Russia Security Update: December 22, 2015-January 5, 2016

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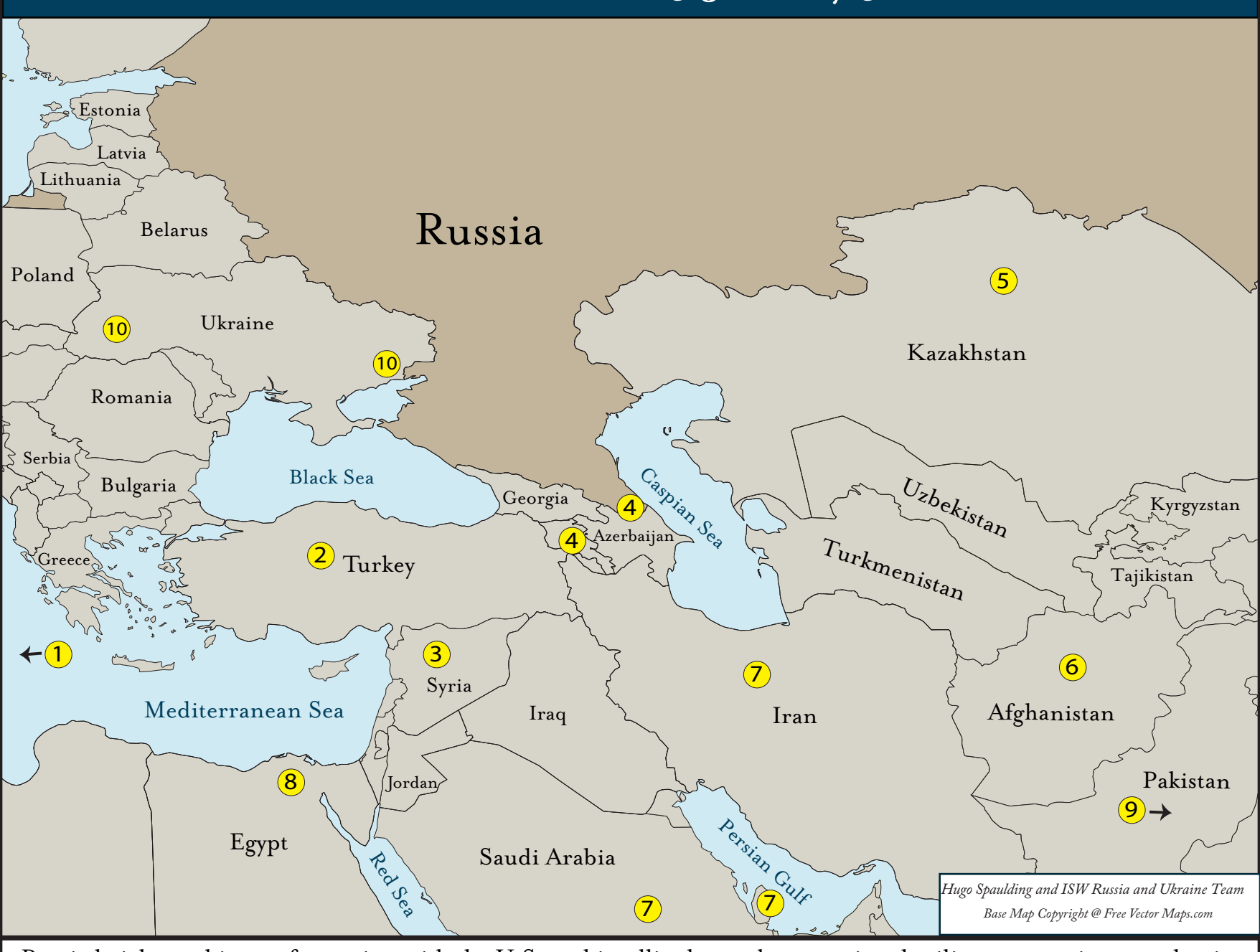

Russia heightened its confrontation with the U.S. and its allies beyond conventional military aggression, conducting information, economic, and possible cyber operations. President Vladimir Putin instituted a new national security strategy outlining Russia's primary security objectives and threats. Russia accused the U.S. and its partners of conducting multimodal warfare in an effort to contain Russia's resurgence as a great power, a core objective in its updated strategy. Moscow also suggested that U.S. efforts to compete with Russia provoked the war in eastern Ukraine and allowed ISIS to expand. The accusations in the new strategy represent Russia's disinformation doctrine of reflexive control, which the Kremlin employs to both disguise itself as a besieged rather than an aggressive actor and to preempt assertive Western military action. Russia escalated economic disputes with Ukraine as Kyiv took a landmark step toward European integration with the January 1 launch of an EU free trade agreement. Ukraine accused Russia of inflicting a major blackout in western Ukraine in an unprecedented cyberattack on December 23. If confirmed, the attack would demonstrate a new Russian asymmetric capability amid an ongoing conflict between the two countries over power supplies to occupied Crimea. Russia continued to drive its confrontation with Turkey with the imposition of additional economic sanctions and the high-profile invitation of a pro-Kurdish Turkish opposition leader to Moscow. Russia meanwhile continued to pursue deeper security integration with its former Soviet allies with newly completed air defense deals and to develop military trade ties with countries beyond the region, including Egypt and India, as a means to project global Russian influence.

1 **United States.** 31 DEC: President Vladimir Putin signed a new Russian national security strategy with heightened rhetoric about the threats posed by the U.S. and its allies. The strategy criticized the U.S. and EU for inciting the armed conflict in Ukraine through an "unconstitutional coup" while intimating that the U.S. aided the rise of ISIS by opposing Assad. The strategy also accuses the U.S. and its allies of applying "political, economic, military and informational pressure" on Russia as a "policy of containment."

2 **Turkey.** 23 DEC: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with pro-Kurdish Turkish opposition leader Selahattin Demirtas in Moscow amid deteriorating Russian-Turkish relations. Lavrov said that Russia was prepared to "actively cooperate" with Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq to fight ISIS and "other extremist groups."

30 DEC: Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev signed a decree banning Turkish companies from operating in the Russian construction and tourism industries.

03 JAN: A Turkish hacking group targeted the social media profile of Russia's communication minister, posting images of Turkish flags and a warplane. The attack follows a series of cyberattacks in December that reportedly disrupted traffic to over 300,000 Turkish websites claimed by the hacking group Anonymous, which echoed Russia's allegation that Ankara trades oil with ISIS.

3 **Syria.** 23 DEC: Amnesty International found evidence indicating that Russia used unguided bombs near civilian areas and indiscriminate cluster munitions during its ongoing air campaign in Syria.

4 **Caucasus.** 23 DEC, 05 JAN: Russia and Armenia signed an agreement to create a joint air defense system in the Caucasus during a defense minister conference for the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States bloc. Russia announced that an additional group of MiG-29 fighter jets would be deployed to Armenia in the second half of 2016 to support the former Soviet republic's air defenses.

29 DEC: Up to three militants opened fire on a group of visitors at a UNESCO heritage site in Dagestan in the North Caucasus, killing one Russian border guard and injuring eleven other individuals. ISIS's regional affiliate Wilayat Qawqaz claimed the attack while Russian law enforcement reports add further indication of an ISIS link.

5 **Kazakhstan.** 23 DEC: Russia announced the completed delivery of free S-300 long range surface-to-air missile systems to Kazakhstan in a deal Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu called Russia's "main contribution" to an unimplemented joint air defense system negotiated in 2013.

6 **Afghanistan.** 23, 29 DEC: President Vladimir Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan said that Russia maintained "channels for exchanging information" with the Taliban and shared a common interest with group in countering ISIS in Afghanistan. Putin's envoy later indicated that Russia may support the easing of U.N. Security Council sanctions against the Taliban as a means to facilitate national reconciliation.

7 **Persian Gulf.** 25 DEC: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed to have "reached an understanding" with his Qatari counterpart in Moscow on ways to facilitate Syrian peace talks despite continued disagreement about the "legitimacy" of the Assad regime.

28 DEC: Russia removed most of Iran's low-enriched uranium and delivered natural uranium in return, a move U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry praised as "one of the most significant steps" in the implementation of Iran's July nuclear deal.

04 JAN: Diplomatic sources reported to Russian state media that Moscow was prepared to host and mediate talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia following a break in diplomatic relations between the Middle Eastern powers.

8 **Egypt.** 30 DEC: A Russian state helicopter manufacturer confirmed that Russia signed an agreement with Egypt over the delivery of 46 attack helicopters for Egypt's *Mistral*-class amphibious assault ships as part of the countries' deepening partnership.

9 **India.** 23-24 DEC: Russia reached a series of defense industry and energy agreements with its historical ally India during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first state visit to Russia, where he met with President Vladimir Putin.

10 **Ukraine.** 22 DEC: An armored group of Russian-backed separatists occupied the uncontrolled village of Kominternove east of the strategic government-held port city of Mariupol, reportedly in retaliation for Ukraine's occupation of nearby uncontrolled villages earlier in December.

23 DEC: A province in western Ukraine suffered a severe blackout, which Ukraine blamed on a Russian cyberattack. Cyber security analysts later found evidence that the incident was the result of a cyberattack, potentially marking the first example of a major power outage caused by hacking. The suspected attack comes amidst severe blackouts in Russian-controlled Crimea caused by disruptions in power lines from southern Ukraine.

30 DEC: The leaders of France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia agreed in a phone call to extend the expiring "Minsk II" ceasefire agreement for eastern Ukraine into 2016.

01-02 JAN: A landmark EU-Ukraine free trade agreement came into effect on 01 JAN as part of Ukraine's EU Association Agreement. Russia's finance ministry announced plans to file a lawsuit in an English court against Ukraine for its failure to pay back a $3 billion Russian debt, which Ukraine incurred in 2013 as compensation for then-President Viktor Yanukovych's decision to turn down an EU Association Agreement. Russia and Ukraine terminated trade in food products in tat-for-tat sanctions related to the EU free trade agreement.