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Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops: Why Hasn't the Administration Responded?
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Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished members of the Committee, Americans are rightly outraged by reports of Russia placing bounties on the deaths of US military personnel in Afghanistan. These reports, as heinous as they are, underscore a broader challenge confronting the West: Russia's pattern of escalating, aggressive international conduct. As we address this extremely troubling intelligence, we should also be assessing the effectiveness of US policy in terms of deterring, countering, and containing the full spectrum of Moscow's malign ambitions and actions.

Under President Putin, Russia turned away from the liberal, rules-based international order and the democratic principles we hoped it would embrace in an enduring way following the end of the Cold War.

Instead Moscow has adopted a revanchist agenda intended to reanimate Russian hegemony, if not full control, over the space of the former Soviet Union and re-establish Russia as a global great power. Towards these ends, Moscow has worked to undermine the cohesion of the Western Alliance, disrupt the politics of our nation and that of our allies and partners, and promote a nationalist authoritarian ideology as a replacement for liberal democracy.

Towards these ends, Moscow has applied the full suite of Russian power to weaken and dominate its neighbors: military and para-military forces, economic and energy embargoes, political subterfuge, information and cyber-warfare, separatist groups, and frozen conflicts.

This campaign history spans over a decade and a half. It leverages the products of a ten year military modernization plan that has significantly upgraded Russian conventional and nuclear forces. Over that period, that campaign has become steadily more provocative, brazen, and aggressive.

It includes Moscow's attempt to subvert Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, the 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia – a NATO ally, the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2014 invasion of Ukraine and the continued occupation of Georgian and Ukrainian territory.

In addition to direct attacks on the territory of its neighbors, Russia regularly conducts assertive naval and air patrols and harasses allied military aircraft and ships. It recently updated its military doctrine to lower the threshold of nuclear conflict.

Russia has also proven itself to be notorious in the realm of subterfuge and assassination. In 2016, Russian intelligence attempted a coup in Montenegro to prevent that nation from joining NATO. Moscow has undertaken assassinations in the United Kingdom and Germany and in other countries it has hunted down and killed those critical of its regime and governance.

As the committee has documented, Russia has meddled in the elections of not only our allies and partners, but even in our own elections.

In Syria, Russian ground and air forces support a regime that has used chemical weapons against its own people. Just this week Russian aircraft executed indiscriminate strikes against schools, hospitals and markets in Idlib province. In Libya, Moscow has recently reinforced its para-military forces supporting renegade General Khalifa Haftar with air defense systems and aircraft. Moscow's interventions in Syria and Libya feature the deployment of para-military forces from the Russia's Wagner Group. In February 2018 in Syria, Russian para-military forces, supported by tanks, attacked outposts known to be manned by US special operations forces. This unprecedented attack on US forces was launched despite warnings from U.S. commanders in the region to their Russian counterparts.

In light of all this, recent reports of Russia's bounties for the deaths of American soldiers in Afghanistan are disturbingly consistent with what has been a steady escalation of Russian international interference, provocation and aggression – a campaign that pursues 20th century objectives leveraging 21st century techniques and old fashioned brute force.

Calibrating the West's Response

The West's response to Russia's assertiveness over this last decade and a half has consisted of limited incremental escalations of economic sanctions and military deployments complemented by half-hearted and short lived diplomatic isolation.

This incrementalism conveys hesitancy and a lack of unity and determination on behalf of the United States and the Western Alliance. It has failed to convince Putin to reverse course. Indeed, it may have actually emboldened him. Continued incrementalism not only promises continued confrontation with Russia, it increases the risk of conflict, both that intentionally driven by Putin and unintentional conflict catalyzed by Putin's growing overconfidence.

US strategy regarding Putin's Russia needs to be calibrated to this reality. Properly calibrated engagement entails exploring avenues through which to modulate tension, including arms control and means through which return to Georgia and Ukraine territories that continue to be occupied by Russia.

Calibrated engagement will also require more immediate and long term measures to deter and counter Russian aggression and provocation. Toward those ends, US strategy toward Russia should include the following priorities:

Increasing the Alliance's Readiness for High Intensity Conflict: Russia's military modernization efforts, increased concentration of forces on its eastern frontier, large-scale military exercises, and a more aggressive nuclear doctrine have increased the risk of high intensity warfare in Europe, the like of which we have not had to face since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Some tangible progress has been made on this front. The United States ended two decades of draw-downs in Europe by returning a limited contingent of heavy combat units to that continent and increasing US weapons stocks there. As part of this force posture shift, the US army has deployed to Poland on a rotational basis a US armored brigade and army combat aviation. Both the Obama and Trump administrations are to be commended for that presence in Poland, as should our NATO Allies for deploying multinational battalions to each of the Baltic States as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and for recent progress toward meeting their commitments to spend the equivalent of 2% of their respective GDP on defense.

However, the force balance along the NATO's eastern frontier remains disturbingly in favor of Russia. To address this challenge, Canada and our European Allies must continue to increase their military capability and readiness. Their investments should aim to address longstanding NATO shortfalls, including air and missile defense, intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance and long-range fires, among others. Time is long overdue for the Allies to carry their share of the security burden.

As the leader of NATO, there is more the US can and should do. Washington should transition the rotational deployment of its armored brigade combat team in Poland to a permanent presence. The division level headquarters the US plans to place in Poland should also be a permanent stationing. This would increase the combat effectiveness our forces in Europe, underscore US commitment to NATO, and deepen the operational ties between US and Polish forces in ways useful for local contingencies and those beyond Europe. The US should also consider permanently stationing to the Baltics states a special forces element to help reinforce the defense of that region.

The President of the United States should also reconsider his recent decision to withdraw US forces from Germany, a decision that portends to reduce military US presence in Europe when the threat posed by Russia is increasing. It unnecessarily weakens a key bilateral relationship in the Western Alliance, including our ability to operate at maximum effectiveness with German and other allied forces. It undercuts NATO's ability to reinforce the Alliance's eastern front. It communicates a lack of commitment to European security that President Putin will surely relish. (Indeed, we should not forget that USG plans announced in 2004 to withdraw forces from Europe were followed by Russia's 2006 invasion of Georgia and similar USG plans announced in 2012 were followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014.)

Supporting the Sovereignty and Transatlantic Aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine: The NATO Alliance, led by the United States, should substantively embrace and support the

membership aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia. NATO enlargement is one of the great success stories of the post-Cold War era. It expanded the zone of peace and security in Europe and strengthened the Alliance's military capability.

The recent elevation of Ukraine's relationship with NATO to that of Enhanced Opportunities Partner will deepen their cooperation, but both Ukraine and Georgia should be provided a clear path to NATO membership, recognizing it will take time to meet the Alliance's political and military requirements. Perpetuating their position in a zone of geopolitical ambiguity – a grey zone in Europe's strategic landscape – only animates President Putin's sense of opportunity to reassert dominion over these two European democracies.

Countering Russian Hybrid-Warfare – The Information Domain: A key and increasingly assertive element of Putin's campaign of disruption against the West has been its generation and dissemination abroad of false and divisive information to manipulate public perceptions and to foment political tension if not social and political unrest. While the United States, our allies and partners and our key multinational institutions, including NATO and the European Union, have become more aware and better equipped to expose Russian disinformation efforts, the West, including Washington, remains very much on the defensive.

The United States essentially unilaterally disarmed itself in the information realm in 1999 when Washington shut down the United States Information Agency. This multi-billion-dollar agency and its staff of over 10,000 professionals was dedicated to the mission of public diplomacy. It was established "to understand, inform, and influence foreign publics in the promotion of the national interest" and to "streamline the U.S. Government's overseas information programs and make them more effective." USIA was our frontline sentinel on the information front during the Cold War and a critical element in our victory in that era. After USIA closed its doors, its founding purpose has only become more important and more complex as evidenced by current events.

Congress should consider recreating a modernized version of USIA so that the United States can return to the offense in this increasingly dynamic and fast-paced dimension of international affairs. Succeeding in this realm is critical to reinforcing the resilience of our alliances and partnerships. It can and should play an important role in our efforts to shape the internal political dynamics of our adversaries – leveraging the power of public engagement, democratic principles, and truth to undercut the authority of authoritarian regimes and to give hope, motivation and support to those yearning and struggling for freedom.

Increasing Economic Sanctions on Russia: Current economic sanctions imposed on Russia have proven insufficient. For six years, Moscow has refused to withdraw from Crimea and eastern Ukraine. It continues to occupy territories of Georgia. Its provocations against these and other Western democracies have continued and escalated. Today's sanctions may be hurting the Russian economy, especially in the context of low oil prices, but if their intended outcome has been to deter Russian aggression, they have failed by that measure.

The West, led by the United States, should move to escalate those measures from targeted sanctions aimed against specific Russian individuals and firms to broader and more comprehensive sectoral sanctions against the Russian financial and energy sectors.

Strengthening Western Cohesion and Unity: These aforementioned actions will only be fully effective if they are complemented by unity in purpose and action among the democratic community of nations – and particularly those of the Transatlantic Community. That unity will require steadfast US leadership and commitment to the principles and institutions that were critical to the West’s victory in the Cold War and since then has been responsible for the expansion and sustainment of freedom, security and prosperity across Europe.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCaul, as the committee evaluates reports on Russian bounties against US military personnel, I would urge it to also assess the overall effectiveness of US strategy regarding Russia over the last decade and determine how the United States should calibrate its efforts to more effectively deter Russia’s escalating malign conduct and aggression and foster a more stable, if not more cooperative relationship, with Moscow. The time is long overdue for an unequivocal US policy.