

A Divided Continuum: The Logic of Russian Escalation Against Post-Soviet States

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Abstract

This thesis probes for patterns in the escalation of Russian interventions against neighboring post-Soviet states after the Cold War. It then seeks to explain the causation of such patterns. I conclude that the factors influencing the intensity levels of Russian interventions can be understood within a periodized framework. After the USSR's collapse, Russia's limited economic capacity prevented it from intensifying its interventions against neighboring ex-Soviet states. An increase in economic power at the turn of the century then shifted Russia's intervention calculus. Russia is most likely to escalate to a significant intensity level when its economy is strong and the targeted state is not a NATO member but is progressing toward membership. The likelihood of Russian intervention increases if these factors remain true and Russia can act with plausible deniability — especially at a time when the U.S. is unlikely to interfere militarily with Russia's plans. Yet, even in times of economic strength, Russia will cap its interventions against NATO member states below the level of armed conflict.

*For my parents, who taught me the value of curiosity,
and for my grandparents, who inspire me ceaselessly.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: The Question	4
Introduction	4
Chapter 2: The Theory	7
Case Selection	7
Intervention Intensity Scale	8
Theoretical Reasoning	9
Alternative Hypotheses	18
The Diversionary Hypothesis	19
The Territorial Annexation Hypothesis	21
Chapter 3: The Case Studies	22
Case 1: Ukraine	22
Historical Overview	22
Hypothesis Analysis	33
Case 2: Georgia	51
Historical Overview	51
Hypothesis Analysis	61
Case 3: Estonia	73
Historical Overview	73
Hypothesis Analysis	83
Chapter 4: The Findings	93
Comparative Hypothesis Analysis	93
Hypothesis Synthesis	98
Chapter 5: Concluding Thoughts and Broader Implications	102
Conclusion	102
Acknowledgments	108
Bibliography	109

FIGURES

Conflict Continuum	9
Political Map of Georgia and Separatist Territories	51
Russian Intervention Against Near Abroad States	101

Chapter 1: The Question

Introduction

If, on an occasional sunny day in the Estonian city of Narva, one were to walk along the city's eponymous river from south to north, one would encounter a charming sight. The quaint medieval Hermann Castle complex, its white tower peering over the outer walls, clings to the western riverbank. Hugging the eastern bank across the narrow river, the impressive Ivangorod Fortress, dwarfing the Hermann Castle, faces its smaller neighbor. Together, these timeworn sentries bookend the Estonia-Russia border as it runs in the middle of the Narva River.

Despite the pleasant picture formed by these castles, their history is chilly — and some fear they may provide the backdrop to a violent future. Dating to the early fourteenth century, the Hermann Castle originated as the local Danish inhabitants' easternmost outpost to protect the population during conflicts with Russians living across the river. The castle's second inhabitants, members of a Germanic Teutonic Knights offshoot, bolstered its defenses the following century after the Moscovian Grand Prince Ivan III built the imposing Ivangorod fortress on the opposite side of the river crossing.¹ Some scholars and policymakers now worry that, centuries later, Narva must once again prepare for Russian aggression from across the river. Following the 2014 Russian annexation of the Ukrainian Crimean peninsula, eyes around the world turned to Narva, wondering if the tranquil Estonian border city might soon follow.² The connection is logical; the two regions share striking similarities in their substantial ethnic Russian populations, histories of secessionist referendums and exposed geographic positions bordering Russian territory. The likelihood of such

¹ "Hermann Castle, Narva, Estonia." SpottingHistory. Accessed March 30, 2020.

² Trimbach, David J., and Shannon O'Lear. "Russians in Estonia: Is Narva the next Crimea?" *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56, no. 5 (2015): 493.

an annexation is, however, highly debatable. This would represent not only a violation of Estonian sovereignty but also an unprecedented and provocative incursion into the borders of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia has already once crippled Estonia with attacks in the cyber domain, and further escalation remains possible.

Narva's predicament is not unique in the region. As the Soviet Union disintegrated as a political entity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the former superpower's territory fractured into fifteen independent states, many of which contained autonomous territories within their borders. For the last three decades, the Russian Federation — the USSR's legal successor and by far the largest, wealthiest and most politically powerful of these states — has developed complicated relations with the other independent states that emerged and reemerged along its border. Within the last fifteen years, as Russia has recovered from significant economic decline and increased its capacity for projecting power across the region, it has engaged in conflicts with several of its weaker neighbors. Many Western scholars, policymakers and even casual observers have labeled this behavior as Russian revisionism, often implying that Russia's leaders and citizens seek to restore Russia to the Soviet Union's regional and prominent global position. While this thesis does not evaluate the validity of this claim, it does investigate the stimuli that appear to trigger these Russian escalations. Situations such as that of Narva beg the question: what factors lead Russia to escalate the intensity of its interventions against neighboring post-Soviet states?

Through this examination, this paper aims to create a portrait of the conditions that increase the intensity levels of Russian interventions. An understanding of the factors that impact this Russian calculus can inform policymakers and scholars of the causes of aggressive Russian behavior, as opposed to a general diagnosis of nostalgia for the eminence of the USSR. As countries along the

Russian border fear their massive neighbor could soon attempt to raise the Russian flag above their cities, back disruptive separatist movements within their borders or cripple their economies through the internet, analysis of the trends behind Russian escalation against its neighbors becomes even more urgent. This paper examines issues and patterns that could impact the behavior of leaders and states for decades to come.

After an extended study of Russian intervention in the cases of Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia, I conclude that the factors influencing escalation of Russian interventions can be best understood within a periodized framework of two distinct eras. After the USSR's collapse, Russia's limited economic capacity prevented it from escalating the intensity levels of its interventions against neighboring post-Soviet states for an extended period of time. Even at points at which Russian escalation was plausible, such as aggressive diplomacy during the 1993 Crimean crisis and severe tensions in 1993 over troop movements and the treatment of Russian minorities in Estonia, Russia was simply too weak to intervene at higher intensity levels.

By 2007, however, Russia's economy had largely recovered from this lengthy period of economic vulnerability, which in turn enabled more assertive behavior. Higher level intervention in the region was back on the table, and Russia's heightened capacity led to increasingly aggressive interventions in response to specific triggers. Yet, even this newly bellicose Russia still displayed an unwillingness to cross the threshold of direct military intervention against NATO states in its neighborhood. Instead, as demonstrated by the 2007 Russian cyberattacks against NATO member Estonia, increased aggression against NATO remained restricted to strictly non-kinetic domains. Non-NATO states in the region, however, experienced interventions reaching the threshold of armed conflict. When these states began to achieve substantial progress in the process leading to

NATO membership, Russia launched military interventions to block those states' accessions into NATO, as in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Since these attacks, Russia has remained entrenched in its ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, but it has not pursued further major interventions in the region. Its signals to NATO about eastward expansion appear to have dissuaded the Western alliance from further courting former Soviet states.

Chapter 2: The Theory

Case Selection

The paper tests this argument by examining variation of intervention intensity levels within and across three case studies: Russian intervention in Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia. These three case studies were selected because they constitute the universe of cases of high-intensity Russian intervention against states in its near abroad after the fall of the USSR.³ Although Russia's relationships with its other neighbors are certainly intriguing and worthy of examination, this paper does not include neighboring states that were not Soviet republics. The research question is limited to states formerly incorporated into Soviet territory because of the unique relationship created by their lengthy and only recently dissolved union. For this reason, former members of the Soviet Union's Warsaw Pact military alliance, like Poland and Hungary, are not included in the study. Due to this focus on the former Soviet space, cases like recent Russian intervention in Syria and Russian nonintervention in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s are not examined. Additionally, the research question only examines Russian interventions against states and not against non-state

³ The term "near abroad" is used in scholarly discourse with diverse implications, often referring to states that Russia considers within its sphere of influence. For the sake of brevity throughout this paper, I use the term "near abroad states," abbreviated as "NA states," to refer specifically and solely to the subset of states that were formerly republics in the Soviet Union, excluding Russia.

actors. Conflicts like the Chechen Wars or the War of Dagestan are therefore not considered in this paper, although the level of Russian intervention was significant in both cases.

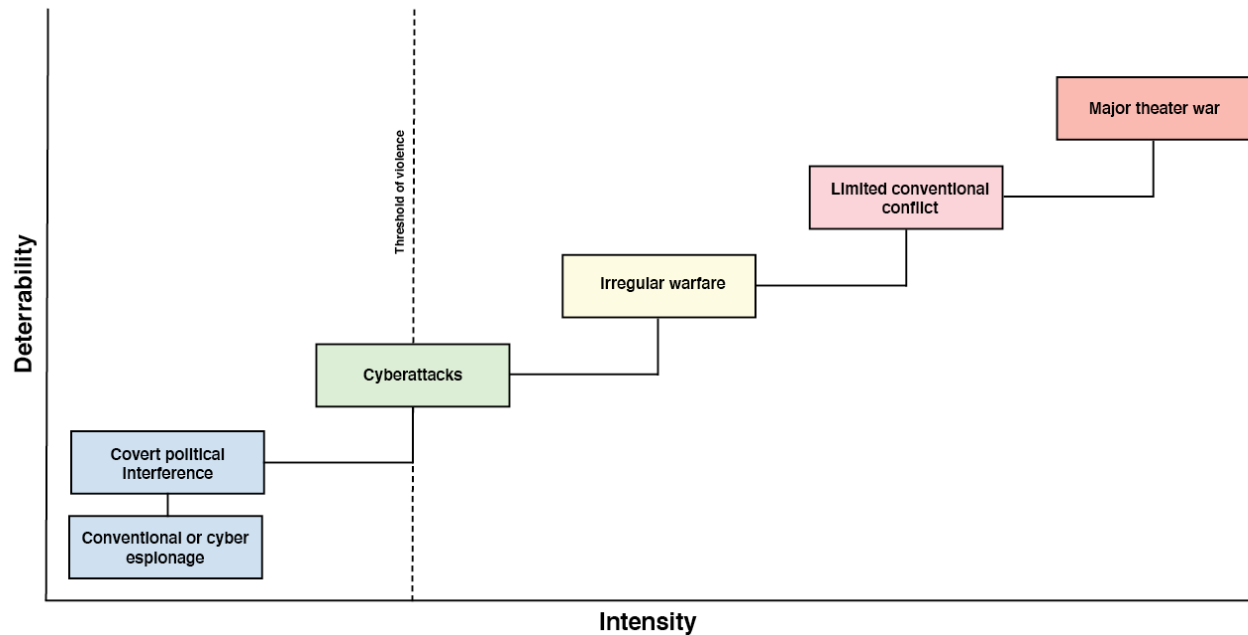
Lastly, the cases examined are limited to those in which Russia has experienced its most serious disputes. Although discussions of Russia's security posture toward all of its former Soviet republic neighbors is an important topic of discussion, this paper focuses on how Russia scales the intensity of its interventions when disputes arise with these NA states. The cases of Russian relations with Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia involve the most serious disputes with NA states. Furthermore, these cases represent the only cases of NA state disputes in which Russia has escalated interventions to significant intensities, with reasonable evidence indicating Russian state support. The three selected case studies therefore represent the full range of cases relevant to the research question.

Each of the cases represents an appropriate point of examination under the parameters described above. This paper analyzes why, in all three instances, Russia intervened at different levels during different crises. Comparative analysis of the patterns within each case study against those of the other two then provides a robust framework for testing the hypotheses.

Intervention Intensity Scale

This paper conceptualizes the use of force as part of a continuum of intensity levels in the following figure. This represents the scale of possible actions Russia could take when intervening against NA states, ordered from least assertive to most assertive. This continuum reflects that the actions at the highest intensity levels are generally the most likely to be deterred, as states will only select into such conflicts when no less costly solution agreeable to both parties exists. Low-intensity and low-visibility actions like espionage at the conventional and cyber levels are exceedingly difficult

for states to prevent and are therefore placed at the lower end of both axes. Cyberattacks represent a significant increase in intensity, due to their potential to cripple a country's civil networks, military communications and economic infrastructure. The threshold of violence intersects cyberattacks on the continuum, as cyberattacks possess the potential to directly cause physical damage. The next steps of intervention in the continuum, all in the kinetic domain, progress in intensity due to the substantial increases in both the stakes at hand and the countries' kinetic engagements at each step.



Theoretical Reasoning

This paper's conclusions about the factors influencing Russian escalation follow the predictions of four hypotheses and one sub-hypothesis, which are each grounded in security studies literature. After evaluating these hypotheses within each case study and across the cases collectively, I

synthesize the findings for the hypotheses into one theory, which articulates how the interaction of different factors causes variation in the intensity level of Russian intervention against NA states.

H1 asserts that Russia is less likely to directly intervene at the level of military action against NA states with NATO membership. Its sub-hypothesis, H1A, claims that U.S. credibility at a given point affects the intensity level at which Russia is willing to intervene. H2 argues that Russia is more likely to intervene aggressively against a non-NATO member NA state when that state is already making significant progress toward NATO accession. H3 contends that Russia is more willing to increase its intervention intensity level when it can rely upon a method that provides plausible deniability. H4 argues that Russia's economic capacity determines whether it intervenes at a high intensity level.

H1: Near abroad states with NATO membership are more likely to successfully achieve general deterrence toward Russia.

NATO, a security alliance between the United States and many powerful European states, including France, the United Kingdom and (formerly West) Germany, was the principal adversary of the USSR's Warsaw Pact alliance during the Cold War. After the USSR's disintegration, NATO remained intact. The alliance is now the dominant institution for transatlantic security cooperation and is buttressed considerably by the conventional and nuclear capabilities of the U.S.

H1 posits that after a post-Soviet state enters NATO, it acquires an enhanced capacity for deterring Russian aggression. NATO's central premise is that all member states will defend any member in the event of a direct military conflict. The alliance's effectiveness hinges upon the ability of all member states to invoke Article V, which is a mutual defense pact obligating the entire alliance

to provide military assistance if a member is attacked. This mechanism for summoning the military might of powerful European states, but even more importantly, of the U.S., serves as a strong deterrent for Russian aggression against NATO members. H1 therefore assumes that Russia operates in an environment in which it seeks to avoid a military confrontation against NATO.

A skeptic of the significance of alliances could argue that Russia might wager that the U.S. would not support Estonia when its immediate foreign policy goals do not justify the costs of such protection. In this scenario, Russia might consider escalating its interventions against Estonia. Yet, even though military alliances have not historically served as absolute guarantees of mutual support, the risk of retaliation created by a state's NATO membership may prove a sufficient deterrent mechanism. It is true that the alliance cannot ensure third party support during conflict beyond a reasonable doubt; NATO suffers from the same lingering possibility of defection as all other alliances. Yet, for the NATO alliance to successfully dissuade Russian high-intensity intervention against a member, the threat of a NATO response does not need to be absolute and beyond any doubt, but simply credible. Rather than proving it will intervene, the alliance must merely communicate that the probability of NATO intervention (and, by extension, the imposition of unacceptable costs) is large enough to prove too risky for Russia.

Non-cooperative game theorist James Morrow reasons that costly signaling increases a military alliance's credibility, supporting the argument that Russia is unlikely to intervene at the level of military invasion against NATO members. Successful alliances rely upon states' self-enforcement of obligations both to function effectively and to communicate the alliance's strength to would-be attackers.⁴ Morrow explains that because alliances impose costs on members, states will only enter

⁴ Morrow, James D. "Alliances: Why Write Them Down?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (2000): 63.

alliances with other states if they share meaningful interests and if they anticipate meeting their commitments in the event of war.⁵ These costs often take the form of audience costs, meaning leaders will face domestic and international ridicule if they do not support an ally. Joining the alliance requires the undertaking of these new costs in the event of failure to defend allies; had the leaders not entered the alliance, they would not have experienced this ridicule. The formal alliance is therefore a commitment device incentivizing the defense of any member targeted by Russia, since the inherent costs of failing to defend that state are higher than they would have been in a world without the alliance.⁶ Addressing NATO specifically, Morrow argues that NATO's extensive peacetime military coordination increases the odds that the allies will succeed if they fight together, which in turn increases the likelihood that NATO states will defend each other.⁷

These factors increase the likelihood that Russia will anticipate that NATO will honor its commitment to defend its members. Since Russia does not seek to provoke a conflict against U.S.-led NATO forces, even if it maintains some level of intervention against NATO states, it will refrain from escalating this aggression to the point of overt military conflict.

H1A: The United States' credibility positively affects near abroad states' abilities to deter Russia.

A sub-hypothesis of H1, H1A argues that U.S. credibility as a potential defender impacts the degree to which Russia intervenes against NA states. Due to the U.S.'s central role within NATO's military core and strategic direction, this paper focuses largely on the U.S. rather than other NATO

⁵ Ibid, 73.

⁶ Ibid, 72.

⁷ Ibid, 71.

states. Essentially, Russia's assessment of the likelihood of a U.S. response determines whether it escalates its interventions. This credibility hinges upon two major factors: capacity and willingness.

If Russia believes that U.S. military capacity would enable it to win a military confrontation and assumes the U.S. might intervene, Russia is unlikely to escalate its aggression against NA states to the level of military intervention. One indicator of U.S. capability would be a recent display of its ability to accomplish its military objectives abroad. When the U.S. can demonstrate the effectiveness of its conventional military, Russia is less likely to risk any confrontation that could trigger a U.S. military response. Likewise, if the U.S. military performs poorly, it suffers a reputational loss that may embolden actors like Russia. Another indicator of capacity for intervention against Russia is whether the U.S. has the ready supply of forces, materials and funding necessary for a military intervention. Substantial U.S. military involvement in other areas of the world would decrease the availability of such necessities and would therefore reduce U.S. capacity.

This deterrence relies upon not only demonstrated U.S. military capacity but also the perceived degree of U.S. willingness to directly confront a global power like Russia. This willingness can be predicted by the shifts over time in the U.S.'s international reputation as an actor likely to intervene abroad. The U.S. is less likely to convince Russia of its willingness to intervene in an eastern European conflict when its military is entrenched in other conflicts around the world. This is due to material constraints limiting the number of major conflicts in which the U.S. can afford to participate at one time. The level of prior U.S. engagement elsewhere therefore influences the degree to which Russia may increase the intensity level of its interventions against NA states, as this decreases the likelihood of U.S. willingness to commit further forces to a new conflict. Furthermore, the U.S. is unlikely to engage in further military conflicts if it is experiencing a significant domestic

crisis at the time, as the population is unlikely to approve of allocation of significant funding for that purpose.

Russia is also more likely to intervene when the U.S. has recently failed to act in situations that would have logically warranted U.S. intervention given its strategic interests. When the U.S. intervenes consistently to aid other countries, Russia is likely to anticipate new U.S. interventions. Yet, if the U.S. has not intervened in situations in which it indicated it would or situations that appear to align with its interests, the implied odds of a new U.S. intervention are decreased. Due to the democratic nature of the U.S. government, however, other critical factors affect this calculation. If the U.S. is already entrenched in conflicts that are faring poorly or unpopular among the U.S. population, the collective political will to enter a new conflict among U.S. leaders and policymakers, who often consider their reelection prospects when making decisions, is unlikely.

Thus, the variation of U.S. credibility, consisting of its capacity and reputation of willingness as perceived by Russia, influences the degree of escalation that Russia undertakes in its interventions.

H2: Overt NATO deliberations surrounding an NA state's possible entry without officially giving membership decrease that state's ability to deter Russia.

H2 claims that Russia is more likely to intervene in an NA state's affairs when that state is significantly strengthening its relationship with NATO but is not yet a member. This hypothesis draws upon the predictions of H1 and assumes that Russia is indeed deterred to a higher degree when a state has achieved NATO membership, as a result of the Article V collective defense mechanism's implications. Therefore, the inclusion of additional countries into NATO increases the number of states that possess this potent deterrent capability. This appears particularly threatening

to Russia when NATO expands eastward, into Russia's neighborhood. Russia bristles at the prospect of former Soviet states, which it considers within its cultural, economic and security spheres of influence, foregoing closer ties with Russia in favor of NATO accession. Russia therefore regards NATO efforts to bring former Soviet states into the alliance as a direct threat.

H2 is rooted in James Fearon's theory that commitment problems between rational states incentivize preventive interventions. Fearon explains that even when states accurately perceive each other's capabilities and motivations, war may still occur instead of successful peaceful bargaining. In a situation with two mutually distrustful states, when one state has the prospect of becoming more powerful in the future, the other state is more likely to escalate its intervention against its adversary. Yet, Fearon argues, separately from the classic argument that states intervene preventively to prevent future dangerous attacks, that the disadvantaged state will instead intervene because it anticipates a new peaceful status quo that it will find unacceptable.⁸ As applied to the relationship between Russia and an NA state hoping for NATO accession, this situation arises from the strong deterrent capabilities provided by NATO membership, which are discussed in H1. Therefore, although Russia would accept a situation in which NA states join NATO but promise credibly to abide by Russian preferences, after the NA states achieve NATO membership, they have greater incentives to disregard inconvenient Russian preferences. Russia therefore cannot trust such pre-NATO accession commitments made by NA states and, consequently, has an incentive to act preventively.

As a result of this dilemma, Russia is likely to act assertively when NA states approach NATO membership. This intervention is a preventive strategy intended to freeze the process of the state's integration into NATO. Russian intervention achieves this through two distinct but related

⁸ Fearon, James. "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 406.

effects. Firstly, intervention serves to unhinge the target country's political stability, convincing NATO that the NA state is an unstable liability and could require undesirable deployments of NATO aid. Demonstrated political stability within a state has essentially served as a prerequisite for NATO accession, and states experiencing domestic turmoil are unlikely to prove theirs. Furthermore, this intervention signals that Russia, openly regarding eastward NATO expansion as a threat to its territorial integrity, remains risk-acceptant regarding this issue and could initiate a fight over the NA state in question.

These strategies benefit Russia directly. By discouraging further NATO moves to incorporate the NA state into the alliance, Russia isolates the state from European integration and incentivizes the state to turn toward Russia for strategic cooperation. Ultimately, this should be visible through increased Russian intervention at times of substantial progress in the state's accession efforts. The inverse of this idea should remain true; Russia has less incentive to intervene and disrupt the NATO accession process when an NA state's relations with NATO are demonstrably poor and the state remains far from accession. Therefore, for H2 to be supported, increased Russian intervention during or after periods of serious cooperation and progress toward accession should be observable.

H3: Near abroad states are less likely to successfully deter Russia if Russia is able to use a covert method of attack.

H3 asserts that Russia is more likely to intervene if it can do so in a manner that provides plausible deniability. Undesirable consequences for overt intervention can range from economic repercussions, like sanctions enacted by the international community, to military responses. Yet, if Russia can achieve its goals while leaving little evidence of its meddling, it can plausibly deny

accusations against it, increasing the odds of avoiding these negative responses. If Russia can pursue strategic objectives while maintaining diplomatic distance from the events, it is more likely to select into intervention situations. It will pursue any intervention to the highest possible intensity level at which it can plausibly deny any responsibility. Therefore, Russia is more likely to intervene in situations in which it can rely upon proxy forces to accomplish its objectives or to create the deception that its troops are actually local, nonaffiliated groups. Similarly, Russia is likely to rely upon cyber intervention in conjunction with higher level kinetic intervention or, if significantly deterred, in lieu of kinetic intervention. By employing these strategies, Russia can escalate to the point of low-level military action with reduced fear of meaningful international retribution.

H4: The extent of Russian intervention in the affairs of near abroad states reflects the strength of the Russian economic strategic position.

H4 argues that Russia's economic capacity is a significant factor driving its escalatory behavior. Escalating interventions to the point of military action incurs significant expenses for states. When economic conditions are poor in Russia, the resulting low capacity may prove prohibitive for high-level interventions abroad, as politicians are likely to divert the required funds to domestic needs. Beyond the inherent cost of military intervention, if Russia's economy has been performing poorly, the government simply is less likely to pursue interventions that could risk harmful international responses. Russia must anticipate the possibility of severe international economic sanctions in response to aggressive military actions against neighboring states. The restrictive effect of this risk can be identified in periods like the 1990s, when the Russian economy contracted significantly. Although the economic collapse affected the Russian oil industry, oil exports

still constituted a major portion of the government's revenue.⁹ Any international sanctions against these Russian exports would have devastated such a weak and narrowly focused export economy. Yet, this principle also applies throughout the early 2000s, when the growing economy depended upon exports of oil and natural gas.¹⁰ Russian leaders were simply less likely to risk aggressive behaviors that could provoke devastating sanctions against these essential exports. Each of these factors inhibits significant Russian intervention during periods of economic vulnerability.

When Russia achieves economic strength, escalating intervention to higher intensity levels becomes possible. While Russia was unable to act beyond low-intensity measures during its weak period, it now has the capacity to launch interventions in support of its interests. A resurgent economy both allows for the direct costs of expensive interventions and enables Russia to withstand the indirect costs of intense intervention. Once economically stable, Russia can consider intervention in desirable situations.

Alternative Hypotheses

Although the hypotheses listed above were the final hypotheses selected for examination, several other hypotheses were initially considered as well. These two alternative hypotheses were the "domestic diversion" hypothesis and the "territorial annexation" hypothesis.

⁹ Vatansever, Adnan. "Russia's Oil Exports: Economic Rationale Versus Strategic Gains." Carnegie Papers. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2010. p. 5.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

The Domestic Diversion Hypothesis

Although the “diversion” hypothesis initially appeared to add a new and valuable dimension to the examination, closer analysis reveals significant weaknesses. When I considered whether any specific factors within Russian domestic politics could partially explain patterns of Russian intervention in NA states, I was initially intrigued by the idea that Russian leaders could intervene at times of political weakness as a diversionary tactic. Yet, further scrutiny reveals that the historical record of Russian intervention in Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia does not reflect this concept.

Polling shows former Russian President Boris Yeltsin’s approval ratings remained largely below the 40% mark after 1993 and below 30% after 1994. His ratings dipped to between 20% and 10% approval between 1995 and 1996, and they remained below 10% from late 1998 until his resignation.¹¹ Yet, Russia did not engage in significant intervention in its near abroad (or elsewhere) throughout this period. During Russian President Vladimir Putin’s initial 2000-2008 tenure, his annual approval ratings ranged from 66% to 85%, with his lowest points occurring in 2005 (66%) and 2000, his first year in office (70%).¹² These low points compare favorably to those of other Russian presidents.

Outside of Putin’s ratings, the most notable moments of public disapproval during his first two terms occurred in response to the 2000 Kursk submarine accident, Putin’s 2002 hostage crisis response and Putin’s 2004 hostage crisis response.¹³ In contradiction to this hypothesis, Russian intervention in the three countries did not approach significant levels at any of these hotspots; the

¹¹ Treisman, Daniel. “Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin.” *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 3 (January 2011): 590–609.

¹² “Vladimir Putin's Approval Rating Russia 2000 to 2020.” Statista, March 24, 2020.

¹³ “Timeline: Vladimir Putin - 20 Tumultuous Years as Russian President or PM.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, August 9, 2019.

2007 cyber operations against Estonia occurred in the context of 72% approval (2006) and 81% approval (2007). Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's approval ratings ranged between 56% and 78% during his 2008-2012 term.¹⁴ His 2007 approval totaled 65%, while he received 76% approval in 2008, the year in which Russia intervened against Georgia. He was not in a position of weakness at the time of intervention, and the crisis had its roots during Putin's term in 2007.

Furthermore, during Medvedev's presidency, Putin, who had been forced to the role of prime minister by legal bars on consecutive presidential terms, controlled the government's major decision-making.¹⁵ During Putin's second presidential tenure (2012-present), his lowest ratings points were 63% (2013) and 2019 (64%). The 2013 point does precede Russia's 2014 intervention; yet, that year did not represent a steep decline from his popularity in 2012 (68%) or 2011 (69%). Protests around potential voter fraud influencing Putin's reelection had occurred since 2011. Rather than corresponding to the latest point in a three-year trend, the 2014 intervention appears to correlate much more closely with the early 2014 deposition of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

Furthermore, a proponent of the diversionary explanation would expect leaders to intervene abroad directly before elections to boost their domestic standings; these case studies do not provide any evidence to support this notion. Russian presidential elections occurred in 1991, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2018. The only significant interventions that occurred during the three cases were in 2007, 2008 and 2014. The 2008 intervention in Georgia occurred late in the year, while the election occurred previously in March. Russian intervention against Estonia occurred in May 2007,

¹⁴ "Dmitry Medvedev's Approval Rating in Russia 2007-2019." Statista, February 24, 2020.

¹⁵ Ryabov, Andrei. "Tandemocracy in Today's Russia." Russian Analytical Digest. ETH Zurich, 2008. p. 2.

nearly a year before the election. None of these interventions, therefore, occur directly before presidential elections.

These preliminary findings reflect Taylor Fravel's criticisms of the diversionary hypothesis. In his examination of two case studies, he finds standard realist foreign policy and "coercive diplomacy" to have played a far greater role in the instances of intervention than domestic politics.¹⁶ I reach the same conclusion in this case and align my findings with his critique.

Russian intervention did not reach a significant level during the vast majority of leaders' domestic weak points, and two of its highest intensity intervention points — the 2007 cyber intervention in Estonia and 2008 Russo-Georgian War — do not correlate with weak periods. While the third significant intervention point, the 2014 Russian actions in Ukraine, roughly follows a slightly weak point for Putin, it is more directly linked to events in Ukraine. As a result of this lack of plausible validity, I did not examine this hypothesis further.

The Territorial Annexation Hypothesis

The second alternative hypothesis initially considered for examination was that NA states might be less likely to successfully deter Russian intervention over territorial sovereignty disputes. Yet, multiple separate arguments challenge this notion. Firstly, it is possible that Russian intervention to resolve territorial disputes reflects an opposite causation; essentially, Russia does not use force specifically because of territorial disputes, but it instead intervenes more intensely in such disputes during periods when it feels comfortable using force.

¹⁶ Fravel, M. Taylor. "The Limits of Diversion: Rethinking Internal and External Conflict." *Security Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 338.

Secondly, Russia has often only intervened after years or decades since the onset of its disputes, reducing the likelihood of a sovereignty dispute serving as the independent variable. Russia's major interventions over territorial sovereignty have occurred after long periods of time since the dispute initially arose or was resolved. For example, while Russia claimed Crimean territory in the early 1990s, it was not until 2014 that Russian soldiers facilitated a Crimean referendum that Russia's leadership then cited as justification for the integration of Crimea into Russia. Similarly, although Russia had supported the separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia since Georgia's exit from the Soviet Union, it only intervened overtly and officially recognized their independence in 2008. While these interventions occur in the context of sovereignty disputes, Russia's decisions to use force stem from other external triggers.

In instances of Russian intervention over territorial sovereignty disputes, Russia's level of comfort in using force in response to external stimuli may result in higher level intervention, rather than the opposite causation. This is especially visible in some of its most significant and intense interventions, which actually occurred several decades after their origins. As a result of the unclear (and perhaps unfavorable) causal linkage, this hypothesis was also ultimately not included in the thesis.

Chapter 3: The Case Studies

Ukraine: Historical Overview

The Ukraine case study supports this paper's argument, setting a foundation for Russian behavior toward non-NATO member NA states. The case contains flashpoints for potential Russian intervention in 1993, 2004 and 2014. Out of these, Russia intervened at a significant level only in

2014. This supports the periodized argument that Russia will refrain from escalation during economically weak periods but will intervene at significant intensity levels against non-NATO NA states after economic revival. A description of relevant historical events throughout Ukraine's relationships with both Russia and NATO will support discussion of the hypotheses.

Ukraine and Russia have a lengthy and contentious historical relationship. The Muscovite Empire, which would later evolve into the Russian Empire, annexed eastern Ukraine in the sixteenth century. After the Russian tsar fell and the Bolshevik uprising commenced in 1917, the Ukrainian People's Republic briefly declared independence before the Soviet Union absorbed it in 1921. Western and Eastern Ukraine then functioned as one region under the Soviet Union.¹⁷ The Ukrainian Supreme Soviet declared independence in 1991.¹⁸

Ukrainian cooperation with NATO began early in the independent country's post-Soviet history, as it joined the alliance's North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991. Partnership gradually increased during the mid-1990s with solid first steps of cooperation, such as Ukraine's 1994 entry into the Partnership for Peace (PFP) initiative, 1996 deployment of Ukrainian soldiers to NATO's peacekeeping operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1997 construction of the NATO Information and Documentation Centre in Kyiv and 1999 deployment of the Polish-Ukrainian Battalion to aid NATO's Kosovo peacekeeping operation.¹⁹ Throughout the 1990s, Russia encouraged Ukraine to join its own post-Soviet multilateral regional institution, the Commonwealth of Independent States

¹⁷ Kappeler, Andreas. "Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the Imperial Past and Competing Memories." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 2014): 110.

¹⁸ Reid, Anna. *Borderland: a Journey through the History of Ukraine*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015. p. xv.

¹⁹ "Relations with Ukraine." North Atlantic Treaty Organization, February 4, 2020.

(CIS). It was instead forced to watch Ukraine form close ties with the security alliance founded expressly to counter the USSR — likely a stinging irony.

During and after the breakdown of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, numerous disagreements emerged between Ukraine and Russia over the new political status of Crimea. These revolved around the national status of Crimea but also the status of the Crimean port of Sevastopol, which served as the Soviet Black Sea Fleet base. While a 1991 Crimean referendum reestablished the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR, the superpower's formal dissolution and the subsequent emergence of an independent Ukraine resulted in a Supreme Council of Crimea vote to declare Crimean independence and establish an independent government. After significant tension and additional Ukrainian concessions, however, the Crimean constitution was amended to designate Crimea as an area within Ukraine.²⁰ Within this time period, Russia and Ukraine agreed to divide the Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol. The Crimeans then pressured Ukraine for additional freedoms, and its parliament's leadership advocated for the devolution of presidential powers to the territory.

Emboldened by evident factionalism among Crimeans, Russian officials openly challenged Ukraine's claims to Crimea and stoked dissent within the territory.²¹ The Russian deputy declared Russia's willingness to oversee a Crimean independence referendum and to recognize the territory as an independent CIS polity. Further challenges over Crimea emanated from the Russian Supreme Soviet, as it declared the 1954 transfer of Crimea from the USSR to Ukraine to be illegal. When former Russian Vice President Alexander Rutskoi traveled to Crimea in 1992, he advocated for the

²⁰ Wydra, Doris. "The Crimea Conundrum: The Tug of War Between Russia and Ukraine on the Questions of Autonomy and Self-Determination." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 10, no. 2 (2004): 114.

²¹ Hall, M. Clement. *Crimea: A Very Short History*. Lulu, 2014. p. 57.

territory to secede from Ukraine.²² The following year, the Supreme Soviet nearly unanimously voted in a law “enshrining the federal status of the town of Sevastopol in the Russian Federation constitution.”²³ Pro-Russian groups within Crimea reacted accordingly. Within the month, a leader of the Russian Society of Crimea asserted the group’s desire to force the transfer of Crimea into Russian jurisdiction through violent rebellion.²⁴ After additional tension for several years, Russia and Ukraine eventually signed the 1997 Ukraine-Russia Friendship Treaty, which leased Sevastopol to the Russian navy and officially split the Black Sea Fleet, with the majority under Russian control.²⁵ Ukrainians perceived the deal as heavily weighted toward Russia and potentially problematic for Ukrainian security.²⁶

The internal Crimean political situation was volatile throughout this period, in part due to the administration of Yuriy Meshkov, who was elected Crimean President in 1994. An ethnic Russian and former KGB guard, Meshkov ran on a platform of closer Crimean-Russian relations and dominated the election. In office, he wrestled with the Kiev government for further Crimean autonomy, refused to relinquish control of the Ministry of the Interior to Ukraine, established Crimean defense offices and pushed for mandatory Crimean conscription.²⁷ In line with his election platform, Meshkov sought to establish closer relations with Russia and attempted to secure

²²Kuzio, Taras. *Ukraine-Crimea-Russia: Triangle of Conflict*. Ibidem-Verlag, 2007. p. 116.

²³ Ibid, 117.

²⁴ Hall. *Crimea*. 2014. p. 57.

²⁵ Toucas, Boris. “The Geostrategic Importance of the Black Sea Region: A Brief History.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017.

²⁶ “A Treaty on Friendship: The End of Fiction.” Warsaw Institute, September 4, 2018.

²⁷ Zaborsky, Victor. “Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet in Russian-Ukrainian Relations.” Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, September 1995.

circulation of the ruble in Crimea. From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, Russia and Ukraine remained highly economically mutually reliant, and no potential flashpoints emerged.²⁸

Although Ukraine strengthened its cooperation with NATO throughout the 1990s, the early 2000s marked a difficult period for the alliance and Ukraine. After the U.S. accused Ukraine of selling early-warning radar technology to Iraq and breaking a United Nations embargo, NATO-Ukraine relations soured. This rift became humiliatingly evident for Ukraine at the 2002 NATO Prague summit. NATO downsized a meeting with Ukraine to a minister-level session, asked Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma to refrain from attending the summit and shifted his seat away from the United States' and the United Kingdom's leaders after he disregarded this request.²⁹ Despite Kuchma's 2002 declaration of his intent to bring Ukraine into the NATO alliance, the 2002 creation of an Action Plan at the Prague summit and 2003 Ukrainian commitments to send peacekeepers to Iraq, relations between NATO and Ukraine remained icy.³⁰ Yet, the following year's events considerably altered the dynamic between Ukraine, NATO and Russia.

Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, centered around that year's presidential elections, presented serious concerns for Russia. Erupting only one year after the Georgian Rose Revolution, in which protesters ousted the Russia-friendly Georgian leadership in favor of pro-Western leaders, the Orange Revolution manifested Russian fears of Ukraine's turn toward the West. Despite his eligibility to pursue a third term, Kuchma, the incumbent, endorsed the candidacy of Viktor Yanukovich, who was backed publicly by Russian President Vladimir Putin.³¹ The campaign

²⁸ Molčanov Michail. *Political Culture and National Identity in Russian Ukrainian Relations*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 2003. p. 254.

²⁹ Bransten, Jeremy. "NATO: Solidarity With Russia, Cold Shoulder To Kuchma." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 9, 2008.

³⁰ Glasser, Susan. "U.S. Shifts Stance on Ukrainian." *The Washington Post*, July 27, 2003.

³¹ Karatnycky, Adrian. "Ukraine's Orange Revolution." *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2005): 35.

highlighted a significant geographical divide, as Yanukovych's pro-Russian stance earned him the support of eastern Ukraine, with its substantial ethnic Russian population and favorable attitude toward Russia, while Yanukovych's opponent, Viktor Yushchenko, drew his support primarily from western Ukraine.³² In the leadup to the election, Yushchenko was with dioxin, a move often attributed to the Ukrainian Security Service but also potentially linked to Russia by telephone transcripts.³³

Yanukovych initially declared victory after the election runoff, but Yushchenko supporters alleged election fraud, based on election monitor reports.³⁴ Suspiciously, Putin publicly lauded Yanukovych's success before the Central Election Committee even announced the winner.³⁵ Yushchenko's supporters then assembled the public protests that would become known as the Orange Revolution.³⁶ For weeks, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators marched, and approximately one million protesters peacefully occupied the streets of Kiev.³⁷ Yanukovych's campaign urged for counterdemonstrations in his eastern strongholds, and some of his eastern supporters threatened secession.³⁸ The Ukrainian Supreme Court declared the first runoff invalid, and a second runoff vote commenced under heavy international scrutiny. Yushchenko emerged victorious and, despite Yanukovych's legal allegations of an invalid election, the courts and election committee upheld the results. This marked the ascendance of Yushchenko, a leader aiming to build

³² "A Treaty on Friendship." Warsaw Institute. 2018.

³³ Zon, Hans Van. "Why the Orange Revolution Succeeded." *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 6, no. 3 (2005): 388.

³⁴ Ibid, 387.

³⁵ Ibid, 388.

³⁶ Ibid, 388.

³⁷ Polese, Abel. "Ukraine Orange Revolution, 2004-2005." *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*, 2009, 1.

³⁸ "A Treaty on Friendship." Warsaw Institute. 2018.

closer relationships between the West and Ukraine, and the removal of Putin-backed Moscow ally Yanukovych. Yet, at this point, the Russian military remained within Russian borders, and Ukrainian territorial integrity remained intact.³⁹ Nevertheless, Putin's Russia was clearly shaken by the Orange Revolution, as it responded by increasing the Russian government's internal central control over non-governmental organizations and forming new political organizations.⁴⁰

In the years following the Orange Revolution, the new Ukrainian leadership was fraught with tension. Rapid cabinet turnovers and infighting between Yushchenko and other leaders of the revolution, such as Yuliya Tymoshenko, hobbled the new government's hopes for stable and effective governance.⁴¹ In 2006, Yushchenko pushed for a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) — essentially a guided plan for achieving the conditions necessary for NATO membership. Russia's disapproval of this direction glared in Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov's 2006 warning of the “negative consequences” that would follow a Ukrainian NATO accession.⁴² However, after a parliamentary defeat forced Yushchenko to name Yanukovych his prime minister, Yanukovych's direct opposition to the MAP prevented any progress and effectively shelved the country's pursuit of NATO membership.⁴³

In 2008, with the support of new prime minister Tymoshenko and the parliament, Yushchenko again pushed for a MAP. Russia again vocalized its opposition, and despite the support of U.S. President George W. Bush, numerous NATO leaders, reluctant to sour the alliance's relations with Russia, declined Yushchenko's application.⁴⁴ Yet, NATO leaders still proclaimed that Ukraine

³⁹ Karatnycky. “Ukraine's Orange Revolution.” *Foreign Affairs* (2005): 35.

⁴⁰ Petrov, Nikolay. “Russia's Orange Revolution Syndrome.” PONARS Eurasia, 2010.

⁴¹ Charap, Samuel. “Seeing Orange.” *Foreign Policy*, January 18, 2010.

⁴² Perepelytsia, Grigoriy. “NATO and Ukraine: At the Crossroads.” *NATO Review*, April 1, 2007.

⁴³ Pifer, Steven. “Order from Chaos.” *Brookings*, June 6, 2019.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

would eventually join NATO. Russia's outspoken opposition persisted.⁴⁵ Later in the year, as Yushchenko and Putin stood together at a public speech, Putin threatened to aim nuclear weapons at Ukraine if Ukraine were to join NATO, and the chief of the Russian general staff predicted that military action would follow a Ukrainian NATO accession.⁴⁶ That year, Russia and Ukraine also feuded over transfers of Russian gas, and the Ukrainian economy began to tank from the effects of the global recession.⁴⁷ By the end of Yushchenko's term, his approval ratings stood at a dismal 4 percent.⁴⁸

Yanukovych emerged victorious in the 2010 election and ousted Yushchenko, the politician who had defeated him five years prior. Although Yanukovych maintained cooperation with NATO throughout his term, he declared in 2010 that Ukrainian membership in NATO was an "unrealistic prospect" and officially removed the issue from the Ukrainian agenda. His foreign policy focused on building positive relationships with Russia.⁴⁹

Yanukovych's complicated attitude toward incorporating Ukraine into the West would result in Ukraine's largest political crisis since the Orange Revolution: the Euromaidan protests.

Yanukovych, sensitive to Russian threats of a gas cutoff, chose to renege on a popular 2013 planned association agreement with the European Union and prepared to reorient trade toward Russia.⁵⁰

Protesters occupied the Kiev city hall with demands for the president's immediate resignation. These

⁴⁵ Pifer, Steven. "Averting Crisis in Ukraine." Council on Foreign Relations, January 2009.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Otarashvili, Maia. "Ukraine and the Global Economic Crisis." Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2013.

⁴⁸ Ray, Julie, and Neli Esipova. "Approval Ratings in Ukraine, Russia Highlight Differences." Gallup, October 22, 2018.

⁴⁹ Taylor, Adam. "That Time Ukraine Tried to Join NATO — and NATO Said No." *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2014.

⁵⁰ Kappeler. "Ukraine and Russia: Legacies." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* (2014): 108.

protests evolved into riots, and when Yanukovich attempted to sign laws to constrain protesting rights, hundreds of thousands of protesters responded in the Kiev streets. These riots became violent, with substantial bloodshed between protesters and police. The protests spread to eastern Ukraine, Yanukovich's former stronghold of support. After protesters occupied the justice ministry, the parliament removed restrictions on protesting. Yet, the brief respite in violence ended after the parliamentary opposition failed to secure limitations on presidential power. The European Union enacted sanctions against Ukraine after Yanukovich again resorted to violence against the protesters. On February 21, the EU worked to create a peace agreement between Yanukovich and the opposition, while the parliament granted amnesty to the protesters and voted to impeach Yanukovich. While a member of Tymoshenko's Fatherland party assumed the role of acting president, Yanukovich fled the country and later reemerged in Russia, decrying what he viewed as a coup.

Russia's next steps represented a notable shift in Russian Ukraine policy. As the Euromaidan protesters occupied government buildings and flooded the streets, the Sevastopol City Council had urged the creation of Crimean defense squads to defend the city.⁵¹ This decision may have been spurred by Russian media claims that militarized Ukrainian nationalists would travel from Kiev to Crimea.⁵² Immediately after Yanukovich fled Ukraine and reappeared across the Russian border, Russian special operations forces were deployed to covertly take over key civic and infrastructural sites in Crimea. Although the deployed units had no insignias to betray their Russian identities, their weaponry, fatigues, accents and equipment clearly identified them to observers as professional

⁵¹ Belotserkovskaya, Julia. "Sevastopol City Council Appealed to the Authorities of Ukraine with a Demand to Ban the Activities of VO 'Freedom.'" Sevastopol News, 2014.

⁵² Carbonnel, Alissa de. "How the Separatists Delivered Crimea to Moscow." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, March 12, 2014.

Russian soldiers.⁵³ The newly formed Russian Special Operations Command occupied the Crimean parliament building, securing the election of Sergei Askyonov as prime minister and seizing major Ukrainian compounds.⁵⁴ Numerous Crimean lawmakers alleged that despite their absences from the building, their votes were counted as supporting Askyonov's election.⁵⁵ While Putin initially claimed that the "little green men" occupying buildings were Crimean separatists, the Crimean defense groups appear to have instead played a largely cosmetic role in the operation, providing a "local image."⁵⁶ In the midst of the crisis, Putin secured permission from his Federation Council to deploy Russian forces to Ukraine for the purposes of stabilization.⁵⁷ In under three weeks after the Russians' takeover of the Crimean parliament, after another rigged referendum, Askyonov's new government and the Russian government signed a March treaty to facilitate the accession of Crimea into Russia. A week later, the Ukrainian military units in Crimea surrendered, marking the completion of a bloodless annexation of Crimea.⁵⁸ Russian military exercises along the Russia-Ukraine border pressured Ukraine to accept the shift in status quo.⁵⁹

The next phase of direct Russian intervention in Ukraine, the war in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, has proved far more violent. While the region had served as a source of support for Yanukovich, violent clashes between supporters and opponents of the Euromaidan uprising

⁵³ Pifer, Steven. "Five Years after Crimea's Illegal Annexation, the Issue Is No Closer to Resolution." Brookings. Brookings, March 18, 2019.

⁵⁴ Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations," 16.

⁵⁵ Carbonnel "How the Separatists." Reuters, 2014.

⁵⁶ Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations," 16.

⁵⁷ Hamilton, Robert. "Five Years of War in the Donbas." Black Sea Strategy Papers. Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 24, 2019.

⁵⁸ Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations," 17.

⁵⁹ Malyarenko, Tatyana. "Playing a Give-Away Game? The Undeclared Russian-Ukrainian War in Donbas." Small Wars Journal, December 23, 2015. p. 2.

escalated after March.⁶⁰ Key journalists and local Ukrainian officials identified a mounting presence of the military intelligence forces of the General Staff of the Armed Forces (GRU) in the region as early as March, directly after the Crimean crisis and nearly a month before hostilities erupted in the east.⁶¹ From April 7 to April 14, armed pro-Russian squads took over government buildings in the eastern cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, before reinforcing separatists secured substantial amounts of ground in the surrounding Donetsk and Luhansk provinces.⁶² These separatists proceeded to establish breakaway entities called the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in mid-2014.

Remarkably, Russian intelligence agencies appear to have been involved in recruiting separatists and organizing different militant groups into a central separatist army. In late 2014, regular Russian troops engaged in combat to prevent the separatists from defeat against Ukrainian forces, and Russia has continued to supply manpower and weapons to the separatists; however, Russia maintains it has not been involved.⁶³ Ukraine and the separatists signed the Minsk Agreements in 2014 and 2015 to establish conditions for a ceasefire and territorial reintegration, but these agreements remain ineffective.⁶⁴ The conflict has raged on for years, but no new opportunities for Russia to intervene on a new front have emerged.

Throughout this entire period of relations between Ukraine and Russia, multiple opportunities have emerged during which Russia could have acted to intervene in Ukrainian affairs and secure political gains. The scenarios this paper considers the most likely to result in Russian

⁶⁰ Kudelia, Serhiy. "Domestic Sources of the Donbas Insurgency ." PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 351. PONARS Eurasia, September 2014. p. 2.

⁶¹ Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations," 18.

⁶² Hamilton, "Five Years of War." Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2019.

⁶³ Fischer, Sabine. "The Donbas Conflict: Opposing Interests and Narratives, Difficult Peace Process." SWP Research Paper 5. German Institute for International and Security Affairs, April 2019. p. 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 5.

intervention are the 1992-1993 Russian meddling in Crimea, the 2004 Orange Revolution, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2014 war in Donbas. Since both 2014 conflicts stemmed from the 2013 Euromaidan protests, this paper often treats them together when examining causation of intervention. The dependent variable of Russian intervention varies across these incidents. Russia refrained from intervening militarily in the early 1990s and during the Orange Revolution, but it intervened to annex Crimea and stoke separatist conflict in Donbas. Due to the similarities across these incidents, this thesis questions why Russia chose to intervene in 2014 but not in 1993 or 2004.

Ukraine: Hypothesis Analysis

H1: Near abroad states with NATO membership are more likely to successfully achieve general deterrence toward Russia.

H1 proposes that near abroad (NA) states with official NATO membership possess an enhanced capacity for general deterrence toward Russia, implying that Russia, fearing a failure to achieve its strategic objectives or fearing unacceptable retaliation, is less likely to initiate challenges against these states. The inverse follows; NA states that do not possess NATO memberships, all other factors remaining equal, are less likely to successfully achieve general deterrence toward Russia and prevent an initial challenge to the status quo. Russia, according to this logic, is likely to display an increased propensity for intervening in Ukraine's affairs. This propensity should take the form of increased likelihood of interventions of disproportionately high intensity levels for non-NATO member NA states like Ukraine.

The Ukraine case does not have direct bearing on H1, as there is no internal variation of the independent variable (Ukraine's NATO status) within this case. This limits this case's relevance to

the discussion of H1. However, it does support the inverse implications of H1. Throughout the case, the IV remains constant, as Ukraine has never become a NATO member, although the country's leadership has professed varying degrees of desire to join NATO over time. However, Ukraine's relations with Russia can contribute evidence to a theoretical baseline level of intervention that Russia is willing to take against non-NATO member NA states.

H1's inverse implications predict Ukraine to have a lesser capability of initially deterring Russian challenges than NA NATO members like Estonia. Several flashpoints in the Ukraine-Russia bilateral relationship confirm Ukraine's difficulty in deterring Russia, while other flashpoints pose challenges for the prediction. The primary shift in Russian behavior is visible between the 1993 and 2004 instances of Russian nonintervention and the Russian intervention in the 2014 Euromaidan protests.

The 1993 flashpoint, which marks that decade's apex of Russian governmental efforts to stoke dissent within Crimea, does not necessarily support the hypothesis' implications. According to H1, this is a situation in which Russia is more likely to intervene at a high intensity, but Russia did not escalate at this point. Yet, it is notable that Russian leadership opted for political intervention, in the form of Rutskoi's and the Russian deputy's suggestion of Crimean secession, as well as the Supreme Soviet's votes to condemn the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine and to claim Sevastopol as Russian territory.

The Orange Revolution also does not provide supportive evidence for this prediction. The nullification of the election of Yanukovich — who Putin publicly backed — and the Orange Revolution's massive organized protests evidently led to serious consternation in the Kremlin. Despite this, Russia refrained from escalating against Ukraine. The subsequent defeat of Yanukovich

and victory of Yushchenko, who aimed to orient Ukraine toward NATO, likely heightened Russian concerns. Relative to Fearon's ideas, it is notable that Ukraine did not pursue a particularly moderate policy to avoid provoking Russia. In this scenario, the evident commitment problem suggests the possibility of Russian escalation to prevent an unacceptable shift in status quo. The extended process of supporting Yushchenko's claims and opting for further elections marks a point at which H1 would predict Russian escalation. Yet, despite Ukraine's non-member NATO status, Russia chose to refrain from more intense intervention.

When a comparable predicament emerged ten years later, however, Russia opted for intervention. The 2013 Euromaidan protests were sparked by Yanukovych's retraction of his commitment to achieve closer European integration through a European Union Association Agreement, due to Russian pressure. To Russia, this situation presented a provocation similar to the Orange Revolution. The Orange Revolution protests nullified the fraudulent election of Russia's preferred candidate in favor of a pro-NATO candidate, while the Euromaidan protests ousted a candidate with pro-Russian views because he failed to achieve a closer relationship with the European Union. Although these situations presented comparable stimuli to Russia, one situation resulted in intervention and one did not.

Ultimately, because Ukraine has never joined NATO and the IV therefore remains constant, the Ukraine case study is most useful to H1 because it reflects Russia's willingness to interfere militarily in the affairs of a non-NATO state. This supports the inverse implications of H1 and will provide a useful comparison relative to the other case studies.

H1A: The United States' credibility positively affects near abroad states' abilities to deter Russia.

The U.S.'s credibility as an actor willing to use force is an important factor that directly influences the effectiveness of NATO deterrence. The three primary flashpoints in Ukrainian-Russian relations where Russian military intervention was a possibility are the 1993 height of bilateral tensions over Crimea, the 2004 Orange Revolution and 2014 Euromaidan protests. If the case supports H1A, Russia will be less likely to intervene after events indicating the U.S.'s willingness to use force in response to threats or to enforce American deterrent threats. Similarly, it will be more likely to intervene after events implying that the U.S. is not willing to use force in comparable situations.

In the early 1990s, the U.S. military was an exceptionally credible force. The U.S. emerged as the sole hegemon in a unipolar world at the expense of the USSR, the legal predecessor of Russia. Furthermore, the U.S. demonstrated both its conventional power and its willingness to intervene abroad in its 1990 Desert Shield and 1991 Desert Storm operations.

In the three years preceding the Orange Revolution, the United States had invoked the NATO Article V mutual defense clause to oust the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, defeat Saddam Hussein in Iraq and combat the remaining insurgents in the region.⁶⁵ This sequence gave the U.S. enormous credibility as the most powerful conventional military in the world and added substantially to NATO's deterrent credibility at the time of the Revolution.

However, the events of the decade following the Orange Revolution negatively impacted the U.S.'s reliability as a force willing to launch an invasion in defense of a non-NATO country. For nearly a decade, the U.S.'s displays of power in Iraq and Afghanistan had degraded into long, costly

⁶⁵ Sanger, David. "President Says Military Phase in Iraq Has Ended." *The New York Times*, May 2, 2003.

and unpopular counterinsurgency operations.⁶⁶ The American public was weary of fighting such wars abroad. Another incident, in which Russia played a direct role, expedited the decline of American credibility. In late 2013, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad evidently crossed a “red line” previously established by President Obama: the use of chemical weapons on civilians. Based on the expectations established by the red line comment, U.S. intervention should have occurred. However, Assad’s ally Putin mobilized Russian naval vessels in the region, in combination with hawkish public messaging. Obama then failed to enforce the red line, and Russia chose to annex Crimea mere months later.⁶⁷ H1A is therefore supported by the timeline of events in the Ukraine case study.

H2: Overt NATO deliberations surrounding an NA state’s possible entry without officially giving membership decrease that state’s ability to deter Russia.

H2 argues that when an NA state lacking NATO membership engages in serious public dialogue with NATO over membership, Russia is more likely to intervene in that state’s affairs. This is preventive behavior intended to dissuade NATO from permitting the NA state’s accession. Implicitly, the incentive to engage in this preventive behavior stems from an acknowledgment of the potent deterrent effect created by NATO membership.⁶⁸ NATO membership in turn derives its strength from the Article V mutual defense pact. H2 therefore predicts that serious progress toward membership between NATO and a non-member NA state creates an incentive for Russia to intervene before the NA state can invoke the mandatory support of powerful NATO states.

⁶⁶ Clement, Scott. “Majority of Americans Say Afghan War Has Not Been Worth Fighting, Post-ABC News Poll Finds.” *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2013.

⁶⁷ Valenta, Jiri, and Leni Friedman Valenta. “Why Putin Wants Syria.” *Middle East Forum*, 2016. p. 9.

⁶⁸ See discussion of H1.

Although the Ukraine case study provides promising evidence for H2, Russian behavior during the Orange Revolution does not fit neatly within the hypothesis' predictions. The 1993 flashpoint is likely not relevant to this hypothesis because NATO and Ukraine had not yet developed substantive relations by this point. Further, it is unclear whether the events surrounding the 2004 Orange Revolution support the hypothesis. After establishing the cause for Russian anxiety over this uprising, I examine arguments supporting and opposing the application of H2 in this case.

Not long after Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union, it developed steady cooperation with NATO by participating in several NATO peacekeeping initiatives in central Europe and joining NATO partnership initiatives. Although this ultimately resulted in a relatively close relationship between the two parties throughout the 1990s, the partnership had not progressed to the point of serious membership talks.

The events of the early 2000s reduced the probability of Russian perception of Ukraine as nearing NATO accession, so the Orange Revolution understandably alarmed Russian leaders. At face value, Kuchma's overtures toward NATO in 2002 and the creation in the same year of an Action Plan to strengthen Ukraine's relationship with the alliance hinted toward ambitions of accession. Yet, these events were likely of little concern to Russian leaders. Ukraine's embargo-flouting sales of radar technology to Iraq, Kuchma's unwelcome 2002 NATO summit appearance and the U.S.'s disapproval of Kuchma's conspicuous failure to promote democratic processes all evidently remained thorns in the NATO-Ukraine relationship — and United States apparently disclosed this reality directly to Kuchma.⁶⁹ The lip service NATO paid to the partnership at the time was hardly a cause for Russian apprehension. In the aftermath of these disputes, the

⁶⁹ Glasser. "U.S. Shifts." *The Washington Post*, 2003.

Kremlin viewed the candidacy of Yanukovich in the 2004 election as a means for securing a stronger bilateral relationship with Ukraine at the expense of Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations. It is no surprise, then, that the Orange Revolution surrounding the election disquieted Russia.

On one level, the NATO-Ukraine disputes of the early 2000s and MAP plans of the later 2000s can explain the variation in intervention in a manner consistent with H2. The public tension between Kuchma and NATO would have dispelled Russian concerns over recently improved relations up to 2004. Furthermore, Ukraine remained distant from the conditions necessary for NATO membership, as Kuchma proved unable to institute reforms laid out in the 2002 Action Plan. Public opinion — a significant factor incorporated into NATO's decisions to include new members — also remained decidedly skeptical of joining NATO.⁷⁰ Overall, the concrete progress toward membership that had been achieved by 2004 was negligible, and, in line with H2, Russia did not intervene. When Ukraine applied for MAPs in 2006 and 2008, Russian reactionary rhetoric signaled the Kremlin's deep displeasure. As the MAP program is an important early step in the NATO accession process, Putin's threats reflect Russia's recognition that a successful MAP application would constitute both a sign of progress and, correspondingly, a threat to Russian interests.

Yet, Ukraine's MAP applications were rejected, and Yanukovich's presidency, which began with the new president's officially shelving Ukrainian accession plans, effectively made the issue of Ukraine's relations with the West disappear until the controversy over the EU Association Agreement ignited the 2013 Euromaidan protests. The fact that Russia did not intervene before the

⁷⁰ Woehrel, Steven. "Ukraine's Orange Revolution and U.S. Policy." CRS Report for Congress. Congressional Research Service, April 1, 2005. p. 3.

Ukrainian MAP applications and did intervene militarily after the MAP applications is a sequence promising for H2.

An additional dimension reinforces the link between H2 and the timing of the interventions. The hypothesis fits the timeline described above well, but the delay between the 2006-2008 MAP applications and Russia's early 2014 intervention should be considered. Another potential explanation is that Ukraine's gradual increase in efforts to secure a NATO MAP before Yanukovich's election, in the context of a general long-term trend of NATO expansion, created conditions in which a triggering situation, even indirectly related to NATO, could spark Russian intervention. This triggering event could take the form of Yanukovich's removal, which could appear as a de facto step away from a Russia-oriented policy and toward NATO membership, as discussed above.

An explanation combining the long-term buildup of relations with NATO and the immediate Euromaidan catalyst of an agreement with the EU may also account for Russia's timing. It is possible that Russian leaders viewed the Euromaidan protests — originally a response to Yanukovich's submission to Russian pressure and retraction of his commitment to enter the landmark Association Agreement with the European Union — as a popular rejection of Russia and turn toward the West. Further, it is possible that Russia considered both bodies in its calculations; perhaps Russian leaders viewed heightened EU integration, especially in a post-Yanukovich environment, as a harbinger of closer NATO ties. The widespread and violent protests pushing this agenda would have only underscored this message. This interpretation could easily explain the time gap between the MAP applications and the Russian intervention, since it would anticipate the

immediate Russian reaction to Euromaidan while still allowing for Russian nonintervention in 2004 as previously examined.

H2 fits well with the discussion of the Ukrainian case, but the discrepancy between Russia's responses to the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan protests is notable. However, the consideration of the impact of relevant triggering events like elections in combination with official progress can help to partially — if not fully — explain the non-intervention in 2004 and intervention in 2014. Later examination of the relationship between the respective implications of H2 and H4 more fully resolves this discrepancy.

H3: Near abroad states are less likely to successfully deter Russia if Russia is able to use a covert method of attack.

H3 argues that if Russia is able to intervene in a covert manner, it is more likely to intervene in an NA state's affairs. By doing so, Russia can attempt to avoid the identification of its forces altogether or, at minimum, achieve plausible deniability. This would allow it to continue to pursue its goals while denying involvement through overt diplomatic channels, enabling it to secure tactical and strategic gains while avoiding international punishment and military responses.

The Ukraine case study yields a mixed result for this hypothesis, and the connection remains inconclusive. Russia has relied on two primary covert methods in Ukraine: covert conventional forces and proxy forces. In its 2014 efforts to annex Crimea, Russia relied heavily on unidentified soldiers — “little green men” — to secure key strategic points. Russia also supported separatist groups during its campaign to force the splintering of eastern Ukrainian regions. However, although Russia utilized both of these strategies in Ukraine, determining whether these options were viable

for Russia at other points of time remains complicated. The discussion below will first examine support for the hypothesis' application and subsequently cover its challenges.

Russia's heavy reliance upon covert conventional forces to make strategic gains in Crimea implies their importance for Russia in its decision to intervene. At the 1993 flashpoint, Russian officials openly encouraged a Crimean separatist movement, causing the leader of at least one group, the Russian Society of Crimea, to advocate for armed rebellion against Ukraine. It is notable that Russia did not intervene militarily at this point, although it did pursue political intervention. Thus, while this does not support the idea that Russia is more likely to escalate its intervention if given the chance by local separatists, Russia did try to use these separatists to cause political damage in Ukraine. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Kuchma earned a reputation for silencing and marginalizing Crimean separatism through legal and political processes.⁷¹ For Russia, this likely would have ruled out stoking a Crimean separatist movement, and by extension, using covert forces to propel the separatist movement at the time of the Orange Revolution.

Yet, Crimean separatists began to regain traction after Yanukovich became prime minister in 2006, as his party coalition depended on their support.⁷² This resurgence had tangible implications for Ukraine and NATO, as these separatists prevented NATO from holding joint exercises on the peninsula.⁷³ Years later, the volatile atmosphere of the late 2013 Euromaidan protests convinced Crimean official Vladimir Konstantinov to tell Russian security ministers that Crimea would seek a

⁷¹ Kuzio, Taras. "Yanukovich's Election Opens Up Crimean Separatist Threat." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. Jamestown Foundation, March 3, 2010.

⁷² Kuzio, Taras. "The Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives." *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal*, no. 2 (2016): 92.

⁷³ Paton Walsh, Nick. "Protests Threaten Nato War Games." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, June 12, 2006.

union with Russia if Yanukovych were removed from office.⁷⁴ The Sevastopol City Council's public appeal to Crimeans to form self-defense squads indicates the tense atmosphere in which Russian officials opted to use covert troops for intervention. Yanukovych's removal after the upheaval of the Euromaidan protests, as Konstantinov predicted, sparked fears among the Crimean public that its interests might not be represented by the new administration, and the Ukrainian Rada's late February 2014 vote to remove Russian as an official language in Ukraine provoked Crimean protests in Crimea.⁷⁵ Russia started to prepare for the deployment of its "little green men" on February 24, three days after Yanukovych's flight from Ukraine and one day after the Russian language vote, indicating that the active disapproval of Crimeans likely contributed to the Russian decision to intervene and annex Crimea.

This timing created an ideal pretext for the deployment of professional soldiers capable of occupying strategic points, but the troops needed to appear local to deter any direct responses or international action against Russia. By masquerading their soldiers as Crimean self-defense groups — like those advocated by the Sevastopol council — Russia was also able to manufacture the appearance of legitimacy and self-determination for the operation. For example, the Russian special forces commandos who occupied the Crimean Parliament on February 27 claimed to be members of a local Crimean defense group, while Russian intelligence operators worked for the next week to construct defensive groups from local militias, Cossacks and former *berkut* riot policemen.⁷⁶ These latter groups apparently contributed little military help and were incorporated specifically to add a

⁷⁴ O'Loughlin, John, and Gerard Toal. "The Crimea Conundrum: Legitimacy and Public Opinion after Annexation." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 60, no. 1 (February 2019): 12.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁷⁶ Kofman, Michael, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva, and Jenny Oberholtzer. "Lessons from Russia's Operations in Ukraine." RAND Corporation, May 9, 2017

Crimean dimension to the occupying force.⁷⁷ The Russian plan appears to have revolved around maintaining the narrative that the Crimeans instigated the uprising and required Russian protection to ensure their rights to self-determination. This suggests that the use of covert troops to accomplish strategic goals while constructing a local image and integrating local structures into the operation was an integral tool necessary for success. Russia's deployment of "little green men" in 2014 therefore supports H3.

Russian collaboration with separatist entities in the ensuing 2014 Donbas conflict also supports H3. While locating data on the specific pre-existing groups with which Russia collaborated proves exceedingly difficult due to the reorganization of many separatists into standardized units, Russia undeniably relied upon local proxies to pursue its goals in the Donbas region. By gradually creating a separatist army of diverse actors infused with its own personnel, Russia relied heavily on a proxy force. Local leaders were co-opted into recruiting local fighters as Russian volunteers and veterans traveled to the region to support the separatist initiative. The vast majority of those protesting the Ukrainian parliament's move to revoke the official status of the Russian language were local Ukrainians, and pro-Russian locals tried to occupy government buildings throughout eastern Ukraine. This indicated a promising recruitment pool and likely contributed to Russian decisions to pursue those means.⁷⁸

Russia also took advantage of the patronage links of local elites, including Yanukovych, to recruit new political leaders and fighters. Additionally, Ukrainian miners, volunteers and former

⁷⁷ Bukkvoll, Tor. "Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas." *Parameters* 46, no. 2 (2016): 16.

⁷⁸ Kofman, et al. "Lessons." RAND Corporation, 2017, p. 33.

Ukrainian riot policemen constituted significant portions of the separatist forces.⁷⁹ However, specific units appeared to be Russian-handled professionals tasked not only with performing well but also with reining in the diverse groups constituting the separatist forces under Russian direction. Many of these groups were majority Ukrainian manpower with an experienced core or leader with Russian connections.⁸⁰ The clear reliance upon separatist proxies suggests the importance of such actors in the Russian decision to escalate its intervention to the kinetic realm, further supporting H3.

The two primary challenges for this case study's support for H3 are accounting for the lack of intense intervention in 1993 and confirming the absence of true proxies around the time of the Orange Revolution. In 1993, the clear Russian willingness to stoke tensions in Crimea resulted not in military intervention, which H3 claims is increasingly likely, but in political meddling and encouragement of potentially violent separatist groups. Although there was no military action, Russia's aggressive political provocations seemed to result from the availability of potential separatist splinter groups; the intervention just occurred at a lower intensity level than predicted.

While Russia's covert invasion of Crimea in 2014 carried with it the implicit threat of further and more intense military action, the option to deploy Russian troops covertly and masquerade them as local defense units would have been available in 2004 as well. Russia's military was far less intimidating at the time, but it would likely have proved threatening enough to accomplish its objective of bloodlessly returning Crimea to the Russian fold. Therefore, the opportunity for covert action seems to have been available — if less viable — at multiple flashpoints. A more serious challenge stems from the lack of information regarding the specific pre-existing separatist groups

⁷⁹ Bigg, Claire. "Vostok Battalion, A Powerful New Player In Eastern Ukraine." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 30, 2014.

⁸⁰ Luhn, Alec. "Volunteers or Paid Fighters? The Vostok Battalion Looms Large in War with Kiev." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, June 6, 2014.

that were used to form Russia's separatist army in addition to the groups formed after Euromaidan. Many units of the separatist army appear to have been standardized in structure and name, making identifying precursor groups difficult. Full information about which existing separatist groups contributed to the army would allow further examination of the state of separatist militant groups during the Orange Revolution. This would in turn permit a more decisive assessment of whether any of the groups could have served as a viable proxy force for potential Russian intervention during the Orange Revolution. Without this background, H3 lacks important information that could facilitate a proper assessment of H3's applicability at the Orange Revolution flashpoint.

Ultimately, the evidence supports H3, albeit in a limited manner. In its 2014 intervention in Crimea, Russia relied upon the existence of active Crimean separatist sentiment to provide a cover for its covert units, which were the central actors carrying out the annexation plan. It may have been possible to use covert units at earlier points in time, but the relatively weak nature of Russia's army, coupled with the recent termination of direct Russian military involvement in the Second Chechen War, greatly reduced the plausibility of these forces' deployment. The subsequent Donbas case shows that Russia relied immensely on proxy forces at the onset of the conflict.

Although additional information regarding the specific separatist groups included in the separatist army would greatly strengthen the body of evidence for this incident, the fact that Russia perceived the opportunity to construct proxy forces from locals and by capitalizing upon local power structures provides sufficient support for the theory. This mirrors the Russian behavior of the early 1990s, when governmental bodies and officials attempted to stoke a Crimean separatist movement, although this flashpoint provides largely minor support. The evidence in both 2014

scenarios implies the centrality of both covert and proxy forces to the Russians' plan, which ultimately suggests that Russia is more likely to intervene if it identifies such forces.

H4: The extent of Russian intervention in the affairs of near abroad states reflects the strength of the Russian economic strategic position.

H4 suggests that Russia is more inclined to intervene in near abroad states' affairs if Russia possesses a favorable economic position. Several economic metrics are examined at the point of Russian military intervention — 2014 — and at both 1993 and 2004, points of Russian nonintervention. Ultimately, the Ukraine case study offers solid support for H4.

Examination of Russian gross domestic product (GDP) growth provides a useful indicator in support of H4, while a comparison with that of the U.S. adds an additional informative dimension. From 1990 to 1994, Russian GDP decreased by a substantial average rate of -8.76%, while U.S. GDP increased steadily and averaged a 2.23% growth rate over the same period.⁸¹ This aligns well with Russian nonintervention at the 1993 flashpoint. In the lead-up to the 2004 Orange Revolution flashpoint, from 2000 to 2004, Russia averaged 6.07% growth. Yet, it should be noted that the Russian economy at this point was still much smaller than it had been at the start of the 1990s, due to that decade's recession. At this time, the U.S. economy was continuing its long trend of growth at a steady 2.41% rate.⁸² While the Russian growth rate during this time was more drastic than that of the U.S., which clashes with Russian nonintervention at this flashpoint, the Russian economy was still markedly smaller than it had been ten years before, while the U.S.' economy had

⁸¹ "GDP Growth (Annual %) - Russian Federation." The World Bank. Accessed March 15, 2020. All measures of Russian GDP in this section relate to this citation.

⁸² "GDP Growth (Annual %) - United States." The World Bank. Accessed March 15, 2020. All measures of U.S. GDP in this section relate to this citation.

grown over a long period of time to a size it had never before achieved. The average relative growth rate would suggest Russian intervention at this point, but broader consideration of long-term trends in each economy and evaluation of each country's capacity suggests nonintervention.

Leading up to the 2014 flashpoint, Russian GDP was still rising, but its rate was declining steadily into the rates of 3.7 percent in 2012 and 1.8 percent in 2013. 2013 marked, by far, the largest size of the Russian economy ever. Over the same period, the U.S. economy continued to experience a painfully slow recovery from the 2008 financial crisis as U.S. GDP growth declined from 2.25 to 1.84. This vein of examination supports H4 because Russian intervention and nonintervention patterns clearly follow a trend of Russian economic capacity, and this trend dovetails with the evolution of comparative economic strength between the economies of Russia and the U.S. Russia was unwilling to intervene in 1993 when its economy was in freefall and in 2004 when its recent growth was just overcoming the damage caused by the recent recession. However, when an opportunity to intervene in Ukrainian affairs emerged in 2014, after the economy had long since recovered, intervention occurred. This pattern clearly supports H4.

An examination of trade dynamics between Russia and Ukraine at the three points of interest can provide further insight. At the 1993 flashpoint, Russia and Ukraine were engaged in positive trade discussions, and they reached a free trade agreement in June 1993, suggesting intentions to strengthen the bilateral economic relationship.⁸³ Although a series of trade disputes emerged between the countries from 2000 to 2002, bilateral trade exchange grew substantially after this point. Exchange was particularly high before the 2004 elections and Orange Revolution.⁸⁴ Poor trade

⁸³ "Free Trade Agreement Between the Government of Ukraine and the Government of the Russian Federation," June 24, 1993.

⁸⁴ Szeptycki, Andrzej. "Trade Relations between the Russian Federation and Ukraine ." The Polish Institute of International Affairs, January 2008. p. 30.

relations, however, directly caused the 2014 Euromaidan protests. As Ukraine pursued the signing of an Associated Agreement with the European Union, Russia increased pressure on Yanukovych to forsake this plan and instead pursue further economic integration with Russia.

In response, Putin applied punishment and then offered incentives. In August 2013, Russia blocked all Ukrainian imports from entering Russia, shocking the Ukrainian economy.⁸⁵ As protests erupted around Yanukovych's failure to pursue the Association Agreement, Putin offered to slash the price of Russian gas by one third and buy billions of Ukrainian bonds.⁸⁶ Yet, the arrangement crumbled and Russia retained its superior trade position as the Ukrainian economy slid into recession. Russia began its annexation of Crimea mere months afterward. Again, in a manner similar to the growth comparison between the two countries, trade patterns offer insights into the timing of Russian intervention. Russia refrained from intervention when strong trade links existed between the two countries. Yet, as the two countries reached a critical point in their relationship and Ukraine attempted to integrate more closely with the European Union, Russia behaved aggressively, first enacting harsh punitive measures and then offering concessions before eventually invading.

The Ukraine case study offers support for H4. Russia avoided intervention when its economy fared poorly, but it intervened when its economy had recovered, even with a slower growth rate. Sensitivity to its relative weakness compared to the U.S. economy in the 1990s and 2004 is apparent, while its intervention occurred at a point of comparative strength. The second metric of analyzing trade relations at each flashpoint complements this conclusion. When trade relations were growing, Russia refrained from escalating, but when Russia was in a position to exercise its

⁸⁵ "Ukraine's Employers Federation: Russia's Customs Service Halts All Ukrainian Imports." Interfax-Ukraine/Kyiv Post, August 14, 2013.

⁸⁶ "Trading Insults." *The Economist*. August 24, 2013.

significant economic leverage over Ukraine — especially with a Ukraine-EU agreement at stake — Russia intervened militarily.

Hypothesis conclusions

Overall, the hypotheses fared well, although they did not provide answers for all questions. The case study supported H1 because it depicted Russia's willingness to intervene in the affairs of a non-NATO state. However, H1 did not conclusively explain dependent variable variation within the case. The case study supported H2 fairly well, although the time gap between the last major pro-NATO steps and Russian intervention remains a matter of note. However, consideration of additional factors provided a more robust perspective that supported the hypothesis. H3 was generally supported, but more specific information regarding specific groups is required to provide conclusive support. H4 fared extremely well and provided valuable insights.

Georgia: Historical Overview



87

The Georgia case study provides further support for the paper’s central argument in the context of Russian intervention against a non-NATO NA state. Flashpoints for potential Russian intervention occurred in the early 1990s, 2003, 2004 and 2008. As in the Ukraine case, the Georgia case supports the paper’s central argument, indicating both Russian unwillingness to intervene at high intensity against a non-NATO NA state pursuing membership during a period of economic weakness and willingness to do so after economic stabilization of the Russian economy. A description of relevant historical events throughout the relationships between Georgia, the separatist republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Russian Federation and NATO will more easily facilitate discussion of the hypotheses.

Despite ethnic distinctions, the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have both frequently been grouped together politically with Georgia throughout history, often resulting in conflict. Both

⁸⁷ “Map of Georgia, Abkhazia, South Osetia.” Wikimedia Commons, July 5, 2011.

regions belonged to Georgia during its brief post-Russian Empire independence from 1918 to 1922, but South Ossetia engaged in an unsuccessful civil war against Georgia for several years.⁸⁸ During the USSR's administration, Abkhazia and South Ossetia generally remained autonomous republics within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. After Georgia split from the crumbling Soviet Union in 1991, the two territories again waged costly civil wars in attempts to win independence from Georgia.⁸⁹ The Abkhazians, notably, received support from some Russian military units. The Russian leadership was divided on the matter of the war, creating subsequent confusion about whether Russian leaders were responsible for this limited military support. Russian President Boris Yeltsin often vocalized his support for Georgian territorial integrity. At the same time, the Communist-dominated parliament tried to support the Abkhaz forces as a coercive tool to push Georgia into the CIS and to retaliate against support that the Russians alleged Georgia was giving to Chechnyan rebels.⁹⁰

Yeltsin claimed Russian soldiers' involvement was simply a result of individual local commanders' agendas, but Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze alleged Russian central leadership organized or blessed Abkhazian attacks.⁹¹ Circumstantial evidence indicates that Yeltsin would occasionally "bend, if not bow" to pressure from the Parliament; yet, this effort did not appear centrally coordinated as an official state operation.⁹² Abkhazia essentially defeated Georgian troops, forcing Georgia to enter Russia's CIS and subsequently request CIS peacekeepers to protect

⁸⁸ Markovic, Nina. "Behind the Scenes of the Russia-Georgia Conflict." Parliament of Australia, February 18, 2013.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Kozhokin, Evgeny. "Chapter 5: Georgia-Abkhazia." In *U.S. and Russian Policymaking With Respect to the Use of Force*. RAND Corporation, 1996.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

the Abkhazia-Georgia border. Although both republics declared independence and are often considered de facto autonomous, their claims remained unrecognized internationally until Russia took up their case in 2008.

Georgia entered relations with NATO in the early 1990s. The country joined NATO's North Atlantic Cooperation Council/Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1992 and entered the PFP in 1994. Georgian forces supported NATO's Kosovo mission in 1999, which likely irked Russia, an ally of Serbia that protested against the NATO mission. Georgia opened joint exercises with NATO in 2001 and 2002.⁹³ The possible NATO accession of Georgia, a former member of the USSR, evidently stirred Russian apprehensions in the late 2000s.

Relations between Georgia and Russia remained volatile throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, as Russia accused Georgia of aiding and training Chechnyan rebels. Georgia denied these allegations and summoned Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) monitors for verification. Yet, in mid-2000, Russian planes struck Georgian guard posts and towns three times, claiming that one of the incidents was accidental.⁹⁴ At this point, acknowledging and addressing the issue of a potential Chechen rebel presence in Georgia allowed both states to strengthen their positions in the region. Russia could claim justification for limited strikes against its neighbor, Georgia could request international funding, and the United States could expand on its regional footprint by providing personnel to aid Georgia.⁹⁵

⁹³ "Relations with Georgia." NATO, October 4, 2019.

⁹⁴ Dixon, Robyn. "A Gateway to Chechnya, Georgia Risks Wider War." *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 2000.

⁹⁵ Peuch, Jean-Christophe. "Caucasus: Georgians, Chechens Take Stand Against Russia Over Pankisi." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 9, 2008.

Yet, the events of the 2003 Rose Revolution would prove to have a far greater impact upon the relationship between Georgia, Russia and NATO. After Putin became Russian president in 2000, he maintained an amicable tone toward NATO for several years. The Rose Revolution occurred during this stage of that relationship.⁹⁶ After Georgia's population began to suspect electoral fraud in the 2003 presidential election, nearly 100,000 peaceful protesters blocked the streets of Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, and demanded the resignation of Shevardnadze, who had been in power since a coup early in the days of Georgian independence. When the president sent several hundred armed soldiers to restore order in the streets, the protesters handed roses to the soldiers and proceeded to storm the parliament building. Mikhail Saakashvili personally requested Shevardnadze's resignation in the chamber and won the presidential election several months later.⁹⁷

Russo-Georgian relations soured directly after the revolution, as Russia considered the events a coup, and Saakashvili's preference to create a stronger relationship with the West put him at odds with the Kremlin.⁹⁸ Although the U.S. had supported Shevardnadze, Saakashvili's term marked a distinct turn toward NATO and the West, and achieving NATO membership dominated his foreign policy after he entered office.⁹⁹ He openly expressed aspirations for Georgian NATO membership, but he also attempted to implement serious policy reforms to expedite the process.¹⁰⁰ Georgian soldiers contributed to efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq throughout the mid-2000s, and

⁹⁶ Thalís, Alexander. "Threat or Threatened? Russia in the Era of NATO Expansion." Australian Outlook. Australian Institute of International Affairs, June 3, 2018.

⁹⁷ "How the Rose Revolution Happened." BBC News. BBC, May 10, 2005.

⁹⁸ Delcour, Laure, and Kataryna Wolczuk. "Spoiler or Facilitator of Democratization?: Russias Role in Georgia and Ukraine." *Democratization* 22, no. 3 (2015): 468.

⁹⁹ Robinson, Matt. "Saakashvili Warns West on Russia Ties." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, December 2, 2008.

¹⁰⁰ "President and President Saakashvili Discuss NATO, Democracy." The White House. National Archives and Records Administration, May 10, 2005.

between 2004 and 2007, Saakashvili increased Georgia's military expenditure from 1.37 percent of GDP to 9.1 percent.¹⁰¹ These efforts to strengthen ties with NATO, however, would prove ineffective when battle-tested.

The 2004 Adjara crisis represents an intriguing and anomalous point of Russian aid — rather than intervention — in Georgia's attempts to pacify its separatist republics. Adjara, another autonomous region of Georgia controlled by a Russia-friendly ex-Soviet leader, Aslan Abashidze, presented a crisis immediately after Saakashvili's rise to power. Adjara was an independent republic in the USSR but emerged as technically part of the Georgian state. Saakashvili's overt determination to bring Adjara fully under Georgian control fed tensions before a parliamentary election, as pro-Saakashvili political campaigns spouted anti-Abashidze rhetoric.

The uneasy situation devolved into violence in February 2004 as supporters of both sides clashed and individuals linked to Adjara's security ministry beat a prominent Georgian journalist.¹⁰² Abashidze protested that the Georgian government was attempting to foment a Rose Revolution in Adjara. In March, he traveled to Moscow in an attempt to secure Russian backing, as a remaining Russian military base in Adjara ensured Russia's deep interest in the region's security. Tensions increased when Georgian forces were put on high alert as approximately 1,000 Adjarian paramilitary and special forces personnel coalesced near the territory's border.¹⁰³ The crisis reached its apex after separatists destroyed major bridges linking the region to Georgia and thousands of protesters marched against Abashidze in a manner reminiscent of the Rose Revolution. Georgian officials' remarks at this time alluded ominously to the violent death of former Romanian dictator Nicolae

¹⁰¹ "Military Expenditure (% of GDP) - Georgia." The World Bank. Accessed March 15, 2020.

¹⁰² Gogia, Giorgi. "Georgia's Woes Are Far from Over." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, March 26, 2004.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Ceaușescu. Eventually, a Russian envoy convinced Abashidze to abdicate his position and flee to Russia, with safe passage guaranteed by Georgia. The Russian decision to use the country's influence to facilitate a peaceful resolution of the crisis, rather than to support the Russia-friendly leader who supported the Adjara Russian military base, led to hopes for a more productive Georgia-Russia relationship and future collaboration in the peaceful resolution of Georgia's separatist crises.¹⁰⁴

This initial thawing of their bilateral relationship quickly devolved as conflict arose in South Ossetia in May 2004. Directly after the successful diffusion of the Adjara crisis, Saakashvili ordered the destruction of a lucrative smuggling enterprise lining the pockets of South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity. Georgian forces closed a major smuggling market by force and bombed roads.¹⁰⁵ In July, Georgian peacekeepers discovered and detained a Russian peacekeeper convoy apparently bringing arms to South Ossetia, driving up tensions between Georgia and Russia.¹⁰⁶ In early August, the Russian Duma labeled Georgian warnings to South Ossetians as violations of Russian sovereignty, warned of an impending large-scale conflict involving Russia and asked Putin to take action for the sake of stability.¹⁰⁷ Clashes between Georgian and South Ossetian forces soon erupted, but a ceasefire was established in August.¹⁰⁸ Yet, a Georgian Defense and Security committee parliamentarian alleged that video evidence proved Russian troops were preparing to attack Georgian targets until Saakashvili opted to recall Georgian units from South Ossetia.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Glasser, Susan. "Georgian President Reclaims Region." *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Puddington, Arch, and Aili Piano, eds. *Freedom in the World 2009: The Annual Survey of Political Rights & Civil Liberties*. New York: Freedom House, 2009. p. 829.

¹⁰⁶ "Georgia Seizes Russian Arms Convoy in South Ossetia." Civil Georgia, July 7, 2004.

¹⁰⁷ "Fragment of the Document 'On Statement by the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation' on the Situation in the Caucasus." Small Businesses of Moscow, August 5, 2004.

¹⁰⁸ Puddington, et al. *Freedom*. Freedom House, 2009. p.829.

¹⁰⁹ Torbakov, Igor. "South Ossetia Crisis Stokes Tension Between Russia and Georgia." Eurasianet, August 5, 2004.

Despite Saakashvili's subsequent offers of autonomy for South Ossetia, relations worsened and further incidents continued to sour relations between Georgia, South Ossetia and Russia. A 2005 Georgian proposal to grant South Ossetia additional autonomy as a constituent of Georgia failed to attract Ossetian backing, despite cautious Russian approval. Although this plan entailed a Georgian compromise by offering further autonomy, it also required a compromise from the Ossetians — recognition of direct Georgian control. Instead, Ossetians later voted for complete independence in an unrecognized referendum.¹¹⁰ Trilateral tensions flared in 2006 after Georgia arrested several Russian military officers it claimed were spies who planned a deadly car bombing and Russia restricted its levels of Georgian exports.¹¹¹ In 2007, a Georgian parliamentary move to establish a temporary Georgian administration in South Ossetia again inflamed relations with Russia.¹¹² That August, a missile fired from a Sukhoi jet landed without detonating near a Georgian village. Georgia, citing radar records, alleged that the jet was Russian, while the Russians denied the claim and accused Georgia of planting the missile.¹¹³ A month later, Georgia claimed it shot down a plane that had repeatedly entered its airspace from Russia, while Russia and Abkhazia claimed the plane was a Georgian plane that crashed independently.¹¹⁴

In 2008, NATO activity pushed Russian-Georgian tensions to the breaking point. At the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, American advocacy for the creation of Georgian and

¹¹⁰ "Timeline: Conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, August 10, 2008.

¹¹¹ "South Ossetians Vote for Independence." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, November 13, 2006.

¹¹² "Timeline." Reuters, 2008.

¹¹³ Antidze, Margarita. "Georgia Accuses Russia of Firing Missile at Village." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, August 7, 2007.

¹¹⁴ Asatiani, Salome, and Jeffrey Donovan. "Tbilisi Investigating Reports Of Plane Downed In Kodori." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 8, 2008.

Ukrainian MAP plans was overruled by European concerns over Russian reactions. The decision to grant a MAP was based on whether NATO members considered that country's progress within the 1994 PFP program adequate.¹¹⁵ Despite the decision to refrain from granting MAPs, NATO committed to granting both countries membership in the future and guaranteed consideration of the matter at the December 2008 summit.¹¹⁶ Russia reacted harshly. The Russian chief of staff vowed that Russia would take military and non-military measures to protect its regional interests, and the Russian foreign minister declared that Russia would undertake any necessary steps for preventing Georgian and Ukrainian membership.¹¹⁷

The next events led to conflict between Georgia and Russia. In mid-April, Putin ordered the official recognition of businesses in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, created formal diplomatic connections and transferred additional military forces and equipment to Abkhazia.¹¹⁸ Russia and Abkhazia then accused Georgia of massing troops near the Abkhaz border, although United Nations observers stated that they did not possess evidence of this.¹¹⁹ Afterward, a plane later confirmed by UN observers to be Russian shot down a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) over Abkhazia. After buses transporting Georgian voters during a parliamentary election were blown up — a move that UN observers suggested may have been staged by Georgia — Russia deployed troops to rebuild a railway connecting Abkhazia and Russia and began a large-scale military exercise

¹¹⁵ Bigg, Claire. "NATO: What Is A Membership Action Plan?" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 2, 2012.

¹¹⁶ "Russia Army Vows Steps If Georgia and Ukraine Join NATO." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, April 11, 2008.

¹¹⁷ "Russia Army Vows." Reuters, 2008.

¹¹⁸ "Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia." International Crisis Group, August 23, 2016.

¹¹⁹ Cornell, Svante E., Johanna Popjanevski, and Niklas Nilsson. *Russia's War in Georgia: Causes and Implications for Georgia and the World*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2008. p. 8.

near its border.¹²⁰ Two days after the railway was mended, a Georgian police vehicle was attacked with improvised explosive devices that the US ambassador to Georgia privately attributed to Russia, and shooting and shelling broke out between Georgian and South Ossetian forces.¹²¹ Although attribution remains murky, an independent EU observer alleges Georgian instigation of the firefights.¹²²

Within the week, a convoy of 100 Russian vehicles entered the tunnel linking Russian territory with South Ossetia. Georgian troops then shelled the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali and occupied the city, but Russian troops launched a successful counterattack.¹²³ At this time, Russia also launched crippling cyberattacks against Georgian websites. Russian planes bombed strategic targets inside Georgian borders, including factories in the Georgian capital Tbilisi and civilian residences in Gori, while Russian troops pushed into South Ossetia and opened a new front in Abkhazia.¹²⁴ The Russians pushed far into Georgian territory before a ceasefire agreement was reached with international moderation. Russia then officially recognized the two separatist republics as independent states, despite Western criticism. Russian soldiers remained stationed in the separatist enclaves.¹²⁵

Despite periods of improved diplomatic relations since the war, tensions remain. The war took its toll on Saakashvili's popularity, and after his 2012 electoral loss, Georgia's government managed to gradually improve relations with Russia. Tourist visa permissions for Russians opened in

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 9.

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 12.

¹²² "Five Years on, Georgia Makes up with Russia." BBC News. BBC, June 25, 2013.

¹²³ Cornell, et al. *Russia's War*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2008. p. 16

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 17.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 22.

2012, providing prospects of economic growth in the crucial tourism sector.¹²⁶ Late that year, bilateral diplomatic discussions reopened for the first time since the war, and in 2013, Russia eased its restrictions on Georgian goods. Yet, despite this progress, the separatist republics have remained sticking points. In 2017, Russia moved to incorporate South Ossetian military structures into its own, formalizing Russian command and control.¹²⁷ Tensions flared again in 2019 when Georgian crowds protested violently after a Russian politician gave a speech from the speaker's chair of the Georgian parliament. Although Putin rejected the Duma's motion to enact retaliatory sanctions, the Kremlin criticized Georgia's inability to "pacify anti-Russian forces."¹²⁸

Throughout this period, multiple opportunities existed for Russia to intervene militarily in Georgian affairs. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War and, to a limited degree, the small-scale Russian backing of separatists in the early 1990s, are instances in which Russia opted to intervene, while the 2003 Rose Revolution and 2004 Ajara crisis represent notable points at which this did not occur. This thesis questions why the Russian propensity for intervention varied across the different flashpoints in this case.

¹²⁶ Rukhadze, Vasili. "Despite Bilateral Talks, Russian Threat Still Hangs Over Georgia." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. The Jamestown Foundation, April 25, 2014.

¹²⁷ Menabde, Giorgi. "Russian Military Absorbs 'Army of South Ossetia'." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. The Jamestown Foundation, March 21, 2017.

¹²⁸ Ellyatt, Holly. "Tensions between Russia and Georgia Are on the Rise Again: Here's Why It Matters." *CNBC*, July 11, 2019.

Georgia: Hypothesis Analysis

H1: Near abroad states with NATO membership are more likely to successfully achieve general deterrence toward Russia.

H1 posits that NA states that have attained NATO membership are more likely to deter Russia from initiating and escalating interventions. In the case of Georgia, the independent variable — Georgia's status as a NATO member or non-member — has remained static. Despite Georgia's efforts in the mid-2000s, it has not yet received NATO membership. Georgia's case therefore adds to the body of evidence for Russia's willingness to intervene against non-NATO member NA states. Russia acted militarily against Georgia when it launched overt attacks against Georgia in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Furthermore, some Russian units supported separatists against Georgia during the conflicts of the early 1990s; this involvement does not appear to have been centrally organized, but the leadership may have turned a blind eye to this minor military support. This pattern of interference against a non-NATO state supports H1. However, at first glance, the lack of Russian escalation in response to the 2003 Rose Revolution and the decision to aid Georgia during the 2004 Adjara crisis, rather than undermine it by supporting the rebellious territory, warrant explanation in the context of the hypothesis.

Russia's decisions to intervene in both low-level and overt military manners in Georgian affairs at several key junctures demonstrate its leaders' comfort with applying Russian military power against non-NATO former USSR members. This can be seen in Russia's willingness to both support separatist entities within Georgia and unilaterally attack targets in undisputed Georgian territory. As Abkhazia and South Ossetia waged separatist wars against Georgia in the 1990s, Russian planes and ground units assisted the rebels. Yeltsin often claimed that these strikes were results of wayward

commanders, but such repeated instances likely indicated that Yeltsin may have turned a blind eye to the military's actions. Russia's subsequent decisions to launch strikes against Georgian forces in the separatist territories during the 2008 crisis and to escalate the conflict by attacking targets within undisputed zones in Georgia — including strategic targets like warplane factories near Tbilisi — reveal its comfort with escalating conflicts against weaker non-NATO member NA states.

Given this demonstrated Russian risk-acceptance vis-a-vis Georgia, the Rose Revolution and Adjara crisis at face value appear to be slightly surprising points of non-intervention at a basic level; however, closer examination of each situation highlights factors that could have reasonably reduced the probability of Russian intervention. The Rose Revolution represented the popular overthrow of a sitting president and former Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs by a staunchly pro-Western leader. Russia has historically criticized this kind of political revolution in its region and has often accused the West of supporting such revolutionary factions.

Yet, Shevardnadze was also viewed as an ally of the West and a thorn in Russia's side. His former tenure as the Soviet foreign minister also earned him little love among Russians, as he was perceived to have played a role in the dissolution of the Soviet Union.¹²⁹ Russia aided in negotiations between Shevardnadze and the opposition, likely because it saw an opportunity to nurture closer relations with Georgia at the onset of the new Georgian president's term. Russia mostly hardened its rhetoric regarding the revolution and blamed the West after opposition parties in Moldova, encouraged by the Rose Revolution, staged protests that forced the Moldovan president to back out of a diplomatic deal with Russia.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ "A Moment of Truth." *The Economist*. November 27, 2003.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

This behavior implies that Russia was initially inclined to view the change of leadership optimistically, especially given its difficult history with Shevarnadze. Russia seemed to bristle primarily after the revolution and subsequent presidential turnover directly impacted its diplomatic initiatives in its near abroad. This observation pairs well with Russia's response after the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine removed a leader who had yielded to Russian pressure and dropped a deal with the EU in favor of closer economic ties with Russia.

The lack of Russian intervention in the 2004 Adjara crisis was also likely a product of this early period of cooperation between Putin and Saakashvili, as well as a consequence of other factors. Putin's willingness to actually ameliorate the crisis and broker a peaceful resolution indicates the optimistic attitude Putin took toward this aspect of Russia-Georgia relations at the time. It is also noteworthy that anti-Russian protests occurred in Adjara throughout the crisis and the vast majority of the Adjarian population is ethnically Georgian, meaning Russia's long-term interest in helping Adjara to achieve independence is limited.¹³¹ Adjara, unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, does not border Russia. Even if Russia could weaken Georgia by forcing Adjara's secession, Adjara presents a much less likely candidate for possible incorporation into the Russian Federation than the other two separatist republics, reducing the value of supporting chaos in Adjara.

Overall, Russia's willingness to intervene with its conventional military at multiple points throughout its relationship with Georgia indicates a significant lack of Georgian deterrent capability as a non-NATO member NA state.

¹³¹ Rukhadze, Vasili. "New Rhetoric, but Old Policy on Adjara Autonomy." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. The Jamestown Foundation, November 26, 2012.

H1A: The United States' credibility positively affects near abroad states' abilities to deter Russia.

H1A contends that the U.S.'s credibility as a capable actor willing to intervene militarily abroad factors into Russian calculations for intervention in NA states. The Georgia case study provides solid support for this hypothesis.

U.S. capability and credibility in the early 1990s was at an exceptionally high point. The U.S. had emerged victorious from the Cold War as the leading power in a unipolar world, at the price of the Soviet Union's fall from bipolar heavyweight to a significantly weaker state in the Russian Federation. The U.S. also proved its conventional superiority during the 1990 Desert Shield and 1991 Desert Storm operations. Russia did support separatist forces in their conflicts against Georgia, but this support remained limited, and the degree of consensus between the Russian parliament and Yeltsin in authorizing this support is unclear. Therefore, while low-level Russian intervention during this period did occur, its highly limited nature is significant to the hypothesis. Leading up to the 2003 and 2004 flashpoints, at which Russian intervention did not occur, U.S. credibility again was solid. The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 underscored both the U.S. willingness to intervene across the world and the capability of doing so. This corresponds with Russian nonintervention at this point.

Yet, by 2008, U.S. credibility had decreased due to poor progress in these wars. The mere fact of the U.S.'s continued deep engagement in these conflicts inherently reduced the chances of the U.S. opening a new major conflict by responding militarily to Russian actions in Georgia. The U.S. had just committed more resources and personnel to the fight in Iraq in 2007, a move that not only increased U.S. involvement but resulted in the most annual casualties among U.S. soldiers during the

conflict until that point.¹³² By 2008, U.S. public opinion had shifted drastically against the War in Iraq, with 54% disapproval and 38% approval as opposed to 22% disapproval and 72% approval in 2003.¹³³ It should be noted that Russia's 2008 intervention occurred before the onset of the global financial crisis of 2008, so this economic distress was not a salient factor in the Russian intervention calculus. These circumstances align well with the Russian decision to act militarily against Georgia in 2008.

Overall, trends of U.S. credibility correspond well with patterns of Russian intervention and nonintervention in Georgian affairs. The Russian active support of the separatists in the early 1990s does pose an issue for the hypothesis, but it is important to note both the questionable centrality of this decision and the limited nature of the intervention. Russian nonintervention in 2003 and 2004 matches the high degree of U.S. credibility at this time, while intervention in 2008 as the U.S. remained entrenched in costly and increasingly unpopular conflicts also supports the hypothesis.

H2: Overt NATO deliberations surrounding an NA state's possible entry without officially giving membership decrease that state's ability to deter Russia.

H2 argues that an NA state engaging in overt constructive dialogue with NATO regarding membership or openly making progress in NATO programs intended to groom for membership has a lesser likelihood of deterring Russian intervention. The Georgian case study provides solid support for H2, although, as in the discussion of H1, non-intervention in the cases of the Rose Revolution and the Adjara crisis must be examined.

¹³² "A Timeline of the U.S. War in Afghanistan." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed March 18, 2020.

¹³³ Rosentiel, Tom. "Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq: 2003-2008." Pew Research Center, December 30, 2019.

The major flashpoint at which Russian behavior supports H2 is Russian intervention in 2008. The uncanny timing of Russia's decision to intervene actively in Georgian relations with the separatists suggests a strong connection between NATO activity and Russian military actions. Although NATO did not offer Georgia a MAP plan at its 2008 Bucharest summit — a decision NATO members guided by prescient concerns that Russia would respond in a violent or destabilizing manner — it suggested to Georgia that it would eventually receive membership and committed to taking up the matter as soon as that December. Russia's civil and military leaders responded openly to these NATO promises by threatening military and non-military actions to protect Russian national interests.

Within weeks, Russia escalated tensions by opting out of the CIS economic sanctions on Abkhazian and Ossetian businesses, shooting a Georgian drone and potentially blowing up a Georgian police vehicle, although the Russians argued the Georgians blew up the vehicle to blame the attack on the Ossetians and trigger a conflict. It also mobilized its military and prepared for a military incursion into the separatist territories before the outbreak of conflict. When Georgian troops entered South Ossetia, Russia's military response was massive and swift. Russia's deliberate opening of a second front in Abkhazia and subsequent invasion of Georgia indicate a political objective revolving around Georgia, rather than the simple intention to defend Ossetians and stabilize the region. It is evident that within weeks of NATO's promises, Russia intentionally escalated tensions between Georgia and the separatists and capitalized upon the opportunity to invade Georgia. These actions fall in line with the Kremlin and Russian military's blunt promises to assert Russian interests through military and non-military means.

Some might argue that NATO's MAP promises might not have been the immediate trigger for Russian intervention but rather were preemptive deterrent responses to a perceived immediate threat of Russian intervention against Georgia. According to this logic, if the MAP was discussed for the sole purpose of preventing an imminent Russian intervention, the Russian intervention could not technically be considered a response to the stimulus of the MAP comments. Yet, this assumption is flawed. NATO grants its MAP programs to countries with which it has developed long-standing and productive relationships. Its members assess whether the aspirant country has progressed far enough in military and political reforms previously established as necessary for NATO accession. Saakashvili consistently supported Georgian military reforms for years before tensions with Russia reemerged, and these efforts resulted in a steadily increased percentage of Georgian GDP dedicated to military reformation after 2004. NATO's consideration of Georgian MAP requests in 2008 occurred at a reasonable period of time given Georgian efforts. Such concerns of reversed causality between Russian intervention and NATO's guarantees are therefore unfounded.

The flashpoint of Russian intervention in the early 1990s, although it might constitute Russian military intervention against Georgia on behalf of separatist territories, is not necessarily relevant to H2. Georgian relations with NATO at that point in time were largely undeveloped, and the minimal Russian military support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia appears more closely linked to disputes with Shevardnadze, allegations of Georgian support for Chechnyan separatists and direct concerns over the orientation of the separatist territories than with NATO and Georgia. While forcing Georgia into a position in which it would feel forced to join the CIS certainly played a large

role in this decision, there is little evidence that this was directed in response to specific developments in NATO-Georgia relations. In this conflict, NATO did not play a central role.

In a vein similar to the discussion of H1, the Rose Revolution presented a complicated situation for Russia that did not initially represent an obvious Georgian step closer to NATO. Although Saakashvili was considered pro-Western and many of the NGOs involved in Shevardnadze's removal were backed with Western money, this change did not inherently imply a shift toward NATO. Shevardnadze was friendly toward NATO and only the previous year had allowed American advisors into Georgian territory for counterterrorism training.¹³⁴ Saakashvili's rise, although problematic for Russia, initially may have also presented an opportunity to develop closer relations with a new leader. Russia's position toward Saakashvili had not yet soured to a point of concern.

Russian non-intervention in the Adjara crisis follows this logic. Georgia had not yet pivoted toward NATO to a degree that would stoke Russian aggression. Relations with Saakashvili and Georgia were still trending up as Saakashvili and Putin worked constructively during this period. In the context of this cooperative period, Russia aided Georgia in diffusing the Adjara crisis, rather than standing by or aiding it. Furthermore, as noted in the discussion of H1, demographic and geographic factors make Adjara an unlikely candidate for incorporation into Russia, lessening the appeal of assisting its separatism. Non-intervention in this case follows logically.

Overall, this case supports H2 when considering formal steps in the process leading to Georgian NATO accession. Russia's rhetoric and reaction to NATO's strong suggestions of a Georgian MAP reflect this causality. Georgia's relationship with NATO had not yet progressed to a point Russia considered threatening, so the Rose Revolution did not trigger intervention.

¹³⁴ "US Army Trainers Land in Georgia." BBC News. BBC, May 19, 2002.

H3: Near abroad states are less likely to successfully deter Russia if Russia is able to use a covert method of attack.

H3 identifies the ability to use a covert method of attack or the availability of plausible proxy forces as causal factors in Russian intervention. The Georgian case study provides a sizable body of evidence to support H3. In this case, the availability of willing proxy forces seems to be a greater factor, as proxies were closely linked to Russia's immediate strategic goals. However, Russia did evidently take opportunities for covert action in conjunction with its support of proxy armies. As in the discussions of H1 and H2, non-intervention during the 2004 Adjara crisis warrants examination.

Both instances of Russian intervention support H3. As Georgia struggled to fight against separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the early 1990s, Russia backed the separatists militarily both through arms aid and actual deployment of Russian units. Yet, it seems that Russia effectively secured a degree of plausible deniability through the presence of its proxies, as the separatists could act with low-visibility Russian backing and Yeltsin could claim at various points that Russian commanders were acting independently, separating the central Russian government from Russian military actions. Russia was therefore able to pursue its strategic, operational and tactical goals with both proxies and conventional forces for which it could deny responsibility. Russian interest in using proxies and pursuing covert action is also visible in its behavior during the tense buildup to the 2008 crisis. The confirmed Russian jet strike against a Georgian drone and alleged Russian role in the police car bombing suggest a Russian interest in engaging in covert brinkmanship at this point. Clearly, the existence of strong and feasible proxies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia encouraged overt Russian intervention in 2008. In this case, the Russian-backed separatist troops seemed to almost play the role of trigger forces, as Russia launched a well-prepared and large-scale military response

immediately after the separatists engaged in combat. This willingness to launch an attack due to the availability of proxies is precisely the behavior predicted by H3.

It is true that these proxies have been constantly available to Russia; therefore, one might argue that since the independent variable remains the same throughout the case study, Russian intervention in this case cannot be attributed to the availability of proxies. Yet, it is not variation of proxies' availability in this case that supports H3. Rather, it is notable that Russia exhibited comfort intervening with its proxies at numerous points in response to other stimuli besides an increasing availability of proxies. Their availability has allowed Russia to intervene easily and constantly when it desires to do so. Essentially, the relatively high level and frequency of intervention in this case reflects the steady availability of proxy actors.

The Adjara crisis may at first seem an appropriate opportunity for intervention given the availability of local proxies, but additional factors render these less viable options than the separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Adjara is completely separated from the Russian border by Georgian territory. This creates additional barriers to supplying arms and maintaining a consistent flow of materials. In addition to Adjara's geographic position, the territory's majority ethnic Georgian population may also make the Adjarians less desirable proxy partners for Russia due to the impossibility of eventually incorporating the territory into Russia.

Yet, one of the most salient reasons Russia chose to aid Georgia in this case is that the crisis occurred in the broader political context of a positive bilateral relationship. H3 does not suppose blindly that Russia will intervene in every scenario in which a separatist group presents a potential proxy force; it only assumes that Russia will have a lower threshold for intervening in such

environments when intervention is in Russian political interests. This crisis did not occur at such a point.

The Georgian case study broadly supports H3, as the availability of South Ossetian and Abkhazian separatist forces — and the long-term political relationships Russia formed with these entities — enabled Russian intervention at numerous points.

H4: The extent of Russian intervention in the affairs of near abroad states reflects the strength of the Russian economic strategic position.

H4 argues that if Russia is performing well economically, holds a stronger economic position relative to the West or holds strategic economic leverage over the NA state in question, it is more likely to intervene.

Russia's economy performed poorly in comparison to that of the U.S. in the early 1990s. As the U.S.'s GDP continued a trend of steady expansion and averaged 2.23% growth from 1990 to 1994, the Russian economy shrank.¹³⁵ Russian GDP averaged a loss of -8.76% over that same period.¹³⁶ Notably, this is a time when Russia was apparently providing light military support to the separatists fighting Georgia. At this point, this contrast in economic performance would have predicted non-intervention.

At the 2003 and 2004 flashpoints, the Russian economy was performing extremely well and recovering from the late 1990s' crash. Russian GDP averaged growth of 6.07% from 2000 to 2004, although the economy was still small compared to its size a decade beforehand.¹³⁷ During this same

¹³⁵ "GDP Growth - United States." The World Bank.

¹³⁶ "GDP Growth - Russian Federation." The World Bank.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

period, the U.S. was continuing a longstanding trend of slow and steady growth, averaging 2.41% growth from 2000 to 2004.¹³⁸ While a comparison of short-term economic performance favors Russian growth rates over those of the U.S., it is important to note that Russian non-intervention in 2003 and assistance in 2004 occurred at a time when Russia's economy was just approaching its previous size, and the U.S. economy had never been larger. The relative rates do not support H4 regarding the 2003 and 2004 flashpoints, but the overall balance of capability does.

By the 2008 flashpoint, Russia's economy was still growing rapidly while the U.S.'s growth was slowing and approaching stagnation. Russia's economy averaged 7.05% growth from 2005 to 2008 and far surpassed the Russian economy's highest point before the late 1990s' default.¹³⁹ Over the same period, the U.S. economy averaged 2.02% growth, but its growth rate was decreasing before the economic crisis.¹⁴⁰ This comparison of economic performance does not immediately suggest intervention, although the basic balance of growth rates indeed favors Russia here. The success in absolute terms of Russia's economy relative to its previous state is particularly notable.

Georgia's geographic position leaves it particularly vulnerable to Russian economic pressure. Russia has historically been Georgia's main gas provider, and it exploited this to increase prices steeply for Georgia after the Rose Revolution.¹⁴¹ Although Georgia began to purchase gas from Azerbaijan in 2008, Russia was still able to exploit its power grid links in Georgia through utilizing pre-existing connections and buying Georgian companies.¹⁴² These factors give Russia a heightened ability to apply significant economic pressure to Georgia, and it has often pursued this strategy at

¹³⁸ "GDP Growth - United States." The World Bank.

¹³⁹ "GDP Growth - Russian Federation." The World Bank.

¹⁴⁰ "GDP Growth - United States." The World Bank.

¹⁴¹ Newnham, Randall. "Georgia on My Mind? Russian Sanctions and the End of the 'Rose Revolution.'" *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 6, no. 2 (July 2015): 164.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 165.

various flashpoints instead of military intervention. This, therefore, does not indicate causality between direct economic leverage over Georgia and escalation.

Ultimately, the Georgian case study does not support H4 when examining the relative rate of economic growth and when considering changes in Russia's ability to exert economic pressure. Yet, examination of this issue suggests that, rather than reacting to how its economy is faring when compared to that of the U.S., Russia is responsive to expansion of its absolute economic capabilities.

Hypothesis conclusions

The Georgia case study supports H1 because of Russia's evident willingness to intervene militarily in the affairs of a non-NATO member NA state. The pattern of Russian intervention also reflects a sensitivity to U.S. credibility, supporting H1A. This case also provides strong support for H2, as Russia evidently intervened militarily in response to Georgia's possible imminent acquisition of a MAP. The case is favorable to H3 in a general sense, as while the IV did not vary across the timeline, Russian intervention always involved proxy separatist forces. H4 was partially supported, as comparison of the growth rates of Russia and the U.S. did not yield correlations, but Russia did clearly act more aggressively when its economy had rebounded in absolute terms.

Estonia: Historical Overview

As the case examining the only NATO member from the subset in question, the Estonian case study provides important support for this paper's argument. Flashpoints for potential Russian intervention against Estonia occurred in 1993, 2004 and 2007. In a manner consistent with Russian behavior toward the non-NATO NA states, Russia refrained from intervention when its economy

was faring poorly. Yet, by the late 2000s, when its economy had recovered, Russia intervened at a significant level of intensity. However, while its interventions against Ukraine and Georgia reached the intensity of overt military conflict, Russian intervention against Estonia remained capped at the level of large-scale cyberattacks, which indicates an unwillingness to directly attack a NATO member. A description of relevant historical events throughout the relationships between Estonia, the Russian Federation and NATO will more easily facilitate discussion of the hypotheses.

Although the Estonian Republic gained independence during the interwar period of the early twentieth century, it was forcibly occupied during World War II first by the Germans and subsequently by the Soviet Union, in which it remained until the superpower's final days.¹⁴³ Estonia's bid for independence from the USSR, a concerted nonviolent nationwide effort, resulted in Moscow's unsuccessful mobilization of military force to halt the revolutionary proceedings. Encouraged by new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's introspective approach to reforming the USSR's political and cultural structure in the mid-1980s, an Estonian cultural revival promoting traditional nationalistic songs emerged.¹⁴⁴ This Estonian nationalist movement involved events like a 1988 Tallinn musical festival that attracted almost 25% of Estonia's population and featured members of the political leadership who advocated for Estonian independence.¹⁴⁵ Supporters of further Estonian autonomy included leadership of the governing Communist Party, which passed a parliamentary declaration of Estonian sovereignty that, in addition to provisions like declarations of ownership over Estonian natural resources, asserted the primacy of Estonian laws over Soviet laws.

¹⁴³ Smith, David J. *Estonia: Independence and European Integration*. Routledge, 2003. p. 27.

¹⁴⁴ Zunes, Stephen. "Estonia's Singing Revolution (1986-1991)." International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, April 2009. p. 2.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁴⁶ Over the next three years, these movements and mass events increased in power and frequency, leading to the development of local government institutions in competition with the existing Soviet structures.¹⁴⁷ In 1991, during a Moscow Soviet nationalist coup, Soviet tanks and soldiers were deployed into Estonia to prevent further defection, but nonviolent crowds of Estonians physically blocked access to vital infrastructure until the coup's failure the next day. This victory contributed to the collapse of the USSR. Weeks later, the leadership of the new Russian state acknowledged the formal independence of Estonia and the two other Baltic states.¹⁴⁸

In the beginning and middle of the 1990s, Estonia's tough stance on Russian troop withdrawal and citizenship created a potential flashpoint with Russia. Estonia approached its independence with the perspective of continuing the tenure of the Estonian Republic, which it deemed illegally annexed by the USSR, as opposed to the formation of a new country. Estonian readoption of its 1938 Law on Citizenship in 1992 therefore essentially prevented dozens of thousands of ethnic Russians living in Estonia from automatically receiving Estonian citizenship.¹⁴⁹ At this time, only slightly over 60% of the 1.6 million-person population in Estonia was ethnically Estonian.¹⁵⁰ Several months later, Estonia, in conjunction with the other Baltic states, demanded full Russian removal of Soviet forces. Yet, after an Estonian presidential election in which over 40% of the population was unable to vote as a result of the strict citizenship laws, Russian President Boris Yeltsin stopped the removal of soldiers from the Baltic states and demanded more rights for the

¹⁴⁶ Parks, Michael. "Parliament in Estonia Declares 'Sovereignty'." *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1988.

¹⁴⁷ Zunes. "Estonia's Singing." International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2009. p. 4.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p.4.

¹⁴⁹ "Chronology for Russians in Estonia." Minorities at Risk Project, 2004.

¹⁵⁰ Erlanger, Steven. "In the Baltics, There May Be No Home for Russians." *The New York Times*, November 22, 1992.

Russian populations in those states, appealing to the UN. In the eastern Estonian city of Narva, known for its sizable Russian population, protests erupted against these Estonian government policies.¹⁵¹ In the summer of 1993, after the Estonian Alien Registration Law demanded that people who immigrated into Estonia during the Soviet period register with the government and denied Estonian residence to retired Soviet military officers born after 1930, Russia severed its natural gas flow to Estonia in protest.

Estonian President Lennart Meri then responded to Russian pressure by suspending the Alien Registration law, but the city council of Narva, which not only held a large Russian population but also faced rapid post-Soviet deindustrialization, declared a referendum on autonomy the day after the law's suspension. Although the vast majority of voters opted for autonomy, Narva's leaders conceded defeat after the Estonian Supreme Court declared the referendum illegitimate.¹⁵² Yet, among other hardline Russian organizations in Estonia, a group of Russian veterans alleged human rights violations to the UN. A Liberal Democratic Party politician called for retired Russian veterans in Estonia to organize and enact armed resistance, but most Russian groups disavowed the calls to arms.¹⁵³

As debates over Russian minorities and troop withdrawal continued into 1994, Russian statements against Estonian treatment of its Russian minorities slowed the troop withdrawal process. After Estonia then claimed pre-1940 borders, which claimed territory then under Russian control, Yeltsin fully halted troop withdrawal and sent the transitioning forces back to their Estonian bases. A bilateral agreement facilitating troop withdrawal in exchange for the citizenship of 10,000 retired

¹⁵¹ "Chronology for Russians in Estonia." Minorities at Risk Project, 2004.

¹⁵² "Chronology for Russians in Estonia." Minorities at Risk Project, 2004.

¹⁵³ Park, Andrus. "Russia and Estonian Security Dilemmas." *Europe-Asia Studies* 47, no. 1 (1995): 38.

Soviet officers and families resolved that tension.¹⁵⁴ While debates around these issues continued for the rest of the decade, this period represented the highest degree of tension over these issues.

During this same period, Estonia had pushed for revision of borders. After 1994, Estonia announced a more positive approach toward diplomacy with Russia and dropped the issue, although this may have related both to an utter lack of support from the West on the issue at a time when Estonia sought membership in the EU.¹⁵⁵

Throughout this period, Estonia began to strengthen its relations with NATO, which reached a more productive stage after the deescalation of Estonia's immediate crises with Russia. Estonia largely pursued this cooperation in conjunction with the other Baltic states. Estonia helped to found the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in 1991, but the development of this partnership largely began after 1993.¹⁵⁶ Estonia joined the PFP in early 1994, and after the Russian parliamentary elections in 1993 led to increasingly assertive Russian rhetoric, many Estonian leaders suggested a turn toward the West out of concern for Russian intentions in the region.¹⁵⁷ Estonia opened an official dialogue with NATO about membership in 1996 and received a MAP in 1999 after NATO designated it a "probable applicant country."¹⁵⁸ Among other developments, Estonia and the other Baltic states increased their defense spending to meet the NATO 2% GDP target at

¹⁵⁴ "Chronology for Russians in Estonia." Minorities at Risk Project, 2004.

¹⁵⁵ Viktorova, Jevgenia. "Conflict Transformation the Estonian Way: The Estonian-Russian Border Conflict, European Integration and Shifts in Discursive Representation of the 'Other.'" *Perspectives*, no. 27 (2006): 50.

¹⁵⁶ "Estonia in NATO." Estonian Atlantic Treaty Organization. Accessed March 22, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Park. "Russia and Estonian Security." *Europe-Asia Studies* (1995): 29.

¹⁵⁸ "Estonia in NATO." Estonian Atlantic Treaty Organization.

the turn of the century.¹⁵⁹ Estonia and NATO held accession talks in 2002 and 2003, and NATO eventually granted Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania membership in 2004.¹⁶⁰

Russia frequently responded to these signs of progress in closeness between Estonia and NATO with economic punishments, like its 1994 denial of Most Favored Nation status to Estonia and bans on select Estonian imports. Yet, Estonia's 2004 NATO accession happened to coincide with its 2004 EU accession, preventing subsequent arbitrary economic measures as a result of the common market.¹⁶¹ At this point, the Russian response toward this NATO expansion remained mixed. Putin grudgingly labeled the prospect of Estonian NATO accession a non-threat in 2002.¹⁶² Yet, Russia anticipated Estonia's NATO accession with hints of red line statements, a general parliamentary declaration against further NATO expansion and an alleged incursion into Estonian airspace the month before accession.

Despite this clear animosity, however, Russia's response remained largely rhetorical.¹⁶³ Russia's aggressive tone simmered soon after the official accession. Putin noted later in 2004 that every country has the right to choose its preferred form of security and that, despite his objections, he hoped NATO's expansion would increase international trust.¹⁶⁴ In 2005, however, Russia cut off

¹⁵⁹ Luik, Juri. "Membership Action Plan (MAP) On the Road toward NATO." *Baltic Defence Review*, no. 2 (1999): 27.

¹⁶⁰ "Estonia in NATO." Estonian Atlantic Treaty Organization.

¹⁶¹ "Estonia and Russia, 20 Years on: Stuck in History." Estonian Public Broadcasting, August 25, 2011.

¹⁶² Warren, Marcus. "Putin Lets Nato 'Recruit' in Baltic." *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, June 25, 2002.

¹⁶³ Myers, Steven. "As NATO Finally Arrives on Its Border, Russia Grumbles." *The New York Times*, April 3, 2004.

¹⁶⁴ Mydans, Seth. "Putin Doubts Expanded NATO Meets New Threats." *The New York Times*, April 9, 2004.

talks with Estonia about its border, citing negative Estonian comments about the country's history under the USSR.¹⁶⁵

In 2007, Estonia-Russian relations reached their most drastic flashpoint, including cyberattacks widely interpreted as authorized by the Russian government, when the Estonian government removed a statue honoring Soviet soldiers who fought in World War II from its prominent place of display. The Estonian government claims it moved the statue from the public square and to rebury the remains of Soviet soldiers in a military cemetery because, beginning in 2005, radical Soviet revisionist groups had started to convene at the statue.¹⁶⁶ Despite the approval of several prominent Russian politicians and alleged Estonian efforts to include Russia in the relocation process, Moscow accused the Estonian government of anti-Russian sentiment.¹⁶⁷ The day that Estonia began the statue's relocation process, April 26, 2007, the country was hit with cyberattacks that lasted for weeks. The first wave of attacks appeared uncoordinated, poorly funded and facilitated through hacking forums. The day these attacks began, Russia suddenly dismantled strategically significant railroads for alleged maintenance work. Analysis of these first attacks indicates they were likely not orchestrated directly by the Kremlin.¹⁶⁸

Large riots in Estonia accompanied the first wave of cyberattacks. Riots in the center of the Estonian capital Tallinn, in which mostly ethnic Russian protesters chanted "Russia" and brandished Russian flags, resulted in nearly 100 documented instances of vandalism and looting. Rioting, involving the burning of the statue of an Estonian military leader who opposed Russia in Estonia's

¹⁶⁵ "Estonia Profile - Timeline." BBC News, March 4, 2019.

¹⁶⁶ Liik, Kadri. "The 'Bronze Year' of Estonia-Russia Relations." In *Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Yearbook*, 73, 2007.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 73.

¹⁶⁸ "Hybrid Threats: 2007 Cyber Attacks on Estonia." NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2007. p. 53.

1918 independence war, also broke out in Johvi and Kohtla-Järve, far northeastern Estonian towns with majority ethnic Russian populations.¹⁶⁹ Estonian leaders accused Russia of funding and deploying many of the rioters.¹⁷⁰ In Moscow, the pro-Putin Russian nationalist youth group Nashi organized large protests blockading the Estonian embassy for over a week and physically disrupted a press conference with the Estonian ambassador.¹⁷¹

When the protests in Estonia quieted one week later, a second wave of cyberattacks — more closely coordinated and more advanced in capability than the first — began. This wave has been more closely linked to the Russian government. This sophisticated wave targeted Estonian banks — a shrewd choice, given the Estonian population's incredibly high reliance upon online banking at the time. The attacks peaked on a prominent Russian national holiday and dissipated after several weeks.

172

Many IP addresses of those responsible for the Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack pointed to Russian nationals, including former employees of political parties. Additionally, the structure of the attacks, including the start at midnight Moscow time, the apparently coordinated end of the attacks and the attacks' advanced flexibility to adapt to countermeasures, indicated central control and collection of intelligence throughout the attacks.¹⁷³ These aspects, in conjunction with the non-cyber Russian measures and Russian refusal to assist in combating the attacks, led Estonian politicians to accuse Russia of interfering in Estonian internal affairs.¹⁷⁴ Russia denied playing any

¹⁶⁹ "Tallinn Tense after Deadly Riots." BBC News, April 28, 2007.

¹⁷⁰ Traynor, Ian. "EU Protests over Russian Attacks on Ambassadors." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, May 2, 2007.

¹⁷¹ Myers, Steven. "Friction Between Estonia and Russia Ignites Protests in Moscow." *The New York Times*, May 3, 2007.

¹⁷² "Hybrid Threats." NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2007. p. 55.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 61.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 56.

role and claimed that independent “patriotic” groups and hackers were responsible. Estonia subsequently tightened its relations with NATO, as well as its cyber infrastructure capability, in the years following these attacks. In 2008, Estonia and NATO established the NATO Co-operation Cyber Defence Center of Excellence in Estonia.¹⁷⁵

Minor disputes and arguments emerged between the two countries in the following years, but their relations generally improved from their 2007 low point in the following years, although several Russian agents were discovered in Estonian government positions in the early 2010s. Talks about the border resumed in 2012. Yet, they soured again in late 2014 when Russia apparently abducted Estonian intelligence official Eston Kohver on the Estonian side of a border crossing. Kohver had anticipated meeting Russian smuggling informants, but smoke and stun grenades launched from the Russian area of the border obscured his backup team’s view while he was removed from the meeting point. A joint Estonia-Russia border guard report initially confirmed that the border security had been violated from the Russian side, but Russian officials later refused to confirm this statement. Throughout his career, Kohver disrupted smuggling operations potentially linked to the Russian FSB’s criminal networks.¹⁷⁶ However, it is also notable that his abduction occurred merely two days after U.S. President Barack Obama visited Tallinn to reaffirm NATO’s commitment to defending Estonia.¹⁷⁷ After Russia sentenced Kohver to 15 years in prison in 2015, Estonia secured his freedom for the exchange of a Russian mole arrested in Estonia in 2012.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ “Estonia and NATO.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Republic of Estonia, February 2019.

¹⁷⁶ Higgins, Andrew. “Tensions Surge in Estonia Amid a Russian Replay of Cold War Tactics.” *The New York Times*, October 6, 2014.

¹⁷⁷ “Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia.” Office of the Press Secretary. National Archives and Records Administration, September 3, 2014.

¹⁷⁸ “Russia and Estonia 'Exchange Spies' after Kohver Row.” BBC News. BBC, September 26, 2015.

Relations have since remained somewhat icy. NATO launched large-scale drills in the Baltic region in 2015 and announced plans to expand its conventional arsenal in the Baltic, while in turn Russia expanded its nuclear arsenal.¹⁷⁹ As of 2018, Russia had not ratified a border treaty signed with Estonia in 2015, preventing the solidification of a formal border accord.¹⁸⁰ Low-level tension has persisted, as Russia has taken actions like airspace violations in the Baltic states and established a helicopter based on a small island between Estonia and Finland.¹⁸¹

Throughout Estonia's relationship with Russia, several potential opportunities for Russian escalation of intensity levels have occurred. Serious intervention has occurred only at the point of the 2007 cyberattacks, and no escalation to the point of military action has occurred. The point at which Russia responded to its 1993 disagreements with Estonia by freezing natural gas pipelines represented a potential opportunity for higher level intervention, as Russia was moving large numbers of troops throughout Estonia and considered its large minority population in Estonia to be threatened. The second potential flashpoint at which potential Russian intervention seems plausible is Estonia's 2004 NATO accession. The third major flashpoint, at which the most intense Russian intervention in Estonian affairs since Estonian independence occurred, was the 2007 crisis. Yet, it is notable that this intervention did not reach the intensity level of military action. Although Russia seemingly opted for large-scale cyberattacks in conjunction with physical pressure on the Estonian embassy, an armed action against the embassy or incursion into a heavily Russian area like Narva could have occurred. Yet, it did not.

¹⁷⁹ Schmitt, Eric, and Steven Myers. "NATO Refocuses on the Kremlin, Its Original Foe." *The New York Times*, June 23, 2015.

¹⁸⁰ "Estonia External Relations Briefing: Estonia as an International Actor in 2018: an Overview." China-CEE Institute, December 2018.

¹⁸¹ Woody, Christopher. "Amid Tensions with Russia, NATO Is Trying to up Its Game in the Waters around Europe." *Business Insider*, November 13, 2019.

Estonia: Hypothesis Analysis

H1: Near abroad states with NATO membership are more likely to successfully achieve general deterrence toward Russia.

H1 implies that Russia is less likely to instigate an armed conflict against an NA state with NATO membership. The Estonian case study, judged from Estonia's 2004 accession and onward, ultimately supports this hypothesis. Yet, H1 alone cannot explain the lack of Russian intervention escalation at the 1993 flashpoint.

Since Estonia joined NATO in 2004, Russia has not intervened militarily in Estonian affairs, despite its occasionally threatening rhetoric and ominous troop movements. Instead, in the 2007 bilateral diplomatic crisis involving the highest level of Russian intervention, Russia opted for cyberattacks. This move indicates some degree of restraint on the part of the Russians, given the seemingly provocative nature of the Estonian government's decision to relocate the statue and graves. Russia did not choose to restrain from intervening in this instance. Its leaders indeed considered the stimulus worthy of a large-scale response against the Estonian government and populace. Yet, it confined this response to the cyber domain and, if indeed linked to the government, to support of protests in Estonia and intimidation of the Estonian ambassador in Moscow.¹⁸² These measures were the extent of the immediate Russian response, but conditions during some of these flashpoints could have presented potential incentives for Russian military action. The pro-Russian violence in Tallinn certainly would have provided encouragement, but

¹⁸² Traynor. "EU Protests." The Guardian, 2007.

perhaps more significant are the protests that occurred in northeastern Estonia. These protests emerged in majority-Russian towns mere miles from the Russian border.

These factors presented possible conditions for a Russian military incursion, and these conditions are indeed discernible in instances of Russian military action like the annexation of Crimea. Yet, Russia refrained from any military intervention against Estonia. Furthermore, even the Russian cyberattacks remained within domains likely considered to be at a safe distance from sectors of cyberspace that could trigger enactment of the NATO Article V collective defense mechanism. Considered together, these factors indicate a deliberate Russian ambition to intervene but also a distinct restraint from intervention that could provoke NATO.

It should be noted that although the Estonian case study indicates Russian sensitivity to NATO during the 2007 crisis, there is no point before Estonia's NATO accession at which Russia displayed a willingness to intervene at a higher level during a comparable crisis. There is therefore no pre-accession case of military intervention to compare to the post-accession case of substantial non-military intervention. During the period of tense Estonian-Russian relations in the early 1990s, Russia took steps to indicate its disapproval of Estonian diplomacy. At the point at which Russia halted its Estonian gas flows in 1993, Russia had troops stationed within Estonia and remained extremely vocal in its concerns about the Estonian government's perceived marginalization of ethnic Russians. Russia halted the withdrawal of its troops and returned them to their former posts during a particularly contentious diplomatic exchange, but no military intervention actually occurred.

Overall, The case supports H1. Although an intervention in the 1990s would have helped to link Estonia and H1, H1 simply predicts that Russia will not act militarily after NATO accession, not that Russia will always be intervening if a state is not in NATO. The factors present during the 2007

flashpoint indicate a Russian sensitivity to a potential NATO response, even if this cannot be fully confirmed without an example of high-level intervention before accession for comparison.

H1A: The United States' credibility positively affects near abroad states' abilities to deter Russia.

H1A argues that the United States' credibility as a powerful actor with the willingness and capability to respond militarily to Russian aggression impacts Russia's willingness to intervene in the affairs of the country in question. The intensity levels of Russian intervention in Estonian affairs over time support this hypothesis, although the capping of Russian escalation levels to cyberattacks and diplomatic intimidation during the 2007 crisis likely results from the predictions of H1 as well as those of H1A.

The early 1990s and early 2000s marked a strong point for the U.S.'s military credibility. Its performance in the 1990 Operation Desert Shield and 1991 Operation Desert Storm operations showcased the elite capabilities of American conventional forces. These events not only announced the U.S.'s willingness to intervene in foreign affairs with its conventional might but also signaled the implications of the onset of a unipolar world helmed by a hegemonic U.S. Russia, the legal successor to the USSR, was unlikely to test the U.S.'s patience at this point. It should be noted that the U.S. had not communicated a distinct interest in incorporating the Baltic states into NATO at the time, but in this context it is unlikely that Russia would have sought to antagonize the situation in that region through military intervention. Similarly, the U.S. enjoyed a credible reputation for effective conventional intervention during Estonia's 2002 and 2003 NATO accession talks. The U.S.'s 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and 2003 invasion of Iraq again highlighted its conventional power and willingness to intervene militarily abroad.

By 2007, the year during which Russia chose to respond to Estonian internal affairs with massive cyberattacks, U.S. credibility as an effective and willing military power had waned. The U.S. invasions in the Middle East had created widespread insurgencies, and the counterinsurgency operations required colossal American investments in finances and manpower. The wars became deeply unpopular domestically, and the prospect of additional U.S. military deployment to another area of the world with a delicate political balance — especially against a resurgent European power — was unlikely to appeal to voters and policymakers. A U.S. military response was even more unlikely in the event of cyberattacks limited to non-kinetic domains. Enough U.S. credibility likely remained to disincentivize a Russian military action in this case — a reality that supports H1 due to the U.S.'s position as a major driver of NATO's military muscle. Yet, the Russian leadership still felt comfortable pursuing massive cyberattacks in this case.

Ultimately, the Russian pattern of nonintervention at the first two flashpoints and low-level intervention at the third flashpoint corresponds well to the trajectory of American conventional might and willpower.

H2: Overt NATO deliberations surrounding an NA state's possible entry without officially giving membership decrease that state's ability to deter Russia.

H2 posits that as a state overtly progresses toward NATO membership, Russia is more likely to intervene in that country's affairs. While the Estonian case study does not seem to provide supportive evidence for this hypothesis, this absence of assertive behavior in anticipation of potential Estonian NATO membership may result from external factors.

In the leadup to Estonia's NATO accession, between the 1999 MAP provision and 2002, Russia did not instigate military action or even low-intensity isolated military actions in response against Estonia. Considering the core assumption guiding this hypothesis that for Russia, and especially for Putin, NA state NATO accession inherently creates an undesirable zero-sum loss, this lack of aggressive responses to Estonia's pursuit of NATO membership seems aberrational. In the context of Russia's critical rhetoric regarding the Estonian government's disparagement of the Soviet 1940 takeover — an issue important not only for Russian national pride but also for potential Russian reparations responsibilities — this seems even more surprising.¹⁸³

Yet, despite the likelihood that even at that time Russian leaders viewed Estonian NATO accession unfavorably, Russia opted for non-intervention likely because of external factors like its own aspirations for its relationship with NATO, its potential acknowledgement of the Baltic countries' eventual acceptance into NATO and the aforementioned increase in U.S. credibility as Estonia's accession became increasingly likely. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Russian leaders were actively seeking to develop a positive Russia-NATO relationship, even if largely to enhance Russia's influence upon the alliance's decision-making processes.¹⁸⁴ Prior to 1997, Russian leaders were likely not overly concerned with a potentially imminent accession for Estonia, as the U.S. had taken a careful approach epitomized by Secretary of Defense William Perry's statement that Estonia was not prepared to enter the alliance. When Madeleine Albright became U.S. Secretary of State in 1997, the U.S. began to openly consider Estonian accession more seriously.¹⁸⁵ Pressuring Estonia, now a likely candidate for eventual NATO accession, would likely have inserted a roadblock into these relations.

¹⁸³ Kramer, Mark. "NATO, the Baltic States and Russia: a Framework for Sustainable Enlargement." *International Affairs* 78, no. 4 (October 2002): 734.

¹⁸⁴ "NATO-Russia Relations: The Return of the Enemy." Warsaw Institute, April 4, 2019. p. 2.

¹⁸⁵ Kramer. "NATO." *International Affairs* (2002): 740.

Putin's statements and actions at the onset of his presidency also indicate that Estonia's imminent accession may have become an unavoidable reality to Russia by that time. In early 2001, Putin signed a declaration with the president of Lithuania — a fellow Baltic country to which Estonia remained closely linked in its pursuit of NATO membership — recognizing each country's right to pursue its own security in any manner not jeopardizing the security of other countries.¹⁸⁶ While Putin's subsequent statements in June 2002 showed that he did not favor the Baltics' accessions, this joint declaration indicates he did not consider challenging the Baltics' accessions worth the price of provoking the U.S. and NATO.¹⁸⁷ Relating to H1A, these remarks and the most intense steps of Estonia's path to NATO occurred soon after the U.S. launched Operation Enduring Freedom and invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, certainly a serious sign of its credibility at the time as a capable and willing military power. The ensuing American invasion of Iraq in 2003 emphasized this point. At the time, the calculus for Russia reflected nonintervention as the most reasonable option, regardless of Russian preferences.

H3: Near abroad states are less likely to successfully deter Russia if Russia is able to use a covert method of attack.

H3 argues Russia is more likely to intervene if it is able to employ methods of attack that provide it with plausible deniability. This capability for Russia revolves around its ability to rely on capable proxy forces. The degree to which these forces are actually available in Estonia is highly debatable; much scholarly discourse focuses on majority-ethnic Russian town Narva and similar areas as pockets of potential latent separatism that Russia could exploit. Yet, this population does

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 747.

¹⁸⁷ "Excerpts from a Transcript of the News Conference for Russian and Foreign Journalists." President of Russia, June 24, 2002.

not actually appear to harbor capable and strong-willed separatist militia groups available for Russian exploitation. Furthermore, since its independence, Estonia has fostered local defense groups that likely present a further obstacle for foreign mobilization of proxies within the population. The Estonian case study thus provides some support for H3, since a lack of viable proxy groups has thus far corresponded with a lack of military intervention.

At first glance, conditions in areas like Narva seem parallel to those in Crimea and the Georgian separatist republics. The population largely consists of Russophone ethnic Russians whose families immigrated to the area under Soviet administration. Narva's leadership also organized a referendum for autonomy after Estonia's split from the Soviet Union. The town and its neighboring areas also saw pro-Russian rioting during the 2007 crisis. These factors create conditions similar to those in areas where Russia has attempted to mobilize the population in separatist conflicts.

Yet, notable differences set Narva apart from these areas. The Narva leadership acknowledged that it would abide by the Estonian court's ruling on its autonomy referendum even before the court announced its ruling, showing a level of deference to the governing NA state not characteristic of the other separatist movements. The area's inhabitants also point to the adjacent Russian region's poverty as a deterrent for seeking incorporation into Russia.¹⁸⁸ When a politician in the 1990s attempted to organize an armed rebellion of Russian veterans in Estonia, prominent Russian groups in eastern Estonia opposed him. The existence and active participation of locally networked Estonian paramilitary defense groups like the Estonian Defense League, which played a key role in preventing the Soviet capture of Estonian broadcasting services in the early 1990s, has also likely provided a serious deterrent. The pro-Russian sentiment and organizational structures

¹⁸⁸ Balmforth, Tom. "Russians Of Narva Not Seeking 'Liberation' By Moscow." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 6, 2014.

that Russia seeks simply do not exist in sufficient quantities, and these factors have remained constant since the first flashpoint of the early 1990s.

It is also notable that Russia's most serious intervention in Estonian affairs, which occurred years after Estonia's NATO accession, was largely limited to the cyber domain. Despite the qualified conclusions of experts in the field, it is exceedingly difficult to confirm beyond a reasonable doubt, with concrete evidence, that the Russian government played a central role in organizing the attacks. This opacity likely played a major role in Russia's decision to employ cyberattacks. It could apply coercive force against Estonia while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability.

H4: The extent of Russian intervention in the affairs of near abroad states reflects the strength of the Russian economic strategic position.

H4 posits that Russia's economic strategic position determines its willingness to intervene in NA states' affairs. This position can be examined either by tracking Russia's relative economic strength and growth when compared to powerful NATO members like the U.S. or by examining any direct economic leverage Russia has over the NA state in question. Ultimately, while the Russian growth rate relative to that of the U.S. does not seem to play a significant role in Russian-decision making, absolute Russian growth in this case does seem to be an indicator supporting H4.

Russia's economy, relative to that of the U.S., fared poorly in the early 1990s. As Russian leaders transitioned Russia from a centrally controlled economy to a market economy, Russia's GDP contracted significantly. With shrinkage rates increasing from -3% in 1990 to -12.57% in 1994, Russia was unlikely to pursue a costly intervention in Estonia — especially when considering the

chaotic impact of economic reformation.¹⁸⁹ When this data is paired with the U.S.'s steady growth during that time period, with GDP growth ranging from 1.88% in 1990 to 4.02% in 1994, Russia's strategic position for pursuing provocative interventions was meager.¹⁹⁰

Leading up to the 2004 flashpoint, the playing field became more level in terms of GDP growth. Although Russia's economy suffered from a debt default in the late 1990s, the reemerged economy of the new millennium was finally performing well. At that point, Russia's GDP was expanding, continuing from 5.1% in 2001 to 7.2% in 2004.¹⁹¹ The U.S.'s economy was still continuing along its steady growth trend, ranging from .99% in 2001 to 3.79% in 2004. When Russia escalated to its highest level of intervention in 2007, its economy was thriving. Russian GDP grew by 6.4% in 2005, 8.2% in 2006 and 8.5% in 2007.¹⁹² Comparatively, the U.S. economy was still growing steadily (although at a decreasing rate), expanding 3.51% in 2005, 2.85% in 2006 and 1.87% in 2007.

¹⁹³ Russian growth in both absolute and relative terms was high at the 2004 and 2007 flashpoints.

While it supports intervention in 2007, it does not correspond with nonintervention in 2004.

Throughout Russia's relationship with Estonia, it has provided much of Estonia's energy resources and has leveraged this position at various flashpoints. In 1993, a point at which Russia apparently supplied all of Estonia's natural gas, Russia cut off its natural gas flows to Estonia in response to the Estonian residency controversy.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, during the 2007 crisis, Russia halted its oil supply to Estonia. Russia's leveraging of its strategic position aligns well with the flashpoints, but

¹⁸⁹ "GDP Growth - Russian Federation." The World Bank.

¹⁹⁰ "GDP Growth - United States." The World Bank.

¹⁹¹ "GDP Growth - Russian Federation." The World Bank.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ "GDP Growth - United States." The World Bank.

¹⁹⁴ Myers. "Friction." *The New York Times*, 2007.

it does not explain the lack of intervention during the earlier two flashpoints, as the availability of this strategy as a coercive tool was consistently available.

Although the balance of relative Russian and U.S. growth rates does not appear to drive Russian escalation in the Estonian case study, the nonintervention and lower level interference of the early 1990s and early 2000s, as well as the intervention at the 2007 flashpoint, support the hypothesis when Russia's absolute growth is the metric considered. Essentially, the comparison between U.S. and Russian growth rates does not seem to play a significant role, while the rate of Russian growth examined by itself seems a successful indicator.

Hypothesis conclusions

The Estonia case supports H1 overall, as even though no high-level intervention occurred before Estonia's NATO accession to confirm that the 2007 cyber attack was a muted response, the Russian decision to cap its escalation at the cyber domain — especially subdomains that likely were utilized to avoid definitive attribution — indicates that considerations of NATO affected Russian decision-making. In a manner similar to the Georgia case, due to the similarities in flashpoint timing, the Estonian case supports H1A, as U.S. credibility was high in the 1990s and early 2000s, but it had decreased substantially by the time of the 2007 cyber attacks. This case largely does not provide support for H2's predictions that Russia would interfere to prevent Estonia's NATO accession, although this may result from the negative effects of economic weakness, a prediction of H4, rather than a lack of desire to intervene. The case also appears to support H3's predictions that Russia is more likely to escalate its intervention to levels at which covert tactics afford plausible deniability. Although a potential target population exists, it has not been the direct subject of Russian

intervention attempts, unlike the Georgia and Ukraine cases, because it appears unwilling to provide a proxy role. Yet, Russia was willing to use large-scale cyberattacks because Estonia's highly interconnected system proved particularly vulnerable, while the tactic provided plausible deniability. If the first wave of cyberattacks was indeed unrelated to the Russian government, the fact that Russia likely organized the second wave seems to result from the successful shield of deniability provided by the first wave. In a manner similar to the Georgian case, the Estonian case provides some of the strongest support for H4 in terms of Russian growth.

Chapter 4: The Findings

Comparative Hypothesis Analysis

H1: Near abroad states with NATO membership are more likely to successfully achieve general deterrence toward Russia.

Comparison of each case's results for H1 indicates that NATO membership is an effective deterrent of Russian military intervention. Russia was willing to intervene in Ukraine in 2014 and in Georgia in 2008. The independent variable of NATO membership has remained consistent for both countries; neither Ukraine nor Georgia has achieved NATO membership. Yet, while Russia readily intervened militarily in the affairs of these non-NATO member NA states, it has completely refrained from acting militarily against Estonia, which entered NATO in 2004. When examining this question across the cases, the pattern supports the claim that NATO membership deters Russian military intervention.

In the case of Estonia, it is also significant that the level of intervention, when one flashpoint resulted in an instance of escalation, remained below the thresholds of both armed conflict and

territorial annexation. In 2007, Russia intervened through cyber attacks as opposed to military methods. When military intervention was possible, Russia refrained not only from military action but also from targeting specific domains that were most likely to trigger NATO action. This apparent intervention cap, in comparison to the armed interventions of Georgia in 1993 and 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014, further suggests that NATO membership deters military intervention.

Yet, it should be noted that Russia also did not intervene militarily in Estonia's affairs before Estonia entered NATO. Therefore, while the IV varies within the Estonia case study, the internal variation does not confirm the cross-case conclusion. This paper will later argue that the non-intervention during the 1993 flashpoints in all three cases is a result of the predictions of H4, rather than a failure of H1.

H1A: The United States' credibility positively affects near abroad states' abilities to deter Russia.

Examination of H1A's predictions across the cases indicates that U.S. credibility as a willing and effective force deployer effectively deters Russian military intervention against NA NATO members and NA non-NATO member states. In the early 1990s, when the U.S. was a newly emerged hegemon that had demonstrated its military power during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Russia largely refrained from escalating against these countries to the intensity level of military action. No intervention occurred in Estonia or Ukraine in 1993. The apparent exception comes in the form of its limited support for Georgian separatists, but this support, which may have been only tacitly supported by Yeltsin, remained confined to a small scale and does not appear to be truly state-sanctioned. Therefore, while this example represents more serious intervention than espionage, this paper does not consider it a true limited military intervention. Similarly, after the U.S.

deployed on a large scale to Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, Russia did not intervene militarily during the Georgian 2003 or 2004 flashpoints, Estonian 2004 flashpoint or Ukrainian 2004 flashpoint.

Yet, by the mid-to-late 2000s, a clear shift in U.S. credibility occurred. The opportunities created for Russia are evident, as Russia intervened militarily in the non-NATO NA states and at the cyber level in Estonia after this point. By the 2007 Estonian flashpoint and 2008 Georgian flashpoint, the U.S.'s deep and somewhat unsuccessful entrenchment in Afghanistan and Iraq had decreased its credibility. In an infamous incident just before Russia's 2014 military intervention in Ukraine, U.S. leadership failed to enforce its red line in Syria, incurring serious domestic ridicule. This pattern within each case and consistent across all three cases provides clear support for the relevance of H1A. It should be noted that while H1A corresponds with these patterns, it is likely not a driving force affecting Russian decisions due to specific NATO threats but rather a broad indicator of the effects of U.S. engagement abroad.

H2: Overt NATO deliberations surrounding an NA state's possible entry without officially giving membership decrease that state's ability to deter Russia.

Findings from the case studies indicate H2 predicts accurately after the mid-2000s, although the hypothesis did not appear to predict accurately before the mid-2000s. In response to states' progress toward NATO membership in the mid-to-late 2000s, Russia acted to destabilize those countries and prevent NATO accession. Russia intervened militarily against Georgia in 2008 and later acted in 2014 to destabilize Ukraine. Yet, when Estonia progressed along the path to NATO membership after 1999 and acceded in 2004, despite negative Russian rhetoric, no intervention

occurred. Non-intervention in this case contradicts the predictions of H2. This seems to indicate a distinct shift in the mid-to-late 2000s from unwillingness to willingness to block states' NATO accession via intervention. This paper will later argue that this shift likely derives from the effects predicted by H4.

H3: Near abroad states are less likely to successfully deter Russia if Russia is able to use a covert method of attack.

Examination of the cases generally supports the claim that Russia is more likely to intervene or to escalate its intervention if methods providing plausible deniability are available. In the Ukrainian case, the availability and strength of the Crimean separatist movement corresponded with Russian attempts to destabilize Ukraine through Crimea, including serious armed intervention during the second such flashpoint. Russia's annexation of Crimea and attempts to carve out sections of eastern Ukraine relied upon its ability to mobilize separatist armies, as well as its ability to deploy Russian soldiers and feasibly disguise them as Crimean separatists. In the Georgian case, the IV did not vary; separatist proxies and allies were consistently available. This does not suggest that Russia would constantly intervene militarily in Georgian affairs; rather, it is significant that both instances of Russian military action in Georgia directly involved separatists and mingled Russian forces with those of the separatists.

The Estonian case also provides several strains of support for this hypothesis. The Estonian region bordering Russia houses a poorly assimilated and majority-ethnic Russian population, similar to the communities from which Russia extracted proxies in Ukraine and Georgia; however, this group has generally displayed little desire to leave Estonia for Russia. Correspondingly, Russia has not seriously and actively attempted to weaponize this population as proxies or to attempt covert

convention operations under the guise of Estonian separatists. This provides an example of non-intervention when a population does not provide substantial viable proxies, which complements Russia's evident tendency for intervention when such proxies are reasonably viable, as in Ukraine and Georgia. Yet, Russia opted for cyber attacks, which inherently enable plausible deniability, to weaken Estonia's highly networked online infrastructure. The cover afforded by this tactic appears significant in Russia's decision to act against Estonia. In all cases, Russia appears to favor methods of instigation, attack or interference that offer plausible deniability.

H4: The extent of Russian intervention in the affairs of near abroad states reflects the strength of the Russian economic strategic position.

Comparative analysis of the case studies substantially supports H4's prediction that Russia's strategic economic position significantly influences its intervention calculus. The impact of Russia's growth relative to that of the U.S. proved less illuminating than anticipated, as the case studies did not reflect significant variation in conjunction with the two states' comparative rates. However, variation matched isolated overall Russian growth trends more closely, and Russia's absolute growth corresponded significantly with its intervention patterns. The Ukraine case study demonstrated this connection, as Russia did not intervene at its 1993 flashpoint, as its economy struggled, or at its 2004 flashpoint, by which its economy had just recovered from its downward spiral. Russian intervention in Ukraine occurred in 2014, after the country's economy had grown significantly.

The intensity of Russian intervention in Georgia follows a similar pattern, although the small-scale intervention of the early 1990s warrants discussion. While this intervention did occur at a point of economic shrinkage, as discussed previously, it remained quite limited. As in the Ukraine

case study, Russia refrained from intervention in 2004 but pursued it in 2008, after its economy had rebounded and grown enormously. The Estonia case study reflects the same general pattern as the other two cases. No intervention occurred at its 1993 and 2004 flashpoints, and Russia's cyber intervention occurred in 2007, just after Russia's initial economic resurgence. The pattern of Russian nonintervention during periods of economic weakness and significant intervention when the country fared well economically is clear and consistent across all cases. Furthermore, this pattern is evident chronologically. Russia engaged in almost no military intervention in these states in the early 1990s and early 2000s but engaged in interventions against all three states between the mid-2000s and mid-2010s.

Hypothesis Synthesis

Considered together, the implications of the case studies for the hypotheses predict that Russia is most likely to intervene militarily if it is performing well economically and the NA state in question is a non-NATO member progressing toward membership. Russia is even more likely to intervene if these factors remain true and if Russia can instigate or prosecute an intervention with plausible deniability — especially at a time when the U.S. is unlikely to interfere militarily with Russia's plans.

This conclusion is visible when a two-stage periodization of Russian intervention, in consideration of the five hypotheses, is constructed. From the early 1990s until the mid-2000s, the negative predictions of H4 — that Russia will not intervene militarily in NA states when its economy is struggling — are dominant over the predictions of the other hypotheses. Regardless of Russia's degree of interest in intervening during this period of poverty, it refrained from doing so. This

correlation also aligns nearly perfectly with the pattern of H1A's implications. This is only logical; Russia opts for nonintervention when its economy is faring poorly, which is also a situation in which the deterrent power of a credible U.S. military and political will proves especially potent. This period, during which Russia had little ability to intervene and little desire to do so in the face of decisive U.S. military superiority, manifests H4's predictions for Russian nonintervention.

The mid-to-late 2000s prove to be a liminal point at which Russian poverty and corresponding nonintervention (Stage 1) transition into economic strength and corresponding intervention (Stage 2). At this point, H4's negative predictions cease to be true, and H4's positive predictions of the impact of Russian prosperity on its appetite for intervention begin to apply. During this second period, H4's implications no longer prevent the other hypotheses' predictions from impacting Russian behavior. When Russia is performing well economically, the interaction of the implications of H1 and H2 becomes the dominant factor. In Stage 2, if an NA state is a NATO member, Russia is extremely unlikely to pursue military intervention. However, if a non-NATO member NA state is seriously progressing toward membership, Russia is more likely to pursue preventive intervention to either coerce the NA state into remaining in the Russian sphere of influence or to render that state an undesirable and unstable candidate for NATO.

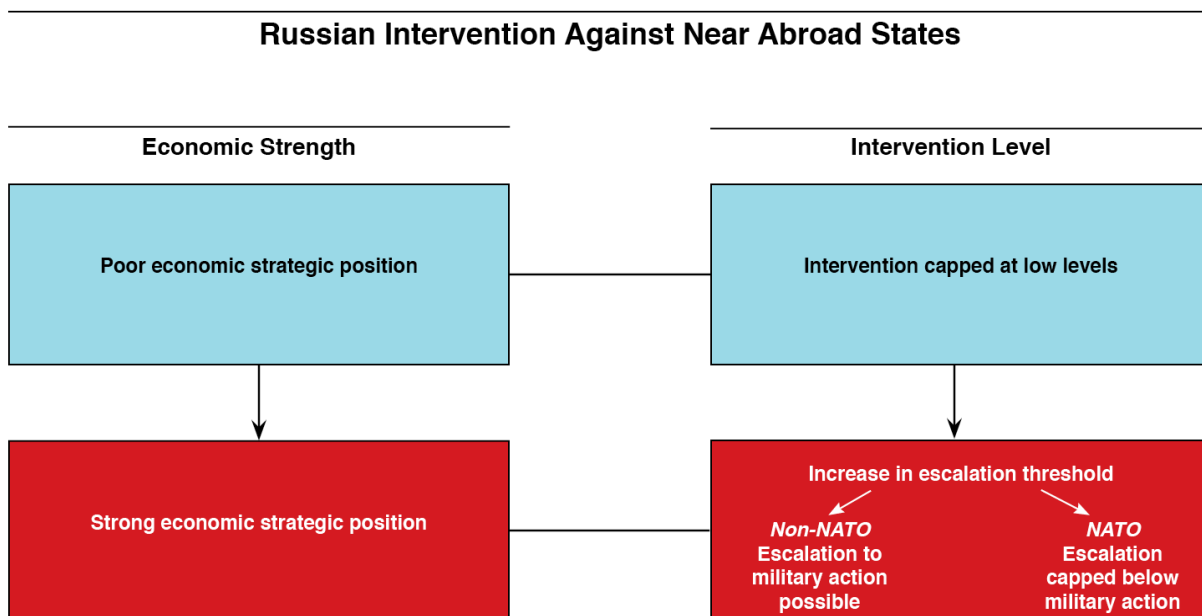
In Stage 2, as in Stage 1, H1A is influential. All three instances of Stage 2 Russian intervention discussed in the case studies occurred at points at which a challenge from the U.S. was perceived as implausible due to U.S. engagement elsewhere or notable failures to act on its deterrent threats. Just as Russia intervenes less intensely against NATO members, it apparently selects into interventions at points with low likelihoods of active U.S. challenges.

This periodization is crucial for understanding why Russia did not intervene while Estonia approached and achieved NATO membership but has yet displayed a consistent willingness to intervene to prevent Ukrainian and Georgian membership. Essentially, the Estonian accession process occurred during Stage 1, while Ukraine and Georgia only began to seriously pursue and progress toward membership during Stage 2. When Estonia secured a MAP in 1999, entered NATO accession discussions in 2002 and acceded in 2004, Russia responded rhetorically but was not positioned economically to intervene, especially during a time when the newly dominant U.S. could reasonably threaten to defend NATO's interests. Yet, by the mid-to-late 2000s, Russia had developed the economic capability to issue challenges in defense of its interests and to withstand the economic consequences of its interventions. This resurgence corresponds well with a fivefold increase in the prices of oil and gas, which would have given Russia increased leverage over the international community.¹⁹⁵ This period also coincided with the waning of U.S. credibility during its Global War on Terrorism. These factors permitted Russia to intervene in 2007 — although Estonia's NATO status resulted in a cap on the intervention intensity level. These factors also invited Russian intervention in 2008; Georgia's non-NATO status permitted military intervention, while its overt progression toward membership actively encouraged Russian intervention.

In terms of the hypotheses, the restrictions of a weak economy under Stage 1 H4 prevented Russian intervention during Estonia's accession process, while the increased flexibility provided by a stronger economy under Stage 2 H4, permitted Russian intervention generally against all three countries. This largely occurred with the aid of H3's predictions, the benefits of employing a covert strategy providing plausible deniability, at points in time permitted by H1A's negative implications, or

¹⁹⁵ Piet Rémi, and Roger E. Kanet. *Shifting Priorities in Russia's Foreign and Security Policy*. Taylor and Francis, 2016. p. 59.

moments at which the U.S. was in a poor position to pick fights abroad. In the economically sound Stage 2 of H4, while H1 prevented Russia from escalating its Estonian intervention beyond cyberattacks and minor threats against diplomats due to Estonia's NATO status, H2 induced Russia to intervene against Ukraine and Georgia at high intensities since those countries were advancing toward NATO membership. These interventions in the midst of Ukraine and Georgia's progressions toward NATO membership essentially blocked further serious progress and thereby prevented H1, the deterrence provided by NATO membership, from becoming relevant to these states. The periodized synthesis of these hypotheses' implications is represented in the following figure.



In summary, this periodization's dissection of the hypotheses' relevance to the case studies demonstrates that Russia refrains from directly attacking NATO members but may intervene when states approach membership, as long as it has the capability of doing so.

Chapter 5: Concluding Thoughts and Broader Implications

This study has sought to illuminate the factors that drive Russian intervention and nonintervention against other ex-Soviet states, as a cursory examination of Russia's regional foreign relations revealed a variation in intervention levels across different circumstances. Internal and comparative analysis of the three case studies, which represented the totality of such cases up to this point in time, has yielded significant findings. When Russia's economic capabilities were stunted in the 1990s and early 2000s, no major intervention occurred against these NA states, even during severe diplomatic crises.

After Russia's economic recovery in the mid-2000s, it displayed a willingness to intervene in its near abroad, although the intensity of its actions depended on whether a state had already achieved NATO membership or was a non-member pursuing membership. In 2007, Russia evidently was willing to launch a large-scale intervention against NATO member Estonia, but this intervention remained capped at the intensity level of cyberattacks. Russia has not intervened militarily against Estonia. However, Russia was willing to act militarily against non-NATO states at this time, as it invaded Georgia in 2008, annexed Crimea in 2014 and launched a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine the same year. In these situations, the ability to intervene in a covert way seemed to have increased Russia's level of intervention.

The examination was inspired by events that altered the course of twenty-first century international relations and resulted in concrete and serious consequences for the populations involved. It is therefore critical not only to consider what lessons and patterns can be extracted from the past but also to explore these findings' implications for the future across multiple domains of international politics.

Most directly, the findings hold implications for how Russia may interact with countries within its near abroad in the future. The obvious prediction stemming from this thesis is that if other post-Soviet neighboring states indicate interest in and make serious progress toward NATO membership — perhaps signified by a MAP program — Russia is likely to intervene militarily. This possibility is elevated if those states have pro-Russian separatist groups or pockets of ethnic Russian minority populations that are poorly integrated into that country's cultural fabric, as Russia could either attempt to mobilize those groups or disguise its own troops as members of those groups. Yet, this hinges on Russia's ability to weather potential punitive actions from the international community, which in turn depends on Russia's economic capacity.

If Russia attempts this strategy against multiple states in too condensed a period of time, it risks incurring massive economic sanctions that would prevent it from pursuing such activities. Such a situation would therefore prove an interesting case for the findings of this paper. It may present a scenario in which Russia is presented with several countries in which it would hope to keep out of NATO, but it is forced to limit its intervention to only one or two of those states due to material constraints. Yet, this policy of attempting simultaneous NA state accessions would prove a risky course of action for NATO; Russia might combat this NATO effort by targeting one or two key states, assuming that NATO leaders would not continue their course when faced with such aggression. In this situation, considerations of the credibility of potential U.S. intervention and of possible covert intervention avenues may play outsized roles in Russian decision-making. Otherwise, new factors beyond the scope of this paper may ultimately force those decisions.

This paper's conclusions also hold significant implications for how the U.S. and NATO may seek to proceed with diplomacy in eastern Europe. Visible shifts in NATO's priorities for expansion

are already observable, as the alliance has shifted toward incorporating members from central Europe rather than expanding eastward. Russia's efforts in Georgia and Ukraine seem, therefore, to have fulfilled their primary objective of freezing those countries in place, but they also appear to have successfully signaled Russia's broader intent to defend the integrity of its sphere of influence.

Yet, it is feasible that, as leadership rotates and time passes after these major Russian incursions, NATO might once again consider admitting countries bordering Russia as members. Absent a major shift in NATO-Russia relations or a Russian economic downturn like that of the 1990s, NATO should expect vehement pushback from the Russians, as demonstrated in the past. Of course, even given severe Russian rhetoric, it is possible that NATO may still be able to maneuver its way to successful incorporation of the state in question. However, if Russia maintains an aggressive posture, to proceed successfully with these accession efforts, NATO may need to pursue more drastic actions.

Ultimately, NATO's course of action depends on the issues that it intends to address in the long term. If NATO aims to prevent further destabilizing Russian military interventions against NA states, it must acknowledge the roots of such invasions. Assertive NATO behavior geared toward the accession of further NA states is likely to prompt further Russian responses in the form of military action. As a result of NATO's successful enlargement efforts in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the alliance became complacent and assumed it could promise Ukraine and Georgia the same treatment. Yet, it must be noted that if Russia were not experiencing a period of crippling weakness at this time, it likely would have reacted far more aggressively to the membership processes of Estonia and even the Warsaw Pact countries.

Russia was only able to assert its stance when it regained the ability to intervene militarily. In late 2014, eminent offensive neorealist John Mearsheimer published an article entitled “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault.” Mearsheimer, predictably, attributes Russia’s annexation of Crimea, among other factors, to NATO’s bold steps forward in bringing Ukraine closer to the alliance. He labels this situation a case of “Geopolitics 101,” as “great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory,” and ultimately, “it is the Russians, not the West, who ... get to decide what counts as a threat to them.”¹⁹⁶ It is only logical that this attitude will continue to guide Russian strategic thought as its leaders carefully observe NATO’s actions in the region. If NATO aims to drastically reduce the odds of armed Russian interventions in NA states, it will likely need to shelve any plans to give membership to any of those countries.

Yet, if NATO primarily seeks to continue incorporating additional NA states into the alliance, this paper implies that no long-term solution agreeable to Russia exists. If this is NATO’s goal, it might consider freezing efforts at NA state accession unacceptable and might instead consider pursuing membership for these countries in a covert manner. This would hinge on the alliance’s ability to develop both those countries’ military capacities and their military coordination capabilities with NATO without Russia observing this process, with the assumption that if NATO suddenly announced the state’s membership, Russia would be unable to intervene militarily in protest.

Obviously, this snap-intervention approach would prove extremely risky for the entire alliance and any NA state involved. It is likely impossible in the first place to achieve this without Russian knowledge. Furthermore, even if this were possible, it would constitute an incredibly risky

¹⁹⁶ Mearsheimer, John. “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault.” *Foreign Affairs*, September 2014, 82.

policy. A Russian discovery of any secret efforts to develop an NA state's military capacity and military links to NATO would likely result not only in severe direct intervention but also in considerable long-term damage to the diplomatic relationships between Russia and Western states. Even if this gambit did succeed and NATO could suddenly announce the membership of one or multiple states, this policy would cause potentially irreparable damage to the trust between Russia and NATO. Yet, although this option obviously entails tremendous risks, it undeniably does contain benefits for the alliance, as NATO would gain more valuable footholds along the Russian border. Despite this advantage, however, the potential costs of such an approach likely outweighs the benefits.

Aside from these predictions, a continuation by the U.S. of current President Donald Trump's more entrenched and isolationist approach toward international politics could have significant effects on Russia's intervention calculus. Trump's skeptical attitude toward NATO, if continued, may severely reduce both NATO's ability to expand eastward and also the credibility of NATO deterrent threats. If NATO, in the long term, adopts a policy of reduced engagement in eastern Europe, there are several different reactions that Russia might take. It might see this period as providing increased leeway to intervene militarily against non-NATO NA states with reduced risk of international intervention or severe punishment. However, it could also view this situation as an opportunity for coercing these countries into closer relationships through non-military means. If U.S. leaders continue to question the importance of NATO, it is also possible that Russia may feel more comfortable with intervening against NATO states in non-military domains or may even test NATO's commitment to responding to lower-intensity kinetic aggression in areas like Estonia's Narva.

Predicting the events of the future based on the trends of the past is never simple, but it is my hope that this paper's findings may serve as a historically grounded guide for understanding the Russian intervention calculus as new crises emerge. In an ideal world, the twenty-first century could represent a point of yet unprecedented levels of cooperation between Russia and the Western nations of NATO in the current format of the international system. Yet, barring any enormous shifts in the balance of great power politics, conflicts and flashpoints are sure to emerge, stemming from either familiar catalysts or triggers unforeseeable at this point in time. In such an environment, it is the careful consideration of the underlying factors that influence Russian behavior, and not the blanket labeling of Russian behavior as benign or revanchist without qualification, that will enable current and aspiring NATO states to navigate peaceful diplomacy with Russia. Perhaps with this attitude and theoretical base, the Narva River's Hermann Castle and Ivangorod Fortress will witness nothing more than the quiet chatter of tourists and commuters, and not the roar of artillery, at the Russian border crossing.

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