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Hibernating Bear

Explaining the Ukraine War's Effect on Russian Power Projection

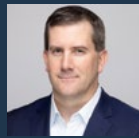
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Executive Summary

SINCE RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION of Ukraine, there have been several crises—in Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Venezuela, and Iran—where Russia did not intervene despite significant challenges to its longstanding relationships and interests. Moscow's actions have raised questions about how the war in Ukraine has affected Russia's capacity to project power to defend and advance its interests beyond its borders.

The war in Ukraine has not fundamentally dismantled Russia's power projection capabilities. The core pillars of Russia's expeditionary reach—strategic airlift, its blue water navy, long-range strike assets, logistics networks, and command structures—have not been structurally eliminated by the conflict. Although Russia's losses in Ukraine have been significant in specific systems and in manpower, they have not fundamentally hollowed out the foundations of Russian mobility or reach. Instead, the war in Ukraine has led Moscow to impose a far more ruthless prioritization of its interests and reduced its tolerance for additional risk. The war has concentrated Russia's military, fiscal, and escalation bandwidth in a single theater, substantially reducing its willingness to assume additional risk that could escalate to produce simultaneous high-intensity contingencies and/or jeopardize its primary war effort in Ukraine.

While the war in Ukraine continues, Russia retains the capacity to operate globally along the less forceful end of the power projection spectrum and also probably has sufficient strategic assets to deploy a robust force package—similar in size to what it deployed in Syria in 2015—to locations beyond Russia's periphery, provided sufficient access and a permissive operating environment. Russia would be most likely to project power to defend its interests in Belarus and the Arctic, and in support of its strategic partners in China and North Korea.

Given the scope of operations in Ukraine, however, Moscow is unlikely to take on a large operation elsewhere. Russia's loss of airborne early-warning aircraft, the less permissive international environment—especially the closure of the Turkish Straits to naval vessels, which makes it nearly impossible for Moscow to sustain significant deployments in the eastern Mediterranean region—and the degradation of Russian command and control, including the willingness of its senior leaders to simultaneously manage another major military action, are likely to inhibit Russian actions.

Such limits on Russian capacity, however, are unlikely to be decisive in shaping Moscow's calculus on power projection. As history has shown, Russia has been willing to project power along its periphery even when the Russian military was at its weakest in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In early 2022, as President Vladimir Putin was preparing most of his ready ground

forces to invade Ukraine, he carved out a detachment to deploy to Kazakhstan to bolster its president amid unrest.

Once the war in Ukraine ends, Russia's great power strategic culture will remain unchanged, and its intent to challenge perceived U.S. unilateralism will persist and likely intensify. For that reason, Russia's ability to project force beyond its borders will remain a core strategic priority. Russia's capacity for power projection and the permissiveness of the environments in which they project power will also likely improve. Once the war in Ukraine winds down, Russia is likely to retain much of the basic military infrastructure it needs to project power abroad and where attrition has occurred, Russia's defense industrial base—already operating at high tempo—will allow it to rapidly restore its capabilities. Any reduction in sanctions and/or export controls, lifting of restrictions on naval transit through the Turkish Straits, freed leadership attention, and reduced battlefield consumption of equipment will create a more permissive environment for power projection. Moreover, Russia will be well-positioned to leverage arms sales—which are likely to resume after the war—and operational know-how gained in Ukraine as instruments of influence, trading military technology, training, and advisory support for the access and political alignment that underpin effective power projection.

The war in Ukraine has not fundamentally dismantled Russia's power projection capabilities.

How the war in Ukraine ends matters. If Moscow emerges having weakened Ukraine militarily—imposing limits on its armed forces and securing a more compliant government—Russia would be able to reduce the scale of forces tied down on its western flank, freeing manpower, equipment, and leadership attention for use elsewhere, lowering the opportunity costs that have constrained parallel operations during the war. Europe's posture after the war in Ukraine ends will shape where those freed resources would be directed. The Kremlin's judgment that it can shape the outcome on the ground has long been a factor in its power projection calculus. If European governments fail to follow through on defense modernization and deterrence commitments, Moscow may judge the environment permissive enough to continue prioritizing Europe as the primary arena for advancing its great power ambitions.

Introduction

PRIOR TO 2022, Russia was widely seen to be gaining geopolitical momentum. The 2014 annexation of Crimea, the intervention in eastern Ukraine and the continued conflict there, and especially the 2015 deployment to Syria—Russia’s first sustained expeditionary combat operation outside the post-Soviet space—all challenged assumptions about Moscow’s capabilities, risk tolerance, and ambitions. These operations prompted an analytic effort to better understand the Kremlin’s willingness to use military force to advance its foreign policy objectives. The pressing questions at the time centered on understanding the conditions under which Russia would intervene, its capabilities for doing so, and President Vladimir Putin’s personal appetite for risk. The dominant concern was not whether Russia would project power, but where it might do so next.¹

The debate has since shifted markedly. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine there has been a series of crises where Moscow opted not to intervene, despite significant challenges to its long-standing relationships and interests. Russia’s failure to challenge Azerbaijan’s consolidation of and control over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 and its limited efforts to protect its clients in Syria and Venezuela have fueled arguments that Moscow is no longer capable of defending its interests abroad.² Even more pointedly, the argument goes, Russia did very little to support Iran as it endured 12 days of punishing war at the hands of Israel and the United States in 2025 and then again in 2026 as the United States and Israel executed Operation Epic Fury to decapitate the regime—despite the deepening relationship between Russia and Iran over the course of the war in Ukraine. The central question has evolved: It is no longer where will Russia project power, but will Russia retain the capability to project power in a meaningful and sustained way?

The report examines this question. It assesses Russian power projection in the aftermath of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Before the war in Ukraine, Russia had credible but limited power projection capabilities. It was able to deploy discrete forces abroad and sustain selective operations that, even while falling well short of the scale, permanence, and global logistics architecture that underpin U.S. military reach, still often complicated U.S. military planning.

The report argues that the war in Ukraine has not fundamentally dismantled Russia’s power projection capabilities; instead, it has imposed a far stricter hierarchy of priorities, limiting Moscow’s willingness to take on additional risk that might detract from its priority efforts in Ukraine. The core pillars of Russia’s expeditionary reach—strategic airlift, long-range strike assets, logistic networks, and command structures—have not

been structurally eliminated by the conflict. Although its losses in Ukraine have been significant in specific systems and in manpower, they have not entirely hollowed out the foundations of Russian mobility or reach. And where attrition has occurred, Russia’s defense industrial base—already operating at high tempo—will allow it to rapidly restore its capabilities.

What has changed more decisively are Moscow’s priorities and tolerance for additional risk. Putin currently views the world through the prism of Ukraine; he is unwilling to jeopardize his primary war effort or risk escalation that could produce simultaneous high-intensity contingencies. Yet, just because Russia did not act in Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, Venezuela, or Iran does not mean that Russia will be unwilling to project power while the war continues. There remains a list of places—especially Belarus and the Arctic—where Russia would likely intervene militarily to protect its interests. Russia is also likely to sustain a spectrum of lower-intensity power projection activities while the war in Ukraine continues.

Russia is likely to retain much of the architecture necessary to resume global activity once its war in Ukraine ends—and how it ends will matter tremendously. The central analytical question is thus not whether Russia can project power again, but how will it prioritize competing theaters and will it reassert itself in visible ways across the global stage or concentrate its efforts on consolidating influence in Europe and Eurasia?

Russia is likely to retain much of the architecture necessary to resume global activity once the war in Ukraine ends—and how it ends will matter tremendously.

This report starts by defining power projection and Russian conceptions of it. It then identifies the pillars of Russian power projection—the key entities, units, and institutions that either enable power projection or that Moscow uses to project power abroad—and the factors that shaped Russian decision-making about when and where to project power prior to February 2022. The report then examines the effect of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on these capabilities and Moscow’s calculus on power projection. Finally, the report concludes by looking ahead at Russia’s approach to power projection after its war in Ukraine and lays out the key assumptions and factors that are most likely to shape Russia’s future approach.

Defining Power Projection

POWER PROJECTION CAN BE A NEBULOUS TERM. To scope this study and ensure it focuses on the most salient aspects of Russian power projection in the wake of the war in Ukraine, the authors defined key terms, made assumptions, and set limitations. The authors leveraged existing U.S. military understandings of power projection and related concepts and adapted them to the Russian context. As such, the authors define Russian power projection as Russia's ability to deploy and sustain military power beyond its borders in support of national-level political and security goals.

The U.S. military defines power projection as “the ability of a nation to apply all or some of its elements of national power—political, economic, informational, or military—to rapidly and effectively deploy and sustain forces in and from multiple dispersed locations to respond to crises, to contribute to deterrence, and to enhance regional stability.”³ The U.S. military further defines force projection as “the ability to project the military instrument of national power from the United States or another theater, in response to requirements for military operations.”⁴ This study's authors determined this approach of applying U.S. definitions of power projection to understanding Russian actions was reasonable, given the United States' and Soviet Union's shared conceptual ground, born of mutual Cold War experiences with power projection, and the need to make the study relevant and understandable to U.S. decision-makers and a broader U.S.-based audience.

This study on Russian power projection deliberately focuses on the military aspects of national power and generally does not include the diplomatic, economic, and informational dimensions. While these latter areas are relevant to understanding Moscow's foreign and security policy, the authors judged that previous work sufficiently addressed Russia's political warfare and cyber or informational attacks related to its war in Ukraine.⁵ Moreover, the authors determined the war in Ukraine simply carried greater potential to affect Russia's ability to project military power beyond its borders than Moscow's other instruments of national power.

The study primarily examines Russia's conventional military and associated security forces. This focus incorporates most elements of the Russian armed forces, including the special forces elements of Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU (Russia's intelligence agency), as well as private military companies (PMCs) like the former Wagner Group. The study will not evaluate Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces or other strictly strategic nuclear elements. The war in Ukraine has not upended Russia's ability to threaten any part of the globe with massive destruction. But the war has shown that these capabilities carry limited practical utility for power projection. The study also generally eschews assessing Russia's intelligence services and related political, cyber, or informational warfare elements.

The Russian Context

Power projection appears to be less an organic Russian or Soviet concept than something that was adapted and incorporated during the long Cold War rivalry with the United States. For example, it was absent from an early Cold War glossary of Soviet military terms.⁶ The concept is translated various ways into the Russian language: проецирование силы (displaying or projecting force), проецирование военной силы (displaying or projecting military force), расширение военного присутствия (expanding military presence), проецирование военной мощи (displaying military might), and боевое развёртывание (military deployment). This lack of a common, single translation suggests that it is a borrowed concept, something appropriated into Russian military and strategic thinking.

While the concept may not be organic to the country, Russia does approach power projection with its own geography, history, and strategic culture. As a large continental empire for much of its history, Russia has not relied on maritime trade or distant imperial colonies for wealth and power. Historically, the requirement for Russia to deploy power abroad has been very local, versus global; along its borders and nearby regions, rather than farther afield. In one of Russia's longest forays in the 19th century, Tsar Aleksandr I's armies covered roughly 1,800 miles in around 18 months to take Paris, but only after Napoleon had invaded Russia and seized Moscow. Compare that with the

Global, expeditionary projection of Russian military power is viewed as important but, at its core, a luxury that can be eschewed as circumstances warrant.

United States, where, even as a young country, American leaders sent an expedition thousands of miles away to present-day Libya in the First Barbary War to halt attacks on American shipping. And because Russia is a land-based power, the Russian army has always held pride of place among the services, rather than the navy or, later, the air forces. Having military culture so focused on ground forces has also colored how Moscow has viewed the power projection mission, creating bureaucratic obstacles that have favored army priorities closer to home, sapping support for a more expeditionary military focus.⁷

In addition to geography, Russia's history—particularly the Great Patriotic War (World War II)—continues to cast a long shadow over how Moscow approaches power projection.

The vulnerability exposed in that war and its enormous costs continue to influence Russian strategic thinking. The war bred an emphasis in Soviet and Russian strategic culture on the use of overwhelming force for a decisive victory to avoid catastrophic cost. This “big war” mentality survived within the Russian military well into the 21st century.⁸ And that perspective required husbanding resources and capabilities closer to home. This poses a stark contrast to the main lessons U.S. leaders learned from that same war—that oceans would not protect the United States and that Washington needed to engage in the world to prevent threats from developing that could eventually strike the homeland. Or, put another way, that U.S. security interests demanded the ability to project significant power abroad.

Yet, the Soviet experience in the long Cold War rivalry with the United States bucked these historical and geographical trends, pushing Moscow to project more power globally. The ideological dimensions of the competition—communism versus capitalism—expanded Soviet interests globally, interests that needed to be backed by Soviet power. Moscow’s desire to legitimize its global standing, whether through acknowledgment by Washington or recognition of Moscow’s leadership by the broader Communist Bloc and third world, demanded an ability to deploy Soviet power globally.⁹ Then, the broader strategic military competition demanded a Soviet ability to counter U.S. threats or deploy countervailing capabilities. One late Cold War study argued that Soviet interest in the power projection mission, which was primarily centered in the Soviet Navy and political officers, had peaked in the early 1970s as an outgrowth of broader efforts to acquire additional global basing to better track U.S. ballistic missile submarines.¹⁰

Overall, Russia’s understanding of power projection is the result of competing imperatives. Russia’s history and culture push it toward a narrower understanding, while Moscow’s main experience in projecting power abroad took place during the global Cold War competition with the United States. These resulting tensions, therefore, likely define Moscow’s current understanding and drive an approach whereby global, expeditionary projection of Russian military power is viewed as important but, at its core, a luxury that can be eschewed as circumstances warrant.

A Spectrum of Russian Power Projection Activities

Power projection, even when narrowly focused on the military instrument of national power, can involve a range of different activities. To help differentiate among these activities and facilitate analysis, it is useful to consider a range of power projection activities, extending from less forceful to more forceful, or moving from “soft power” to “hard power.” The following are short descriptions of the type of Russian power projection activities included in this study:

- **Humanitarian assistance and disaster recovery** include the use of military assets and capabilities to provide humanitarian assistance such as food, shelter, and medical care to help foreign countries and populations recover from crises or natural disasters. For example, in December 2025, Russia delivered 35 tons of humanitarian aid to Sri Lanka after a powerful cyclone.¹¹
- **Security assistance and training** include a range of activities, from equipment donations to capacity building to specialized training in counterterrorism, counterintelligence, or cyber operations. Russia has historically been among the most active competitors to the United States in this realm, even if its resources are modest compared to what Washington can expend.¹² Security assistance and training have been key in Moscow’s efforts to build influence with the states of the Sahel in North Africa.¹³
- **Military exercises** include bilateral or multilateral training deployments with foreign militaries to boost readiness or practice combined operations ahead of a crisis. Russia uses such military exercises to boost influence with foreign partners or signal resolve to foreign rivals. Even while engaged in Ukraine, Russia continues to deploy forces abroad for military exercises, including a multilateral naval exercise with South Africa in January 2026.¹⁴
- **Port visits** are designed to display military presence and boost international prestige. Russia commonly sends its navy and air force assets, like naval surface vessels or long-range bombers, to foreign maritime ports or airfields in these “show the flag” missions, such as the visit of two Russian corvettes to the new naval facility at Ream, Cambodia, in April 2025 and two Tu-160 Blackjack bombers to South Africa in October 2019.¹⁵
- **Foreign military access and basing** are critical to a nation’s ability to deploy military forces abroad. Outside of Ukraine, Russia maintains a number of foreign military bases, primarily in the states of the former Soviet Union.¹⁶ Russia also has a number of overseas logistics and port access agreements (including a potential new one at Port Sudan, strategically located on the Red Sea), has been establishing a logistics hub in Libya, and, as of June 2026, maintains both a naval and an air base in Syria.¹⁷
- **Peacekeeping operations**, or the deployment of military forces to support international peacekeeping operations, can boost a country’s international prestige and give it a “seat at the table” when resolving security crises. Russia deployed forces to the Balkans in the 1990s in peacekeeping roles, even serving alongside NATO forces in Bosnia.¹⁸ Since 2012, Russia has eschewed participation in UN-mandated peacekeeping operations, but in 2020, Moscow deployed a

peacekeeping contingent to Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus as part of the agreement ending the fighting there between Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁹

- **Maritime and/or airspace patrols** conducted abroad allow a state to gain operational familiarity with an area, to signal interest in a particular region, to gather intelligence on a developing crisis, or to deter military action. Russia has used such patrols to harass and disrupt U.S. or Western military activity, to signal disapproval, or to influence Western decision-making. Russian attack submarines periodically operate off the U.S. East Coast; Russian bombers have conducted joint patrols with Chinese counterparts across the Pacific; and amid potential U.S. military attacks on Iran in February 2026, Russia deployed a naval corvette to the Middle East for patrols in the Gulf of Oman.²⁰
- **Armed interventions** are military operations in support of a state. States can deploy military forces abroad to assist an established governing authority to address an ongoing security challenge. Moscow has sent military forces abroad numerous times to bolster a partner government, including most prominently to Syria in 2015, as well as Kazakhstan in January 2022.²¹
- **Armed conflicts** are military operations against a state. States may use military force against other states or international armed groups in support of their own strategic interests. Russia's attacks against Ukraine in 2014–15 and 2022, as well as its intervention in response to Georgia's attack in South Ossetia in 2008, fit into this category.

The Pillars of Russian Power Projection and Moscow's Pre-2022 Decision-Making Calculus

MOSCOW RELIES ON KEY UNITS, branches and services, capabilities, and enablers—what the authors term the pillars of Russian power projection—for its overseas missions. This section identifies these pillars of Russian power projection and the factors that shaped how Russia employed them prior to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

- **Airborne troops:** Moscow has historically reached for the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) first in a crisis, as these units generally maintain higher readiness than others and therefore can deploy quickly. The VDV has been a substantial force, numbering roughly 45,000 personnel, and organized in four divisions and six brigades in the run-up to

the war in Ukraine, though it suffered significant attrition in the early fighting there.²² VDV troops fought in Georgia in 2008, in Ukraine prior to 2022, in Syria, and in Kazakhstan in January 2022.²³

- **Naval infantry:** Similar to the VDV, Russia's naval infantry units serve as a source of high-readiness light infantry that Moscow can deploy abroad in a crisis. Russia sent such naval infantry to Crimea in 2014 and Syria in 2015.²⁴
- **Spetsnaz and special forces:** Russia uses Spetsnaz (special operation) units associated with military intelligence (GRU), special units from the Federal Security Service (FSB) such as Alpha and Vympel, and the military's newer Special Operations Forces Command (KSSO), for sensitive and complex tasks. For example, GRU Spetsnaz led the seizure of the Prague Airport at the beginning of the Soviet intervention in 1968, and a combined GRU, Alpha, and Vympel force assassinated Afghanistan's president at the beginning of the Soviet invasion in 1979.²⁵ More recently, a KSSO detachment deployed near the Turkish border in Syria to retrieve essential equipment from a Russian aircraft shot down by Türkiye.²⁶
- **Peacekeeping units:** While other elements have served in peacekeeping roles, Russia also maintains a unit specifically tasked with peacekeeping operations, the 15th Separate Guards Motor Rifle Brigade. Elements of the brigade staffed the peacekeeping force that deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus in 2020 after the ceasefire that stopped the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan.²⁷
- **Long-range aviation:** Russia maintains a fleet of more than 100 Tu-160, Tu-95, and Tu-22 bombers armed with longer-range cruise missiles; these aircraft can deploy abroad for airport visits, deterrence patrols, joint exercises, signaling, and deterrence and coercion.²⁸
- **Military transport aviation (VTA):** Russia can leverage a fleet of more than 100 AN-22, AN-124, and Il-76 transport aircraft for strategic airlift. Russia's VTA is an essential enabler that, though significantly smaller than the equivalent U.S. force, allows Moscow to position forces globally.²⁹
- **Blue water naval assets:** The Russian navy historically has been a center of support for power projection, even though this has never been the navy's primary mission. Surface fleet elements, primarily frigates and corvettes from Northern Fleet and Pacific Fleet, but also the Baltic Fleet, can operate in global oceans. These surface combatants conduct "show the flag" missions but are extremely limited in contested environments. Russia's submarine force, however, is world class and can operate globally.³⁰ Russia also operates the largest icebreaker fleet and maintains a capable, though limited, sealift capacity.³¹

- **Ministry of Emergency Services (MChS):** Russia's MChS partners with the Russian military to deliver humanitarian aid and disaster relief supplies, serving in a niche role for power projection.³² For example, Russia sent rescuers and ordered its forces in Syria to support humanitarian operations in Türkiye and Syria after a large earthquake in February 2023.³³
- **Allies and partners:** Moscow has often turned to allies and partners as enablers, facilitating Russia's presence in a region. For example, Belarus provided a key staging ground for Russia's attack on Kyiv in 2022, while Moscow's ties with Iraq facilitated overflight rights that were essential to Russia's ability to sustain its presence in Syria.³⁴
- **Private military companies:** PMCs provide Russia a deniable, expendable capability to bolster partner governments, as well as provide capacity building and security assistance.³⁵

The Factors Affecting Russia's Pre-2022 Power Projection Calculus

From the collapse of the Soviet Union to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia's approach to power projection evolved through three distinct phases. In the 1990s, Moscow was largely in retrenchment mode: It withdrew hundreds of thousands of troops from Eastern Europe, while deployments were concentrated in the post-Soviet space and focused on managing instability and civil wars on its periphery, as well as maintaining legacy bases. Its efforts during this time aimed at preserving residual influence rather than expanding it. In the 2000s, buoyed by economic recovery and military reform, Russia shifted toward calibrated regional assertiveness: It revived large-scale exercises, long-range bomber patrols, and naval deployments while demonstrating a willingness to use force decisively in Georgia in 2008. After 2014, Russia entered a more expeditionary and diversified phase: It combined hybrid warfare in Ukraine with sustained out-of-area operations in Syria, and expanded security assistance and private military deployments in Africa and the Middle East, visible naval and air patrols, and selective humanitarian missions for strategic messaging.

Across the three phases, several factors guided Moscow's power projection calculus. Russia's decisions to project power have been shaped by multiple, sometimes competing factors, and none of these factors alone guaranteed Russian action.

Capabilities. Military and economic capability have defined what Russia can do, but they have not determined what Russia has done in practice. In many cases, Russia has refrained from intervening even when it had the means to do so. In 2010, for example, after its campaign to oust Kyrgyzstan's president,

Russia has decided to project power even when its capabilities have been limited. In the 1990s—when its military readiness, funding, and modernization were at their lowest—Moscow nonetheless projected power repeatedly in its near abroad.

Moscow was quick to recognize the new government. Yet, when severe ethnic violence then broke out in southern Kyrgyzstan and the new government requested Russian troops to help quell the fighting, Moscow refused.³⁶ In multiple cases—including the 2020 Belarus protests, instability in Libya and Egypt during the Arab Spring, and amid the U.S. invasion of Iraq—Russia had the means to intervene but, for other reasons discussed in this section, chose not to.

Conversely, Russia has decided to project power even when its capabilities have been limited. In the 1990s—when its military readiness, funding, and modernization were at their lowest—Moscow nonetheless projected power repeatedly in its near abroad. It intervened in the Moldovan civil war to support the breakaway Transnistria region, supported separatists in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia, and deployed forces during the Tajik civil war. These were limited and geographically proximate operations, but in each instance, Moscow sustained and extended its military presence in each region. These episodes demonstrate that Russia has decided to project power even when Russian capabilities are constrained. In sum, capability has set the outer boundary of feasible action, while political judgment has determined when and where Moscow chooses to intervene.

Great power strategic culture. Russian leaders view the country as a sovereign center of influence entitled to participate in managing major international outcomes. That self-conception has underscored for Russian leaders the overarching necessity of being able to project power, as well as the more specific calculus about when and where it does so. External engagement has been a means of securing recognition and compelling consultation; it's been a way to secure Moscow "a seat at the table" such that major international decisions cannot be made without Russia.

Russia's desire to be seen as a global power has prompted action even absent an immediate threat or sharp shift in the balance of power. Projecting power signals capability, resolve, and relevance—it compels others to treat Russia as an indispensable actor. Being present in key crises, positioning itself as a broker, or shaping outcomes reinforces Moscow's claim to coequal standing with other major powers. This logic is closely tied to competition with the United States and NATO. Russian

decision-makers have repeatedly acted to prevent what Moscow sees as unilateral Western dominance. Russia inserting itself into a crisis can constrain U.S. freedom of action and force the United States to take different actions than it might otherwise have absent Russian involvement.

Several examples illustrate this dynamic. In 1999, when Putin was head of the FSB and secretary of the Russian Security Council during the so-called Dash to Pristina, a small contingent of Russian peacekeepers in Bosnia occupied the airport at Pristina at the end of the fighting in Kosovo before NATO forces arrived in an effort to force the alliance to consider Russian interests.³⁷ In 2015, Russia's intervention in Syria was motivated in part by Moscow's desire to stop what it perceived as another U.S. attempt at regime change. Russian actions forced the United States to establish a military-to-military deconfliction channel and compelled regional players such as Türkiye and Israel to consider the new Russian presence.³⁸ And in 2019, during the Venezuelan presidential crisis, Russia deployed a small number of military personnel and aircraft to Venezuela—primarily advisors and technical specialists—using this limited but visible presence to signal support for former President Nicolás Maduro and complicate potential U.S. actions.

Geography. Closely related to Russia's great power culture is geography. In Moscow's conception, great power standing is inseparable from regional primacy: To be a great power, you must first be a regional one, capable of shaping outcomes in post-Soviet Eurasia and denying that role to external powers. As a result, Russia has been far more likely to project power in its immediate neighborhood than in more distant theaters.

Geography also sharpens threat perceptions. The Kremlin views a favorable balance of power along its periphery as vital given Russia's long land borders, history of invasion, and limited natural defenses, and it is acutely concerned about hostile governments emerging nearby that could align with Western institutions or host foreign forces. At the same time, Moscow fears the spillover of instability—including political upheaval, terrorism, and illicit trafficking—from neighboring states into Russian territory.

Finally, Russia's deep political, economic, and military ties across the region raise the stakes for action. The presence of military bases, peacekeeping contingents, and extensive economic linkages creates both the incentive and the obligation to project power to defend these assets and sustain Russian influence.

Precluding geopolitical loss. Russia has been the most willing to accept risk in its operations when it perceives itself as acting to forestall a geopolitical loss, for example shoring up embattled client leaders or preventing countries from drifting away from Moscow's orbit. Russia's military action in Georgia in

2008 was both a response to Tbilisi's attack on the separatist region of South Ossetia and an effort to avoid losing control of a territory it considered a point of leverage for keeping Georgia within Russia's orbit. When Putin seized Crimea in 2014, he was worried about the loss of Russia's naval base there.³⁹ Similarly, the 2015 intervention in Syria prevented the likely collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, which would have eliminated Russia's foothold and diminished its role in shaping regional outcomes. In these cases, the use of force functioned as damage control: stopping adverse change and maintaining a status quo compatible with Russian interests.

Permissiveness of the environment. Russia is more likely to project power when the operational and political environment is permissive. Where Moscow can secure basing and access rights—or leverage existing facilities—it reduces both the cost and risk of intervention. Political permissiveness is equally important. Russia prefers to operate where it can claim it was invited by the government, frame its involvement as legal or counterterrorism-related, and avoid unified regional opposition. Moscow typically seeks to present its actions as stabilizing or legitimate while limiting reputational and escalation costs.

To be a great power, you must first be a regional one, capable of shaping outcomes in post-Soviet Eurasia and denying that role to external powers. As a result, Russia has been far more likely to project power in its immediate neighborhood than in more distant theaters.

Two additional dynamics shape Russia's sense of the permissiveness of the environment. The first is the risk of direct conflict with the United States. Russian decision-makers have consistently sought to avoid direct military confrontation with the United States, given the risks of horizontal and vertical escalation, including at the nuclear level. As a result, Moscow is more inclined to project power in environments where it assesses that Washington is unwilling to directly confront Russia or intervene decisively itself, or where it can be deterred from deeper involvement.

Second, Russia tends to intervene only when it judges it can decisively shape the outcome (a judgment that can be distorted by the personalist nature of Putin's system, where centralized decision-making and filtered information increase the risk of miscalculation, as Ukraine demonstrates). Historically, Russian leaders eschewed potential interventions amid ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and again in 2018 after street protests ousted the ruling leadership in Armenia. In both cases, Moscow

appears to have concluded that intervention would entangle it in fluid domestic crises where outcomes were uncertain and Russian forces could become mired in open-ended stabilization missions without clear leverage over the political trajectory. Even when the United States indicated it would welcome Russian action in Kyrgyzstan, the Kremlin declined, judging that the risks of escalation, reputational costs, and limited strategic upside outweighed the benefits.

The Effect of the Ukraine War on Russian Power Projection

RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a fundamental break in Putin's more global foreign policy following his return to the Russian presidency in 2012. The largest land war in Europe since World War II has had significant effects on Russian power projection, including Russia's military capabilities and available resources, the Kremlin's political priorities and risk tolerance, and the broader international environment.

Simple comparison brings the changes into stark relief. In 2015, Russia deployed a small, joint force to Syria to bolster the Assad regime amid U.S.-backed pressure; in December 2024, that same Assad regime was overrun in weeks, while Russian forces there did next to nothing.⁴⁰ In 2020, surprised by an Azerbaijani assault on occupied Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia belatedly began military maneuvers in the region to coerce a ceasefire; in 2023, Russia withdrew its peacekeeping forces, allowing Baku to retake the remaining parts of Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴¹ (The appendix provides additional details on the change in Russia's calculus in these two cases). Finally, in March 2019, Putin was confident enough to send a small contingent of soldiers to Venezuela in hopes of dissuading U.S. military action to overthrow the Maduro regime; in January 2026, the Kremlin did nothing as U.S. forces captured Maduro.⁴²

It is clear that there has been a change in Russian power projection. The challenge is to better understand the key drivers, the scope, and the degree, in order to anticipate where and how Moscow is still willing and able to project power.

Capabilities. The impact of the Ukraine war on Russian capabilities has been modest. It has increased the demand for Russian military capabilities, though unevenly across different parts of the Russian military. Unsurprisingly, the war's effect on Russia's ability to project military power elsewhere has also been mixed.

Despite its war in Ukraine, Russia remains one of the few countries able to deploy globally, in large part because, beyond the Black Sea Fleet, the war has not significantly disrupted

Russia's "blue water" navy, nor its strategic airlift capabilities. The Northern, Baltic, and Pacific Fleets are still able to regularly deploy vessels for training, port visits, and out-of-area patrols, and its submarine fleet remains intact.⁴³ Russia has also lost very few military transport aircraft during the war; for example, in the strategic airlift fleet, the loss of five Il-76s in a fleet of more than 100 aircraft has a minor effect.⁴⁴ Russia can still operate globally along the less forceful end of the power projection spectrum and also probably has sufficient strategic assets to deploy a robust force package—similar in size to what it deployed to Syria in 2015—to locations beyond Russia's periphery, provided sufficient access and a permissive operating environment.

Moscow has been able to manage and adapt in other areas where Russian forces have faced more demand or damage from war in Ukraine. Moscow deployed the bulk of its high readiness ground forces to Ukraine in the initial stages of the invasion in February 2022, and key units like the VDV suffered high casualties.⁴⁵ The VDV, naval infantry, and GRU Spetsnaz now operate more like specialized assault infantry in Ukraine, though force expansion has allowed Russia to backfill losses.⁴⁶ Since these assets are no longer poised as rapid reaction forces deployable abroad for other contingencies, Moscow could pull detachments from the units for missions abroad—similar to Syria in 2015 or Kazakhstan in 2022—though this would create tradeoffs for operations in Ukraine.

The Russian military's demand for missile strikes in Ukraine by Russian Long-Range Aviation (LRA) has also been high, yet the overall effect of the war on LRA capability has been mixed. Russia's LRA has lost some aircraft, primarily to attacks while aircraft were on the ground, and the increased operational tempo has stressed readiness and maintenance. However, that same increase in demand and use has also likely increased the

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overall proficiency of the force.⁴⁷ As of 2026, Russia has been able to manage these demands, continuing to conduct deterrence-focused strategic bomber flights near the United States, while also completing periodic joint patrols with China in the Indo-Pacific region.⁴⁸ Further, the manpower demands early in the war eventually pushed the military to turn to the Wagner

Group for support. When the group's leader, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, fell out with military leadership and launched an open rebellion, the consequences could have destroyed this key pillar of Russian power projection. Yet, Moscow adapted, essentially nationalizing the group and turning part of it into the new Africa Corps, ensuring that Russia could still use the remnants of this force to project Russian power to points in Africa.⁴⁹

Although the degradation of key dimensions of Russia's power projection capabilities has been modest, there have been important effects from the war. First, the scope of operations in Ukraine means that Moscow is less likely to take on a large operation elsewhere. This matters most for Russian power projection along its immediate periphery, which has historically been most important for Moscow. It likely matters less for more expeditionary missions beyond the Russian periphery, since in those cases the airlift and maritime transport limits what Russia can deploy in any case. Russia would likely have to rely on host nation radars for air defense of any deployment abroad, as it has lost several A-50 Airborne Early Warning aircraft from a pre-2022 fleet of fewer than 10.⁵⁰ Since 2017, Russia had regularly deployed such aircraft to support its force in Syria. The war may have also discouraged or distracted from further development of military doctrine for power projection. The Russian General Staff had debuted a "Strategy of Limited Actions," drawing from its experiences in Syria, in March 2019, but there seems to have been little further doctrinal development of the concept.⁵¹

Changes stemming from the Ukraine war have also made the international environment much less conducive to Russia's ability to project power abroad. Moscow relied on partners and positive relations to facilitate a more global Russia in the 2010s, leveraging broadly permissive environments. But now, with the prospects of secondary sanctions, tariffs, and diplomatic blowback, cooperating with Russia carries more risks for third countries. This makes it harder for Moscow to negotiate basing, access, and overflight agreements with foreign partners. It also makes third countries more reticent to turn to Russia for security assistance, training, and military exercises. More tangibly, the fighting in Ukraine has driven Türkiye to invoke the Montreux Convention, closing the Turkish Straits to naval vessels, thereby preventing Russia from reinforcing its Black Sea Fleet and making it nearly impossible for Moscow to sustain any significant deployments in the eastern Mediterranean region, like it did in Syria.⁵²

Finally, the Ukraine war seems to inhibit Russia's strategic command and control, including the willingness of its senior leaders to simultaneously manage another major military action. More simply, Putin does not appear to be ready or able to divide his time and attention between Ukraine and another major foreign effort. Russia's political system remains highly personalized and although Putin can engage on even the most minute details, he cannot be everywhere. Clearly focused on Ukraine, he likely has little bandwidth for any other complex military power

projection activity requiring his personal attention. Reflecting this ingrained perspective, Putin moved to tamp down the fighting along the line of control in eastern Ukraine in 2015 during the initial months of Russia's intervention in Syria, perhaps to ease demands on Moscow's strategic command and control.

Yet, as Russia's history has shown, its military capabilities are only part of the decision calculus. Even when the Russian military was at its weakest in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Moscow actively projected military power along its periphery in places like Georgia and Tajikistan.⁵³ More recently, as Putin was preparing most of his ready ground forces to invade Ukraine in early 2022, he carved out a detachment to deploy to Kazakhstan to bolster its president amid domestic unrest.⁵⁴ Thus, even though Russian capabilities have been degraded somewhat by the war in Ukraine, Moscow may still decide to project power if Putin judges that core interests are at risk.

Prioritization. The most significant effect of the war on Russia's approach to power projection has been on Moscow's political calculus. The war in Ukraine has led Moscow to impose a far more ruthless prioritization of its interests. The war has concentrated Russia's military, fiscal, and escalation bandwidth in a single theater, substantially reducing its willingness to assume additional risk in other regions. As a result, while Moscow retains elements of its power projection toolkit—specifically its navy and strategic lift capabilities—the political appetite to employ them in ways that could trigger parallel crises has markedly declined.

While the war in Ukraine continues, the Kremlin is likely to weigh decisions to expend resources on power projection far more carefully against its anticipated payoff. Part of this calculus includes Putin's apparent preference to maintain a positive relationship with U.S. President Donald Trump. Moscow's limited support to Venezuela and its cautious approach to supporting Iran likely reflected Putin's calculation that antagonizing Trump in secondary theaters could trigger stronger U.S. alignment with Kyiv, a risk Putin was unwilling to run while the war in Ukraine remains his central priority.

Moscow would also have to weigh any payoff from its power projection against new risks. The United States during Trump's second term in office has demonstrated greater willingness to use force assertively on the global stage, which undoubtedly will affect Moscow's calculus on power projection. Ukraine too has shown a willingness and ability to strike deep inside Russia and in third countries, with a proven covert action capability. There are reports, for example, of Ukrainian military intelligence launching attacks against Russian PMCs in Sudan.⁵⁵ This would raise the risks for Moscow of any new power projection mission abroad, as any foreign military deployment would need to factor in the risk of Ukrainian attack. Moreover, given the proxy war in Ukraine with the West, Moscow would need to consider the risks that

a Western state would opportunistically confront or otherwise take assertive action that might threaten Russian military assets deployed abroad. For example, as of June 2026, London was considering seizing Russian-flagged “shadow fleet” vessels, highlighting the potential risks from Western action.⁵⁶

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Yet, while Russia did not intervene in Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, Venezuela, or Iran, inaction in those places does not mean it will not intervene anywhere. Put differently, Russia has concentrated its resources and risk in Ukraine, but it has not abandoned its external commitments entirely. There remains a list of places—especially Belarus and the Arctic—where Russia would likely intervene militarily to protect its interests. Likewise, there remains a spectrum of lower-intensity power projection activities that Russia is likely to sustain while the war in Ukraine continues (see Table 1). The following are places and regions where Russia is still likely willing to project power while the war in Ukraine continues.

Belarus. As a “Union State” with deep economic, military, and logistical ties to Moscow, Belarus is vital to Russia’s political and security depth and regime survival. Minsk provides springboards for Russian airfields, troop deployments, and logistics toward Ukraine and NATO’s eastern flank. Even while war-weary, Russia continues large joint exercises in Belarus (e.g., Zapad 2025) and maintains integrated defense plans because protecting Belarussian President Aleksandr Lukashenko’s regime and securing the western border are seen as essential. Any threat to Belarus threatens Russia’s own border, so Minsk remains a key focus despite Moscow’s limited resources. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov underscored this calculus in November 2025 when he said: “It would be inaccurate to juxtapose our partnership with Venezuela with our union with the Republic of Belarus.”⁵⁷

The Arctic. Russia is likely to continue to prioritize power projection in the Arctic, a strategic resource base for Moscow and a core part of its global deterrent posture. Since 2022, Russia has reinforced and modernized key Arctic bases, while sustaining investment in dual-use infrastructure tied to the Northern Sea Route and energy extraction.⁵⁸ The Russian Northern Fleet has

maintained regular submarine patrols underpinning Russia’s nuclear deterrent, alongside strategic bomber flights over the Barents and Norwegian Seas and periodic large-scale Arctic exercises that rehearse cruise missile launches and integrated air defense.⁵⁹ At the same time, Moscow has relied on signaling and gray zone tactics—expanded exclusion zones during drills, GPS interference, close air intercepts near NATO airspace, and maritime maneuvering near critical infrastructure—to project presence and impose friction without opening a new high-intensity front.⁶⁰ NATO’s announcement of Arctic Sentry in February 2026—a new unified NATO mission designed to bolster maritime awareness and counter Russian influence in the High North—will likely reinforce Moscow’s view that the High North is becoming an increasingly contested military domain, strengthening the Kremlin’s resolve to prioritize the region within its power projection calculus.⁶¹

Moldova, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Moscow undoubtedly retains a predilection to project power in the other former Soviet republics, but the Ukraine war, to varying degrees, will probably inhibit these ambitions. In each of these regions, Russia is likely to retain sufficient military capabilities and determination to pursue its interests so that Moscow will be willing and able to project power along the less forceful end of the spectrum. However, unlike in Belarus or the Arctic, the Ukraine war is likely to make forceful military power projection more complicated and less worth the risk. In Moldova, geography is the principal hurdle as it is landlocked between NATO ally Romania and Ukraine. In a scenario where Moldova forces Russian peacekeepers out of Transnistria, Moscow would face serious challenges moving a sufficient force there and sustaining it, due to the absence of permissive access routes. In the Caucasus, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrated that Moscow is neither willing to completely spoil its relations with Baku nor to stomach the tradeoffs necessary to deploy a force large enough to confront Azerbaijan. Georgia and Armenia present different challenges, but Moscow would probably rather play the long game than deploy a large force to either country. (Russia deployed roughly 70,000 troops in the war in Georgia in 2008.)⁶² Finally, in Central Asia, military intervention to support a ruling regime à la Kazakhstan is certainly conceivable, especially if in a permissive environment. In more complex situations—akin to those in Uzbekistan in 2005 and Kyrgyzstan in 2010—the potential risks and questionable ability to determine outcomes would probably outweigh any benefits.

China, North Korea, and Iran. Even while the war in Ukraine continues, Russia will likely be willing to project power in support of its “axis of upheaval”—or the strategic partnerships Russia maintains with China, North Korea, and Iran.⁶³ Even as Moscow was cautious with its support in the initial weeks of Operation

Epic Fury, it has already sent drones to Iran, as well as satellite imagery, targeting data, and intelligence support. Russia has also shared its knowledge in drone tactics with Tehran.⁶⁴ The longer the conflict continues, the more Russia is likely to do in support of its partner to support the survival of the Iranian regime and prolong the war to impose economic and reputational costs on the United States.

Russia's calculus on China and North Korea would likely be different, with Russia likely willing to do even more on their behalf. China underwrites Russia's economic resilience, and North Korea is now bound to Moscow by a formal defense commitment. In both cases, Russia retains strong incentives to employ lower-cost instruments of power projection—strategic signaling, military exercises, technology transfer, intelligence support, and horizontal escalation—to reinforce these relationships and complicate U.S. decision-making, even as Ukraine remains its primary theater. This does not imply that Moscow would deploy large-scale forces in their defense, but rather that the Kremlin would probably be more willing than in the case of Iran to employ calibrated power projection tools to support Beijing or Pyongyang in a crisis.

The Global South. Russia will retain the ability to project power globally along the less forceful end of the spectrum despite the war in Ukraine. But Russia cannot be everything to everyone, everywhere, at the same time. The war in Ukraine is costly, both in personnel and resource demands. There will be fewer personnel available to conduct training and facilitate security cooperation and more significant tradeoffs to providing arms and equipment on preferential terms for foreign states, all of which mean Moscow has fewer levers to use to negotiate the types of basing and access that facilitate power projection. And so, Moscow is likely to prioritize those power projection activities globally that align with its broader push to influence the Global South, enticing states to support a more multipolar global order. Less forceful power projection is likely to follow Russian foreign policy engagement in effort to bolster Russian influence in key regions like the Sahel, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, while eschewing more activity in regions already dominated by other global powers, like South and Central America and East Asia.

Table 1: An Assessment of Russian Willingness and Ability to Project Military Power While the Ukraine War Continues

This matrix addresses Russia's assessed willingness and ability to conduct the range of power projection missions across a comprehensive set of global geographies. The assessments represented in the matrix are based on the authors' judgments of the relative priority of that country or region to Russia's leaders, Russia's ability to deploy military assets in support of that power projection activity to that region, the permissiveness of the environment for deploying military forces, and therefore Moscow's judgment of the relative risk.

	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Recovery	Security Assistance and Training	Military Exercises	Port Visits	Foreign Basing and Access	Peacekeeping Operations	Air and Maritime Patrols	Military Intervention	Military Conflicts
Arctic	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Balkans	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Baltics	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Belarus	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Caucasus	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Central Asia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
East Asia/Taiwan	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Eastern Mediterranean	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Korean Peninsula	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Moldova	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
North Africa	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Persian Gulf	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Sahel	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
South Asia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Southeast Asia/South China Sea	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Sub-Saharan Africa	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Western Hemisphere	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	● Likely to conduct this type of power projection activity in this region			● Possibly willing or able to conduct this type of power projection activity in this region			● Unlikely to conduct this type of power projection activity in this region		

Looking Forward: The Hibernating Bear

ONCE LARGE-SCALE COMBAT OPERATIONS in Ukraine wind down, Russia is likely to move quickly to regenerate elements of its conventional force posture and reconstitute select expeditionary capabilities, particularly in domains such as airpower, long-range strike, naval deployments, and security assistance that are less manpower intensive than ground warfare. Despite economic strain, the Kremlin has prioritized defense-industrial mobilization and signaled no retreat from its ambition to act as a decisive global actor. Politically, Putin is likely to sustain his narrative that Russia remains in an existential struggle with the West and use this to validate Russia's pursuit of great power status—reinforcing the will to resume visible power projection once bandwidth permits.

Assessing Russia's approach to power projection after the war in Ukraine is inherently uncertain. Factors such as the duration of the war, how it ends, the state of Russia's economy, and the scale of force regeneration required all remain open questions. Accordingly, while the authors assess that Moscow is likely to seek a rapid restoration of its power projection capabilities and global role, this judgment carries only moderate confidence. The following key assumptions and critical variables underpin this assessment.

Politically, Putin is likely to sustain his narrative that Russia remains in an existential struggle with the West and use this to validate Russia's pursuit of great power status—reinforcing the will to resume visible power projection once bandwidth permits.

Russia's great power strategic culture will remain unchanged, and its intent to challenge perceived U.S. unilateralism will persist and likely intensify. In 2004, Vladimir Putin declared, "We showed ourselves to be weak, and the weak get beaten," and in a 2018 Federal Assembly address he stated, "No one listened to us then. So, listen to us now!"⁶⁵ These two statements, separated by nearly a decade and a half, encapsulate the imperative Putin places on wielding military strength on the global stage. The war in Ukraine will not change that world view; if anything, recent U.S. actions—especially U.S. military operations targeting Maduro in Venezuela and the killing of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, which Putin condemned as a "cynical violation" of international norms—likely reinforce

for Putin the necessity of confronting what Russia perceives as U.S. unilateralism and willingness to topple leaders it views as unfriendly.⁶⁶ Such episodes likely validate Putin's view that the international system rewards strength and punishes weakness, and that only those capable of projecting power and defending their interests will thrive. For that reason, Russia's ability to project force beyond its borders will remain a core strategic priority after the war ends, and Putin is likely to hold fast to his long-held intent to counter U.S. dominance.

Russian capacity for and permissiveness of power projection will likely improve. Once the war in Ukraine winds down, Russia is likely to retain much of the basic military infrastructure it needs to project power abroad and to rebuild the parts that have been worn down by the fighting. Its core tools—most of its navy outside the Black Sea, military transport aircraft, long-range bombers, nuclear forces, and established overseas footholds such as its facilities in Syria—remain largely intact. Units that have taken heavier losses, particularly elite airborne and naval infantry forces, would take time to restore, but a reduction in combat demands would allow Moscow to shift resources toward rebuilding them. Likewise, any reduction in sanctions and/or export controls would facilitate its rebuilding.

A postwar environment could also prove more permissive operationally. If restrictions on naval transit through the Turkish Straits were lifted, Russia would regain greater freedom to move ships between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, restoring flexibility in how it uses amphibious and support vessels to sustain operations abroad. Combined with freed leadership attention and reduced battlefield consumption of equipment, these factors would strengthen Russia's practical capacity to resume wider power projection.

Likewise, Russia is likely to face a more permissive environment because Moscow will likely be better positioned to use its statecraft to secure access, basing, overflight, and stopover rights. As combat demands in Ukraine recede, Russia's defense industrial base—already operating at elevated levels—will be able to resume exports that have been constrained by the war, allowing it to rebuild and deepen security partnerships across the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Asia. At the same time, Russia will emerge from Ukraine with hard-earned expertise in contemporary warfare, particularly in uncrewed systems, electronic warfare, and the integration of precision strike with real-time reconnaissance. For many states, this experience will be highly sought after. Moscow will be well-positioned to leverage both arms sales and operational know-how as instruments of influence, trading military technology, training, and advisory support for the access and political alignment that underpin effective power projection.

How the war in Ukraine ends matters. How it ends will shape Russia's capacity and direction for power projection. If Moscow emerges having weakened Ukraine militarily—imposing limits on its armed forces and securing a more compliant

government—Russia would be able to reduce the scale of forces tied down on its western flank. That outcome would free manpower, equipment, and leadership attention for use elsewhere, lowering the opportunity costs that have constrained parallel operations during the war. If Ukraine emerges with a robust military that can serve as its own security guarantee and a government committed to sovereignty and Western alignment, it will detract Russia's focus from power projection.

Also important in determining where those freed resources are directed will be Europe's posture after the war in Ukraine ends. The Kremlin's judgment that it can shape the outcome on the ground has long been a factor in its power projection calculus. If European governments fail to follow through on defense modernization and deterrence commitments, Moscow may judge the environment permissive enough to continue prioritizing Europe as the primary arena for advancing great power ambitions. By contrast, if Europe sustains higher defense spending, strengthens deterrence, and reduces vulnerabilities, the Kremlin may conclude that the costs of further confrontation on the continent are too high. In that case, Russia would be more likely to pursue status and influence through a revived global posture—emphasizing selective engagements in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and other regions where it assesses it can shape outcomes at lower risk.

Domestic factors and public opinion will matter, but it is unclear to what extent. Domestic political dynamics are likely to shape Russia's post-Ukraine approach to power projection—but the direction of that effect is currently uncertain. On the one hand, public opposition to another major foreign engagement could constrain Russian power projection. Putin has long been attuned to public opinion and has sought to manage it throughout the war through controlled media narratives, selective mobilization, and financial inducements to limit backlash. The most recent polls by Levada continue to show that roughly two-thirds of Russians favor moving toward peace negotiations, and Russians regularly rank economic concerns—inflation, rising prices, and declining living standards—among their top public concerns.⁶⁷ Once the war winds down, economic strain—high inflation, labor shortages, budget deficits driven by defense spending, and uneven regional burdens—could generate pressure to redirect state resources toward domestic stabilization rather than additional foreign deployments. In this way, public fatigue and fiscal constraints could act as brakes on further power projection.

It is also possible, however, that the war has inured both the Russian public and the Kremlin to the costs of military action, reinforcing a belief in Moscow that it can act with relative impunity. If the regime has been able to sustain tolerance for hundreds of thousands of casualties over years of high-intensity war, smaller expeditionary operations—and their far more limited losses—may appear comparatively low risk.

At the same time, the end of large-scale combat in Ukraine will introduce its own domestic risks. Hundreds of thousands of veterans—many wounded, psychologically traumatized, or socially dislocated—will return to regions already grappling with economic stress, raising the risk of instability. One conceivable response would be to channel portions of this manpower into external engagements that are limited in scale (and potentially politically deniable), thereby mitigating domestic volatility while sustaining Russia's status as an active security provider abroad. Africa—where Moscow has relied on expeditionary models involving contractors, advisory missions, and security assistance—offers a comparatively low-risk theater for such activity. In short, domestic opinion and postwar social pressures will matter for Russia's power projection calculus, but whether they constrain or redirect it remains an open question.

Personalism, Putin's appetite for risk, and the chances of miscalculation raise the prospects of future Russian action. The highly personalized nature of Russia's political system will also shape postwar decisions about power projection. Decision-making is concentrated in Putin's hands, and his interpretation of Russia's strategic position—and of his own historical legacy—will weigh heavily in determining where and how Moscow acts. Putin has framed the war in Ukraine as part of a broader struggle to revise the European security order. As a result, he is likely to weigh opportunities for action farther afield against the possibility of advancing these aims in Europe, particularly if he perceives openings to test Western

Once the war in Ukraine winds down, Russia is likely to retain much of the basic military infrastructure it needs to project power abroad and to rebuild the parts that have been worn down by the fighting.

resolve. The centralization of decision-making increases the risk that Putin miscalculates European cohesion and resolve. Putin's decision to launch the Russian invasion of Ukraine rested on expectations of a rapid, decisive victory, and while the war's protracted course might suggest greater caution ahead, the same structural pathologies—information distortion, overcentralized decision-making, and optimistic threat assessments—are likely to persist in the Kremlin's calculus. Although the Russian public may want to avoid being bogged down in another lengthy war, Russian leaders may again convince themselves they can achieve quick wins in future conflicts—a dynamic that is far from unique to Russian leaders.

Conclusion

RUSSIA'S APPARENT RETRENCHMENT from select theaters since 2022 has been widely interpreted as evidence that the war in Ukraine has fundamentally degraded Moscow's ability to project power. This report finds a more nuanced reality. While the war has imposed real costs—particularly on manpower, readiness, and access—it has not dismantled the core pillars that underpin Russia's expeditionary reach. Rather, the more decisive shift has been political. The Kremlin has imposed a far stricter hierarchy of priorities, concentrating resources, leadership attention, and escalation risk in Ukraine. In doing so, Moscow has become far more selective, intervening only where it judges the stakes to be critical, the environment permissive, and the likelihood of shaping outcomes high. Russia's restraint in cases such as Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh thus reflects not simply what it cannot do, but what it has chosen not to do.

Looking ahead, both the supply of Russian power and the demand for it are likely to increase—and the operating environment may become more permissive rather than less. As the war in Ukraine winds down, constraints tied to prioritization and risk tolerance are likely to ease, freeing resources and leadership attention for external engagements. At the same time, broader geopolitical trends are likely to work in Moscow's favor. A more fragmented international system, greater tolerance among many states for transactional security relationships, and uneven Western willingness or ability to contest Russian activity will expand opportunities for Moscow to secure basing, access, and partnerships. Many countries—particularly in the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Asia—will continue to value Russia as an alternative security provider, making it easier for Moscow to rebuild the relationships that underpin power projection. At the same time, Putin has demonstrated a willingness and ability to prioritize ruthlessly, and Europe is likely to remain a central focus of Russian strategy. Whether Moscow resumes a more global posture or concentrates its resources on Europe will depend on how the war in Ukraine ends and how effectively European states strengthen deterrence. But in either case, the “hibernating bear” is not a permanently diminished one: Russia will remain both willing and able to project power when it judges the conditions to be right.

Appendix: The Cases of Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh

The following two cases—Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh—illustrate the effect of the war in Ukraine on Russia's decision-making calculus on power projection. In both cases, Russia responded differently to dynamics on the ground before and after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These case studies make clear that Russia's changing behavior is not primarily a function of capability loss, but of the war's impact on Moscow's prioritization and risk tolerance.

Syria

Beginning in 2015, Russia provided an enormous amount of support to shore up the Assad regime against opposition forces. Yet, when the rebels finally reached the outskirts of Damascus in 2024 and Assad fled the country, Moscow did little more than provide shelter for Assad, seemingly unwilling to defend the regime it had supported for almost a decade.

Russia intervened in Syria in 2015 for three main reasons: to prevent the loss of a longtime partner in Damascus and the access to military facilities that came with that relationship, to push back against perceived U.S. unilateralism and efforts at regime change, and to prevent the spread of terrorism.

In 2024, these factors were less pressing. The terrorist threat had reduced (or at least been contained) during the previous nine years, and disinterest from the West showed there was little evidence of Western efforts to sponsor regime change. Whereas in 2015 Assad had been grateful for Russia's help, by 2024 the relationship between Damascus and Moscow had soured. Assad was now more of a liability than an asset for Moscow; he was unwilling to reform, unwilling to negotiate, and no longer compliant to Moscow's demands. Base access remained a concern for Moscow, but by the time the collapse of the Assad regime seemed imminent, Moscow judged it could likely retain access to its bases by building relationships with the new regime. Russian officials reportedly reached out to now-Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa before the rebels even reached Damascus in 2024.⁶⁸ Furthermore, with the United States forced to reckon with Russia in Ukraine, Moscow had less need to be in Syria to be taken seriously by the West.

The war in Ukraine undoubtedly put pressure on Russian resources. As Moscow reprioritized resources, the more competent Russian soldiers were moved from Syria to Ukraine, and eventually Moscow cut off funding to Syria entirely.⁶⁹ These decisions were indications that Moscow no longer thought it worth its effort to defend the Assad regime, instead believing that a fragmented Syria would work to its advantage—allowing it to retain some level of influence and reduce its engagement in an unprofitable protracted conflict—rather than decisive factors in Moscow's decision-making regarding intervention.

Nagorno-Karabakh

In the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia historically acted as Armenia's main security backer. After six weeks of violent conflict in 2020, Russia brokered a ceasefire leading to the deployment of a 2,000-strong Russian peacekeeping force to the region. In September 2023, Azerbaijan invaded Nagorno-Karabakh again, ejecting the Armenian forces and causing most of the Armenian population to flee. By April 2024, the Russian peacekeeping force withdrew all troops and vehicles.

For decades, Russia saw itself as the leading player in the South Caucasus, aiming to keep the peace and preserve the balance of power and status quo among the countries in the region. When violence broke out in 2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia intervened to maintain its image and relevance as a regional power, to push back against Turkish encroachment, and to preserve the status quo. However, the Russian peacekeeping force did not have a clear written mandate, and its rules of engagement were never clearly delineated or understood by all parties to the conflict. As a result, the number of armed clashes grew as both sides built up fortifications and trenches.⁷⁰ Throughout 2022 and 2023, Russian escort missions and patrols ceased, and humanitarian aid diminished. Russia was unable to stop Azerbaijan's lightning offensive on September 19, 2023, which ejected Armenian forces from Nagorno-Karabakh entirely. In April 2024, the peacekeeping force withdrew entirely.⁷¹

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine changed the calculations for Russia when thinking about projecting power in the region. By 2023, it had become clear that the peacekeeping force had little influence over the conflict. It therefore did not make sense for Russia to keep 2,000 men and 90 armored vehicles in place when they were needed in nearby Ukraine. Just deploying the peacekeeping force allowed Russia to demonstrate it was still relevant in the region and that it would not cede the role of regional hegemon to Türkiye. However, Russia was still reliant on good relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially as the war in Ukraine dragged on. By allowing Azerbaijan to take back areas along the Armenian border and tolerating the expulsion of most of Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian population, Moscow aimed to force Armenia to reckon with its vulnerability in the hope that it would turn toward Russia for protection. In addition, Russia didn't use its extensive electronic warfare capabilities against the Azerbaijani drones, which were a crucial part of its successful offensive. By doing so, Russia may have been trying to set up a level of dependence in Baku and reminding the country it could only go so far without Russian permission.

If Russia's aim was to maintain the status quo balance of power within the region and its position as regional hegemon, then its 2020 intervention was a success despite its ignominious end. Once it became clear that Russia did not have the resources or interest to maintain the peacekeeping force, Moscow was able to influence the way the conflict played out to maintain influence over both sides and restore the status quo.

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