue to drive Russian foreign policy, the Soviet legacy will be waning in the years ahead even if it never fully disappears.

Notes

1 The transfer of all Soviet tactical nuclear weapons from other former republics to Russian territory occurred quickly (within a few months), but the transfer of all strategic nuclear missiles took much longer, in part because of cunctation by Ukraine before agreeing in 1994 to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapons state. All strategic nuclear warheads (which were never under Ukrainian operational control) were transferred from Ukraine to Russia by June 1996. The dismantling of SS-24, SS-19, and SS-18 delivery vehicles in Ukraine and Kazakhstan took considerably longer but was eventually completed with U.S. funding.

2 Two recent comparative studies of ‘legacies’ in the former Communist world cover political, bureaucratic, economic, industrial, legal, social, ethnic, intellectual, religious, attitudinal, cultural, and artistic legacies but do not deal at all with legacies in foreign policy. See Beissinger and Kotkin (2014) and Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2017).

3 Kanet and Sussex (2015), esp. the chapters by Graeme Gill and Peter Shearman.

4 For a vivid account of this incident by one of the main participants, see Jackson (2007), pp. 216–275.


6 Three of the newly independent Central Asian countries adjoining China (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) ratified the 1991 agreement separately.


8 EU sanctions against Russia have not led to any diminution of Russian natural gas exports to the EU, which account for roughly 40 per cent of the EU’s total gas consumption (‘Russia’s Gas Exports to Europe’, 2018, p. 4).

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42


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