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THE GROWING DANGER OF MILITARY CONFLICT WITH RUSSIA

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Once more, the circle in U.S.-Russia relations is complete. The Clinton administration took office in 1993 promising a Bill and Boris strategic partnership between the two countries, and ended with recriminations over the Kosovo operation, with Gen. Wesley Clark prepared to start World War III to block the arrival of Russian peacekeepers in Pristina. George W. Bush left the Ljubljana summit with Vladimir Putin in summer 2001 promising a qualitatively different U.S.-Russia relationship, which seemed to bear fruit in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, but concluded his term dealing with the Russian incursion into Georgia with calls from his own party, especially in Congress, for a forceful U.S. response. Barack Obama was going to reset relations with Russia, and now, in the weeks remaining in office, is facing demands from his own State Department and Department of Defense for drawing a line in the sand in Syria against Russian airstrikes on a besieged Aleppo—even at the risk of a face-to-face confrontation between American and Russian forces.

At various points in these pages over the past twenty-five years, serious voices □□□ Fred Ikle, Robert Legvold, Henry Kissinger, Graham Allison and Dimitri K. Simes, and Robert Blackwill, to name a few □□□□ called for a sober evaluation of U.S.-Russia relations and a concerted effort to work through the irritants and roadblocks in the U.S.-Russia relationship to find a way to concentrate on the advancing the agenda of shared interests between Washington and Moscow. Yet in both the Capitol and White House and in the Kremlin, matters have deteriorated to the point that such advice now falls on deaf and uninterested ears. Each side has a well-rehearsed litany of complaints and accusations □□□□□ attacks, Syria, Ukraine, human rights, NATO enlargement, color revolutions, duplicity over Libya, and so on and so forth □□□□ makes dialogue almost impossible.

In 1992, 2000 and 2008, the expectation was that following the U.S. elections, the page would be turned. A new effort, we were assured, would be undertaken to improve relations. Candidates Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama were all critical of the engagement efforts of their predecessors on the campaign trail, and then, within six months of taking office, sought a fresh start with the Kremlin.

Now I believe that things are going to be different. Very different.

Russia is indeed expecting a period of distraction and lack of reaction while the United States sorts out its presidential future. However, the Kremlin is not waiting passively to see who the next occupant of the Oval Office will be, but working to establish facts on the ground. It seems clear that the Russian government wants to present the new U.S. administration with the following: an Aleppo largely back under Syrian government control, with Bashar al-Assad having outlasted the Obama administration which demanded his departure and predicted his overthrow; a whole host of new capabilities □□□□ new cruise missiles to drones to cyber tools □□ suggest that U.S. predominance in these areas may be ending; putting Iskander missile systems in Kaliningrad to underline Russian efforts to undermine recent efforts to reassure NATOs eastern flank; extensive civil defense efforts at home; and diplomatic efforts aimed at attenuating Washingtons ties with traditional allies on both the western and eastern ends of the Asian continent (Turkey and the Philippines) while seeking to reestablish Soviet era bases in Cuba and Vietnam.

On the last point, the irony is that Putin closed those facilities in part to save money and in part to signal his interest in pursuing partnership with Washington. The fact that he is now committed to reestablishing them is the strongest signal that he has lost interest in pursuing any new reset with Washington come January. Instead, he will want the new President to have to accept cold realities about Russian power and to understand Russias abilities to create costs for U.S. actions □□□ not to discount Moscows ability or willingness to use these tools if pressed. Civil defense exercises that impact one-quarter of the countrys population are not run on a whim.

The messaging is plain: Russia is deadly serious.

I believe that the United States did not take seriously Putins warning in his 2014 address to the Duma following the annexation of Crimea: If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard. You must always remember this. There were three ways in which to respond. The first would be to believe that Putin would not allow the spring to snap back for fear of U.S. counteraction. Over the last two years, we have seen that Russia has taken the measure of U.S. deterrent and compellence capabilities, through constant probing and testing, and is assessing what it believes Americas true red lines are □□□ what is announced from the podiums of the White House and Foggy Bottom □□□ sees no reason to completely forestall the springback. The second is to assess that the response of the Russian springback would be weak and ineffectual. It

may be very true that the long-term trajectory of Russian power is negative and that the arc of history will bend in a way to consign the current Kremlin regime to the ashbin. But National Intelligence Council predictions about likely Russian futures in the 2030s is not a basis for conducting policy in 2016 on the basis of current, real, actual Russian capabilities today □□□□□□ as operations in Syria and Ukraine and the reputed cyber intrusions have demonstrated—are real

The prudent response would either be to find ways to de-escalate the pressure on the spring or to prepare for its snapback and to be able to cushion the shock. A whole host of track II dialogues over the past two years □□□□ of whose conclusions were reported in these pages □□□□□□□□□□ compromises on flashpoint issues like Ukraine and Syria and developing new codes of conduct for cyberspace. But the political costs of acting on these recommendations □□□□□ would have required the United States to step back from some of its positions and preferences □□□□ seen as too high. In Syria, for instance, walking back the Assad must go demand as a precondition for talks on the countrys future, at a time when Russia might have been open to compromise. Today, when the United States has reluctantly conceded that Assad might be able to stay, at least for a period of time, Moscow has moved on and decided it can win in Syria, or at least in Aleppo, to give Assad a much stronger hand to play as the bargaining on Syria begins with Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

The other prudent response □□□ prepare for the springback □□□□ ran up against costs the U.S. was unwilling to pay. Two ineffectual NATO summits in 2014 and 2015 did little to convince Europeans that in the face of a threat from the Kremlin and with the United States facing a more assertive China in the Pacific, they would need to rapidly restore real expeditionary capabilities. The U.S. itself did not want to abandon its preferred construct for defense spending: drawdowns in Europe and the Middle East to allow for buildups in the Far East while making overall cuts. Nor did the U.S. want to shoulder the burden of a Ukraine aid program that would be the equivalent of what Washington was willing to spend post-1989 in central Europe or be prepared to commit to a more direct intervention in Syria to advance its preferred outcome. Instead, we have tended to complain about Russias actions and why they are inappropriate for a twenty-first-century world.

Last year, the calculation of Saudi Arabia □□□ by extension of the United States □□□ that Russia could not sustain its more assertive position in the Middle East (and other parts of the world) in light of declining energy prices, and that unsheathing the oil weapon would curb Kremlin ambitions. This was wrong. Today, it is Saudi Arabia that has begun to search for ways to firm up oil prices while Rosneft □□□□□□ state oil company □□□□□□ that it has no need for capping production. Syria has not proven to be the quagmire that President Obama said it would be for Moscow. The Russia-Turkey partnership now seems to be back on track while Ankaras ties with Washington worsen. While the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Americas signature economic initiative for Asia, is on political life support, Chinese president Xi Jinping will travel to the BRICS summit in Goa later this week to unveil ambitious proposals for free trade arrangements that bypass the West.

Moscow is setting red lines of its own. The United States, under the current administration and then under new management come January, needs to assess which of those lines it is unwilling to

cross, which ones Russia is serious about defending, and which ones America must be prepared to defy—and in so doing, be prepared to pay the costs.

As an observer of U.S. policy, I cant say for certain where the United States might be prepared to compromise and where it would stand firm. But U.S. leaders have to make these calls based on their assessment of U.S. values and interests combined with costs America is willing to pay. But U.S. policy will be on a firming footing once there is a salutary realization that, when it comes to the Kremlin, there are no risk-free options.

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