

## Aggressive Elites

### A Policy of Quiet Containment for Russia's Diversionary Tactics

#### PIPS White Paper 9.4: *Executive Summary*

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Russia uses new generation warfare, a combination of covert subversive operations and direct state involvement in the military, against the United States and its allies since the Soviet era. However, current policy responses neglect the role of elite dynamics in Russian decision-making. While political and economic analyses are necessary for understanding Russia's motivations, examining the role of elite dynamics has important implications for identifying policies to counter Russian aggression. As elites become increasingly dependent on diversionary conflict to maintain power, the existing policy of sanctions and military exercises in Eastern Europe will likely further Russian aggression, thereby exacerbating long-term global insecurity. Instead, a policy of "quiet containment" can limit opportunities for Russian elites to incite future conflict through indirect signaling, increase the costs of Russian aggression through proxies, and reassure allies through military advising.

#### *Russia's Threat to U.S. Interests*

Russia uses disinformation to sow distrust in the U.S. system of democracy and global governance and uses conventional military tactics to consolidate its own power by exploiting conflicts. Although President Vladimir Putin understands the weakness of Russia relative to the West, he consistently demonstrates the disruptive capabilities of a declining power through aggressive international policies. Putin's actions challenge the current world order and U.S. interests regarding the spread of democratic values.

- *Undermining Democratic Governance in the West* Russia weaponizes information by using cyberattacks, social media messaging, and internet trolls to undermine U.S. political legitimacy. Russia also supports parties on far ends of the political spectrum that are sympathetic to its interests. As a result, the West faces a backlash against liberal values and democracy in both the conventional and cyber realms.
- *Exploiting Political Fractures to Consolidate Power Globally* Russia militarily exploits divisions in the Middle East and the post-Soviet region to open political space for its interests, destabilizing the geopolitical landscape in the process. The Kremlin supports authoritarian regimes in the Middle East regardless of poor governance or human rights

abuses and conducts politically-driven military interventions in the post-Soviet space.

Russia seeks to restore superpower status outside the bounds of Western values and institutions. Achieving this goal requires economic decline in the West and an unstable Western geopolitical landscape. Through assaults on Western democracy and use of military power in regions of strategic importance, Moscow seeks to limit U.S. power projection.

### *A Needed Emphasis on Elites*

Current analyses of Russian aggression portray the government as either geopolitically insecure, inherently expansionist, or domestically vulnerable. These characterizations provide an incomplete understanding of Russia's motivations, limiting U.S. policy-makers to a choice between either appeasement or overt, rigorous deterrence.

Prevailing explanations for Russia's actions overlook the role of elite dynamics in the Kremlin's decision making. Putin recently initiated a process of empowering new leaders within the *siloviki*, a loyal military elite. As a result of this transition, power is consolidating around Putin. The formation of this new elite structure is increasing anti-Western political attitudes among elites and greater domestic legitimacy of the Putin regime. As Russian elites seek to justify their rule in the face of declining economic, social, and diplomatic status, they are more likely to employ aggressive tactics against the West as an alternative source of power.

### *Policy Recommendation: Quiet Containment*

The United States should pursue a policy of quiet containment that increases the cost of Russian aggression without further inciting elites to engage in violent diversionary conflict. Quiet containment seeks to reduce Moscow's ability to use perceived Western aggression as a justification for its own diversionary spectacles. The aim of quiet containment is to deprive Russia of pretext for warmongering, while providing support for U.S. allies.

- *The Goldilocks Principle: The Dangers of Too Much or Too Little* To ensure there are checks on Russian power projection, the United States must find a balance between excessive interference and idling in the face of an aggressive power. A rigorous containment policy risks playing into Russian elites' diversionary political strategy. On the other hand, a policy of appeasement risks allowing Russian aggression to continue, setting a precedent that the rules of the international order may be violated.

- *Quiet but Not Silent* Quiet containment policy requires indirect signaling in response to Russian actions. It uses proxies and intermediaries as backchannels to hinder Russia in conventional and unconventional arenas and provides support to at-risk allies through military advising and technological development. Indirect signaling imposes costs on Russian elites without playing into their diversionary logic, while allies acting as proxies can initiate the necessary processes to penalize Russia for international abuses. Because weapons sales would play into Russia's diversionary logic, the United States should pursue

a policy of advising and training vulnerable U.S. allies.

### *Opportunities for Quiet Containment*

The United States should apply quiet containment policies in areas of current or potential Russian involvement. Russia remains a prominent actor in Syria, Ukraine, nuclear policy, cyberspace, and the Arctic.

In Syria, for example, a quiet containment policy would prompt Washington to work with U.S. allies in international organizations to indict key Syrian regime figures for war crimes at the ICC. In doing so, the United States would signal that it is unwilling to tolerate Russia's continued support of the Assad regime. At the same time, the United States should work with Turkey to maintain safe zones for moderate rebels and civilians along its northern border with Syria. Quiet containment would work in a similarly indirect-yet-firm manner in other areas where the United States must counter Russian aggression.

As Russia continues to disrupt the international order, it is crucial to understand the role of elite dynamics in Russia's foreign policy decision-making. The United States should consider a policy of quiet containment that imposes costs on Russian aggression without playing into the Kremlin's diversionary logic. Quiet containment would be an effective U.S. foreign policy tool in numerous areas where Russia is still a prominent actor, and its underlying principles can be applied to future conflict areas.