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VISIONARIOS

Visionario: A Series of Unfortunate Events

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ABSTRACT

Visioning is a planning tool for thinking about events that could happen in the future. Visionarios are not forecasts or predictions. They are plausible descriptions of future conditions developed for helping decision makers prepare for whatever the future may bring. This visionario tests several assumptions about the new president of the United States, Donald J. Trump, his potential behaviors, and his relationship with Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. The visionario explores a series of possible unfortunate and unanticipated events with the potential to lead to war between the United States and Russia. However, with visionarios, thinking through the consequences of alternative actions could prevent potential catastrophes from occurring if used appropriately by policymakers as part of a foresight component of foreign policy.

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In the autumn of 2018, the world awoke to the startling news that President Vladimir Putin had invaded Poland. This came amidst months of tension between leaders of the United States and the West over an ultimatum issued by Putin to Eastern European NATO countries formerly under the influence or control of the Soviet Union in areas known as the “near abroad”: Quit NATO, or else face the consequences. This was the third major shock to the West in three years. In 2016, the citizens of the United Kingdom elected to exit the European Union, or “Brexit,” and the people of the United States elected Donald J. Trump as their president.

In secret communiqués, Putin explained his directive was a response to the U.S. Monroe Doctrine of 1823 that ensured no European power would rival the United States in the Americas. For Putin, Russia needed its own version to legitimize its own sphere of influence in those “near abroad” areas. Putin knew the Monroe Doctrine was at the heart of the Spanish-American War in 1898, where the United States wrested control of Cuba and Puerto Rico away from Spain, and served as a backdrop to President John F. Kennedy's decision, in 1963, to risk nuclear war with the Soviets, a risk assessed by Kennedy at the time, as between one-third to one half of “going nuclear.” (Allison, 2012)

This invasion stemmed from a series of events that began with the election of President Trump in 2016 and his ambivalence about the U.S. commitment to NATO. It was reinforced by a set of miscalculations, unfavorable decision making, intergroup dynamics, perception and misperception issues, and a warm relationship between Putin and Trump that ultimately collided with Russian and American national interests. In fact, that friendship mirrored how Kaiser Wilhelm II and Czar Nicholas's family ties obscured national interest agendas that senior military and political advisors pursued in Germany and Russia prior to the First World War.

President Trump's election on 2016 brought with it deep political divisions. In addition to unified Democratic opposition on both domestic and foreign issues, mainstream Republicans, led by House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI), were in opposition to several of Trump's foreign policy approaches, the most basic of which was what some called his efforts to "reconfigure" U.S.–Russian relations. Trump's very public ambivalence about NATO involved efforts to water down U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the American Treaty, which requires a collective security response from member nations to a post war attack situation. U.S. Republican officials could not have been more displeased. U.S. Senator John McCain (R-AR) warned Trump against a structural shift in American–Russian relations. However, Baltic state leaders were chilled to the bone when Newt Gingrich reported to the *National Review* that "Estonia is in the suburbs of St. Petersburg. The Russians aren't gonna necessarily come across the border militarily. The Russians are gonna do what they did in Ukraine...I'm not sure I would risk a nuclear war over some place which is the suburbs of St. Petersburg. I think we have to think about what does this stuff mean." (Nordlinger, 2016).

Washington insiders were fearful a Trump presidency would be associated with a more aggressive Putin foreign policy. Behind the scenes, Putin had approached President Trump about a *quid pro quo* arrangement where Russian political and military support would be withdrawn from Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in exchange for Trump's agreement to accept Russian predominance in eastern Europe, part of its "near abroad" areas. In addition, Putin told Trump he would promote Chinese and Russian economic development in Iran and if necessary use negative sanctions to compel the Iranians and their main proxies in Syria, Hezbollah and the Revolutionary Guards Corps, al Quds, to withdraw their support for Assad. Putin would also support a strong Iranian voice in final talks about a post Assad regime and its composition, and promote a Russian–Iranian–Houthi axis in Yemen where the war between Houthi separatists, supporters of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the Saudi-led, U.S.-backed coalition had fought war to a stalemate.

For Trump, his acquiescence to Russian revanchism in Eastern Europe allowed him to claim a prize that had eluded his Democratic rivals for years—a resolution

of the crisis in Syria with the support of the “moderate” Free Syrian Army and other Syrian secular nationalists. The backbone of the new post-Assad government consisted of secular nationalists who had supported the revolution in al Darr’a in 2011 as a fierce struggle for freedom and who now worked freely with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (PYD) primarily in the north to destroy the network of Islamic Jihadist groups in Syria. To do so, Trump put American boots on the ground and took muscular action against outside supporters in states such as Kuwait and Qatar, threatening to impose trade sanctions against those states should monies to Islamic Jihadist groups continue to flow into Syria. Trump ignored President Erdogan’s protests about working with the Kurds and the problems “West Kurdistan” in Syria might pose to Turkey to support this arrangement.

At a functional level, the plan was to allow Russia to reassert its influence and control over the Baltic states, to recreate the condition of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as satellite states. After that was accomplished, Putin had explained to Trump, the plan would require pivoting from the Baltics, Finland, and Poland to the areas southwards towards the Black and Caspian Seas to reassert influence, if not total control, in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, states marked by political unrest, religious and cultural differences, and “inter-civilizational fault lines” (Huntington, 1996), as well as occasional violence against Russian interests.

Both Trump and Putin assumed President Erdogan, already alienated by the American position about Syrian–Kurdish collaboration, would be unable to turn to Russia to press his case when Russian political and military operations in those areas materialized. What this plan also offered was an incentive to the Chinese to support the plan in exchange for a veto of a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Russian actions in the Baltics. The Chinese were given greater leeway to promote their economic policies in Africa, and carving out a broader tripartite economic regime that articulated specific spheres of economic influence with flexibility for particularly desirable markets for the United States, Russia, and China.

All seemed to be well in terms of the plan, and it was in August 2017 that Putin decided to act on his covert plan. In a coordinated action that involved tanks, Russian troops, and air cover, the Russians launched attacks against the three Baltic States. Resistance, at least at first, was minimal, and crack Russian troops were able to secure positions in those countries in 72 hours. In one fell swoop, this operation put Russian troops at the border of Poland and Finland and it also posed a new security threat to Belarus on its northern border with Lithuania.

But here, plans began to go wrong for Trump: Within hours after those military actions, Putin issued an ultimatum to all central European powers that were part of NATO. He told them to begin the process of leaving NATO immediately or face the prospect of an invasion. Trump was enraged, lashing

out at Putin on his Twitter account that Putin was a backstabbing duplicitous leader who had betrayed Trump's efforts to broker good relations. Within hours, Trump put U.S. forces on alert status, changing the U.S. military's DefCon status. In reaction, Western governments and China frantically called an emergency session of the U.N. Security Council for consultations. While Putin awaited the reply of leadership in those NATO countries, NATO was pressed to invoke Article Five of the American Treaty which required a collective response to this act of war. President Trump, who wanted to score a victory in Syria and who had agreed with Putin to acquiesce to Russian plans was now afraid to bow to Republican and Democratic pressure to react militarily against the Russians because Putin would leak the agreement.

The United Nations called an emergency session of the Security Council and a legally binding Security Council resolution offered by the British to condemn Putin's aggression and demand a return to the pre-conflict *status quo ante* was vetoed by both the Chinese and the Russians. NATO was in complete disarray as the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) awaited a response from President Trump to implement plans that had been designed long ago to counter and contain Russian aggression. Trump decided to address the U.N. in person and launched a verbal attack against Putin stating he was "mentally unbalanced due to advanced syphilis," even though later there was found no basis for such a claim.

Two events in short order made the situation even worse. First, a group of 20 or so Latvian insurgents set fires to cars in front of the Russian embassy in Riga and threw Molotov cocktails at the building. The Russian guards shot those insurgents and FSB agents who had previously infiltrated into Latvia, and began to round up suspected collaborators throughout Riga. In the process, egregious human rights violations occurred with women and children abused and killed. Second, Poland's government issued an official declaration condemning in the strongest terms this example of Russian revanchism, reasserting Poland's independence from the Russians and its commitment to NATO. Over the next three days, the remaining Eastern European members of NATO—the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania—all followed suit. The stage had been set for wider conflagration with two clear camps in opposition and all awaited Trump's next decision.

The Trump White House continued to claim the "Putin mental unbalanced due to syphilis" claim in large part due to Putin's betrayal of the original plan and the stress associated with crisis decision-making dynamics. NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR), under pressure from the German, French, and British governments to respond, and with the British having already sent assistance to the Baltic States independently in the forms of arms and advisors smuggled over the Polish border, implemented a full scale alert and mobilization for NATO troops in Poland. President

Trump's inappropriate responses in the face of Putin's aggression had either obscured or made it impossible to communicate effectively in a timely way with SACEUR about the role American troops would play in this changing environment and, as a result, American troops under NATO command were part of this mobilization in Poland.

Putin, not realizing that provisions for removing American troops from the immediate battle zone had not been fully implemented, was furious at the response of the NATO European countries and decided to make an example of Poland. Historical animosities between Poland and Russia helped amplify feelings of rage on both sides, and on the night of October 14, 2018, the Russians invaded Poland with heavy tanks and troops to march on Warsaw. In the ensuing battles, American troops were killed and both Republicans and Democrats clamored for the U.S. Congress to declare war on Russia. Trump's vindictive responses continued to be inappropriate. He had been outmaneuvered by Putin and now by an across-the-political-spectrum opposition in the U.S. Government. The United States and Russia were at war.

Notes on contributors

Richard J. Chasdi: Before joining Walsh College as an Associate Professor in September 2013, Dr. Chasdi taught at Wayne State University and the University of Windsor. His B.A. is from Brandeis University, his M.A. is from Boston College, and his Ph.D. is from Purdue University in Political Science. Dr. Chasdi has a long and distinguished career in consulting and international problem solving in the security arena, in particular international conflict resolution and mediation. Dr. Chasdi was a Distinguished Fellow at the Project on National Security Reform (PNSR) in Washington, DC.

Sheila R. Ronis is Chair of the Department of Management at Walsh College and serves as the Director of the Center for Complex and Strategic Decisions, holding a special term appointment with Argonne National Laboratory University of Chicago. She is president of The University Group, Inc., a management consulting firm and think tank. Dr. Ronis is the former chair of the Vision Working Group of the Project on National Security Reform (PNSR). Dr. Ronis earned a Bachelor of Science in Physics, Mathematics, and Education. Her M.A. and Ph.D. are from The Ohio State University in Large Social System Behavior.

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