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Department of European Studies and  
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**Russian reaction to perceived  
threats in its *Near Abroad* in the 21st  
Century**

BY

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This paper was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of International Relations and European Studies degree at the University of Nicosia.

**University of Nicosia**

**Nicosia, Cyprus**

**February 2017**



**A Master's Project**  
**In**  
**International Relations**  
**By**  
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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Masters of International Relations and European Studies degree  
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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Petros Savvides for introducing me to the topic and for his expert advice and guidance throughout this difficult project. Besides my advisor, I would like to thank the rest of my thesis committee: Prof. Andreas Theophanous and Dr. Michalis Kontos, for their encouragement and insightful comments. Furthermore, I would like to thank my friend Dr. Gregory Stournaras and my brother Dimitris Soldatos for reading and commenting on my project. Last but not least, I would like to thank my wife Maria for her support and understanding through the process of researching and writing this thesis.

## Abstract

During recent years tensions between Russia and Western states have risen, undermining the stability that Europe has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War. The purpose of this research is to study Russia's behavior and external actions during this time, and determine the driving factors that led its leadership to adopt them. The analysis is made principally through Structural Realism, using in addition the Perception and Misperception Theory to explain state behavior and threat perception. Initially the thesis examines Russia's geopolitical position and the post-Cold War international system, as well as the alternative strategies of A2/AD and *Hybrid Warfare* that characterize Russian actions.

Then, the post-Cold War Western foreign policy actions in Europe and the Middle East are discussed. The main issues examined are the NATO and EU enlargement to the East, the development of NATO's Ballistic Missile Defense and Western global interventions after 1990. Emphasis is placed on Russia's perception of these actions as threatening to its perceived sphere of influence, its *Near Abroad*, and its initial reaction to this emerging security dilemma. Subsequently, analysis focuses on Russian aggressive actions and external behavior. Beginning with Putin's ascent to power, Russia recovered from its decline and rebuilt its military, using it as a central tool to promote its foreign policy objectives. This became obvious in the interventions that started with the invasion in Georgia in 2008 and its engagement in Ukraine in 2014. The latest intervention in Syria, in 2015, marked Russia's first step beyond its *Near Abroad*, aiming to extend its influence on global scale.

The research concludes that the current Russian assertive behavior in its *Near Abroad* resulted as a reaction to external threats, as Russian leadership perceived the West's strategic behavior in the post-Cold War period. In order to confront these threats and reclaim Russia's Great Power status, Moscow chose a hard power approach that led to a confrontation with the West. This ongoing antagonism has a serious impact on the security balance on a regional and global scale.

# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Figures .....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Abbreviations .....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Chapter 1 – Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Aim and Scope of the research.....	1
1.2 History and Geopolitics of Russia.....	4
1.3 The post-Cold War Russia and the <i>Near Abroad</i> .....	7
<b>Chapter 2 – Theory and Literature Review .....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Review of the Literature .....	11
2.2 Structural Realism .....	13
2.3 Threat Perception in the International System .....	15
2.4 Alternative strategies .....	17
<b>Chapter 3 - Actions of the West.....</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1 The new role and the enlargement of NATO .....	22
3.2 The EU Integration Process.....	27
3.3 The Ballistic Missile Defense .....	31
3.4 Global Intervention.....	35
3.5 Overview.....	38
<b>Chapter 4 - Russian Reaction .....</b>	<b>41</b>
4.1 Power transition and Military Build-up.....	42
4.2 The Russo-Georgian War .....	47

4.3 The Ukrainian Crisis .....	51
4.4 Intervention in Syria .....	56
4.5 The Renewed confrontation in Europe .....	59
4.6 Overview.....	63
<b>Chapter 5 - Summary and Conclusion .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>69</b>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1:</b> The traditional invasion routes in Russian heartland.....	4
<b>Figure 2:</b> The first three phases of Russian expansion .....	6
<b>Figure 3:</b> The Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact until 1989 .....	8
<b>Figure 4:</b> NATO enlargement stages .....	25
<b>Figure 5:</b> The European Union enlargement .....	28
<b>Figure 6:</b> NATO Ballistic Missile Defense.....	33
<b>Figure 7:</b> US military bases abroad in 2015 .....	36
<b>Figure 8:</b> Russian SAM deployment in 2016 .....	46
<b>Figure 9:</b> Main events of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War .....	49
<b>Figure 10:</b> Ukrainian territory under Russian or separatist control in 2016.....	55
<b>Figure 11:</b> Russian initial deployment and airstrikes in September 2015.....	57
<b>Figure 12:</b> The current Russia - NATO confrontation in Europe.....	62



## Abbreviations

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile
BMD	Ballistic Missile Defense
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CFE	Conventional Armed Forces in Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EPAA	European Phased Adaptive Approach
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
IRBM	Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile
KFOR	Kosovo Force
MRBM	Medium-Range Ballistic Missile
NACC	North Atlantic Cooperation Council
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PfP	Partnership for Peace
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missiles
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SRBM	Short-Range Ballistic Missile
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VJTF	Very High Readiness Joint Task Force
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WTO	World Trade Organization

# Chapter 1 – Introduction

*'I have no way to defend my borders except to extend them.'*

*Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia*

## 1.1 Aim and Scope of the research

In recent years, the global power distribution is under vigorous transformation, with the United States (US) influence in decline and the rise of regional powers. Within this framework, Russia is seeking to advance its regional and global role and reestablish itself as a major player in the international system. The Russian leadership is determined to restore what it considers to be Russia's rightful place among the world's Great Powers and counter the perceived threats that hamper this goal.

The first step towards achieving this objective is to dominate its regional subsystem, by establishing a zone of indirect control around its borders. These efforts are more than obvious today, as Russia is relying on its soft and hard power in order to control the regions of its immediate interest. The cases of Georgia and Ukraine, when they tried to be integrated in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), are clear examples of this strategy. In this context, Russia intends to play a key role in the under transformation international system and its interests and actions should be taken into serious account, as they will influence the future of European and global security.

After the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the global influence of Russia was reduced significantly, while the corresponding influence of the US and its allies increased, and offered a great opportunity to the

West to spread its strategic influence eastwards, reaching the borders of the former Superpower. Certain of the actions taken by the West,<sup>1</sup> during this period, were perceived as threats by Russia, which in turn reacted. The aim of this research is to examine the behavior and the external actions of Russia in the 21st Century, in response to these perceived threats in its *Near Abroad*.<sup>2</sup> The research will examine the means and the strategy that the Russian leadership used to react to Western actions. The analysis will be focused on Russian actions and intervention in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and the Middle East.

The theoretical analysis is founded on the Structural Realism paradigm. Western actions, after the end of the Cold War, will be explained under the theoretical framework of Offensive Realism. The West attempted to maximize its power and influence on a global scale and include former Warsaw Pact countries in its sphere of influence. The expansion of NATO and the EU are clear examples of this strategy. These actions were perceived as a threat to Russian security, where Moscow found itself in a security dilemma. To oppose Western assertiveness and gained superiority, Russia had to improvise and use an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy and *Hybrid Warfare*.

In order to approach and analyze the subject in depth, certain research questions have to be addressed. First of all, what was the geopolitical situation after the end of the Cold War and what was Russia's position in it? How did the West act to exploit the advantage of winning the Cold War? Why were these actions perceived as a threat by the Russian leadership? How did Russia react to counter these perceived threats and secure in its *Near Abroad* in the 21st Century? What means did Russia use to overcome its disadvantages? What does

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<sup>1</sup> The term "West" is used throughout the research to include the US and its European allies in NATO and the EU.

<sup>2</sup> The term *Near Abroad* generally refers to the former USSR states.

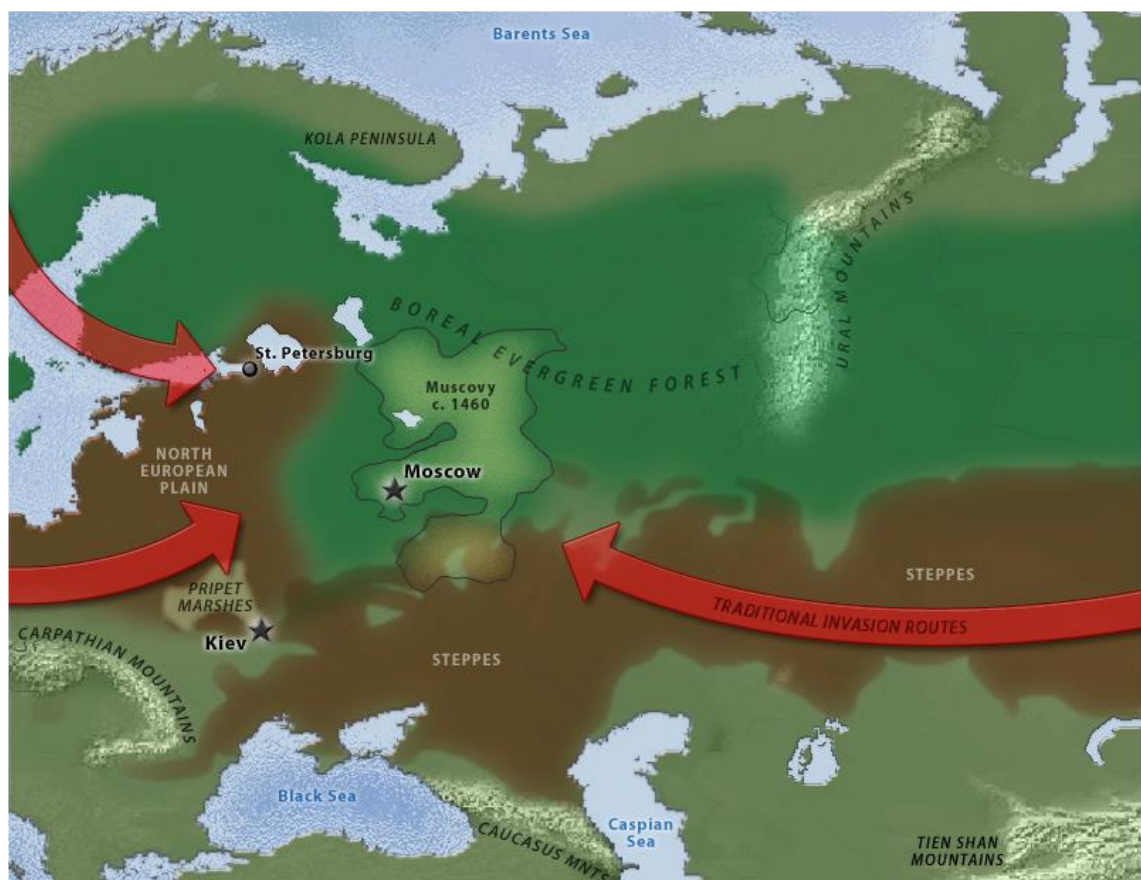
Russia aim to accomplish in the future by applying this strategy? Finally, what are the implications of this confrontation in Eastern Europe for the regional and the global security system?

This chapter continues with the analysis of the geostrategic position of Russia throughout its history and the current challenges in its *Near Abroad*. Furthermore, it describes the geopolitical situation after the Cold War, with the decline of Russian power, the collapse of the bipolar system and the establishment of a unipolar system under the US. In Chapter 2 the theoretical framework is analyzed, including the Structural Realism paradigm and the concept of Perception and Misperception in international politics. Additionally, the alternative strategies of *A2/AD* and *Hybrid Warfare*, which Russia has used extensively over the past few years, are described.

Chapter 3 examines the post-Cold War actions of the West, such as the expansion of NATO and the EU, the Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) and the global Western intervention, which were perceived as critical security threats to Russia. Subsequently in Chapter 4, the Russian response to these actions will be analyzed. The research will focus on both hard-military power and soft power, used by Russia as part of its grand strategy, after the rise of Vladimir Putin into power. The interventions in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015 are the main Russian actions that will be examined, as part of its overall effort to ensure the control of its *Near Abroad*, to return to a region of pivotal interest and to safeguard a position and saying over global security affairs. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes and discusses the implications of Russian and Western confrontation to regional and global security in the future and suggests recommendations for future EU and NATO actions.

## 1.2 History and Geopolitics of Russia

Nowadays, even after the collapse and the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia remains the largest country in the world. Russian territory, of 17 million km<sup>2</sup>, covers more than one eighth of Earth's land area, extending from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean and from the Caucasus and Central Asia to the Arctic. Despite its vast land area, Russia's population is only about 142 million, which is heavily concentrated in the western part, leaving the rest of the country scarcely populated (CIA, 2016). Defending this extensive territory, with more than 22,500 km of borders with 14 different countries, is a challenging task. This reality is worse if the landscape is taken into account, as most of its borders lack any geographic barrier that could be used to defend against potential enemies (STRATFOR, 2015: 5).



*Figure 1: The traditional invasion routes in Russian heartland*

*Source: Friedman (2012: 2)*

The vulnerability of its borders is a fact that haunts every Russian leadership throughout its history. After a series of great devastations due to continuous invasions, Russian leaders decided that the only option was to expand its borders, aiming to find a more defensible barrier or at least to create a safe buffer zone between its heartland and its rivals. As Catherine the Great argued 'I have no way to defend my borders except to extend them' (Talbot, 2009: 133). This quest for security through expansion led to the creation of the Russian Empire, which reached its greatest extension during the Soviet period (Friedman, 2012: 9).

Starting from the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, Russians ended the Mongol domination and established the Grand Duchy of Muscovy. The new state had to face two traditional invasion routes as shown in Figure 1. The first was the eastern path that the Mongols used, which runs across the Asian steps, while the second was from the West, along the North European plain that the Teutonic Knights used to attack (Friedman, 2012: 2). To deal with these hazards Russia expanded in four main phases as depicted in Figure 2. At first, during the 15<sup>th</sup> Century when Ivan the Great<sup>3</sup> expanded the Grand Duchy to the north reaching the Arctic and East to the Ural Mountains. These lands offered defensible territory of forests and mountains against the Mongols, which were the greatest threat at the time (Braudel, 2010: 695). The second phase lasted until the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, continuing the eastward expansion. Ivan the Terrible<sup>4</sup> became the first Tsar of all Russians in 1547 transforming the former Grand Duchy into a Tsardom (BBC, 2016). The eastern invasion route was finally secured, when Russia controlled the steppes

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<sup>3</sup> Ivan the III (1440 – 1505)

<sup>4</sup> Ivan the IV (1530 – 1584)

and the Siberia region, reaching the Pacific to the East and the Caspian Sea to the South.



**Figure 2:** The first three phases of Russian expansion

Source: Friedman (2012: 3)

This left the subsequent Russian leaders having to deal with the western invasion route across Eastern Europe. During the third phase of expansion in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, Russia pushed to the West and South and became an Empire in 1721 (Friedman, 2012: 4). Peter the Great<sup>5</sup> and his successors conquered the Baltic region, parts of Poland and Ukraine, reaching the Baltic Sea, the Pripet Marshes and the Carpathian Mountains to the West. Additionally, until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Russia had completed the conquest of Crimea, the Caucasus region and Central Asia, securing its southern borders (BBC, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Peter the I (1672 – 1725)

The last phase took place during the 20th Century, when Russian power reached its peak. Under the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, Russia controlled almost half of the European continent.

This history of continuous expansion has not come without a cost. Controlling and sustaining such a vast and inhospitable territory had been a huge burden for every Russian leadership. During its history, Russian leaders had to struggle to keep the country from collapsing under the financial, military and political cost of this expansion (Goodrich, 2016). The only solution to this struggle was a powerful central state, which could overcome the above problems and keep the country united (Kotkin, 2016: 4).

Despite all the expansions, the Russian state still lacks any stable geographical barrier to its West. History has proven that Moscow can acquire the time and space needed to defend itself in times of trouble, only through the control of buffer zones. This was the strategy that gave Russia enough time to defeat both Napoleon and Nazi Germany (Friedman, 2012: 9). Nevertheless, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the shrinkage of its western territory, Russia lost most of its valuable buffer zones, increasing the insecurity of its post-soviet leaders (Kuchins, 2000).

### **1.3 The post-Cold War Russia and the *Near Abroad***

During the 1990's, the international system itself underwent a substantial change from a bipolar world, during the Cold War (1945-1989), to a unipolar world, centered on American hegemony (Neacsu, 2016: 15). The struggle to expand and maintain the control over its vast territory and sphere of influence (Gilpin, 1981: 146) exhausted Russia, despite the efforts of its leadership. Strategic



overexpansion led the Soviet Union to its collapse and eventually its defeat in the Cold War confrontation (Goodrich, 2016). Mikhail Gorbachev tried to reform the Soviet state and its deteriorating economy, through Perestroika and Glasnost, but he failed to prevent the disintegration that followed. The geopolitical situation became more complex, as a total of 15 new states<sup>6</sup> emerged from the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, in 1991 the Warsaw Pact was dissolved, leading to the loss of the six soviet satellite states<sup>7</sup> in Eastern and Central Europe (Calvocoressi, 2004: 124-130). Figure 3 depicts the area controlled by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact until 1989.



**Figure 3:** The Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact until 1989

Source: Friedman (2012: 10)

The West immediately exploited the power vacuum created after the retreat of Soviet influence. The US found itself as the only Superpower, having prevailed

<sup>6</sup> These are, except Russia, the 3 Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), 3 in the Caucasus region (Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan), 3 in Eastern Europe (Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova) and 5 in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan).

<sup>7</sup> Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia (dissolved in 1992 into Czech Republic and Slovakia), East Germany (united with West Germany in 1990), Hungary, Poland and Romania.

in the Cold War confrontation (Brzezinski, 1998: 31-32). The new reality allowed the West to extend its sphere of influence and dominate the international system. Western global intervention was remarkably increased, with democracy promotion and liberalism as the main narratives for internal and external legitimization (Jentleson, 2014: 362-374; Monten, 2005). NATO proved to be a convenient organizational framework to be used in this cause. Moreover, many of the former Soviet states in Central and Eastern Europe were gradually incorporated in the organization, extending Western influence further to the East, reaching the borders of its former Cold War rival (Brzezinski, 1998: 53-60). Likewise, equally important was the enlargement of the other major Western organization, the EU.

As it is clear from the above, Russian interests were greatly ignored during this period. At first, there was an effort to Westernize Russia and integrate it into international organizations such as the World Bank in 1992, Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994 and World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2012<sup>8</sup>. The first post-Soviet Russian leader, Boris Yeltsin was conciliatory to the Western actions, due to the dire economic condition and the weakened position of the country. Albeit, even at that time, the Russian leadership clearly expressed its concerns to the expansive Western actions (Sarotte, 2014: 91-93).

A new term, introduced during the 1990's, is the concept of the *Near Abroad*,<sup>9</sup> which is used to refer to the fourteen Soviet Union successor states other than Russia (Williams, 2004). By referring to them as such, Russian leaders intend to emphasize the gravity of these countries to Russian interests (Safire, 1994). As already mentioned, because of Russia's geostrategic position, its

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<sup>8</sup> Negotiations begun in 1993 (Jolly, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> In Russian "*Blizhneye Zarubezhye*".

immediate bordering states are of core importance to its security. Therefore, the fact that the West acquired control of a number of them, or attempted to do so, alerted the Russians. Initially, due to its relative weakness, Russia could not react adequately, but as the power balance changed, during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the new Russian leadership, under Vladimir Putin, became more aggressive reclaiming the control of its *Near Abroad* (Humphrey, 2009: 41-42).

# Chapter 2 – Theory and Literature Review

*'Uncertainty about the intentions of other states is unavoidable, [...] states can never be sure that other states do not have offensive intentions to go along with their offensive capabilities.'*

*John J. Mearsheimer*<sup>10</sup>

## 2.1 Review of the Literature

The Western concern about the Russian actions in its *Near Abroad* began rising significantly after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. Yet, the event that came as a shock was the Ukrainian Crisis that begun in 2013 and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Using the Liberal approach and democracy promotion as their core theories, many Western scholars blame the aggressive policies of Vladimir Putin as the main cause of these crises. Notably, Joseph Nye (2014; 2015), the co-founder of the Neoliberalist paradigm,<sup>11</sup> argues that Russian aggression and the opportunistic approach of Putin caused the Ukrainian crisis. Moreover, Larry Diamond (2016) claims that 'Putin has embraced an opportunistic but sophisticated campaign to sabotage democracy' and 'make the world safe for autocracy.' By naming democracy as the main enemy of Putin's strategy, Diamond continues the prevailing narrative in the West and misses key aspects that could explain the Russian actions: unawareness and insecurity about the West's intentions.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2011: 81

<sup>11</sup> First introduced in 1977, by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye (*Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, 1977), Neoliberalism still greatly influences the US foreign policy.

This is the main point that most Realist theorists have highlighted since the end of the Cold War, but Western leaders have largely ignored (Art, 1998: 388-389). During the 1990's and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century many scholars argued for the benefits of the expansion of the Western institutions to the East (Sloan, 1995; Williams and Neumann, 2000; Schimmelfennig, 2001). On the other hand, George Kennan, the advocate of the Containment policy during the Cold War, in 1997 argued that 'expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War' because such an action may 'inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion' and it would 'restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations' (Kennan, 1997). Furthermore, he repeated this opinion in an interview in 1998 stating that 'the Russians will gradually react quite adversely [to NATO eastern expansion] and it will affect their policies' (Friedman, 1998). The post-Cold War behavior of the West is well described by Mary Elise Sarotte (2014: 96-97), who emphasizes on the false promises that Western leaders made to post-Soviet Russia, as the cause of the current confrontation.

The West's emphasis on liberal principles and the neglect of the realist logic is the reason why the West shares the blame for the current Russian behavior, according to John Mearsheimer (2014b: 77-78). The great Neorealist theorist examines the Western expansion to the East and argues that it was interpreted as a provocative and threatening action by Russian leaders, who felt obliged to react (Mearsheimer, 2016). Therefore, he suggests that the US should respect Russian interests and do not intervene in its *Near Abroad*, in order to avoid an unnecessary confrontation (Mearsheimer, 2014a; 2015). Similarly, Stephen Walt (2005: 107-110) acknowledges that the US actions can be understood as provocative to others and believes that the eastern US expansion is a 'dangerous

and unnecessary goal' and supports the idea that countries like Ukraine remain as 'neutral buffer state[s] in perpetuity' (Walt, 2015).

On the contrary, other major American scholars and statesmen disagree with Mearsheimer's and Walt's approach, emphasizing on internal political dynamics as a cause for Russian external behavior and defend the implemented US policy so far (McFaul, Sestanovich and Mearsheimer, 2014: 169-170, 174-175). Finally, the well-known US diplomat, Henry Kissinger (2014), justifies both US and Russia's interests and tries to emphasize the complexity of the Ukrainian problem by suggesting a compromising solution to ease the tension in West - Russia relations.

In the endeavor of this research, to examine and explain the Russian external behavior and actions, a theoretical framework is valuable and necessary. Structural Realism will be the main International Relations paradigm that will be used to analyze both Western and Russia's actions. Additionally, the concept of Perception and Misperception in international politics, introduced by Robert Jervis (1976), will assist to explain the different perspectives that each Great Power has, concerning the other's actions and intentions. Finally, the basic elements of A2/AD strategy and *Hybrid Warfare* will be analyzed in order to better understand the means that Moscow chose to use in pursuit of its objectives.

## **2.2 Structural Realism**

Realism is the oldest, the most cohesive and the most influential approach in International Relations theory. It derives its origins from great theorists of the past, such as Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes and Carl von Clausewitz. The most influential modern thinker of Realism, in the post-World War II period, was Hans Morgenthau, who set the basis of Classical Realism in

his book (*Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 1948). The next key thinker was Kenneth Waltz, who introduced Neorealism or Structural Realism, outlined in his most influential work (*Theory of International Politics*, 1979).

The first main assumption of Structural Realism is that states are the only significant actors in international politics. Moreover, the Great Powers are the central actors that shape the system (Mearsheimer, 2011: 80-81). The international system is competitive and anarchical, as there is no supranational authority that can enforce rules over the states. All states are considered as rational actors, capable of forming sound strategies that maximize their own self-interest. The paramount national interest for every state is to ensure its own survival. To ensure this primary goal, all states build up military capabilities to protect themselves. However, states can never be certain of the intentions of other states as they act in an anarchical system and information is most of the time uncertain. Since everyone possesses some offensive military capability, they may be lead to a security dilemma (Kouskouvelis, 2007: 58-61).

As it derives from the above, the security dilemma is a key cause of confrontation in the international system. As John Herzl (1950: 157) clearly states:

Wherever such anarchic society has existed [...] there has arisen what may be called the 'security dilemma' [...] states] living in such a constellation must be, and usually are, concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other [states]. [...] Striving to attain security from such attack, they are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on.

Therefore, states seek power in order to ensure their security and prevail in any real or probable confrontation. Additionally, security can only be obtained by self-help, meaning states seek their own interest and will not subordinate their interest to the interests of other states (Waltz, 1979: 72).

Another basic addition of Structural Realism is the concept of the International System and its structure, as a basic factor that defines the relations among states. Thus, depending on the power distribution among the major actors, each system can be categorized as multipolar, bipolar or unipolar. Furthermore, the behavior and the action of the states, within each system, are defined by the pressure of the system structure upon them (Jackson and Sørensen, 2006: 133-139).

A partial separation that occurred inside the Structural Realist paradigm was the differentiation between Defensive and Offensive Realism. This resulted from the introduction of Offensive Realism by John Mearsheimer. The main difference is that Mearsheimer (2011: 89) states that Great Powers seek to maximize their power and influence to achieve security through domination and hegemony.<sup>12</sup> While on the other hand, Defensive Realists argue that states seek to balance threats, instead of power, achieve and maintain security by a balance of power and do not entirely rule out limited cooperation (Jervis, 1978: 187).

## **2.3 Threat Perception in the International System**

Although Realism constitutes a suitable tool to analyze and predict the external behavior of states in the international system, rationality alone cannot explain the decisions made by their leaders. This is why decision-making theories are useful

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<sup>12</sup> Although global hegemony is unachievable according to Mearsheimer (2011: 295-296).



in the attempt to understand the actions taken and the logic behind them. The Perception and Misperception theory developed by Robert Jervis (Perception and Misperception in International Politics, 1976) will be used for that cause.

The main argument of this theory is that decision-makers do not always interpret the information provided in the same way, and that misperception can undermine the rationality of their choices and actions (Jervis, 1976: 13-18). As Jervis (1988: 675) defines it, misperception includes 'inaccurate inferences, miscalculations of consequences, and misjudgments about how others will react to one's policies.'

Certain main hypotheses, made by Jervis in his work (1968: 455-474), can help us conceive this view in more depth. Firstly, decision-makers tend to adjust incoming information according to their existing images and theories. In addition, they continue their initial stance even if the information provided is conflicting. When there are different backgrounds, information and messages sent may be easily interpreted in different ways. Furthermore, past negative experiences tend to be dominant in our way of interpreting other's intentions. Having planned an action does not make our intentions automatically as clear to the receiver of the information as it is to us, even worse if the action does not turn out as originally planned.

In addition, there is a tendency for decision-makers to perceive the other states as more aggressive, more organized and coordinated in their action than themselves. Similarly, political leaders tend to take the position of foreign officials as representative of the other government as a whole, but this is not always the case and it can lead to misunderstandings about the official position of a state. Moreover, states tend to overestimate the degree to which others act as a result to their own actions, even more so when this behavior is in accordance with their

desires. Yet when their actions are opposite to our interests we attribute them to their domestic factors (Jervis, 1968: 475-477).

Another Jervis's hypothesis that is especially helpful is that states assume that their intentions are always clear and accurately perceived by others when they do not try to conceal them. Besides, we usually tend not to recognize that evidence obvious to the other side may support more than one theory, even one opposite to our own. Lastly, international actors find it hard to believe that others perceive them as a threat; even more that others do not recognize their vital concerns about security (Kouskouvelis, 2007: 312-313).

Therefore, actions taken by one side can frequently be interpreted in a different way by others. In the same manner, the perception of threat is not always clear to the initial actor, a condition that makes confrontation more likely. Ultimately, the security dilemma, geographic challenges and elite beliefs and perceptions are some of the main causes that explain the outbreak of conflicts (Taliaferro, 2000: 140).

## **2.4 Alternative strategies**

Since the end of the Cold War, the US and their allies have enjoyed an extensive international freedom of action, when the international system had been transformed from bipolar to unipolar. This was expressed by multiple interventions worldwide, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, as the West had no notable adversary. The post-Cold War Russian arsenal of nuclear weapons, while an effective strategic deterrent, was not alone adequate to serve the emerging Russian strategic ambition of becoming again a Great Power with a vital saying in global affairs. To overcome this Western supremacy in

conventional warfare<sup>13</sup> Russia had to improvise. In this framework, the Russian military leadership developed and employed a strategy for *A2/AD* and *Hybrid Warfare*.

The first of these terms, *A2/AD*, is a combination of strategies that focus on the prevention of the adversary to operate in a specific area, vital to our interests. As the US Department of Defense (Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC), 2012: 6) defines the two separate terms:

Anti-Access [consists of the] actions and capabilities, usually long-range, designed to prevent an opposing force from entering an operational area [and] Area-Denial are those actions and capabilities, usually of shorter range, designed not to keep an opposing force out, but to limit its freedom of action within the operational area.

Although the concept may be not new, as this has been the goal of every defender throughout history, in recent years *A2/AD* has acquired a new meaning (Lasconjarias and Marrone, 2016: 3). The development of new technologies, such as missiles, aerial and maritime reconnaissance, cyberspace and space-based assets, has made this strategy more appealing to emerging powers and more threatening to an aspiring world hegemon (Cowan, 2016). Under those circumstances, it is not a surprise that the US, as the current dominant Great Power, views this strategy as a threat to its global power projection capabilities. In contrast, emerging powers, such as China and Russia, that seek to establish their own regional and global role, are more attracted to practice an *A2/AD* strategy. In this framework, *A2/AD* was developed as a conventional strategy of long range Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAM) and ballistic missile systems that could disrupt the uninhibited expansion of NATO and EU eastwards through the indirect

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<sup>13</sup> The term can be generally defined as a declared armed conflict between two or more states engaged in direct combat deploying organized military forces (Clausewitz, 2007: 31-44). This does not include unconventional (asymmetrical) tactics or the use nuclear weapons.

threat/control of neighboring airspace and territory (e.g. see Kaliningrad and Crimea).

Another new term in modern forms of war, that describes their increasing complexity, is *Hybrid Warfare*. Despite the absence of a widely accepted definition, *Hybrid Warfare* as Frank Hoffman (2007: 14) defines it

incorporate[s] a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder [...] coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergic effect.

As shown above, the unconventional means that can be used include, but are not limited to, terrorism, organized crime, the cyberwarfare, the information war and population influence operations (Hoffman, 2009: 37-38).

Initially, *Hybrid Warfare* originated as means for non-state actors, like Hezbollah, to oppose and overcome the superiority of states' conventional armed forces<sup>14</sup> (Hoffman, 2009: 37). However, it eventually proved a convenient form of operations to states that lacked the available resources to achieve their objectives. Most of the means of *Hybrid Warfare* are relatively inexpensive, compared to conventional and nuclear capabilities and thus they can be used to complement a conventional operation. Furthermore, such actions have the advantages of secrecy and deniability of state involvement (Lanoszka, 2016: 187-188).

In conclusion, after the decline of its former conventional power, Russia had to find new effective means to promote its regional interests. The nuclear threat is always an effective option but the magnitude of the threat and the chance of escalation does not make it suitable for every occasion. In fact, A2/AD based on conventional means and *Hybrid Warfare* proved to be an effective means for an

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<sup>14</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it first appeared in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lebanon War of 2006.

aspiring regional power to reclaim part of its former influence, at least in regions close to its borders.

## Chapter 3 - Actions of the West

*'If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us.'*

*Madeleine Albright, US Secretary of State<sup>15</sup>*

The first and necessary step to understand the behavior of Russians in response to the perceived threats is to identify what consists a threat to them. Every Great Power that acts according to Realism tends to think in relative or absolute gains and the current Russian leadership seems to follow that way of thinking (Taylor, 2015; Eitelhuber, 2009: 9). The post-Cold War unipolar world order, as it was shaped, left Russia marginalized. The Western leaderships adopted the views of Neoliberalism to a large extent. As Francis Fukuyama (1989: 4) argued, that period signaled not only the end of the Cold War, but 'the end of history as such [...] the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.'

First and foremost, the two major Western organizations, NATO and the EU, gradually expanded eastward in Europe during the 1990s and 2000s. This act was not viewed as aggressive by the West, since according to the *Open Door Policy*, it was based on the free will of each state to decide whether to join an organization or not (NATO, 2015a). From its point of view, Moscow considered such actions as threatening and aggressive to its vital interests in its perceived sphere of influence.

Another issue, which triggered the reaction of Russia, was the development of the NATO BMD during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The declared aim of this system is to

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Matt Lauer on NBC-TV, 19 Feb 1998  
<http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/1998/980219a.html>

protect the alliance members from emerging ballistic missile threats (NATO, 2016b). However, Russia sees the system as a threat to the balance of power and its deterrence capability.

Finally, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has been involved in a number of overseas interventions, with the declared objective of democracy promotion and the protection of human rights. These interventions, which took place mainly in the Balkans and the Middle East, did not have the authorization of the United Nations (UN) and aimed at the promotion of US global hegemony, largely ignoring Russian interests and security concerns.

Triggered by these actions, which were perceived as hostile, Moscow reacted aggressively resulting in an escalating confrontation. These four issues, that took place after the end of the Cold War, are essential to explain the West-Russia relations until today and will be discussed in the rest of this chapter.

### **3.1 The new role and the enlargement of NATO**

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is currently the world's largest military alliance. It was originally established in 1949 in Washington D.C. with the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, mainly in response to the threat posed by the Soviet Union at that time and later by the Warsaw Pact.<sup>16</sup> The primary purpose of the organization, as it was declared in its founding treaty, is collective defense. As it was clearly set in Article 5 (NATO, 1949) 'an armed attack against one or more of [the members ...] shall be considered an attack against them all.' The initial 12 members<sup>17</sup> were gradually increased to 16,<sup>18</sup> until the end of the Cold War.

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<sup>16</sup> The Warsaw Pact was established in 1955.

<sup>17</sup> The 1949 founding members were: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States.

<sup>18</sup> The 4 subsequent members were Greece and Turkey (1952), West Germany (1955) and Spain (1982).

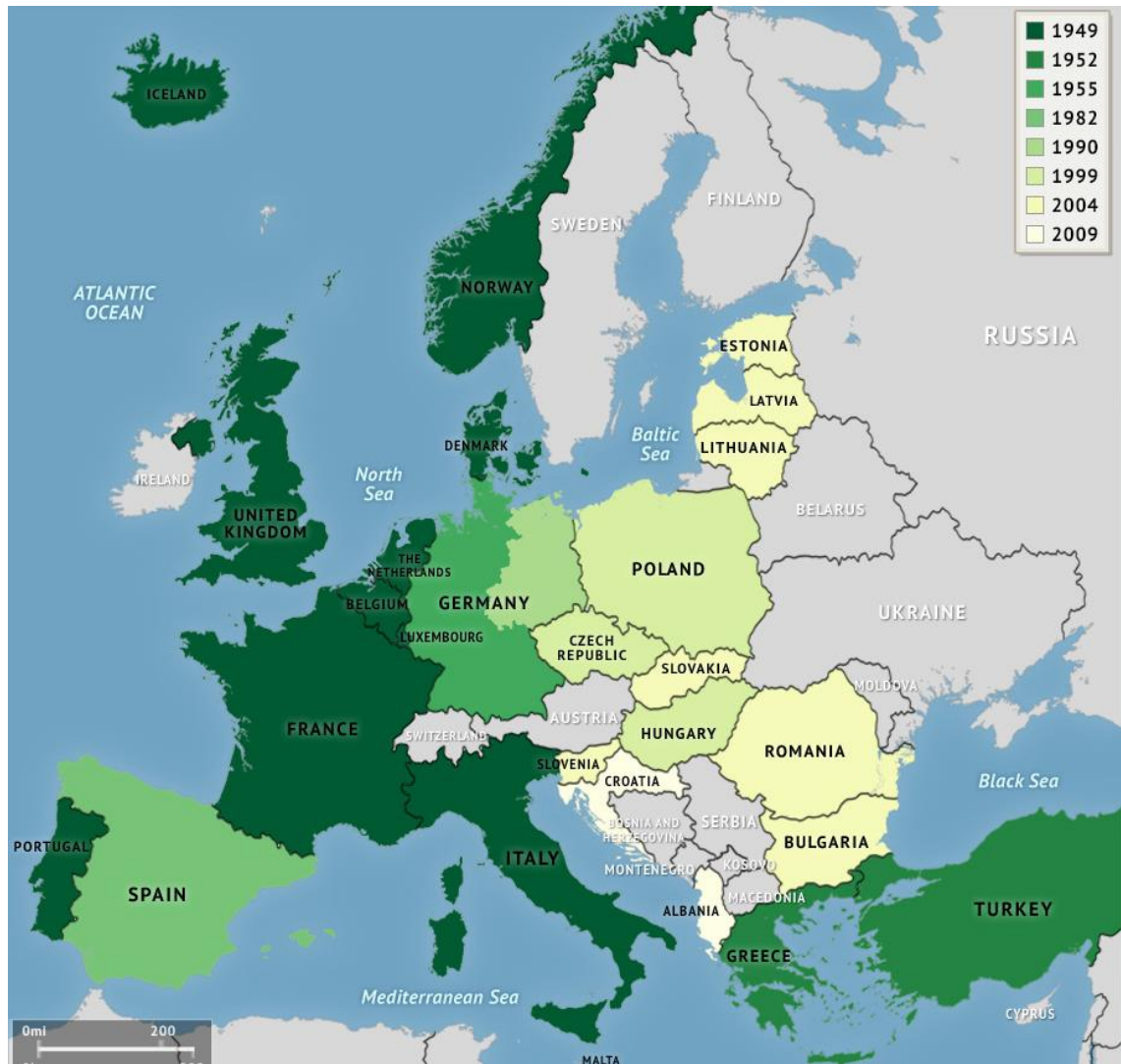
When in the beginning of the 1990's the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact collapsed, NATO had *de facto* prevailed in the Cold War. The negotiations at that time were intense, with European security and the future of NATO being core issues (Sarotte, 2014: 91). One of the main Western objectives was the reunification of Germany, though they needed Russia's consensus to achieve it, as Soviet troops were still based in East Germany and the rest of East Europe. On the other hand, Gorbachev feared the prospect of a unified Germany being a part of NATO, and even more the expansion of NATO further east. As he clearly stated to James Baker, the US Secretary of State, 'any extension of the zone of NATO would be unacceptable' (Sarotte, 2009). During the negotiations, the Soviets acquired the impression that the West had assured them that NATO would not expand (Sarotte, 2014: 93). In fact, such a promise was not clearly stated in any written document and Western officials deny its binding effect (Kramer, 2014: 208; NATO, 2016c); nevertheless the Russians consider it valid (Iitzkowitz Shifrinson, 2016; Spiegel Online, 2009), a case that would cause an extensive dispute in later years (Braithwaite, 2016).

The post-Cold War period signaled a quest for NATO to redefine itself and acquire a new role in the international order. The debate during those years was intense and even the very existence of the Alliance was in question (Duffield, 1994: 765). Eventually, NATO not only survived, but also expanded and redefined its purpose as a cooperative-security organization with the objectives to foster dialogue and cooperation with former adversaries in the Warsaw Pact and to manage conflicts in areas on the European periphery such as the Balkans and the Middle East (Haglund, 2012). The collaboration with the European non-NATO members was enhanced by the establishment of the PfP program in 1994 that currently includes 22 countries (NATO, 2016a).



Initially, Washington and NATO sought to foster cooperation with Russia and integrate it in the new unipolar world order. The communist model was being gradually replaced with a more liberal system, based on the western values of democracy, capitalism and free market economy. In order to encourage Russia's transformation to a liberal democracy and to enhance security cooperation, Russia was included to several international institutions such as the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in 1991 and PfP in 1994 (Gheciu, 2009: 43). There were even suggestions to integrate Russia to NATO, but the plan was not deemed as realistic at that time (Charap and Troitskiy, 2013: 51). Instead, the NATO-Russia Council was established in 2002 as a mechanism for consultation and consensus building. Although Russia was considered as a useful ally in several issues, such as counter-terrorism and crisis management in certain areas (Gheciu, 2009: 43,51), it was not treated as an equal partner by the West (Kortunov, 1997: 32).

As already mentioned, the major problem between Russia and NATO is the latter's expansion eastwards. The principle that was decided to drive the future of NATO was the *Open Door Policy* as it is described in Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty; membership is open to any 'European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area' (NATO, 1949). This policy created an excessive debate in the West about its soundness and its consequences. The supporters of the idea claim that 'NATO's *Open Door Policy* has helped close Cold War-era divisions in Europe and has contributed to spreading democracy, security and stability further across Europe.' In contrast, its opponents warned about the danger of renewing the strategic rivalry in Europe, as Russia, faced with a security dilemma, would eventually react (Jackson and Sørensen, 2006: 144-150).



*Figure 4: NATO enlargement stages*

Source: <https://www.stratfor.com/image/expansion-nato>

Despite the serious disagreements, the enlargement proceeded in three successive stages after 1990, as shown in Figure 4. In fact, the first former Eastern Block country to be integrated to NATO was East Germany, when it has reunified with West Germany in 1990. The first<sup>19</sup> enlargement took place in 1999 and included three countries in Central Europe: the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland.<sup>20</sup> Russian objections were intense and the impression was that the

<sup>19</sup> The stages refer to the post-Cold War enlargements that are in fact the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> in total.

<sup>20</sup> These 3 countries along with Slovakia (originally as Czechoslovakia until 1993) had formed in 1991 the Visegrád Group, an alliance with the purpose to join the 'Western European structures' (Engelberg, 1991).

aim was the isolation of Russia and to prevent it from regaining its former Great Power status (Kortunov, 1996: 342-343).

Nevertheless, the expansion continued in 2004 to include seven more countries from Central and Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. NATO came even closer and was now touching Russian borders, in the case of the Baltic States (Lazarević, 2009: 42). Furthermore, contrary to the previous expansion, the three Baltic States were not just former Warsaw Pact countries, but former part of the Soviet Union itself. This fact exaggerated the security fears of Moscow and some Russian officials urged for strengthening the defense measures against NATO. Russians clearly perceived that action as a direct threat to their interests and a serious violation of their *Near Abroad* (Gidadhubli, 2004: 1885).

The final enlargement so far was less ambitious as it included only Albania and Croatia, in 2009. Still there are several other countries<sup>21</sup> aspiring to join the Alliance and participate in the Membership Action Plan (NATO, 2015b). Recently, Moscow has threatened Montenegro with retaliatory measures and has encouraged it to keep a neutral status in order to prevent it from continuing its membership negotiations. Any further NATO enlargement is perceived as a direct threat to Russia's regional and global power status (Joseph and Vuković, 2016). Apart from that, the more controversial candidates are Georgia and Ukraine, which are in the stage of *Intensified Dialogue* with NATO, with the prospect that one day they will become members (NATO, 2015a). Although the Bush administration in 2008 supported their membership, several members, such as France and Germany, concerned about the reaction of Russia, opposed that plan (Mearsheimer, 2014b: 78-79). Additionally, further enlargement will put into

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<sup>21</sup> Currently they are Montenegro, FYROM and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

question the ability of NATO to meet its Article 5 commitment, to protect these countries in case of a Russian aggressive action. Failing to protect a NATO country will undermine the basic foundations of the alliance (Jackson and Sørensen, 2006: 148).

In the initial steps of enlargement Moscow's reaction was firm, but was not translated into actions, largely due to the relative weakness of the Russian state to react (Gidadhubli, 2004). As the fears of encirclement were coming true and Russian economy improved to a point, the reaction began to be more aggressive. The decision by the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to pursue the integration of the country to NATO alarmed Moscow. During the 2008 Bucharest Summit the membership of Georgia and Ukraine was discussed, and postponed for a future date, nevertheless Russia intended to rule out such an action (Lazarević, 2009: 45-46). A few days later, the Russian Chief of the General Staff, General Yuri Baluyevsky, stated that 'Russia will take steps aimed at ensuring its interests along its borders,' (Peter, 2008) referring to the probability of Ukraine or Georgia joining NATO. The events that followed would confirm his sayings, as the Russo-Georgian War and the intervention in Ukraine would prove.

## **3.2 The EU Integration Process**

The other major Western organization, which will be discussed as a threat to Russia, is the European Union. The EU traces its origins in the 1951 Treaty of Paris (Moussis, 2015: 20), with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community, between its six founding members.<sup>22</sup> This initial community eventually evolved to a hybrid intergovernmental and supranational organization

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<sup>22</sup> Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands Luxembourg and West Germany.

that the EU is today. At the end of the Cold War, in the 1990's, the EU<sup>23</sup> consisted of 12 members,<sup>24</sup> after three enlargement stages. Although the EU is not a military alliance like NATO, many Russian politicians tend to view the two organizations as representing the same interests and as an extension of the US foreign policy, a fact that is not entirely correct (Larivé, 2008: 2).



*Figure 5: The European Union enlargement*

Source: [https://europa.eu/european-union/documents-publications/slide-presentations\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/documents-publications/slide-presentations_en)

<sup>23</sup> At the time it was officially named European Communities. The term European Union was introduced in 1991 by the Treaty of Maastricht (Moussis, 2015: 22).

<sup>24</sup> The 6 new members until then were: Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom in 1973, Greece in 1981 and Spain and Portugal in 1986.

The post-Cold War EU enlargement has proceeded even further than NATO as Figure 5 clearly shows. The first crucial issue for EU was the reunification of Germany, which was settled after intense negotiations with the Soviet leaders (Sarotte, 2014: 91-93). The fall of the *Iron Curtain* had opened the prospect of integration to many Central and Eastern European countries. Eventually the integration proceeded in four subsequent rounds, to include 28 member-states<sup>25</sup>.

The first enlargement took place in 1995, including Austria, Finland and Sweden. All three countries were not part of the former Eastern Block and had kept a neutral stance during the Cold War period. However, the case of Finland was special, as it was the first European country with extensive borders to the post-Soviet Russia that became part of a Western organization. During the Cold War, Finland kept a neutral stance in order to appease its neighbor and retain its sovereignty.<sup>26</sup> Although its *Near Abroad* had not yet been breached, Russia viewed EU's expansion with concern (Whitfield, 2015: 28).

The largest enlargement round was by far the second, which took place in 2004. A total of ten countries joined the Union,<sup>27</sup> which now dominated most of Central and Northern Europe. Seven of them were members of the former Warsaw Pact, including the three Baltic States. The EU had well penetrated the Russian security zone absorbing many states that were part of Russia's *Near Abroad*. This fact combined with the expansion of NATO in the same area, raised the concerns of the Russians as their former allies had begun waning. Both the EU and NATO had integrated the Baltic States, a region of core interest for Russia, due to historic, strategic and economic reasons and the existence of a

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<sup>25</sup> Despite the outcome of the British referendum of 23 June 2016 to exit the EU, the process so far has not been initiated.

<sup>26</sup> The policy followed by Finland towards Russia was notably named *Finlandization* (Majander, 1999: 77-78).

<sup>27</sup> These were Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

considerable Russian minority in all three countries (Mezhevich, 2015: 6). Furthermore, they control the land route to the Kaliningrad Oblast<sup>28</sup> and combined with Finland they could block the exit to the Baltic Sea (Grigas, 2015).

Soon followed a third and a fourth enlargement including the Balkan countries of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and finally Croatia in 2013 (Moussis, 2015: 16-17). Another two of Russia's former allies had joined a Western organization, limiting its influence in the Balkan Peninsula. Moreover, the rest of the Balkan countries are in various stages of the process to becoming members of the EU. Albania, FYROM, Montenegro and Serbia are already candidate countries and Bosnia - Herzegovina has applied for membership (European Union, 2016).

Eventually, the issue that greatly undermined the EU-Russia relations was the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, undertaken by the EU in 2009, aiming to promote cooperation with the six remaining post-Soviet states in Europe: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (European Union External Action Service, 2016). The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov clearly expressed opposition accusing the EU that the EaP is an 'attempt to expand its sphere of influence in the quest for hydrocarbons' (Pop, 2009). Russia clearly views this attempt as a direct involvement in its own sphere of influence (Traynor, 2009).

Equally negative was Russia's perception of the so-called *Color Revolutions* that took place in its *Near Abroad*. The *Rose Revolution* of 2003 in Georgia and the *Orange Revolution*, the following year, in Ukraine, overthrew the pro-Russian leaders of the two countries, and set them to the course of more intense collaboration with the West and the pursuit of EU and NATO membership (Simão,

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<sup>28</sup> The Kaliningrad enclave is a geostrategic area for Russia and among other things the base of the Russian Baltic Fleet.

2011: 87-89). According to Anthony Cordesman (2014), Russian leaders view the *Color Revolutions* as a 'new US and European approach to warfare that focuses on creating destabilizing revolutions in other states as a means of serving their security interests at low cost and with minimal casualties.' Furthermore, the *Euromaidan* demonstrations of 2014 in Ukraine resulted in the resignation of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, who had blocked the EU association agreement (Diuk, 2014). Putin's response to the pro-Western aspirations of both countries caused dynamic Russian actions in both countries.

Overall, the EU integration process was viewed from Moscow as a loss of control over its former territories (Larivé, 2008: 1). Despite the fact that the EU does not pose a direct military threat to Russia, compared to NATO, it still has its own interests that in many areas are not compatible with Russia's. After all, we should not forget that one of the driving factors for the very creation of the EU was the threat of the former Soviet Union (Moussis, 2015: 13). Therefore, it is not strange that threat perception is mutual to a certain point.

### **3.3 The Ballistic Missile Defense**

One of the most controversial issues, that still influence the Russia-NATO relations, is the development of NATO's BMD in Europe. The purpose of this new antiballistic system is declared to be the prevention of ballistic missiles threats to Europe from rogue states (Weitz, 2010: 103-104). However, Russia strongly opposes its development, since it perceives it as a potential threat to its own retaliation capability in case of a nuclear confrontation (Cimbala, 2012: 270)

The first approach for the creation of a system aiming to the defense against ballistic missiles in Europe was initiated during the NATO Prague Summit in 2002. By 2007, the US President George W. Bush had agreed with Poland and the



Czech Republic to develop the first elements of the antiballistic system. The initial plan was for ten interceptor missile systems in Poland and a radar tracking system in the Czech Republic (Burns, 2007). Russian response was immediate, with Moscow warning that the development of the antiballistic system could lead to a new arms race in Europe and that it would freeze the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE)<sup>29</sup> (Socor, 2007). Moreover, the Russian military leadership threatened that Poland would make itself a nuclear target in case it hosted a BMD site (de Quetteville and Pierce, 2008).

In an effort to appease Russian fears, the next US President, Barack Obama, altered the initial planning of the BMD and enhanced the cooperation with Russia in the field. The proposed missile installations in Poland and the Czech Republic were cancelled and a new 'Phased, Adaptive Approach' for Missile Defense in Europe was announced in 2009 (The White House, 2009). As a gesture of good will, Russia postponed its plan to deploy *Iskander* SRBMs<sup>30</sup> in Kaliningrad (Harding, 2009). The US plan for the *European Phased Adaptive Approach* (EPAA) consisted of four distinct phases.

Phase I, completed by 2011, aimed to counter regional ballistic missile threats and included already available technology, based on the sea-based Aegis Weapon System and the SM-3 Block IA interceptor missile, was achieved mainly with the forward deployment of US Navy ships, based in Spain. Phase II, completed by 2015, expanded the defended area against SRBM and MRBM<sup>31</sup> threats to Southern Europe, with the introduction of the more advanced SM-3 Block IB missile, the addition of an early warning radar station in Turkey and a

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<sup>29</sup> The CFE was signed in 1990 setting limits on main categories of conventional military equipment in Europe, such as tanks, artillery and combat aircraft, between the former Cold War rivals.

<sup>30</sup> Short-Range Ballistic Missile

<sup>31</sup> Medium-Range Ballistic Missile

land based missile site in Romania. Phase III, to be completed by 2018, aims at IRBM<sup>32</sup> threats and widens the coverage to all Europe. The SM-3 missile will be further evolved to the Block IIA variant and a new land missile site will be added in Poland. Finally, Phase IV, which was to be completed by 2020, intended to cope with potential future ICBM<sup>33</sup> threats to the United States, with the employment of the SM-3 Block IIB (Kaya, 2014: 85-86). This final phase was cancelled in 2013, when the US leadership decided to restructure its missile defense planning (US Department of Defense, 2013).



**Figure 6:** NATO Ballistic Missile Defense

Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36271074>

Despite the alternation of the BMD plans, the Russian fears were ultimately not eased. When the first US ship, USS *Monterey*, was deployed in the Black Sea in 2011, as a part of EPAA Phase I, Russian officials strongly reacted, expressing their concern about ‘the intrusion of this US warship [that] breaks existing

<sup>32</sup> Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile

<sup>33</sup> Intercontinental Ballistic Missile

traditions' in the area (Weir, 2011). The subsequent implementation of the EPAA's next phases triggered similar reactions by Russia. As shown in Figure 6, by 2016 a BMD radar is hosted by Turkey, at Kürecik, the first land based SM-3 missiles deployed in Deveselu, Romania, have been declared operational and the construction of the second missile site in Redzikowo, Poland, has already begun (Rose, 2016). The Russian response was intense and the nuclear threats of 2008 were repeated, this time against Romania. Russian officials addressed the BMD as a 'direct threat to global and regional security' and as 'a certain threat to the Russian Federation' (Kramer, 2016).

The declared purpose that the BMD is developed against ballistic threats by 'rogue' states, such as Iran, does not seem to convince the Russians. As Jack Mendelsohn (2007: 25) argues, it 'is unclear [...] why Iran would risk annihilation by attacking Europe or the United States with weapons that have such an obvious return address.' Furthermore, another fact that is suspicious to the Russians is 'why the United States has chosen to locate the radar and interceptors so far north in Europe that part of NATO territory is left uncovered' (Mendelsohn, 2007: 25). Another fact that raised Russian fears was the US unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty<sup>34</sup> in 2001, a treaty that was signed to prevent the advantage of a first-strike nuclear capability by any side, during the Cold War (Diesen, 2016).

The issue of the antiballistic shield has clearly awakened the Russian Cold War fears about the prospect of the US developing a pre-emptive nuclear first-strike capability. In this view, the BMD, despite its current limitations, could be the base for the development of a more advanced antiballistic system with the ability

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<sup>34</sup> The ABM Treaty was signed in 1972 between the Soviet Union and the US, setting a limit of only two anti-ballistic missile sites, with maximum 100 missiles per site, for each country (US Department of State, 2001).

to intercept Russian nuclear ballistic missiles in the future. Having such an asset, the US could use it as an effective shield to counter a retaliatory second-strike, destabilizing the existing nuclear balance (Diesen, 2016). As Koster (2004: 39) argues this 'can best be compared to the use of the shield by an ancient Greek hoplite, which of course carried a shield on one arm and his spear on the other.' It is practically impossible to distinguish weapon systems as clearly defensive and offensive, as the way they can be used may vary, depending on the overall strategy implemented (Diesen and Keane, 2016: 131). This final fact is a major aspect creating misperception about the opponent's intentions leading to a security dilemma.

### **3.4 Global Intervention**

The final issue that will be examined is the growing interventionist policy that the US implemented after the Cold War, which has played a crucial role in US-Russia relations. During the 1990's and the 2000's, the US increased their military presence worldwide and got involved in various interventions. It is significant to mention that despite the end of the Cold War and the absence of a major rival, the US defense budget has remarkably increased since then (SIPRI, 2016). Furthermore, despite the initial withdrawal of major US formations from Western Europe at the beginning of the 1990's, the US military presence has thereafter increased and got redirected to new locations, in Eastern Europe and the Middle East (Dancs, 2009: 2-6). This increased US military presence, as shown in Figure 7, was mainly the result of the major military interventions of the post-Cold War era. In contrast, Russia, which had to decrease its military significantly and minimize its presence abroad, strongly objected to the US interventionist policy, predominantly in the Balkans and the Middle East (Lachowski, 2007: 2)



**Figure 7:** US military bases abroad in 2015

Source: <http://americanempireproject.com/basestation/map.html>

The first Western involvement that triggered Russian reactions was NATO's 1995 intervention in Bosnia. After the international shock caused by the Srebrenica and Markale massacres and the failure of international efforts to end the hostilities, NATO conducted an air campaign against the Bosnian Serbs. Operation *Deliberate Force*, as the campaign was codenamed, succeeded to weaken the Serb Bosnians, who were forced to retreat and negotiate a ceasefire (Calvocoressi, 2004: 498-503). Although Russia was allied with the Serbs, it did not attempt to veto NATO involvement in the UN Security Council (Mueller, 2000: 21). Russian concerns were abated by their participation in the peacekeeping forces established after the Dayton Agreement (Nikitin, 2004).

The second major NATO intervention in the Balkans was *Operation Allied Force*, against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, during the Kosovo War of 1999. NATO forces intervened in favor of Albanian separatists, by bombing Serbian targets in Serbia. The cause of the operation, according to NATO, was the human right violations by the Serbian forces against the Albanian population

of the province (Averre, 2009: 575). This time Russian reaction was stronger and attempted to block the operation by vetoing it in the UN. The absence of UN authorization and international criticism did not stop the US in proceeding with the intervention (Roberts, 1999: 102-104). Russia witnessed the decline of its influence in the Balkans, as its last ally in the area, Yugoslavia, was severely damaged by the US and its allies. The peacekeeping force that was established, KFOR<sup>35</sup>, was again under the leadership of NATO. The Russians failed to control the Serb sectors, as they originally intended, and finally withdrew their troops in 2003 (Averre, 2009: 583-584).

While Russia<sup>36</sup> supported the US initiative to invade Iraq in 1991 and provided help to the US invasion in Afghanistan, this was not the case in the Second Gulf War of 2003. The US pretext for the invasion was the possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) by the Saddam Hussein regime (Ambrosio, 2005: 1198-1199). International objection to this operation was so intense, that the US did not even manage to obtain the consent of most of its NATO allies. Consequently, US President, George W. Bush had to form a *coalition of the willing* to participate in the invasion (Beehner, 2007). Russia insisted on using diplomatic means to resolve the crisis and opposed the invasion, yet its objections were ignored one more time (Dougherty, 2003).

The latest intervention, that intensified the West-Russia rivalry, was the Western involvement in the Syrian Civil War, that begun in 2011. While in the Syrian case, the West has not carried out a full-scale intervention in order to overthrow the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, suggestion has been clearly expressed to do so (Lewis and Ackerman, 2013). The West has been supporting

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<sup>35</sup> Kosovo Force

<sup>36</sup> Still Soviet Union at the time of the First Gulf War.

the antigovernment forces with training and material support for some years (McKelvey, 2015). As the Assad regime remains the final Russian ally in the Middle East, Russia decided to intervene in order to protect its own interests in the area, an action that will be analyzed in the next chapter.

Through this series of interventions and its increased military presence, the US seems to have fully exploited their military advantage, seeking to establish its dominance in the post-Cold War unipolar world system. As Chalmers Johnson argues, the vast network of US bases 'constitutes a new form of empire – an empire of bases' (Johnson, 2004) that promotes US interests worldwide. The commonly used excuse for this policy is humanitarian reasons, democracy promotion and the war against global terrorism (Choi and James, 2016: 902-903). Despite this rhetoric, Western interventions clearly violated international law and were perceived as threats by Russia. Another interesting fact is that these interventions had set a precedent that would be used later by Russians in their own interventions. (Johnson, 2001: 295).

### **3.5 Overview**

In the post-Cold War period, the US and its allies found themselves in a unipolar world system, without any major rival to question and counter their actions effectively. The motives of Western foreign policy were based on liberal values such as the spread of democracy, the protection of international law and human rights. The myth of the 'Reluctant Superpower,' that the US would act only if it was forced to and only to support a just cause, was widespread in the US (Bracevich, 2008: 12-13). Based on these ideas, the West ignored warnings and objections by Russians, who had a different view of these actions and their own interests to protect.

The West considers that the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU is not an aggressive policy, since it is founded on the right of every state to join any security or political organization it wants. Furthermore, these organizations are not considered to be a threat to Russia since the Cold War is over. However, Moscow does not share the same beliefs. In their point of view, these organizations are dangerously closing their western borders and entering their *Near Abroad*. The Western infiltration in this last security zone is perceived as an aggressive and threatening act (Mearsheimer, 2014b: 78-80).

Furthermore, the development of the BMD system in Europe, without any obvious existing threat, has clearly upset Moscow. Although NATO emphasizes the defensive nature of the system, Russia sees the evolution of a potential threat to its deterrence capability in the future (Weitz, 2010: 106). The difference in the perception of what causes an offensive weapon and strategy is more than obvious.

Apart from the voluntary expansion, the West has extended its global influence by force through interventions. These actions have deprived Russia of its last allies in the Balkans and have ignored its interests in other parts of the world, such as the Middle East. In this way, the US has expanded its military presence closer to Russian borders and has intervened to promote their interests worldwide, invoking international law and human rights only when it served their causes. Russian interests and reactions were not taken into account and the interventions proceeded.

What is clear from the facts mentioned above is that the West considered the post-Cold War Russia as a declining power, with limited ability to influence global matters. Despite the steps taken to ease Moscow's concerns, US has generally ignored its interests and underestimated its will and ability to react.



Therefore, the Russian leadership found itself in a security dilemma, feeling obliged to react to the hostile environment that was developing and threatened its vital interests.

## Chapter 4 - Russian Reaction

*'We should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. [...] Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself.'*

*Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation*<sup>37</sup>

Driven by the behavior of the West during the last two decades, the Russian leadership gradually changed its initial acquiescent stance of the Yeltsin period. The post-Cold War status quo had been changing constantly against Russia's interests and the new leadership under Vladimir Putin decided to react. Russia began to reconstruct its economy and its military forces, in order to regain its former power. The collaboration with the West has been relegated to second place and primary consideration is given to Russia's own interests (Rywkin, 2012: 236). In this concept, the protection of its soft post-Soviet perimeter from the encroaching efforts of NATO and the EU became a crucial factor (Cimbala, 2013).

The implemented strategy has three main goals. First, to maintain the integrity of the Russian state and to attract the attention of Russians away from important internal problems and difficulties that have not been solved (Rywkin, 2012: 236). Second, to counter-balance the Western efforts to infiltrate its *Near Abroad* through aggressive moves in other areas such as the Baltic and Nordic countries, the Arctic, the Middle East. The final objective is to eventually gain an equal place next to the West over global security affairs, thus restoring its former Great Power status (Trenin, 2014: 15-16).

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<sup>37</sup> Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 25 Apr 2005  
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

The first opportunity to practice this new strategy was given in 2008, by the actions of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. The country had been seeking accession to Western institutions since the *Rose Revolution* of 2003 that brought Saakashvili to power. In the summer of 2008, Russia exploited the turmoil that was created in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and invaded Georgian territory (Studzifzka, 2015: 23-25).

After this successful initial attempt to protect its *Near Abroad* by force, Russia made the second more ambitious move in 2014. After the *Euromaidan Revolution* and the overthrow of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine shifted its attention to the West and pursued the integration to EU again. Faced with the prospect of losing its influence in a country with pivotal geostrategic importance, Russia intervened in a unique way (Studzifzka, 2015: 30-32).

The final act of Russia's reaction, until today, is its involvement in the Syrian Civil War in 2015. When it became apparent that the war was not turning into Assad's favor and Russia was about to lose an important ally in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, Moscow reacted (Fyderek, 2015: 102-103). This was the first time since the end of the Cold War that Russia was conducting a campaign away from its borders and its *Near Abroad*.

These Russian actions will be analyzed further in the chapter, in order to better understand the implementation of Russian foreign policy and the way it is seeking to achieve its main strategic goals.

## **4.1 Power transition and Military Build-up**

During the 2000's Russia gradually shifted its foreign policy primary objective from the rapprochement and collaboration with the West, to the restoration of its

power and influence abroad (Kanet, 2015: 507-508). During this period Russian leadership succeeded in reforming the country's economy and regaining the central control of its vast territories. When these urgent reforms were accomplished, the focus shifted to more hard power politics. More attention was given to the restoration and modernization of the military and the country's foreign policy became more aggressive, as its interests had to be taken into account, even by force (Larrabee, 2010: 34-37).

The first Russian statesman that reacted to Western power monopoly and promoted a new place for Russia in the world system was Yevgeny Primakov. Initially as a Foreign Minister, and for less than a year as a Prime Minister, Primakov introduced a new doctrine for Russia's foreign policy. The *Primakov Doctrine*, as it was characterized, envisaged the emergence of a new multipolar world dominated by a limited number of Great Powers (Casier, 2006: 387). The main objectives of Russian foreign policy was to restore its position as a Great Power and develop strategic partnerships with other emerging powers in order to balance US monopoly (Cohen, 1997: 3-5).

Undoubtedly, the person that dominates Russian politics since the beginning of the Century is Vladimir Putin. He replaced Boris Yeltsin in 1999 and won all subsequent elections acting as President or Prime Minister of Russia since then. The regime that he has established has often been characterized for autocracy and corruption, among other things (Luhn, 2015). However, one thing is sure; Russia under Vladimir Putin has changed dramatically during the last years.

The first step that Putin took, in order to build a strong state, was to stabilize its domestic politics. Initially, he re-imposed central control over the state and ended the disintegration trends, which had begun since the dissolution of the

Soviet Union. By reducing the power of the new oligarchs, which had emerged during the Yeltsin era, he concentrated the power to the Kremlin and himself (Larrabee, 2010: 35). While his governing has clear aspects of autocracy, it has given Russia a much-needed period of relative stability (Lipman, 2016: 40).

Equally important were the economic reforms that allowed Russian economy to revive from the collapse of the 1998 financial crisis. It is noteworthy that during the last years, Putin has managed a tenfold increase of Russia's GDP,<sup>38</sup> from about 200 million dollars in 1999 to more than 2.200 million dollars in 2013, according to the World Bank records (2016). Although this growth has been halted after the sanctions that followed the annexation of Crimea, the development that Russian economy has experienced over recent years was remarkable (Broadman, 2015).

At the center of this economic revival is the energy sector that until today constitutes by far the largest part of Russian exports. The high oil prices during the last years, combined with the increase of global demand at the same period, has boosted the country's income (Sonmez and Cobanoglu, 2016: 80). Many countries, especially in the EU and most of the former Soviet Republics are largely dependent on Russian energy imports (Sonmez and Cobanoglu, 2016: 110). Russian leadership has repeatedly exploited energy as a foreign policy tool, in order to gain advantage in other major issues. To promote this advantage further, Putin has invested in building a vast network of pipelines across Eurasia in order to have multiple energy routes and reduce the dependency of the network from specific countries, such as Ukraine (Sonmez and Cobanoglu, 2016: 97-101).

Being a realist thinker, Putin also concentrated on the revival and modernization of Russia's military. After all, according to Mearsheimer (2011: 30),

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<sup>38</sup> Gross Domestic Product.

'Great Powers are determined largely on the basis of their relative military capability.' Due to the economic lag of the country, this effort only began in 2008, after the war with Georgia, which revealed the shortcomings of its armed forces. Putin increased the defense budget dramatically and introduced reforms in the structure and equipment of the army, both conventional and nuclear (Trenin, 2016: 23-24). This move ensured him another valuable tool in the foreign policy arena, which he later did not hesitate to use extensively (Charap, 2016: 3-4).

As Putin began to feel stronger due to his country's development, he sought a more independent foreign policy, pressing harder on matters that had a vital interest for Russia. In an effort to counter the US dominance in global security matters, he tried to differentiate its allies by approaching emerging powers such as China and India. Additionally, Russia has founded and joined international organizations – such as the BRICS,<sup>39</sup> the CSTO<sup>40</sup> and the SCO<sup>41</sup> – aiming to economic, political and security cooperation with non-Western countries (Dimitrakopoulou and Liaropoulos, 2010: 39).

Putin gradually hardened his reaction to Western provocations and began to materialize his threats. A first mild demonstration of Russia's aggression took place in 2007 in Estonia. At the time, tensions between the two countries rose due to the removal of a statue<sup>42</sup> in Tallinn. Russia exploited the large Russian minority of the country and incited mass demonstrations, coupled with an unprecedented cyber-attack that paralyzed the country for almost a month (Ruus, 2008; Kozlowski, 2014: 238-239). Moreover, as an answer to the enlargement of

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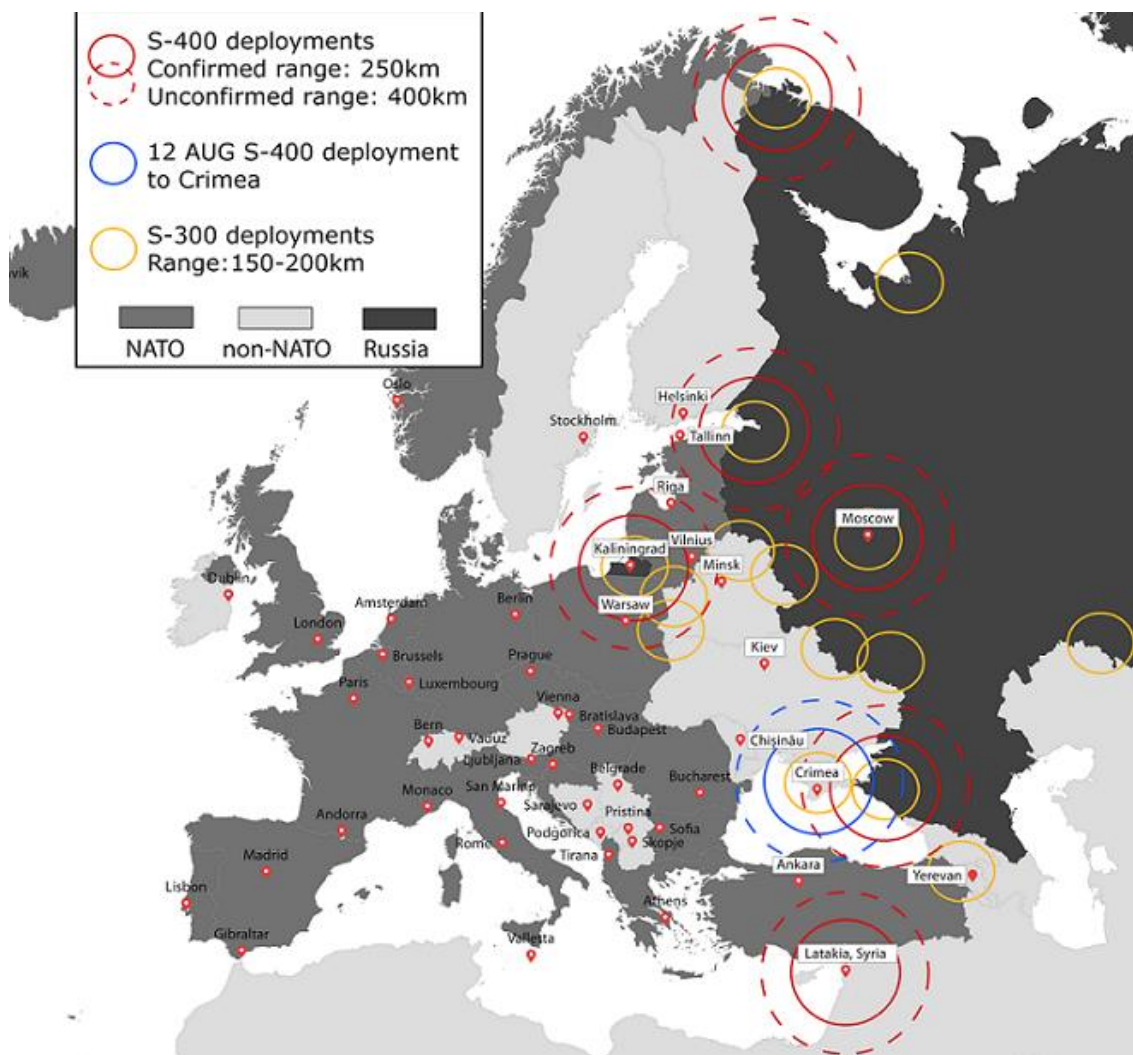
<sup>39</sup> A group of five major emerging powers: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The term was introduced in 2001 (O'Neill, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military alliance among Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, signed in 1992.

<sup>41</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organization: a political, economic, and military organization founded in 2001 China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

<sup>42</sup> The statue symbolized Soviet soldiers who had liberated Estonia in World War II.

NATO, and the development of NATO's BMD, Russia has gradually established an extensive A2/AD zone network in key areas across East Europe as depicted in Figure 8. From the Arctic and the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia has developed S-300 and S-400 SAM systems, aiming to deny these areas from Western air assets (Burton, 2016). In order to invigorate this effort, Russian military has begun the deployment of nuclear capable *Iskander* SRBMs in forward areas such as Kaliningrad, Crimea and Syria (Osborn, 2016; Wilson, 2016).



**Figure 8:** Russian SAM deployment in 2016

Source: (Burton, 2016)

The main objective of Russia's foreign policy is to obtain full sovereignty on its *Near Abroad* and eliminate any external influence in its sphere of influence.

Putin seems determined to act aggressively in order to ensure Russia's equal place in the world order (Trenin, 2014: 3-4). To achieve this goal, he is willing to escalate the antagonism with the West as long as Russian interests are not taken into account. As he has clearly stated 'We are forced to take countermeasures - that is, to aim our missile systems at those facilities which we think pose a threat to us' (Filipov, 2016).

## 4.2 The Russo-Georgian War

While the shift in Russian foreign policy began appearing with the rise of Putin into Power, it was the Georgian crisis of 2008 that revealed Russian decisiveness to stand up against its strategic encirclement by the West. The crisis, which escalated into a full-scale invasion into Georgian territory, was in fact the first military intervention outside Russian soil since the end of the Cold War. The Russian aggressive action shocked the West and brought back memories of the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Eitelhuber, 2009: 1-2).

Georgia and the Transcaucasia region in general has a great strategic importance to Russia. The region works as a buffer zone between Russia's south borders and Turkey, a NATO country (Cornell, 2001: 331). Furthermore, by controlling Georgia, Russia would have complete control of the pipelines<sup>43</sup> that supply Europe with Azerbaijani oil and gas, retaining its economic influence in the continent (Abushov, 2009: 203, 206-207). Due to its place in the *Near Abroad*, it is obvious that Russia could not afford to lose Georgia, especially to NATO and the West.

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<sup>43</sup> Currently, there are the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan gas and oil pipelines and the Baku–Supsa oil pipeline.



Although Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it soon faced serious problems with two of its provinces, which sought to secede from the new country. South Ossetia and Abkhazia tried to gain their own independent status, with covered support from Russia, resulting in a series of conflicts during the early 1990's (Zurcher, 2007: 115-151). Russia exploited the turmoil and intervened in order to end the fighting and established a peacekeeping force. The continuation of a frozen conflict in the area suited the Russian interests well, since it had a pretext to intervene and have control over the country (Matsaberidze, 2015: 82-83).

The roots of the 2008 crisis extend back to the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. After the *Rose Revolution* that took place in 2003 and the overthrow of President Eduard Shevardnadze, Russia begun losing its grip over Georgia. The new President Mikheil Saakashvili practiced a pro-Western foreign policy and pushed for an integration to NATO and the EU<sup>44</sup>. The US increased its economic and military aid to the country and Georgian troops were deployed in NATO missions (German, 2015: 603-604, 611). While the Western influence was increasing, Saakashvili managed to negotiate the withdrawal of all Russian military bases from Georgia except the peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which was completed by 2007 (Antidze, 2007).

In 2008, tensions between Georgia and Russia began to rise and their relations worsened. That year in the NATO Summit in Romania, the integration of Georgia to the alliance was discussed, but it was postponed for a later period, due to concerns from certain European allies. Nevertheless, the prospect was not completely ruled out as Russia sought (Mearsheimer, 2014b: 78-79). Moreover,

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<sup>44</sup> This policy was strongly encouraged by the US, seeking to increase its influence in the Caucasus region (Friedman and Logan, 2009: 38).

in February, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia, backed by most of the Western states. This action challenged Russia's geopolitical interests in Europe and created a precedent for border changes in other areas. As a reaction to these developments, Russia intensified its support for the two separatist Georgian regions and established direct relations with them, taking steps toward the recognition of their independence (Friedman, 2008).



Figure 9: Main events of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2008\\_South\\_Ossetia\\_war\\_en.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2008_South_Ossetia_war_en.svg)

Due to its general support from the West and the development of the country, Saakashvili felt more confident<sup>45</sup> to attempt a final resolution to the persistent internal problems of Georgia (Mearsheimer, 2014b: 79). Using unrest that broke out close to the Georgian-South Ossetian borders as a pretext, Saakashvili ordered the Georgian Army to invade the region in 07 August,

<sup>45</sup> In fact, Saakashvili was counting on support from the West, which seemed to guarantee Georgia's territorial integrity in case of Russian reaction, as implied by their military cooperation and the prospect of joining NATO (Zunes, 2008).

reaching the capital Tskhinvali (Antonenko, 2008: 23). Russia's response was immediate; by 08 August, it launched a full-scale attack through South Ossetia into Georgian territory, as shown in Figure 9. By 12 August, Russian troops were only 40 km from Tbilisi. Furthermore, the Russian military operation expanded to include Abkhazia, opening a second front. The Russian Navy blockaded the Georgian coast to the Black Sea and Russian troops, with support from Abkhazian separatists, attacked and occupied Georgian territory (Cheterian, 2009: 159-160). The ceasefire was finally achieved on 12 August, with the mediation of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, although hostiles lasted for few more days (King, 2008: 9).

Despite the rapid victory achieved over the Georgian Army, Russian military forces were put into a test during the campaign. Russian conventional forces revealed many of their weaknesses due to their outdated equipment, organization and tactics (Kaas, 2009). Shortly after the war, the Russian military leadership initiated a large-scale military reform in order to implement the lessons learnt, and overcome the dysfunctions that had been accumulated during the last two decades (McDermott, 2009: 69-74; Braun, 2012: 70-72). Another interesting element of the 2008 war was the first attempts made by Russia to implement elements of what was later described as *Hybrid Warfare*. In order to support its conventional forces, Russia implemented a cyberwarfare campaign and information warfare aiming to influence the public opinion in favor of their narrative for the war (Cohen and Hamilton, 2009: 44-49).

Ultimately, the Russian military intervention in Georgia proved that Moscow was prepared to use hard power to defend its interests in its *Near Abroad*. Even if Russia was not ready militarily to implement a strong foreign policy in 2008, its leadership nevertheless felt obliged to react in order to forestall to what was

perceived as a strategic encirclement by the West. For the first time, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia engaged its military in a war against a sovereign state, surprising the rest of the world (Kaas, 2009). The West proved unable to react in time and even though it criticized Russian aggressive actions heavily, it was not willing to risk worsening its relations with Russia over Georgia (Malek, 2009: 232; Larrabee, 2010: 36). Eventually, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were recognized as independent states by Russia, which increased its military presence and influence in the region (Antonenko, 2008: 27). Georgia suffered a humiliating defeat and its prospect of joining NATO minimized. In the aftermath of the war, Russian decision to escalate the crisis proved successful, as it largely achieved its objectives, paving the way for the next intervention in Ukraine.

### **4.3 The Ukrainian Crisis**

After the first application of hard power in the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, Putin felt more confident to claim Russia's interests in the *Near Abroad* in a more robust way. The other country, which had aspired to evade Moscow's influence for some years, was Ukraine. When at the beginning of 2014 an uprising threatened to materialize this policy and reorient the country to the West, Russia reacted aggressively. Exploiting the internal divisions in Ukraine, Russia escalated the crisis to an armed conflict that lasts until today. As in the case of Georgia, the military was the main tool used to secure Russia's interests abroad. The Ukrainian Crisis was the turning point that aggravated Moscow's relations with the West (Kanet, 2015: 512).

Ukraine is by far the most important element of Russia's *Near Abroad* strategy in Europe. As Zbigniew Brzezinski (1994: 80) has clearly stated, 'without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then

subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.’ Most of the territory of modern Ukraine had been a part of Russia<sup>46</sup> for centuries and constituted its borders with the rest of Europe. Since the Soviet era, most of the pipelines providing Europe with gas and oil pass through Ukraine (BBC, 2014). Moreover, Russians are by far the largest ethnic and linguistic minority in the country (CIA, 2017). Notably, in some regions in the southeast (such as Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk) Russians constitute the majority of the population (BBC, 2014). Apart from the geostrategic position of mainland Ukraine, its southern part is of special importance to Russia. The Crimean Peninsula occupies a central position and controls most of the Black Sea. Additionally, the Russian Black Sea Fleet is still stationed at Sevastopol after a treaty signed in 1997<sup>47</sup> between the two countries (Tsakiris, 2010: 201-203).

Since the declaration of its independence in 1991, Ukraine’s relations with Russia have been problematic. The first Ukrainian leaderships, during the 1990’s, retained a balanced, rather friendly, attitude towards Moscow and managed to solve most issues that resulted from the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Tsakiris, 2010: 203-204). However, during the next decade this began to change. Particularly after the *Orange Revolution* of 2004, under the leadership of Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, Ukraine reoriented its foreign policy, adopted a more pro-Western stance and attempted to join the EU and NATO (Larrabee, 2010: 38-39). This change was not welcomed by Russia, which reacted strongly. The most effective means used was the Gas Wars<sup>48</sup> of 2006 and 2009, exploiting

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<sup>46</sup> Either with the form of Russian Empire or Soviet Union.

<sup>47</sup> The treaty determined the division of the Black Sea Fleet and the lease of military installations in Crimea by Russia for 20 years, until 2017 (Sherr, 1997: 33-35). The Kharkiv Agreement, signed in 2010, extended the lease for an additional 25 years, until 2042 (Armandon, 2013: 291-292).

<sup>48</sup> Russia increased significantly the Gas prices to Ukraine and for some time cut off the supply completely.

the energy dependence of Ukraine (Kanet, 2015: 511). The Russian pressure paid off when, in 2010, Viktor Yanukovich was elected President and brought Ukraine back to Moscow's influence.

Yet the rapprochement between the two countries did not last long. When in November of 2013 Yanukovich suspended the EU accession process, demonstrations and civil unrest erupted in Kiev. The crisis spread to a revolution across the country, known as the *Euromaidan*, which had an apparent anti-Russian character (Diuk, 2014: 9-10). Yanukovich was overthrown and a new government was elected to resume the negotiation with the EU. Moscow viewed the revolution as a Western-backed effort to influence Ukraine and immediately took action in an effort to prevent the repetition of the *Orange Revolution* (Kuzio, 2015: 161).

This time the Russian reaction was aggressive, encouraged by the previous success in Georgia in 2008. Moscow exploited the presence of a large Russian population in southeast Ukraine and intervened mainly in two regions. Initially, at the Crimean Peninsula in late February 2014, Russian military forces without insignia occupied key installations, disarmed Ukrainian troops in the area and took complete control of the region in just a few days (Ven Bruusgaard, 2014: 83). Ukrainians were taken completely by surprise by the Russian actions and did not have time to react. The operation was largely supported by the local population, whose large majority was Russian speaking, and even some Ukrainian military units defected to the Russian side (Filis, Dimopoulos and Karagiannopoulos, 2014: 21). It is worth noting that during the conflict there were almost no casualties. After a referendum held in March, Crimea was self-declared

independent and subsequently was annexed by Russia<sup>49</sup> (Harding and Walker, 2014).

The other region that Russia intervened was Donbass<sup>50</sup>. One more time, Russia, exploiting the Russian population majority, encouraged and supported an armed insurgency. After the annexation of Crimea, the region was self-declared as autonomous, and tried to secede from Ukraine and join Russia (Filis, Dimopoulos and Karagiannopoulos, 2014: 20). Moscow's support was likewise covert, with Putin denying any direct Russian involvement in the area, stating that 'There are no armed forces, no Russian "instructors" in southeastern Ukraine. And there never were any' (Russian Presidential Executive Office, 2014). The conflict has cost the lives of thousands of combatants and civilians, including the tragic event of the shoot down of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, by a Russian SAM<sup>51</sup> (Freedman, 2014: 16). Despite the numerous efforts to end the hostilities, the armed conflict in Donbass continues until today.

The prevailing strategy that was used by Russia during the operation in Ukraine was *Hybrid Warfare*. The basic elements of this type of operations were described by General Valery Gerasimov (2016) in 2013. Russia combined multiple types of military and civilian operations effectively and paralyzed the Ukrainian defenses. The combination included, but was not limited to, covered Special Forces operations, asymmetrical warfare, information operations and extensive use of the local pro-Russian militias (Thomas, 2015: 453-455). The Russian military proved that it had improved significantly since 2008 (Lanoszka, 2016: 188).

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<sup>49</sup> Crimea was originally part of Russia, since 1783, and was transferred to Ukraine for administrative purposes in 1954 (Calvocoressi, 2004: 133).

<sup>50</sup> The Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk are jointly called Donbass.

<sup>51</sup> Russia denies its involvement and accuses Ukraine for the shot down (Freedman, 2014: 23).

International reaction was harsher this time and the West supported Ukraine, condemning the Russian involvement in the crisis. The majority of the international community did not recognize the annexation of Crimea. Additionally, Russia was faced with sanctions, which, combined with the fall of oil prices, have led, since 2014, the Russian economy to a financial crisis (Pradhan, 2015: 16-17). Moscow replied by posing similar sanctions to Ukraine and Western countries.



**Figure 10:** Ukrainian territory under Russian or separatist control in 2016

Source: <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/ukraines-conflict-rumors-compromise-grow>

As a reaction, Russia threatened to escalate the conflict to a higher level and even threatened to use nuclear force in order to protect Crimea (Johnston, 2015). Vladimir Putin made it clear that Russia still possesses the ability of nuclear strike and that it is prepared to use it in order to defend its vital interests.



This option is not to be interpreted in the narrow sense of only defending its territory, but in addition to retain new territory that is considered to be critical for its security (Durkalec, 2015: 7-8). Consequently, the perspective of the use of tactical nuclear weapons was added to the combination of *Hybrid Warfare* in Ukraine (Durkalec, 2015: 15).

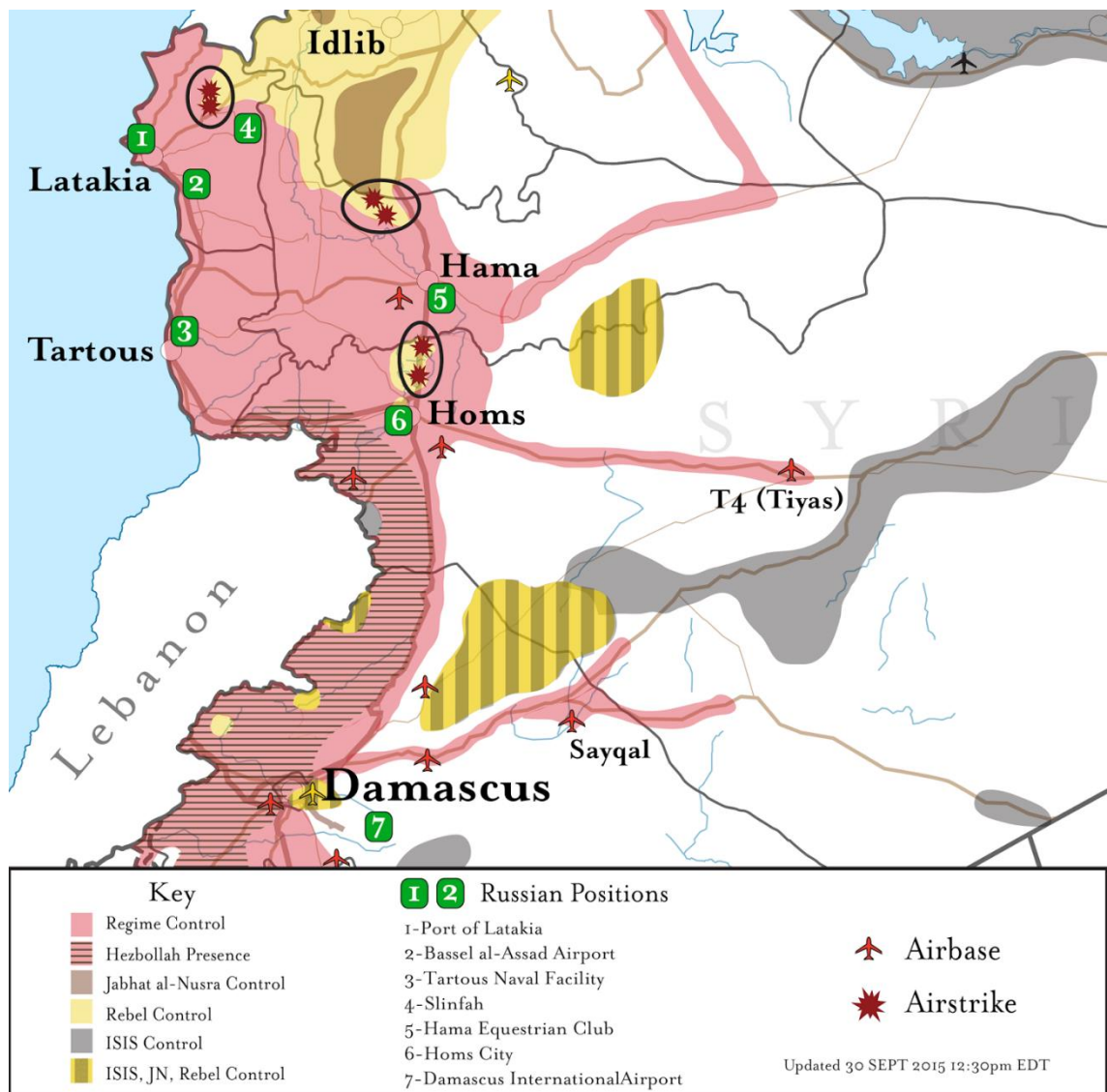
Definitely, Ukraine can be seen as the soft under-belly of Russia and its strategic importance could not be ignored by Putin (Larrabee, 2010: 38). He was prepared to withstand the Western reaction in order to secure and control this critical area. As of 2016, Russia or Russian backed separatists control the entire Crimean peninsula and a most of the Donbass region, as shown in Figure 10. Despite the sanctions, the West proved unable to intervene and prevent Russian involvement in the *Near Abroad* once more. In the aftermath of the current crisis, the integrity of Ukraine is at best doubtful and its prospect of joining EU and NATO has certainly diminished (Marples, 2016: 434-435).

## **4.4 Intervention in Syria**

Despite his intense efforts to secure Russia's immediate sphere of influence, Putin surprised the world by making a more ambitious move in 2015. By the summer of that year, it had become apparent that the outcome of the Syrian Civil War was not going to be in favor of Russia's interests. Fearing that it would be left out of the game that would determine the future of Syria, Russia launched a military operation in late September. This was the first out-of-area operation away from its *Near Abroad*, after years of absence from active intervention in international issues (Renz, 2016).

Syria has been a traditional ally to Russia since the Soviet period. Although this special relationship was put to test after the collapse of the Soviet Union,

Putin's rise to power in Russia and Bashar al-Assad's in Syria in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century reinvigorated the alliance between the two countries (Aghayev and Katman, 2012: 2068). Since Assad regime is Putin's last ally in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, Syria's strategic importance is profound. Furthermore, Syria hosts in the port of Tartus the only Russian naval base left abroad, which, along with the Sevastopol naval base, provides the Russian Navy the capability to operate in the Mediterranean Sea (Valenta and Friedman Valenta, 2016: 5).



**Figure 11:** Russian initial deployment and airstrikes in September 2015

Source: [http://iswresearch.blogspot.gr/2015\\_09\\_01\\_archive.html](http://iswresearch.blogspot.gr/2015_09_01_archive.html)

When the Arab Spring spread and reached Syria in 2011, a brutal Civil War broke out that put the Assad regime at risk. Various rebel groups, including

terrorist organizations, have been trying to overthrow the government and take power since then. From the beginning of the conflict, Russia has provided political support to the Syrian government, vetoing all six draft resolutions<sup>52</sup> in the UN Security Council, protecting Assad from military actions and sanctions against the Syrian government (United Nations, 2016). Equally important was the support provided when US President Obama threatened to attack Assad when he was accused of using chemical weapons against civilians, in the summer of 2013. Russia mediated to deescalate the crisis and even implied that it would invade the Baltic Counties if the US attacked Syria (Valenta and Friedman Valenta, 2016: 9-10).

Russian military forces begun deploying in government-controlled areas of Syria in late summer 2015 and by the end of September they had launched their first operations, as depicted in Figure 11. This action came as great surprise to the West, which did not consider a Russian out of area operation as possible at that time (Gordon, 2015). At the same period, Russia reached an agreement with Iran, Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah to exchange intelligence and jointly combat the Islamic State (Gordon, 2015; Bassam and Perry, 2015). The collaboration with Iran extended further and for some time Russian aircraft were operating from Iranian bases (MacFarquhar and Sanger, 2016). The intervention was mainly based on air bombings, targeting not only the Islamic State but also the opposition groups against the Syrian government. In order to support the operation, a large number of Russian Navy ships were periodically deployed to the East Mediterranean, including its only aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* (Kofman, 2016). Additionally, naval vessels in the Caspian Sea and the East Mediterranean

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<sup>52</sup> Five of them were also vetoed by China.

stoke targets in Syria using of *Kalibr* cruise missiles, occasionally overflying Iranian and Iraqi territory (Kramer and Barnard, 2016).

Most Western countries did not welcome the Russian involvement in Middle East, as their objectives in the area do not coincide<sup>53</sup>. Despite the fact that Russia is fighting against the Islamic State, at the same time it supports President Assad, against Western interests (Stent, 2016: 112-113). Russia's intervention was enough to shift the balance of power in the Civil War in favor of Assad. Through this intervention, Putin has managed to protect a valuable ally in the Middle East and to ensure that this time Russia's interests will be taken into account during the resolution process (Fyderek, 2015: 108).

In general, Russian engagement in Syria has proved to be successful until now. Putin took advantage of the US reluctance to intervene vigorously in the current crisis in Syria and made a decisive action that *de facto* brought Russia back to a region of pivotal US security interest. Not only did he secure Russia's interests in the Middle East, but also proved its ability in conducting military operations away from its borders. By making a step beyond its immediate *Near Abroad*, Moscow intends to show it has the military capability as well as the political will to play a key role in the international system, and it should be taken into consideration over other global security issues (Fyderek, 2015: 104-105).

## 4.5 The Renewed confrontation in Europe

Following Russia's military intervention in Ukraine in April 2014, the Russian - NATO relations have deteriorated and all cooperation so far was suspended. Since then, the military incidents between Russian and Western countries have

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<sup>53</sup> As in the Ukrainian case, Russia threatened to use tactical nuclear weapons, in order to defend its forces in Syria (Mercouris, 2016).

been significantly increased, as shown in Figure 12. The rivalry has expanded beyond Georgia and Ukraine to include other regions as well. In the North, the Baltic region and the North Sea have become areas of great tension. NATO considers future moves and plans to intervene in case of an aggressive action by Russia (Shlapak and Johnson, 2016: 1). Further in the South, the confrontation in the Black Sea has escalated, as the Russians react to the increased presence of US ships in the area after the invasion of Crimea (STRATFOR, 2016)

Certainly, the region where most attention is focused is the Nordic and the Baltic countries, where Russia and NATO have the most extensive direct borders. Russian military action in this region has risen to remind, in some degree, the Cold War era. Since 2014, unknown submarines have been spotted violating Swedish territorial waters and Russia has been accused for the incidents (Bender, 2015; Braw, 2015). Moreover, the Russian leadership has clearly warned Finland and Sweden that the prospect of joining NATO would be answered accordingly (Sharkov, 2016; Dyomkin and Forsell, 2016).

The provocations in the airspace have also reached an alarming level. During the last three years, NATO fighters have intercepted Russian jets 400 times in the Baltic Region, a number that greatly exceeds the aerial encounters before the Ukrainian Crisis (Sharkov, 2017a). Additionally, Russian Bombers have intensified their activity and have been engaged multiple times with NATO aircraft around Britain, reaching even as far as Portugal (Birnbaum, 2014).

NATO's most urgent concern in recent years is the security of the three Baltic Countries. Due to their proximity to Russia, their weak armed forces and the difficulty in sending reinforcements in time<sup>54</sup>, NATO has placed much effort in

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<sup>54</sup> Most NATO ground forces are stationed in Central Europe and the only land route to advance in the Baltic Countries is through the 110 to 150 km wide 'Kaliningrad corridor,' which Russia can encumber (Shlapak and Johnson, 2016: 4).

safeguarding them from a potential Russian attack. The concern is centered in confronting a future *Hybrid War* in the Baltics and deter the Russians from repeating the success they had in Ukraine (Radin, 2017: 1). In order to succeed in this effort NATO has increased its presence in the Baltics. The NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission has been reinforced in response to the increased Russian air activity (Clark et al., 2016: 8). More military exercises are conducted in the area and a new NATO reaction force, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), has been established (NATO, 2017). Recently the US has deployed a 4.000 men Armored Brigade in Poland, with forward elements in the Baltic States and Romania, in its largest US deployment in Europe since the end of the Cold War (Sharkov, 2017b; CBS News, 2017). Russia's response was clear with the Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov stating that, 'We see it as a threat to us. This is an action that threatens our interests [and] our security' (Smith-Spark and Shubert, 2017).

The other major region, where the confrontation is escalating, is the Black Sea. Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has invigorated its presence in the area by deploying more military forces in the Crimean Peninsula, including A2/AD elements and has plans to deploy *Iskander* SRBMs (Osborn, 2016). NATO reacted accordingly, as it considers the area a vital region for Euro-Atlantic security. The US reinforced its ship presence and conducted joint military exercises with other NATO countries, such as Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey aiming to 'send a clear message to any potential aggressor' (Toucas, 2017). In response, Russian fighters have repeatedly harassed US ships and airplanes in the area, such as in the cases of the destroyers *USS Donald* and *USS Porter* in 2016 and 2017 respectively (Borger, 2016; Watson and Shukla, 2017).



mutual frontiers in East Europe. Nevertheless, the antagonism is lately expanding to include accusations of Russian Cyber Warfare in order to influence elections and decision making in Western countries such as Germany, Britain and US (Wagstyl, 2016; Sawyer, 2016; Lipton, Sanger and Shane, 2016).

## 4.6 Overview

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the ascent of Vladimir Putin to power marked a new era for Russia. Gradually, Russian foreign policy shifted and Putin reacted more aggressively to confront the perceived threats from the West. Being a realist thinker, Putin was opposed to Western intervention in Russia's *Near Abroad* and intervened in order to prevent any further outside involvement in this area of special Russian interest. The ultimate objective was to reclaim Russia's former Superpower status that was lost after the Cold War (Fyderek, 2015: 104-105).

Putin used every means available and tried to develop new capabilities in order to achieve his foreign policy objectives. Russia's position as a permanent member at the UN Security Council, and its corresponding veto power, was used extensively in his effort to detain Western interventions. Furthermore, he did not hesitate to use the threat of nuclear retaliation several times, as Russia's nuclear arsenal remains the only military dimension that it can equally match the US (Rywkin, 2012: 234). Russian energy resources and Europe's dependence on them proved another useful tool in exercising pressure against the European countries. Additionally, other countries with similar interests were occasionally used as provisional allies. Last but not least Putin had to count on the Russian military, which he extensively modernized, in order to carry out his ambitious interventions abroad (Charap, 2016: 1-2).



The first aggressive reaction began with Georgia's ambition to escape from Moscow's control and join the West. This time Putin did not repeat the passive stance that deprived Russia of the Baltic Countries in 2004. Exploiting the Georgian attack to suppress the unrest in South Ossetia, Russian troops invaded the country and put an end to its perspective of joining NATO. The next intervention was when Ukraine tried to follow Georgia's path and strengthen its ties with the EU. Practicing a new form of military operations, *Hybrid Warfare*, Russia invaded and annexed the Crimean Peninsula and incited unrest in Eastern Ukraine. Moscow achieved to eliminate the prospect of Georgia's and Ukraine's NATO and EU integration, avoiding the prospect of large direct borders with the West (Matsaberidze, 2015: 80-84)

With its latest intervention in Syria, Russia managed to transcend its immediate periphery. The Syrian Civil War gave Putin the opportunity to demonstrate the power of Russia and the recovery of its ability to conduct long distance military operations. By this action, Putin tried to prove that Russia had surpassed the status of a regional power and could claim a global role, adding a part of Middle East in its sphere of influence.

In conclusion, Russia adopted a more aggressive foreign policy reacting to the perceived threats that led it to a security dilemma during the last two decades. Putin has clearly communicated that he will not tolerate any intervention against Russia's interests in its *Near Abroad* and beyond. These actions have escalated the NATO-Russia military antagonism in recent years, bringing up memories of the Cold War confrontation (Oliphant, 2016).

# Chapter 5 - Summary and Conclusion

*'For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.'*

*Isaac Newton*

The purpose of this research was not to justify Russian aggressive behavior and interventions, but to examine the driving factors that led the Russian leadership to resort to such actions, within the international environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Russian and Western actions as well as the structure of the post-Cold War international system were examined in the light of the Structural Realist paradigm. Furthermore, Jervis' theory on Misperception has proved a useful tool to understand contradicting perceptions that international actors develop about their own and other's behavior. From the research, it can be concluded that the Russian aggression in its *Near Abroad* resulted as a reaction to the past and ongoing behavior of the US and its allies, as Russian leaders perceived it.

Emerging as the absolute winners of the Cold War, the US and its European allies exploited their relative advantage after the decline of Soviet power. Eventually this new reality was expressed by various actions. Having no adequate opponent in the European continent, the West tried to increase its sphere of influence by expanding NATO and the EU to the East. In addition to this peaceful expansion, the US took advantage of its unrivaled dominance, conducting multiple military interventions that increased its global military presence, invoking international law as they pleased. The final act was the development of NATO's BMD in Europe, which has the potential to undermine Russia's deterrence capability. All these actions were perceived as clearly hostile

by Russian policymakers, as they opposed Russia's own regional and global interests. Being in a security dilemma, Moscow had to react to counter the worsening security environment.

Contrary to the predominance of liberalist ideas in the West, Realism tends to dominate Russian strategic thinking (Eitelhuber, 2009: 9). The wounds left after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, restricted, for many years, the country's ability to intervene decisively. When Putin felt strong enough, he tried to implement Russia's version of the *Monroe Doctrine*<sup>55</sup> in the *Near Abroad* (Skak, 2011: 138-154; Slobodchikoff, 2013). Using the Kosovo case as a precedent, Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, signaling the end of the inaction period in its periphery. Ukraine soon followed in 2014, in an effort to complete a buffer zone and cease the West's eastern expansion. The final act was the intervention in the Syrian Civil War, which allowed Putin to make the first step beyond the *Near Abroad*.

The means that Putin adopted were based mainly on internal balancing by expanding Russian's economic and military capabilities. Additionally, he made alliances with countries with similar interests, in an effort to strengthen his external balancing. In order to overcome Russia's relative military disadvantage compared to the US, Moscow had to be based on asymmetric means. *Hybrid Warfare*, A2/AD and the threat of nuclear retaliation were used extensively to achieve Russian objectives and deter any Western counteraction. Putin's main aim is to secure Russia's *Near Abroad* against external influence and to use it as a buffer zone with the West. Only then can he make the next step to reclaim Russia's former Great Power status and pursue for Russia an equal position in

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<sup>55</sup> The US foreign policy of opposing European intervention in the American continent, first introduced by President James Monroe in 1823 (US Department of State, 2017).

other global affairs, in the multipolar world system that Primakov had envisaged (Cohen, 1997: 3).

The intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was the turning point in Russia's relations with the West. The antagonism that emerged brought back memories from the Cold War period. Both sides have escalated the confrontation by rising the number of military exercises, troop and weapon deployments and provocative incidents. The mutual provocations have spread to include all areas of conflicting interests from the Arctic and the Baltic Countries in the North, to the Black sea and the Middle East to the South. Due to the relative power of the involved sides, this confrontation undermines international cooperation and destabilizes the current European and global security system.

As Putin has reversed Russia's declining course and has proved his determination to react aggressively, Russian security interests cannot be ignored in the future. After all, Russia remains one of the two major nuclear world powers, an ability that *de facto* gives it a considerable advantage as an actor in global security matters. It is apparent, that any further effort to expand NATO or the EU to the east will trigger a more aggressive Russian reaction. Moreover, the West has not proved ready or even willing to respond adequately to Russian aggressive actions, such as in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. As Mearsheimer (2014b: 87) argues, for the time being it is better for 'the United States and its allies [to] abandon their plan to westernize Ukraine [and Georgia] and instead aim to make [them] a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia.' Moreover, if the West attempts to reapproach Russia, it could play a stabilizing role in crucial global issues such as terrorism, the Syrian Civil War and Iran's nuclear agreement (Mearsheimer, 2014b: 89).

Although this research has sought to cover a variety of issues and events in Russia's reaction to the perceived Western threats, it has its limitations due to time and length constraints. The analysis was limited to the areas of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and the Middle East. Thus, other important issues, such as the emerging antagonism in the Arctic, the Russian involvement in Transnistria and the Central Asia states, were not covered at all or were briefly mentioned. Furthermore, the internal dynamics that have shaped the Russian foreign policy were not examined, as the focus was exclusively on external factors, which according to Structural Realism influence states' behavior. Additional research could cover these issues in more depth, in order to understand other factors that have influenced Russia's foreign policy actions or its perceptions of threat.

In conclusion, it is clear from the above analysis that in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the Russian foreign policy underwent a decisive transformation. Western behavior in the past two and a half decades was perceived as threatening to Russia's interests and triggered a dynamic reaction. The Russian objective is to influence and play a more active role in the future European and international system and Putin's strategy is continuously pursuing this goal. The new US administration, under President Donald Trump, seems to have the potential to change the global US security priorities and its relationship with Russia. Although future actions and results cannot be easily predicted, the foreign policy that he will adopt will have a critical impact on Russia's effort to reemerge as a Great Power in the future.

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