



## Russian Approaches to Competition

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## Abstract

Russian strategy is best characterized as offensive, seeking to revise the status quo, resulting in an activist foreign policy. The strategy does not eschew selective engagement in areas of mutual interest, but it is not premised on accommodation, concessions, or acceptance of the current balance of power. Instead, it emphasizes building the military means necessary for direct competition, and using them to enable indirect approaches for pursuing state objectives. Direct means range from conventional and nuclear force modernization, expansion of force structure in the European theater, exercises, brinkmanship, and use of force to attain vital interests. They deter US responses, threaten escalation, and create freedom of maneuver for Russian foreign policy. These are principally ways of compressing the opponent, and focusing on the main theater in the competition, which for Moscow is Europe. Indirect means in turn include military deployments abroad to peripheral theaters, covert action, use of proxies and mercenary groups, political warfare and information confrontation. These instruments are interrelated, with direct approaches, tied closely to military capability or classical forms of deterrence, enabling the indirect approach, which is the principal way by which Moscow pursues political aims. The logic of Russian strategy is that absent the ability to generate strong economic or technological means, Moscow is best served with approaches that reduce US performance by disorganizing its opponent's efforts, reducing cohesion, and employing asymmetric means in the competition.

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# Executive Summary

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Scholars and analysts debate the extent to which Russia has a grand strategy, whether Russian strategy is deliberate, or more emergent. Russian elites are often portrayed as opportunistic, yet this speaks more to the activist and revisionist characteristics of Russian foreign policy. Leaders use defined political objectives to discern opportunities, calculate risks, or opportunity costs. Successful strategy is often flexible, adapting to the changing environment, disproved assumptions, and the actions of other actors. Without resolving the debate on whether Russia has a grand strategy, or is capable of executing one, this report provides a primer on Russian approaches to strategic competition. It engages with primary Russian sources, the Western analytical debate on Russian approaches, and the drivers of Russian behavior.

The broader drivers of Russian strategy reflect a quest for status, often beyond the state's economic or technological foundations of power, and a desire for geopolitical space where Russian interests predominate. Moscow sees the US as its main rival, seeking to reduce American influence in international politics, and especially in regions where it has vital interests. Meanwhile the Russian leadership perceives the international operating environment as one of increasing competitiveness and instability, which offers both risks and opportunities.

Russian strategy is best characterized as offensive, seeking to revise the status quo, resulting in an activist foreign policy. The strategy does not eschew selective engagement in areas of mutual interest, but it is not premised on accommodation, concessions, or acceptance of the current balance of power. Instead, it emphasizes building the military means necessary for direct competition, and using them to enable more indirect means of advancing state objectives. The direct approach invests in means such as conventional and nuclear force modernization, expansion of force structure in the European theater, exercises, brinkmanship, and use of force to attain vital interests. They deter US responses, threaten escalation, and lend coercive backing to Russian foreign policy. Indirect means in turn can include military deployments abroad to peripheral theaters, covert action, use of proxies and mercenary groups. Political warfare and information confrontation fall into the indirect category as well. These instruments are interrelated, with direct approaches, tied closely to military capability or classical forms of deterrence, enabling the indirect approach.

A further parsing of Russian approaches categorizes them into forceful and non-forceful means, though the distinction may admittedly be in the eye of the beholder. Nonetheless, prominent Russian concepts employ such distinctions. Forceful means speak to those that primarily rely on the coercive utility of military power, advanced conventional and traditional nuclear capabilities. Non-forceful means involve a range of political-diplomatic, informational,

legal, economic, and other forms of competition (though backed by the threat of force). The logic of Russian strategy is that absent the ability to generate strong economic means, Moscow is best served with approaches that reduce US performance by disorganizing its opponent's efforts, reducing cohesion, and employing asymmetric means in competition.

Perceptions of US strategy play a central role. The dominant Russian view is that the US has a strategy of containment, intended to deny Russia an independent foreign policy. Some Russian officials have explicitly accused the United States of promoting instability to maintain US hegemony. The regime's fear of color revolutions is both real and self-serving. However, Moscow does believe that it is in a bona fide confrontation, and appears set to challenge the US over the post-Cold War settlement in Europe, Russia's position in the international order, and the norms that should define interactions between states.

Among the country's strategic planning documents, Russia's Foreign Policy Concept emphasizes Asia's growing international role, seeing global power as "shifting toward the Asia-Pacific region." Hence Moscow is responding not only to what it believes to be US strategy, but also the changing balance of power between China, the US, and itself. Russian strategy is far more accommodating of China's rise, seeking to build interdependence, and a host of stabilizing security arrangements in the hope of leveraging the country's rise rather than having to overly balance against it. Russia's pivot to Asia is really a pivot to China.

Russia's perceptions of its own relative economic weakness are compounded by the political system's awareness of its technological backwardness, and lackluster attempts in pursuit of state driven modernization. Internal development, domestic order, and state responsiveness are viewed by Russian leadership as necessary for any successful great power foreign policy to work; however, these attributes are often viewed in terms of pathologies or problems to be managed. Moscow sees technological competition and technological change as a central feature of today's international environment and as a danger to Russia's status as a leading power.

Internal factors are important, among which ideology remains a hotly debated factor in Russian foreign policy. The case for a guiding regime ideology, informing Russian approaches, appears overstated. While Russian elites try to conjure a national idea, the regime lacks a coherent doctrine that postulates a relationship between society and the state. Its illiberal predilections are relational to liberalism, and do not make for a coherent doctrine. Consequently, the evidence for ideology playing a central role in Russian strategy remains thin relative to other more significant drivers.

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# Introduction

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There is an extensive debate among Western scholars on whether Russia has what can be termed a grand strategy. Some argue that Russia has no overarching strategy, but instead makes up policy to take advantage of opportunities, others think that Russia does have a strategy, but one that is poorly thought out and ineffective.<sup>1</sup> This report seeks to focus instead on Russian approaches to competition, examining some of the defining elements of how the Russian state pursues great power rivalry, and why. The report begins by outlining the Russia as ‘strategist’ vice ‘opportunist’ debate. Then offers a typology of Russian approaches, and ways of thinking about the different means Russia applies in competition against its rivals. The discussion proceeds to some of the reasoning that underpins this approach, including Russian assumptions about adversary strategies, perceptions of the international environment, and internal factors.

Ultimately the picture painted of exogenous and endogenous factors is a complex narrative, reflecting the somewhat fearful, and insecure Russian perception of international security. Yet Moscow also assumes that the world is undergoing a power transition, which holds not just challenges but opportunities. Russia pursues an activist foreign policy in an effort to revise the present status quo. The Russian approach to competition is not premised on concessions, or accommodation, but confrontation, under the assumption that this is the best way to contest US assertiveness, or compel the US towards settlement on Russian terms. The report hopes to offer a primer on debates surrounding Russian strategy and foreign policy, engaging with primary Russian sources as much as Western literature on the subject. It offers an analytical parsing more so than definitive answers on a complex subject where multiple perspectives or interpretations may have good purchase.

## Methodology

For this project the CNA team collected numerous major policy statements and speeches by Russian political and military leaders for the period 2008-2020, as well as selected major interviews given by top Russian officials. The sample included the annual presidential address to the Russian Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin’s speeches to the Valdai Club, transcripts of

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Benedict Dyson and Matthew J. Parent, “In His Own Words: Vladimir Putin’s Foreign Policy Analyzed,” *War on the Rocks*, Apr. 26, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/in-his-own-words-vladimir-putins-foreign-policy-analyzed/>; alternatively, see Michael McFaul, “Why Vladimir Putin is a terrible strategist,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 17, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2018/12/17/why-vladimir-putin-is-terrible-strategist/>.

Vladimir Putin's annual press conferences, the annual speeches made by the Chief of the General Staff to the Academy of Military Sciences, and other speeches and interviews given on an ad hoc basis to various domestic and international audiences by the president, prime minister, foreign minister, minister of defense, and head of the Russian Security Council. In addition, key texts such as the series of articles authored by Vladimir Putin in advance of the 2012 presidential election are also included. The review covered official government planning documents related to military and foreign policy. Iterations of the Russian military doctrine, Foreign Policy Concept, and National Security Strategy were also consulted in the review sample.

Finally, the team collected numerous secondary source materials, including writings on Russian strategy by both Western and Russian scholars and analysts. The research team's goal was to engage with Western literature and perspectives on the subject matter, highlighting debates where they existed. The purpose of this report was not to settle these debates, though the research team does offer its perspective on the subjects. Instead, the research approach was designed to offer a richer understanding of the discussion, presenting a useful typology and ways of thinking about the Russian approach to competition. The document thereby offers insights into Russian perspectives, and Western analytical debates on this subject matter. The report is therefore more of a primer on a rich and complex discussion, rather than an attempt to assess Russian grand strategy, or analyze Russian foreign policy. The goal was to offer a way to parse and think about both these debates and the question of how Russia approaches competition, recognizing that this term itself may be amorphous or open to interpretation.



# Russian Strategy for Competition

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This section briefly examines the scholarly debate on whether Russia has a grand strategy, pivoting to two central questions: what are Russian approaches to competition, and what is Russia competing over? It argues that Russia is driven by status and the desire for a geopolitical space where Russian interests predominate outside of its own national borders. Moscow also seeks to hasten the transition of a system it sees as defined by US primacy to a multipolar or polycentric world, reducing US influence in international politics. The focus of Russian efforts is Europe and Eurasia. Alignment with China represents an important element in Russian strategy, and a component of Moscow's approach to managing rivalry with the US.

In this section we tackle the question of whether Russia is a strategic actor or opportunist, finding the distinction and the arguments surrounding it to be a false dichotomy. Rather than indulge in grand strategy debates, this section offers a broad framework to parse the ways and means in Russian approaches. While not a comprehensive model, it presents a way of thinking about Russian approaches or stratagems for competition. These are best described as offensive in character, seeking to revise the existing status quo, build the military means to alter the balance of power vis-a-vis the US, deterring the US while pursuing political aims via the indirect approach. Russian approaches are subsequently broken down into direct and indirect ways of competing, along with forceful versus non-forceful means applied.

## Grand debates

Although not an exploration of Russian grand strategy, this report's underlying argument is that Russian approaches to competition do indeed operate under a strategic thesis, both stated and at times unstated, but nonetheless realized. These approaches reflect choices, strategic thinking that links stratagems, and a substantial degree of coherence. In describing Russia's approaches, we borrow to some extent from strategy and military strategy literature, although we reiterate that this study is not an assessment of Russian grand strategy.

First, we briefly tackle the subject of grand strategy to address the more specific subject of whether Russia has a strategy, and how it is revealed in the approaches observed. Incorporating the basic tenets from existing definitions, Australian National University professor Nina Silove deduces that grand strategy is (1) concerned with achieving vital interests or objectives, (2) holistic in nature, in that it considers all spheres of statecraft—diplomatic, military, and economic, and (3) long-term in scope. However, these attributes do not give us a clear sense of what grand strategy really comprises, except that it is related to both resources and policy. Silove notes, "Most definitions of grand strategy focus on

elaborating a few characteristics of the concept without identifying the core phenomenon or object to which those characteristics refer or give rise.”<sup>2</sup>

Analyzing a wealth of literature, Silove argues that the term grand strategy actually refers to at least three distinct approaches: “grand plans,” “grand principles,” and “grand behavior.”<sup>3</sup> First, the “grand plans” school understands grand strategy as an approach deliberately executed by a group of people using an elaborate blueprint of detailed planning documents. Adherents of this school point to such plans as the National Security Strategy or Truman’s NSC-68 as evidence of grand strategy. The second school adheres to the “grand principles” approach, which views grand strategy as less organized or detailed than a step-by-step grand plan, instead guided by general values or concepts. Examples of grand principles include the Cold War strategy of containment and modern-day strategies such as cooperative security and neo-isolationism. Finally, the third school identifies grand strategy through patterns of actions or “grand behavior,” which is guided by a “strategic culture,” molded by historical experience, perceptions, and threats. Many adherents of this school believe that intentionality is not required for grand strategy, noting that “quite often, grand strategies unfold in tentative, reactive, and piecemeal steps.”<sup>4</sup> Adherents of this school believe that the sum of a state’s pattern of behavior—as evidenced in decisions to extract resources, conduct diplomacy, and wage military pursuits—makes up the “realized strategy” itself, even absent a formal blueprint. This view is perhaps best illustrated by Edward Luttwak’s argument that “all states have a grand strategy, whether they know it or not.”<sup>5</sup> This wide range of interpretations demonstrates the academic community’s lack of consensus surrounding the term grand strategy and its scope of application.

Scholarship under the “grand principles” category has dominated recent discussion of grand strategy, as it has offered typologies of discrete variants. Hal Brands’ view of grand strategy is useful in framing the “grand principles” approach: “At its best, then, a grand strategy represents an integrated scheme of interests, threats, resources, and policies. It is the

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<sup>2</sup> Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy,’” *Security Studies*, Vol. 27 (2018), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073>.

<sup>3</sup> Each of these methods for measuring the phenomenon of grand strategy is valuable, though it must be noted that they all rely on external observation. Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword”; Grand strategy is similarly broken up into three distinct “agendas” (grand strategy as variable, process, and blueprint) in Rebecca Friedman Lissner’s “What Is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2 Issue 1, Nov. 2018, <https://tnsr.org/2018/11/what-is-grand-strategy-sweeping-a-conceptual-minefield/>.

<sup>4</sup> Etel Solingen, *Regional Orders at Century’s Dawn: Global and Domestic Influences on Grand Strategy*, (Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 409.

conceptual framework that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they ought to get there; it is the theory, or logic, that guides leaders seeking security in a complex and insecure world.” These theories or logic serve to organize the way a state uses its resources and sets policy.<sup>6</sup>

## Does Russia have a grand strategy?

Perhaps the first question is, do Russia scholars have a consensus on whether Russia has a grand strategy? The answer is, sadly, no. Commentators can often fall into several categories: critics, who tend to be alarmist, and skeptics of Russian strategy.<sup>7</sup> To critics, who warn of Moscow’s expansionist goals and anti-Western orientation, “it is almost axiomatic that Russia has a grand strategy.”<sup>8</sup> Citing his KGB credentials, this camp paints Putin as someone capable of executing grand designs. Skeptics, on the other hand, believe that Russia is neither capable nor interested in developing a grand strategy. Some contend that Moscow never needed a grand strategy because of its geographical land mass and rich natural resources. Other skeptics claim that domestic goals dominate Putin’s agenda, and that his “less-than-grand” strategy is simply a way to stay in power.<sup>9</sup> Some label Putin “more of a shameless opportunist” than a master strategist.<sup>10</sup> Others presume that implementation of the large-scale reforms that often accompany grand strategy would be too difficult given Russia’s political system, which is “beset by informal networks and dysfunctional governance.”<sup>11</sup>

There are those in the middle who argue that Russia does indeed have a grand strategy, or a realized strategy which remains consistent due to enduring drivers of behavior and interests. Proponents of this view may not necessarily see Russia as expansionist, neo-Soviet, or engaged

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<sup>6</sup> Derek H. Chollet and James M. Goldgeier, *America between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), as quoted in Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword.”

<sup>7</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Preserving Influence in a Changing World, Problems of Post-Communism,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 58, no. 2 (2011): 28-44, DOI: 10.2753/PPC1075-8216580203; Andrew Monaghan, “Putin’s Russia: shaping a ‘grand strategy’?,” *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) Vol. 89, No. 5 (Sept. 2013), p. 1224.

<sup>8</sup> Monaghan, “Putin’s Russia: shaping a ‘grand strategy’?,” p. 1225.

<sup>9</sup> Celeste Wallander, “Domestic sources of Russia’s less-than-grand-strategy,” in Tellis & Wills (eds.) *Strategic Asia 2007–2008: Domestic politics, change and grand strategy*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2007, pp. 140-175.

<sup>10</sup> Dyson et al., “In His Own Words.”

<sup>11</sup> Monaghan, “Putin’s Russia: shaping a ‘grand strategy’?,” p. 1225.

in a vengeful conspiracy against the West.<sup>12</sup> Views on Russian foreign policy ambitions and goals can vary, but nonetheless they believe that most actions of the Russian state exhibit a strong organizational logic, linking ends and means. The evidence for them ranges from interpretation of officially published documents, decrees and plans, to bureaucratic processes that point to strategy making in the Kremlin. Other arguments appear more essentialist in nature, or tying Russian strategy to aspects of Russian strategic culture.

For example, international politics scholar Andrew Monaghan equates the Anglo-American “grand strategy” with the Russian term “strategiya,” which former Russian defense official Andrei Kokoshin and others have suggested encompasses a broader strategy beyond military thinking that also includes political and economic outlook.<sup>13</sup> Several scholars like A. Monaghan point to speeches, government initiatives, and detailed planning documents (such as the oft-cited “Strategy – 2020”) as evidence of Russian grand strategy. Some scholars identify specific plans they believe inform Moscow’s grand strategy. For example, Andrei Tsygankov argues that Russia’s overarching goal is “to become an independent center of power and influence by creating flexible international coalitions.”<sup>14</sup>

Still others argue that Russia’s “primary strategic goal is to bring together all the Russian-speaking peoples into a single nation-state.”<sup>15</sup> They point to key principles that guide Russian grand strategy, such as multipolarity,<sup>16</sup> Eurasianism,<sup>17</sup> or a sense of geopolitical vulnerability.<sup>18</sup> Some have even assigned a name to Moscow’s grand strategy; scholar Robert Person, among others, has suggested Russia’s strategy as “Yalta 2.0,” complete with three pillars: achieving an uncontested sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region, achieving global Russian influence, and constraining the US.<sup>19</sup> The vast range of commentary on Russian grand strategy

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<sup>12</sup> See discussion on Russian grand strategy in Samuel Charap et al., *Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality*, RAND, 2021, as a good example of a balanced assessment and framework for such a discussion.

<sup>13</sup> Monaghan, “Putin’s Russia: shaping a ‘grand strategy?’,” p. 1224.

<sup>14</sup> Tsygankov, “Preserving Influence in a Changing World.”

<sup>15</sup> Michel Gurfinkiel, “The strategic goals of a restored Russia,” BESA Center Perspectives Paper, No. 796, Apr. 15, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement*, (London: Polity Press, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn, “Putin’s Brain: Alexander Dugin and the Philosophy Behind Putin’s Invasion of Crimea,” *Foreign Affairs*, Mar. 31, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-31/putins-brain>

<sup>18</sup> Robert Person, “Four Myths about Russian Grand Strategy,” CSIS, Sept. 22, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/four-myths-about-russian-grand-strategy>.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Person, “Russian Grand Strategy in the 21st Century,” in “Russian Strategic Intentions,” May 2019, <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000016b-a5a1-d241-adff-fdf908e00001>.

demonstrates that no one theory has been accepted as authoritative. Although acknowledging this debate is important, resolving it is beyond the scope of this report.

## Strategy or opportunism?

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the debate on Russian approaches to competition is whether their wellspring is opportunism or strategy. This is not only a false dichotomy—the relationship between these two ideas is akin to that between ‘yellow and hot.’ These are two different properties, neither disproving the other, each offering a useful description of the behavior being observed. Opportunism tells us three things about a state: it is revisionist and does not accept the status quo, it has an activist foreign policy and is not pursuing retrenchment, and its strategy or decision-making process is adaptable or flexible. Opportunism does not exist as an opposite, or contradiction, to strategy. In fact, it may be a mark of good strategy, as strategy requires regular adaptation to a changing environment, disproven assumptions, or the reactions of other actors.

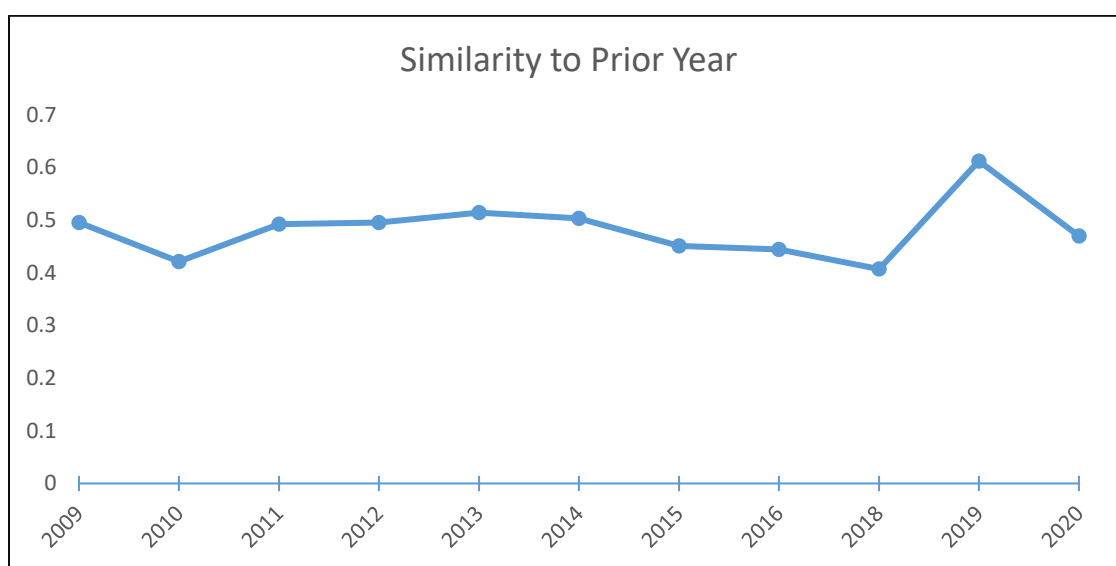
One of the fundamental problems in how Russian opportunism is discussed stems from a lack of first order considerations. How do state leaders know whether or not a situation presents an opportunity? They assess whether it takes them toward a desired end state. For a state to be opportunistic, its leaders must have a sense of their goals and objectives. Opportunities come with risks and opportunity costs which must be considered and managed. Elites may differ in their views about what is or is not an opportunity, and which one to pursue. Opportunism may reflect flexibility, or a more emergent strategy, but it does not exist outside of defined political ends. In and of itself, opportunism does not explain Russian behavior, but it is a useful and perhaps accurate characterization. It also does not negate the proposition that Russian actions are shaped by strategy, enduring foreign policy preferences, ideas, or domestic political considerations. An opportunistic Russia is also a Russia with a strategy for competition.

There are two other ways of interpreting the opportunism versus strategy debate, which logically should not exist because they are neither opposite nor competing explanations. First, opportunism may suggest that Russia does not have a good deliberate strategy because of poor implementation or incoherent elements. Therefore, it appears as opportunism, whereas in reality it is simply bad strategy or strategy that is badly implemented. Second, it is symptomatic of difficulty in discerning an opponent’s strategy, and is therefore analogous to “chaos theories” of state behavior—the idea that a country’s leadership is just sowing chaos and instability. In this way, the lens of opportunism offers insights about the observer’s decision on how to interpret the behavior they see.

One of the challenges with labeling Russia’s approach as opportunistic and chaotic is that the Russian state goes through immense lengths to generate official documents, public and

classified guidance, and engage in a bureaucratic process. These not only set objectives for foreign and domestic policy, but they often appear consistent with public statements. For example, in Vladimir Putin’s own annual presidential speeches there is a tremendous consistency which undermines the notion of a Russian policy that is waffling in geopolitical winds. The graphic below helps illustrate the substantial consistency in themes and substance of Russian presidential speeches, which are often 40-50% or more consistent with each other across the entirety of a 2009-2020 sample size.

**Figure 1. Pairwise analysis of textual similarities in annual presidential speeches (Federal Assembly & Valdai Discussion Club)<sup>20</sup>**



Source: CNA.

In this case, CNA’s findings show that the language in each year’s speeches is approximately 40-50 percent identical to the language in the prior year. The only outliers are the speeches in 2018 and 2019, which are 61 percent similar. Although continuity declines to a small extent with speeches that are more temporally distant, it remains consistently above 33 percent across the board. This finding holds even when the presidency (and thus the speaker) transitions from Dmitry Medvedev to Vladimir Putin in 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Note that 2017 is excluded from the analysis because there was no presidential address to the Federal Assembly that year, as the timing of the annual speech moved from November or December of a given year in 2008-2016, to January - March beginning in 2018. Addresses through 2014 may be found at “Ежегодные послания президента России Федеральному Собранию,” RIA-Novosti, Dec. 3, 2015, <https://ria.ru/20151203/1334427367.html>. More recent speeches may be found at the official presidential website at [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru). Transcripts of meetings with Valdai Club participants may also be found on the official Kremlin website at <https://tinyurl.com/9ef6dkkp>.

The data also reveals that speeches from 2008 to 2013 were broadly similar amongst themselves, but were largely different from those that came after 2014. Similarly, speeches from 2014 to 2016 were similar amongst themselves but differed from those that came later as well as those from the earliest period prior to 2011. Interestingly, the speeches from 2011 to 2013 seemed to be transitional in that they were relatively closely aligned with speeches from every other year. The overall pattern is thus one of relative continuity, though this overall pattern can be divided into three sub-periods, the first beginning at the start of the sample in 2008 and continuing through 2013, the second going from the beginning of the confrontation with the West in 2014 and continuing to 2016, and the last beginning in 2018 when Vladimir Putin began to display an even more openly confrontational style in his speeches. Speeches are but one datapoint, and there are clear limits to this type of analysis, but an example of stronger continuity than change in Russian public statements and depictions of the state's policies.

Regardless of the way one conceptualizes grand strategy—whether as grand plans, grand principles, or grand behavior—there is an observed strategic consistency in Russian approaches to competition. The sections of this report that follow explore these considerations in depth. Collectively, these sections paint a picture of what we know about Moscow's approaches to strategic competition. They represent the view that Russia indeed has a strategy, and that opportunism is a characteristic of how that strategy is implemented.

## Russian approaches to competition

Scoping the nature of the competition is inherently challenging. What is Russia competing for, or perhaps over? In its broadest sense, these drivers could be categorized as status in international politics, a geopolitical space where Russian interests predominate and Moscow can determine security outcomes, along with pursuit of greater influence. The latter can be specified as regional influence that confers a leadership role to Moscow in the former Soviet Union, and global influence that sees Russia as a system determining power. However, these are drivers or general principles. Thus, they are insufficiently specific, do not necessarily require competition, and could be attained collaboratively. In this section, we lay out more specific aims and aspects of Russia's approach to the competition, offering a clearer way to interpret Russian strategy. Elements of Russian thinking or policy formulation are introduced and explored with greater depth in subsequent sections of this report.

### Geostrategic

Russia's global objectives in the so-called competition are to accelerate the transition of power in the international system toward multipolarity or polycentrism. At the very least, Moscow wishes to carve out a space for itself as a leader of its own suborder whose characteristics reflect Russian preferences. Russia also seeks to constrain US power, denying Washington a



hegemonic role in international politics, while engaging in selective cooperation where it suits Russian interests. This is an important aspect of Russian rivalry with the US (*sopernichestvo*), driven by a Russian belief that Washington cannot tolerate an independent Russian foreign policy, or an active role for Russia in the international arena. Russia wants to benefit from integration in the international order and, but without adopting its Western characteristics. Significantly, Moscow also wants exceptions for itself, which it believes it is entitled to because of its status as a great power.

Vladimir Putin noted in his October 2020 speech at the Valdai conference, Russian leaders consider “a strong state a basic condition for Russia’s development.” Russian official rationalization of foreign policy is to some extent based on a conception of Russia as a distinct civilization, whose identity is not compatible with liberal democratic norms being promoted by Western leaders. This is a justifying argument for policy preferences. In the same speech Putin continued, “Trying to blindly imitate someone else’s agenda is pointless and harmful.”<sup>21</sup> Russian leaders generally see the promotion of Western norms as cover for efforts to contain Russia by universalizing characteristically Western rules or behaviors, erode political stability, and effect regime change if possible.<sup>22</sup>

Yet Putin has frequently indicated that he is not in favor of dismantling the existing international order, but would prefer to preserve its core mechanisms, while ensuring that Russia has a key voice and role to play in the system. Russian leaders resent the exclusion of Russia from key decisions made in the post-Cold War period about the structure of the international system. Often, they interpret any decision made without Russia as being made against Russian interests.<sup>23</sup> Russian leaders act in ways that suggest that their current worldview is based on a perception of a confrontation between the Western-organized and US-led international system and states that have been to a greater or lesser extent excluded from this system.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Putin, Speech to the Valdai Discussion Club, Oct. 22, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>.

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, “Putin warns of unnamed foreign efforts to destabilize Russia,” *AP News*, Feb. 24, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-moscow-crime-vladimir-putin-crimea-489b7648217e7e51c96b1e30a54362a0>.

<sup>23</sup> Nadezhda Arbatova and Alexander Dynkin, “World Order after Ukraine,” *Survival* 58, no. 1: 71-90, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1142140>.

<sup>24</sup> Andrey Kortunov, “Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity: On Russia’s World Order Evolution Narratives,” *Russia in Global Affairs* 17, no. 1, 2019, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/between-polycentrism-and-bipolarity/>.



Russian leaders want to assert state sovereignty as a fundamental principle of international law.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, they seek exceptions for Russian interests and security requirements when it comes to the sovereignty of others, seeking to limit their ability to pursue policies or strategic orientations perceived as inimical to Russian interests. Though Russia has made gains in recent years in reasserting its great power status on a global scale, some see it as going through an “identity crisis” that keeps Moscow from finding its proper place in the world order, as it has neither fit into the liberal international order nor been able to create a viable alternative to it.<sup>26</sup> This positions Russian geostrategic ambitions as somewhat of a half-way house, seeing an upper limit to benefits from integration with the existing Western-led international order and unable to offer an competing alternative.

Russia’s own vision for international relations is hierarchical, centered on great powers as firsts among equals. Small states are seen as possessing a more limited degree of sovereignty, subordinate to the security requirements of great powers. Russia views a world stabilized by spheres of influence, or power-centers, where it is the hegemon of its own “near abroad,” as a more balanced order in which it has a greater chance of realizing its economic, diplomatic, and security interests. This vision clashes with Western views of a more open, rules-based world, seeing smaller states and middle powers as key stakeholders, without recognized spheres of influence.

## Europe and Eurasia

In the former Soviet Union, seen from Moscow as “Russia’s near abroad,” Russia seeks to become a leader, but not to the exclusion of other states. Rather, Moscow’s goal is to assert a sphere where it has primacy of interests, not exclusivity.<sup>27</sup> Russia wants other actors to coordinate their policies in this sphere with Moscow. This perspective changes when it comes to countries on Russia’s European borders, which Moscow views as buffers. There, Russia contests relative influence, seeking to have a say over the strategic orientation of states such as Belarus and Ukraine. This has become a zero-sum interaction, derived from a Russian approach to pursuing its own security via a form of “extended defense.” Secondarily, Russia

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<sup>25</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, “The Revisionist Moment: Russia, Trump, and Global Transition,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1788397>.

<sup>26</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, “Putin’s Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia’s Rightful Place,” *Foreign Affairs* 95:3, 30-37, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2016-04-18/putins-foreign-policy>.

<sup>27</sup> In a 2020 interview, Russian foreign minister Lavrov commented, “Today, Russia’s interests in the world arena largely boil down to it preserving influence on its closest neighbors and enjoying their support.” See “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with radio stations Sputnik, Komsomolskaya Pravda and Govorit Moskva, Moscow, Oct. 14, 2020,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Oct. 14, 2020, [https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/conflicts/-/asset\\_publisher/xIEMTQ30vzcA/content/id/4381977](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ30vzcA/content/id/4381977).

seeks to prevent the encroachment of competing or alternative models of development, such as those offered by the European Union (EU), in these states.

This divergence of outlooks, where competition in some states is de facto zero sum, and in others where Russia is accommodating or malleable, yields a diversity of approaches. Russian elites do not care about regime type in these states and do not necessarily use force to avert regime change in these countries. Russia combines incentives with coercive instruments to shape the politics of these states, with mixed results. If there is a pattern to Russian use of force regionally, it is against countries that are seen as bulwarks to prevent the expansion of adversarial blocks, which could be used as instruments against Russia by competing powers. This action is intended to prevent geopolitical defection, as in the case of Ukraine, or to compel a change in policy, as in the case of Georgia. Therefore, some states fall within a zero-sum rubric. Yet in most cases Moscow appears willing to engage in a contest for relative influence without running the risks attendant with use of force, or forceful coercion.

More broadly, in Europe, Moscow seeks to displace US-European primacy in determining security outcomes on the continent, along with the region's security architecture. While Russia has little in the way of an alternative proposition, the general principles that guide Russia's approach include reducing the US role in managing European security and attaining a greater Russian role, degrading European cohesion to prevent collective decision-making, and driving wedges in the Trans-Atlantic partnership between Washington and European states. This does not mean forcefully breaking up the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but rather neutralizing such organizations as instruments by which Washington can set the security agenda in Europe without consulting Moscow. Similarly, Russia seeks to neutralize the US ability to leverage the immense resources that European allies control, which can be used to punish or compel. Because these states sit at the center of global financial and information flows, they represent a critical battleground. Global interdependence is an uneven topography, with some states serving as hubs or key nodes in networks, offering opportunities for state coercion, and defense against coercion by others.<sup>28</sup>

Russia has long sought to avoid dealing with the EU as opposed to individual European states, even though EU countries account for more than 40 percent of Russia's trade. The challenge for Moscow is that, as much as it may wish to pretend the EU does not exist, it is in a catch-22 situation, unable to have good relations with EU member states without having a positive relationship with the EU itself. This situation has been recognized by a number of Russian analysts, such as Andrey Kortunov, who sees Russia's red lines in its relations with the EU as

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<sup>28</sup> For more on this see Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security*, Vol. 44, Issue 1 (2019).

being roughly clear: “Everything that Moscow perceives as an infringement on its sovereignty will be thwarted in the most severe and unequivocal form.”<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, the EU’s red lines are drawn vaguely, with EU officials speaking far too often in general terms about unacceptable Russian actions without tying them to any specifics. Kortunov believes that it may be more fruitful for Russia to prioritize bilateral relations with key European states such as Germany, France, and Italy, rather than focusing on Brussels.<sup>30</sup>

## Alignment with China

Alignment with China is emerging as a central pillar in Russian strategy. Restoring a constructive relationship with China is arguably the most consistent vector in Russian foreign policy, dating back to 1985 under the Soviet Union. It has since evolved into an alignment and a strategic partnership. Russia seeks to deconflict relations with China to focus on their respective competitions with the US, manage China’s rise by fostering interdependence and defense-military cooperation, and rebalance economic relations toward China from a European-centric portfolio. China is therefore one of the central answers to Moscow’s challenges in the ongoing confrontation with the US, from working around sanctions, gaining access to liquidity and investment from non-Western sources, to deleveraging from high levels of dependence on trade relations with Europe.

Aside from China, Russia seeks to engage with other emerging or regional powers and states that can help bolster Moscow’s legitimacy or provide issue-based support in international forums. At a minimum, these actions help establish diversified relations, increase Russia’s status as a power with global relationships, and eliminate the ability of the US to successfully isolate Russia politically. Russia is accommodating of China because alignment with Beijing is seen as paramount. Hence, avoiding competition over vital interests is essential to achieving that partnership. Russia does not follow China in a subordinate role, but it also does not see China as a rival with vital interests in conflict.

## Domestic considerations

Russian views on competition are not detached from domestic political concerns about regime stability. Moscow is concerned about perceived Western influence operations and “color revolutions” in its near abroad. This fear for regime security emerged prominently after the

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<sup>29</sup> Elena Teslova, “Russia-EU break possible but unwanted: interview with Andrey Kortunov,” Anadolu News Agency, Feb. 21, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-eu-break-possible-but-unwanted-analyst/2152053>.

<sup>30</sup> Andrey Kortunov, “Russia and the European Union: Shall We Dispense with Summits?” Russian International Affairs Council, June 30, 2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-and-the-european-union-shall-we-dispense-with-summits/>.

Bolotnaya Square protests Moscow in 2011–2012. In 2015, Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov warned, “In an effort to ‘bring Russia to its knees,’ Washington and its NATO partners are becoming more and more interested in creating crisis situations in the regions bordering on the Russian Federation....The technology of these [color] revolutions has already become standard—manipulation from the outside by the protest potential of the population using the information space in combination with political, economic, humanitarian and other non-military measures.” He noted that “scenarios of coups d’état in the post-Soviet space have been successfully implemented in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.”<sup>31</sup>

The fear of foreign interference has its worst expression in the views of Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, a notable hawk who has stated that, “Activities aimed at destabilizing the socio-political situation in our country are constantly intensifying....The West unites and supports the financially unsystematic opposition and pro-Western-oriented Russian public associations [and] selects candidates for the role of leaders of the opposition movement committed to ‘democratic values and ideals of freedom.’ ...The efforts of the West to ‘export revolutions’ to the countries of the former USSR are subordinated not least to the task of consistently knocking out individual links in the sphere of Russian influence with the strategic goal of organizing a ‘color coup’ in Russia itself.”<sup>32</sup> Such concerns have led to the ban on foreign nongovernmental organizations operating within Russia’s borders, increasing restrictions against any independent media, broad foreign agent labeling laws, and other efforts to suppress information outside of the state’s direct control. These threats are used cynically by national security clans to restrict civil society at times competing with each other in terms of repressive measures, seeking to expand the writ of the state at the expense of public freedoms.

## Offensive vs defensive strategy

To better describe Russian strategy, we offer a simple typology. An offensive strategy is one where the state seeks to change the status quo, invest in the military means to deter or coerce its opponents, impose costs or disorganize their adversaries’ efforts, engage in forms of indirect warfare, and pursue an activist foreign policy to change its relative position in international politics. Example of activism include intervention inside and outside of a country’s immediate region, military deployments abroad, or wars of choice where vital

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<sup>31</sup> “Speech by the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the topic: ‘Military dangers and military threats to the Russian Federation in modern conditions’” [Выступление начальника Генерального штаба Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации на тему: «Военные опасности и военные угрозы Российской Федерации в современных условиях»], Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.

<sup>32</sup> Vitaly Tseplyaev, “Puppetry for action. Nikolay Patrushev - on the methods of ‘color revolutions’” [Кукловодство к действию. Николай Патрушев – о методах «цветных революций»], AIF, June 10, 2020, [https://aif.ru/society/safety/kuklovodstvo\\_k\\_deystviyu\\_nikolay\\_patrushev\\_o\\_metodah\\_cvetnyh\\_revolyuciy](https://aif.ru/society/safety/kuklovodstvo_k_deystviyu_nikolay_patrushev_o_metodah_cvetnyh_revolyuciy).

interests are not necessarily at stake. An offensive strategy is premised on building the means to change the relative balance of power vis-a-vis an opponent, or seeking to degrade their performance and level of organization.

A defensive strategy can be construed as one that largely accepts the military and economic balance, seeks to achieve security and economic interests through accommodation, cooperation, or agreements that reduce the costs of competition, and avoids more controversial forms of indirect warfare. This is a strategy characterized by retrenchment (avoiding costly deployments or wars of choice), eschewing provocations of stronger competitors, and seeking to attain security by reducing the cost of one's foreign policy or the expenses associated with defense. An offensive strategy suggests that a country's leadership assumes it is either operating from a position of strength, or expects that its opponent's power will weaken in the future. There is therefore the potential to change the relative correlation of forces in a favorable trajectory. Conversely, a defensive strategy would signify that the state's leadership sees its country as operating from a position of weakness, or that it expects the future balance of power to be less favorable, without good options for reversing those trends competitively.

These strategies also imply a great deal about a state's view of the international operating environment, the forces shaping it, and their assumptions about what types of strategies will work best. There are also differences associated with the preferences or ideas of individual leaders as to whether confrontation or accommodation is more likely to work. However, these strategies tend to endure beyond individuals and are often more representative of an elite consensus. They do not change suddenly, despite outward appearances. The rhetorical style of a leader may change, but it may not be indicative of a dramatic shift in how a state defines its interests or the best way to pursue them. There is a great deal of inertia in strategy, and leaders often fall back on approaches that they feel worked for them, or their predecessors in the past.

The net sum of Russia's approaches speaks to an offensive strategy, characterized by foreign policy activism, strong investment in military means to attain a better military balance, and indirect warfare to disorganize or degrade the performance of perceived rivals. It is a policy that employs coercive means against adversaries, seeking selective engagement in areas of mutual interest, or to stabilize the competition, but with limited room for accommodation.

Russian strategy appears driven by a growing confidence in its military means (conventional and nuclear capabilities), which may enable Moscow to sustain the military dimensions of a direct competition. However, it is also shaped by lackluster presently available economic means. There is also no expectation that they can be substantially improved in the near future, and a perception that changes in the global economic environment are not in Russia's favor long term given the country's economic model. This is an important distinction, because without the ability to dramatically change its economic fortunes, become a leader or hub in the

global economy, Russian strategy operates within empirical constraints and pessimistic expectations.

Consequently, Russian approaches not only are, but should be expected to be less means-based, and more oriented towards reducing the performance of rivals. This means placing an emphasis on disorganization, coercion, and forcing opponents to spread out their response in order to further reduce the cohesion of their efforts. Altogether these privilege ways of competition that have a lower cost profile relative to symmetric or direct forms of confrontation. There is a degree of contradiction in Russian approaches relative to expectations. If Moscow perceives itself as the weaker party, and that long term international conditions are not necessarily favorable, it should logically pursue retrenchment and accommodation. Yet it appears Russian elites have rejected a defensive strategy in favor of an offensive one, believing that it may prove successful, believing that there is opportunity to change the relative balance of power and that the US too faces strong headwinds.

## Direct vs indirect approaches

If Russia's strategy is indeed offensive, what is the best way to frame Russia's approaches to competition? We offer a simple but effective grouping of ways, borrowing from literature on military strategy: direct and indirect.<sup>33</sup> Direct approaches exhaust the opponent; they focus on the central theaters in contest, such as Europe. These approaches create economic, military, and political pressure on an opponent's interests. They can result in arms races, bidding contests, escalating military exercises, coercive gambits, and *fait accomplis*, for example. Direct approaches use sanctions, embargoes, and blockades. Indirect approaches upset the opponent's balance, spreading their efforts, contesting their interests where they are weakest, and emphasizing asymmetric ways in competition. They are much more likely to employ political and information warfare, proxies, or limited deployments to other theaters.

One way to categorize these actions, beyond type, is by their operating thesis. Direct approaches work from Russia building the means to improve its own capacity and applying pressure. Indirect approaches reduce an opponent's organization or cohesiveness, increasing cost in the competition over time. The costs of direct competition are highly visible, the costs of indirect competition are lower, but may accrue over time. In the direct approach, a state makes clear that it is a contender to be reckoned with, capable of pursuing its interests and contesting its opponent over vital interests in a region. In the indirect approach, the state

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<sup>33</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd revised edition (New York, 1967), p. 339.

becomes a sustained nuisance on a global scale, engaging in behavior that its adversary sees as malign and otherwise pernicious.

Another method, which is found in Russian national level strategic concepts like ‘strategic deterrence,’ is a parsing based on the means employed: forceful versus non-forceful.<sup>34</sup> The former involving a combination of strategic nuclear, conventional, and asymmetric military capabilities (boutique technologies). The latter concerns various non-military, or perhaps less kinetic means of contestation, leaning towards the political, diplomatic, and informational side of the spectrum. The diagram below offers one possible depiction, for the purpose of delineating theaters and vital interests it assumes that Europe is the main theater in contest where Russian vital interests lie, and the locus of its security considerations.

Figure 2. Possible typology for categorizing Russian approaches to competition

	Direct	Indirect
Forceful Means	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conventional &amp; nuclear modernization</li> <li>• Military Exercises/deployments</li> <li>• Boutique mil capabilities (DEW, Hypersonic)</li> <li>• Use of force in theater (Europe)</li> <li>• Physical coercion (brinkmanship)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industrial sabotage</li> <li>• Targeted assassination</li> <li>• Destructive cyberwarfare</li> <li>• Use of force outside of main theater (Syria, Libya)</li> <li>• Use of proxies or mercenary groups as extension of state</li> </ul>
Non-Forceful Means	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political-Diplomatic</li> <li>• Economic</li> <li>• Legal</li> <li>• Humanitarian/Spiritual</li> <li>• Technical (threatening critical information infrastructure)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political warfare</li> <li>• Subversion of elites/corruption</li> <li>• Information confrontation</li> <li>• Mobilization of compatriot groups</li> <li>• Election meddling/hacking</li> <li>• Use of proxy information warfare tools</li> </ul>

Source: CNA.

While direct and indirect means are often considered separately by policy communities, they are closely interrelated. Greater military capability deters an opponent’s response, which in turn generates confidence in pursuit political objectives via indirect approaches. The inherent risk is reduced when a state is confident that it can deter its opponent. Thereby Russia military modernization has substantially improved and enabled its ability to take on riskier forms of indirect competition, with the knowledge that adversaries might be deterred from retaliating

<sup>34</sup> See CNA reports that elaborate on this subject such as Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*, CNA, DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev, Apr. 2020.

or pursuing more escalatory means of reprisal. Direct means serve more as a shield, while indirect means are the sword, or principal offensive tool in the competition.

A mutually acknowledged deterrence relationship, which is seen as stable, makes it likely that the indirect competition will intensify if both sides grow confident that the attendant risks of escalation are relatively low. The notion that as the risk of conflict at higher thresholds declines it increases at lower levels is derived from the concept of a 'stability-instability paradox.' This paradox held that as the likelihood of nuclear use increases, reducing nuclear stability, the chance of conventional war declined, thereby improving conventional stability.<sup>35</sup> The same principle can be potentially applied to lower thresholds of competition, to include sub-conventional war, and various forms of indirect competition. As stability improves at the level of conventional or nuclear war, it makes it more likely that states will perceive a lower risk for engaging in forms of indirect warfare, or other types of provocative competitive behavior.

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<sup>35</sup> For example, see Jervis, Robert, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1979): 617-633, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149629>.



# Direct and Indirect Elements of Russian Approaches to Competition

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Russian strategy for competition can be parsed into direct and indirect approaches. While these terms commonly describe military strategy, they can be adapted to examine Russian approaches outside of a military context. The distinction between the direct and indirect approach was initially developed by military historian B.H. Liddell Hart. He describes the direct approach as the more common strategy, where one side builds up its capacity to possess greater force than its opponent to directly engage in combat and defeat the adversary. As he writes, traditionally, “the destruction of the enemy’s main forces on the battlefield constituted the only true aim in war.”<sup>36</sup> The indirect approach, by contrast, argues “that frontal assaults and massive showdowns are to be avoided; rather one should aim at the enemy’s line of least expectation.”<sup>37</sup> As Hart described it, “The strategy of Indirect Approach is not so much to seek battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by battle is sure to achieve this.”<sup>38</sup>

As it has rebuilt its strength over the last 20 years, Russia’s strategy for competition has a visible direct component, reestablishing the military means to deter the US and intensifying the military confrontation in Europe. The direct approach enables an indirect effort to attain political aims, change the correlation of forces in international politics, and attain a more advantageous position for Moscow. The two are reinforcing efforts, and while the indirect approach may garner greater attention, it is made valuable by substantially bolstered coercive credibility: the perception that Russia has substantial military power and the political resolve to use it in pursuit of its goals.

## The direct approach

Over the last two decades, Russia has substantially resurrected the military instrument of national power. While investing in traditional Russian strengths, nuclear weapons, Russia has not only modernized its strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces but also focused on conventional military power. Identifying major deficits in its conventional military capability,

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<sup>36</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd revised edition (New York, 1967), p. 339.

<sup>37</sup> Henry L. Roberts, “Review of *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan. 1955, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/1955-01-01/strategy-indirect-approach>

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Alex Danchev, “Liddell Hart’s Big Idea,” *Review of International Studies* 25:1 (Jan. 1999), p. 33.

as applied to a range of conflict scenarios, the Russian military has been restored with a regional or large-scale war contingency foremost in mind. Russia's primary potential adversary remains NATO, but its resurrected conventional military power is sufficient to manage local wars, armed conflicts, or limited expeditionary operations. Nuclear weapons, while viewed as the ultimate guarantor of Russian sovereignty, were not good for much in the 1990s and 2000s. Moscow was unable to leverage its status as a leading nuclear weapon state to secure political objectives or deter the US from pursuing policies in Europe.

Russian military reform, and substantial investment in modernization, coincided with a shift in Russian strategy in the mid-2000s. Substantial political and economic resources were routed into restoring Russian military power as part of the military reforms in late 2008, and a robust military modernization program in 2011. These processes were channeled first and foremost to establish a military capable of deterring the US, countering its advantages in air power. The Russian military then pursued a host of capabilities that would allow it to inflict substantial damage against US and NATO allies in a military conflict. While still militarily inferior, depending on the contingency, the correlation of forces changes dramatically between 2008–2021. Russia destroyed an ineffectual mass mobilization army, substantially recapitalized its military stock of modern or modernized weapon systems, and poured funding into a host of advanced capabilities. While Russia's military modernization continues, driven by successive State Armament Programs, the Russian military's potential to take on a coalition of NATO states, or a technologically superior power like the US, has increased considerably.

What this approach suggests is that the Russian state consciously chose to invest substantial government resources into changing the military balance that existed prior to 2008. Moscow continues to spend heavily on shaping that balance a decade later. Russian military expenditure has flattened but offers sustainable modernization, as Russian force structure and capabilities continue to expand. Similarly, the scale and scope of Russian military exercises have also expanded, resulting in an intense training regimen throughout the year, and large capstone Strategic Command-Staff Exercises every September. These activities demonstrate Russia's growing ability to use force in a spectrum of military contingencies, along with a robust reputation for having the will to use military power in pursuit of political aims, as it has in numerous conflicts over the past 30 years.

Table 1 below, derived from Russia's Military Doctrine, lays out the spectrum of conflicts the Russian military is expected to handle, along with pre-conflict periods. It begins with a general period of military danger (arguably the current state of US-Russia rivalry) and continues through limited armed conflict to local, regional, and large-scale wars<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Военная доктрина Российской Федерации [Russian Federation Military Doctrine], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Dec. 30, 2014, <https://rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>.

**Table 1. Conflict phases and types in Russian military doctrine**

Conflict phase/type	Description
Military danger	State of interstate or intrastate relations characterized by a correlation of factors that under certain conditions could lead to the appearance of military threat.
Military threat	State of interstate or intrastate relations characterized by the real possibility of appearance of military conflict between opposing sides, with a high degree of readiness of any state, group of states, or non-state actors to use military force or armed violence.
Armed conflict	Armed conflict of a limited scale between states (international armed conflict) or opposing sides on the territory of one state (internal armed conflict).
Local war	War in which limited political-military goals are pursued, military actions are conducted within the borders of combating states and which touches primarily on the interests (territorial, economic, political, etc.) of just these states.
Regional war	War with the participation of several states from one region, led by national or coalition armed forces, during which the sides pursue important military-political goals.
Large-scale war	War between coalitions of states or the largest states in global society, in which the sides pursue radical political-military goals. Large-scale war could result from the escalation of an armed conflict, local, or regional war involving a significant number of states from various regions of the world. This war would demand mobilization of all available material resources and spiritual forces of the participant-states.

Source: Военная доктрина Российской Федерации [Russian Federation Military Doctrine], printed in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Dec. 30, 2014, <https://rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>.

Russian statements regarding select advanced or strategic military capabilities reflect a belief that these newly acquired instruments will not only deter the US but also get its attention, leading to negotiations and perhaps concessions vis-à-vis Russian interests. Putin’s 2018 speech to the Federal Assembly highlights Russian leaders’ use of strategic deterrence rhetoric. After describing a number of newly developed advanced weapons systems, Putin stated, “I hope that everything that was said today would make any potential aggressor think twice.... We are not threatening anyone, not going to attack anyone or take away anything from anyone with the threat of weapons.”<sup>40</sup> In the following year’s speech, Putin continued in a similar vein. After highlighting the negative international security implications of the US withdrawal from

<sup>40</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Mar. 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>.

the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Putin stated that, in response, Russia “will be forced to respond with mirror or asymmetric actions.... Russia will be forced to create and deploy weapons that can be used not only in the areas we are directly threatened from, but also in areas that contain decision-making centers for the missile systems threatening us.”<sup>41</sup>

Russia’s military strategy has focused on developing sufficient military power to ensure that it could inflict unacceptable levels of consequences on a would-be opponent, and have sufficient strength to withstand the initial period of an intense high-end conflict.<sup>42</sup> This strategy has structured Russia’s approach to its procurement of military equipment and organization of military forces. It is predicated on a concept called “active defense,” which includes developing high-readiness combat groupings, enhancing mobility of armed forces, and focusing on technological advances in a range of platforms and systems, such as command and control, electronic warfare, long-range air defense, and stand-off strike.<sup>43</sup> Advanced conventional military power naturally emboldens a more robust and risky indirect approach because Russia is confident that it has sufficient military strength to deter a military response to indirect action and be credible in threatening escalation. Because conventional and nuclear escalation cannot prove valuable, even to superior adversaries such as the US, Moscow has a much freer hand in pursuing political objectives via indirect means.

## Russian military investment

In the first half of the 2010s, the Russian government rapidly increased defense spending, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP. After rising from 2.5 percent of GDP to 4 percent between 2011 and 2016, the rate of spending in recent years has stabilized at approximately 3.5 percent of GDP.<sup>44</sup> Russian defense spending is often described in dollar terms, based on market exchange rates. By this count, the total Russian defense budget is approximately \$60

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<sup>41</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Feb. 20, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59863>.

<sup>42</sup> Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2015, [https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/rmsi\\_research/3/](https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/rmsi_research/3/); Russia Maritime Studies Institute, “The Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period Until 2030,” *RMSI Research*, 2, 2017, [https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/rmsi\\_research/2/](https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/rmsi_research/2/).

<sup>43</sup> See Gerasimov’s 2019 speech as reported in Anastasiya Sviridova, “Vectors of development of military strategy,” *Векторы развития военной стратегии*, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Mar. 4, 2019, <http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/>.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Connolly, *Russian Military Expenditure in Comparative Perspective: A Purchasing Power Parity Estimate*, CNA, IOP-2019-U-021955-Final, Oct. 2019, 6, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-021955-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-021955-Final.pdf).

billion. A more accurate conversion, based on purchasing power parity, shows that Russian defense spending is closer to \$160 billion in terms of what that money can buy.<sup>45</sup>

The increase in defense spending in the first half of the previous decade was driven primarily by an increase in spending on procurement of weapons and equipment. After an almost two-decade procurement holiday caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent economic problems, Russia's rearmament initiative began in earnest in the early 2010s, with the enactment of the State Armament Program for 2011–2020. This program was launched by then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev as a complement to the reorganization and streamlining of the military that began in 2009. In a speech in March 2010, Medvedev called for renewing arms and equipment at a rate of 9 to 11 percent per year for the next decade to reach a target of modernizing 70 percent of military equipment by 2020.<sup>46</sup> The total investment of approximately 22 trillion rubles was much larger than previous programs. Most analysts were skeptical, but the program was successful in providing the Russian military with the next generation of military equipment across the full spectrum of domains. The rapid introduction of new systems and platforms was possible because of the existence of a variety of late Soviet designs that could be updated and brought to production relatively quickly. As a result, Russian military power grew quickly during the last decade.<sup>47</sup>

The most recent State Armament Program, launched by Putin in 2018, is designed to develop and bring into the force a new generation of equipment, based on post-Soviet designs. In his speeches and writings, Putin has clearly highlighted the role of restored military power in cementing Russia's place in the world. In his 2012 article describing Russia's national security policy, he stated, "Obviously, we will not be able to strengthen our international position, develop our economy or our democratic institutions if we are unable to protect Russia—if we fail to calculate the risks of possible conflicts, secure our military-technological independence and prepare an adequate military response capability as a last-resort response to some kind of challenge... We cannot put off the goal of creating modern armed forces and of

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Kofman and Richard Connolly, "Why Russian Military Expenditure Is Much Higher Than Commonly Understood (As Is China's)," *War on the Rocks*, Dec. 16, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/why-russian-military-expenditure-is-much-higher-than-commonly-understood-as-is-chinas/>.

<sup>46</sup> Dmitry Medvedev, "Расширенное заседание коллегии Министерства обороны," *Kremlin.ru*, Mar. 5, 2010, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/7039>.

<sup>47</sup> Julian Cooper, *Russia's state armament programme to 2020: a quantitative assessment of implementation 2011-2015*, FOI Report, Mar. 2016, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4239--SE>; Richard Connolly and Mathieu Boulegue, *Russia's New State Armament Programme: Implications for the Russian Armed Forces and Military Capabilities to 2027*, Chatham House Research Paper, May 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-05-10-russia-state-armament-programme-connolly-boulegue-final.pdf>.

comprehensively strengthening our defensive potential.”<sup>48</sup> He then highlighted the investment of 23 trillion rubles in military modernization over the next decade, arguing that this money will serve to equip all branches of the military with the latest weapons technology.

In 2018, Putin returned to the theme in his annual speech to the Federal Assembly, noting that the armed forces had 3.7 times more modern weapons than they did at the start of the rearmament process. He argued that Russia’s past military weakness was the reason that its interests were being ignored by the major international powers. The clear implication is that Russia could return as a full-fledged player on the world stage only by rebuilding its military capacity. By 2018, Putin argued, it had done so and now possessed “a modern, high-technology army” that would make anyone reconsider attacking Russia.<sup>49</sup>

The military rearmament took place alongside a reorganization that made the Russian military a much more combat credible force than it had been since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Key aspects of the reorganization included implementing greater mobility, eliminating mass mobilization in exchange for higher levels of constant readiness, and improving inter-service coordination. As part of the reform, military units that existed mostly on paper were eliminated, and the military gradually transitioned to a structure based on fully staffed battalion tactical groups that could mobilize rapidly. The military also made great strides in becoming better coordinated in its operations. The establishment of regional unified strategic commands allowed local commanders to organize all military elements in their respective region, which greatly enhanced inter-service cooperation. These organizational changes were designed to enable the Russian military to respond more quickly to conflict situations.<sup>50</sup>

Preparedness has also been enhanced by an increased focus on operations and exercises. The Russian military operation in Syria has provided an opportunity for the General Staff to test equipment and battle plans, and for combat forces to experience battlefield conditions. Officials such as Gerasimov have described the Syria operation as “priceless combat experience.”<sup>51</sup> Much of the Russian military’s senior leadership has now spent time commanding forces on the ground in Syria. The frequency, complexity, and spontaneity of military exercises have also

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<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Быть сильными: гарантии национальной безопасности для России,” *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, Feb. 20, 2012, <https://rg.ru/2012/02/20/putin-armiya.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Mar. 1, 2018, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/56957>.

<sup>50</sup> Keir Giles, *Assessing Russia’s Reorganized and Rearmed Military*, Carnegie Endowment, May 5, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/03/assessing-russia-s-reorganized-and-rearmed-military-pub-69853>

<sup>51</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, “По опыту Сирии,” *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kuryer*, Mar. 9, 2016, [http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK\\_09\\_624.pdf](http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_09_624.pdf).

all been stepped up. Exercises are increasingly focused on areas designated as priorities in the new military strategy, such as inter-service coordination, improvements in command and control, and greater operational mobility. Finally, snap exercises have allowed military leadership to more closely approximate battlefield conditions, compared to the previous standard of highly scripted and routinized exercise events.<sup>52</sup>

## Military strategy

A strategy titled 'active defense' was set out in 2019 by Gerasimov in a speech to the Russian Academy of Military Science. According to Gerasimov, active defense focuses on a series of measures to prevent, prepare for, and conduct warfare. Prevention consists of determining an adversary's weak points, threatening them to demonstrate the potential for unacceptable damage, to deter the adversary from initiating hostilities. Preparation requires maintaining a high level of combat readiness and mobilization preparedness.<sup>53</sup> The strategy incorporates actions that a standing military need take during a period of military threat, neutralizing that threat via preemptive means, and being prepared to conduct combat operations in the initial period of war. This is a strategy organized around a military capable of using select conventional and nuclear means to deter an opponent, conduct calibrated strikes to manage escalation or pursue war termination. Much of the strategy is geared towards deterring a superior opponent, namely the United States, and being able to avoid decisive defeat in an opening phase of a regional or large-scale war.

The Syrian experience plays a key role in the formulation of Russia's active defense strategy. Based on this experience, the Russian military has formulated a doctrine for defending its interests abroad based on a strategy of limited action. Gerasimov highlights the critical role played by highly mobile self-sufficient groups of forces. He also argues that the most important conditions for the implementation of this strategy include maintaining information dominance, ensuring high readiness of logistics and command and control systems, and covert deployment of forces.<sup>54</sup> These elements highlight the significance of the key features of the last decade's military reform efforts, including permanent readiness, advanced command and control, and technological integration of battle systems.

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<sup>52</sup> Johan Norberg, *Training for War: Russia's Strategic-Level Military Exercises 2009-2017*, FOI Report, Oct. 2018, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4627--SE>.

<sup>53</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, "Векторы развития военной стратегии," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, Mar. 4, 2019, <http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/>.

<sup>54</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, "Векторы развития военной стратегии," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, Mar. 4, 2019, <http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/>.



## The indirect approach

Russian leaders have taken steps to prepare the country for the possibility of direct military confrontation with an adversary. However, in the 21st century, they have focused on the key role of indirect methods as the driving force in international competition with potential key adversaries. In his 2012 programmatic article on Russian national security, for example, Putin noted that “the likelihood of a global war of nuclear powers against each other is low,” and that Russia’s nuclear arsenal meant that “no one will dare to unleash large-scale aggression against us.” However, he continued, changes in technology had “led to a qualitative change in the nature of armed struggle,” in which capabilities in information warfare and cyberspace would be of primary importance in determining outcomes.<sup>55</sup> Gerasimov’s frequently cited 2013 article on the nature of the threat posed by Russia’s adversaries also highlighted the potential for “information warfare [to open] up wide asymmetric opportunities to reduce the combat potential of the enemy.”<sup>56</sup> Although Russian leaders frequently use the term *warfare* in these statements, the discussions focus on political competition with Russia’s adversaries, rather than actual combat. The focus is on means that confer political victory without using military power, impose costs on competitors, contain adversaries, and set up the conditions for successful use of force in likely conflicts.

These statements highlight Russian leaders’ preference for an indirect approach to competition in international politics. Russian strategy includes a preference for achieving its objectives whenever possible through the use of coercive power rather than actual use of force, keeping the latter as a credible threat. Russia often seeks to use its power disparity vis-à-vis smaller neighboring states to ensure that its interests and policy preferences are considered by these states. At the same time, it seeks to deter major adversaries from becoming involved in regional and local conflicts that involve Russian interests. Moscow accomplishes this in part by establishing the perception of escalation dominance, and the notion that there is a strong asymmetry of interests at stake, i.e. that Russia cares sufficiently more about the object in question so as to have greater credibility in threatening to escalate.

This indirect approach to strategic competition generally manifests itself in what is often termed in the US as “gray zone activity,” including political meddling, information warfare, the use of proxy forces, and various types of covert operations. The purpose is to achieve Russian foreign policy goals with a minimal increased risk of military conflict or escalation. To this end, Russia tends to employ local forces as proxies, supported by mercenaries and irregular

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<sup>55</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Быть сильными: гарантии национальной безопасности для России,” *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, Feb. 20, 2012, <https://rg.ru/2012/02/20/putin-armiya.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, “Ценность науки в предвидении,” *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kuryer*, Feb. 26, 2013, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.



volunteers, while limiting the use of its own regular forces to the minimum necessary to play a decisive tipping role in direct engagements. Finally, Russia prefers to use ambiguity in its actions and messaging to slow down adversary decision-making processes and confound risk calculus among adversaries and their allies. The use of ambiguity also preserves plausible deniability among both domestic and international audiences, thus deflecting some of the political ramifications of engaging in conflict.

## Strategy of indirect and asymmetric actions

Russian leaders have preferred to use indirect and asymmetric actions to implement their strategic goals because they perceive their country to be weaker than its adversaries, both militarily and economically.<sup>57</sup> Putin has frequently mentioned the use of asymmetric means in his major speeches. In a 2007 press conference, he argued that, because Russian defense spending was 25 times lower than that of the US, Russians “must think and are thinking, of course, about ensuring our external security. And all of our answers will be asymmetric, but will be highly effective.”<sup>58</sup> In his 2019 address to the Federal Assembly, he noted that if the US were to deploy intermediate-range missiles in Europe, Russia would see this action as a serious threat and be forced to respond with asymmetric actions that correspond to the nature of the threat.<sup>59</sup> The idea is to develop systems and methods that can neutralize the enemy’s technological superiority.<sup>60</sup>

Russian military leaders have made it clear that such actions focus on achieving success while expending a lower level of resources than the opponent does.<sup>61</sup> A recent review of the term *asymmetric operation* in the General Staff journal *Voennaya Mysl* describes it as a “strategy of the struggle of a weak side against a strong one,” asserting that states most often employ this

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<sup>57</sup> For a more detailed examination of the role of asymmetric actions in Russian strategy, see “The Role of the Gray Zone in Russian Military and Security Thought,” in CNA Russia Studies Program, *Asymmetric Campaign Plan Against Russia*, Limited Distribution, CNA, DRM-2020-U-028696-Final, Dec. 2020, pp. 3-21.

<sup>58</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Большая пресс-конференция Владимира Путина,” Lenta.ru, Feb. 1, 2007, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2007/02/01/putin>.

<sup>59</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to Federal Assembly,” Feb. 20, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/59863>.

<sup>60</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, “Ценность науки в предвидении,” *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kuryer*, Feb. 26, 2013, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

<sup>61</sup> A. V. Kartapalov, “Lessons of Military Conflicts and Prospects for the Development of Resources and Methods of Conducting Them. Direct and Indirect Actions in Contemporary International Conflicts,” *Journal of the Academy of Military Science*, no. 2 (2015), pp. 35-36. Cited in Timothy Thomas, *Russian Military Thought: Concepts and Elements*, MITRE, 2019, pp. 5-10.

type of strategy when they are unequal to an adversary in the economic or military realm.<sup>62</sup> The idea is that because weaker states such as Russia are rarely able to beat stronger adversaries, they can use asymmetric tactics to come out on top politically. Similar ideas have been proposed by key Russian military strategists such as S.G. Chekinov and S.A. Bogdanov, as well as by senior generals such as Kartapolov, Gareev, and Gerasimov.<sup>63</sup> The Russian understanding of asymmetric actions includes “employing special operations forces and internal opposition movements; destroying an enemy’s unified information picture by degrading use of their intelligence, navigation, and command and control systems; harnessing information effects to influence an adversary’s population and leadership; and using a variety of other political, economic, and other types of measures.”<sup>64</sup>

Russian officials do not always distinguish between asymmetric and indirect actions.<sup>65</sup> When they do, indirect actions generally refer to non-military means of countering an adversary, whereas asymmetric actions include both non-military and technological means. Potential indirect actions include information warfare, cyberattacks, and the use of political and economic means to achieve objectives.<sup>66</sup> Gerasimov has frequently noted the possibility of using a population’s protest potential as a way of achieving desired objectives, with the implication that regime change may be achieved in this way.<sup>67</sup>

The graphic on the following page, from a 2015 article by Colonel General A.V. Kartapolov, helps illustrate some of the Russian military depictions of asymmetric actions as observed by senior military officers in contemporary conflicts.

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<sup>62</sup> N. N. Tyutyunnikov, *Military Thought in Terms and Definitions, Volume One* (2018), p. 29.

<sup>63</sup> S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, “Asymmetric Actions in Support of the Military Security of Russia,” *Voennaya Mysl'* 3 (2010), 21-22; A. V. Kartapolov, “Lessons of Military Conflicts and Prospects for the Development of Means and Methods of Conducting Them, Direct and Indirect Actions in Contemporary International Conflicts,” *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk* 2 (2015): 35; Valeriy Gerasimov, “Ценность науки в предвидении,” *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kuryer*, Feb. 26, 2013, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

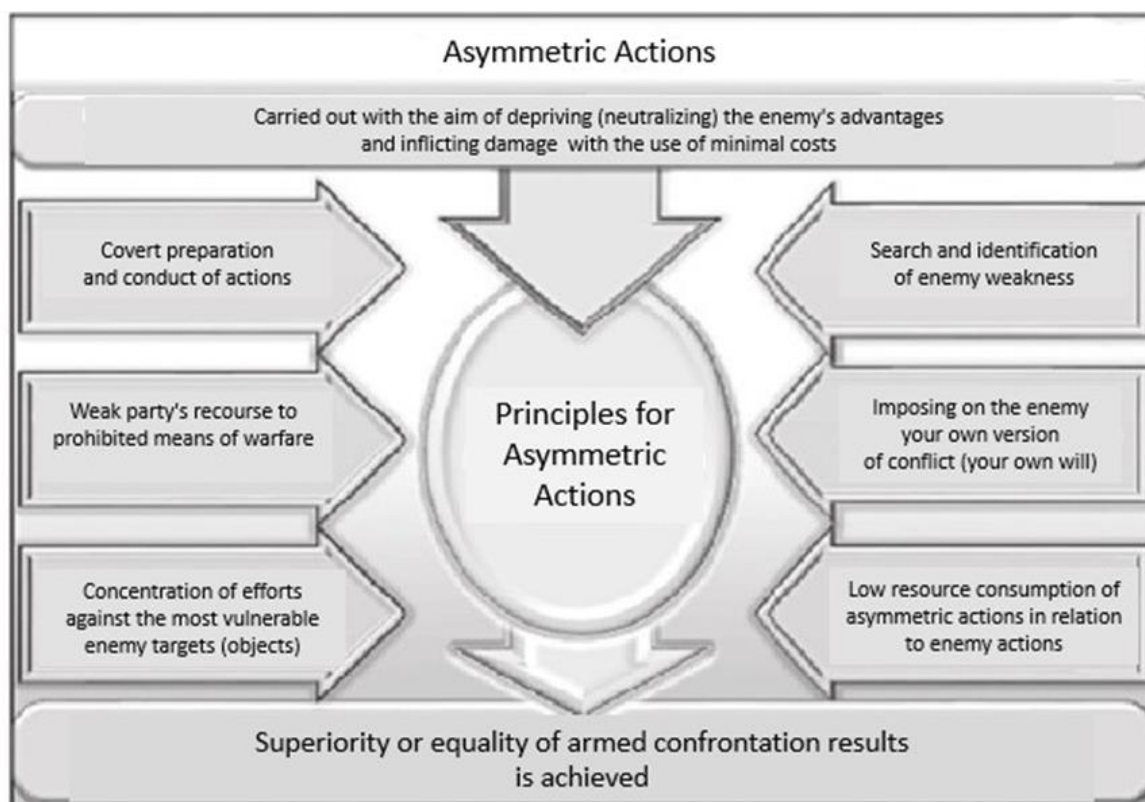
<sup>64</sup> Gerasimov, “Principal Trends in the Development of Forms and Methods of Employing Armed Forces and Current Tasks of Military Science Regarding their Improvement,” 24; Gareev, “Strategic Deterrence: Problems and Solutions,” 8; A. S. Fadeev and V. I. Nichipor, “Modern military conflicts, prospects for the development of their conduct. Direct and indirect actions in armed conflicts of the 21st century,” *Voennaya Mysl'* 9 (2019): 33.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas, *Russian Military Thought: Concepts and Elements*, pp. 5-11.

<sup>66</sup> S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, “The Influence of Indirect Actions on the Character of Modern Warfare,” *Voennaya Mysl'* 6 (2011).

<sup>67</sup> Most famously in his article on how the West conducts operations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Valeriy Gerasimov, “Ценность науки в предвидении,” *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kuryer*, Feb. 26, 2013, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

Figure 3. Russian asymmetric actions



Source: A.V. Kartapolov, "Lessons from military conflicts, prospects for the development of means and methods of their conduct. Direct and indirect actions in modern international conflicts," Уроки военных конфликтов, перспективы развития средств и способов их ведения. Прямые и непрямые действия в современных международных конфликтах, Bulletin of the Academy of Military Sciences, No. 2, 2015, pp. 26-36.

Putin has also highlighted the role of protest mobilization in destabilizing adversaries, though primarily when discussing Russian perceptions of Western actions, rather than Russian strategy. As he noted in a 2014 speech to the Russian Security Council, "Extremism is often used as a geopolitical instrument to rearrange spheres of influence. We see the tragic consequences of the wave of so-called 'colour revolutions,' the turmoil in the countries that have undergone the irresponsible experiments of covert and sometimes blatant interference in their lives. We take this as a lesson and a warning, and we must do everything necessary to ensure this never happens in Russia."<sup>68</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Speech to Security Council Meeting," Nov. 20, 2014, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/47045>.

Russian officials and military planners believe that such indirect actions have a greater role in conflicts in the current period than they did in the past. They argue that non-military measures can provide various benefits during peacetime, including deterring armed conflict, stabilizing the international system, bolstering relations among states, and eliminating possible threats from adversaries.<sup>69</sup>

## Political meddling and subversion

Russia has long capitalized on the use of political means to achieve its foreign policy goals. Russian military strategists argue that an adversary can be undermined by stirring up instability and confusion in its domestic politics and by demoralizing the public through information-psychological attacks, complemented with technological attacks against its information and telecommunications networks.<sup>70</sup> Active measures along these lines include providing financial support for sympathetic political actors abroad, the dissemination of compromising materials to discredit opponents, and cyberattacks designed to damage the integrity of government institutions such as voting systems.

Active measures of this type have three main components. First, they are “not spontaneous lies by politicians, but the methodical output of large bureaucracies.” Second, they contain an element of disinformation. And third, “an active measure is always directed toward an end, usually to weaken the targeted adversary.”<sup>71</sup> Technological innovations of the internet era have made subversion operations more scalable and harder to counter. They have also allowed Russian operatives to integrate disinformation operations with covert actions, both of which serve the purpose of attacking the legitimacy and stability of democratic institutions in adversary states.<sup>72</sup>

These subversive means are used both in the near abroad and farther afield. Russia’s use of subversive activities within the near abroad countries can help ensure that regimes in these countries adopt friendly policies toward Russia and consult Russia when making important decisions. Such actions include mobilizing ethnic Russian populations in neighboring states, using Russian-language media to influence consumers of such information abroad, and

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<sup>69</sup> S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, “Military Strategy: A Look Into the Future,” *Voennaya Mysl'* 11 (2016).

<sup>70</sup> S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, “The Initial Periods of Wars and their Impact on a Country’s Preparations for Future War,” *Voennaya Mysl'* 11 (2012): 26-27.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, (New York, 2020), p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Rid, *Active Measures*, pp. 11-13.

providing support for domestic opponents of governments who oppose Russian objectives.<sup>73</sup> For example, Russian media expressed support for protests against the removal of the Bronze Soldier statue in Estonia in 2007, and engaged in a cyberwarfare attack on Estonia's internet infrastructure in the immediate aftermath of the statue's removal and subsequent rioting in Tallinn.<sup>74</sup>

In the past, efforts at subverting countries outside the former Soviet space and Eastern Europe, such as the US or Western Europe, have been targeted at stopping EU and NATO enlargement, especially by creating divisions among the Western allies about the need for enlargement. Other recent efforts to sow division among Western allies have included Russian support for the Scotland independence referendum and for Brexit. In recent years, Russia has become more directly involved in supporting political forces that are seen as predisposed toward Russia, while attempting to inflict damage on actors seen as anti-Russian. Attacks on the election campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Emmanuel Macron are indicative of these types of actions, as are revelations that Russia has provided financial support to sympathetic political groups in Europe, including the French National Front and the Alternative for Germany party.<sup>75</sup> Russian involvement in an attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016 shows that such activities may extend to direct regime change efforts.<sup>76</sup>

Russia uses different kinds of actors for its subversive activities, ranging from organizations that are part of the Russian government, to non-state actors working on Russia's behalf, to independent groups that have a common interest with Russia on a particular issue. In many cases, covert or denied subversive activities and overt ones are used in tandem. Furthermore, independent groups may be supported by Russian actors without their knowledge.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> John Arquilla et al., *Russian Strategic Intentions*, A Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) White Paper, May 2019, <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000016b-a5a1-d241-adff-fdf908e00001>.

<sup>74</sup> Jennie Schulze, "Playing the Compatriot Card in Estonia and Latvia: School Reform and the Bronze Soldier Crisis," APSA 2010 Annual Meeting Paper, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1643469>.

<sup>75</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russian Influence Operations in Germany and Their Effect," *CSIS Commentary*, Feb. 3, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-influence-operations-germany-and-their-effect>; Gabriel Gatehouse, "Marine Le Pen: Who's funding France's far right?" BBC News, Apr. 3, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39478066>.

<sup>76</sup> Alan Crosby, "Montenegrin Coup Verdict A Wakeup Call To EU On Russia's Rising Role In Balkan Instability," RFE/RL, May 10, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegrin-coup-verdict-a-wakeup-call-to-eu-on-russia-s-rising-role-in-balkan-instability/29933787.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *Russia Report*, July 21, 2020, [https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721\\_HC632\\_CCS001\\_CCS1019402408-001\\_ISC\\_Russia\\_Report\\_Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721_HC632_CCS001_CCS1019402408-001_ISC_Russia_Report_Web_Accessible.pdf).

## Information warfare

Russia frequently uses information warfare as a tool to affect opponents' standing in the world. Russian thinkers define information warfare as the use of "information, computers, and communications technologies to suppress an enemy or to disorganize its management and introduce chaos."<sup>78</sup> They see great possibilities in using this tool successfully, including the potential to affect an adversary's political sovereignty, economic independence and role as a world leader, and believe that its effect can rival that of traditional warfare.<sup>79</sup> As Gerasimov has stated, Russian officials believe that "information warfare opens up wide asymmetric opportunities to reduce the combat potential of the enemy."<sup>80</sup>

Accordingly, Russia has focused increasingly on using the media, including foreign language channels, to shape and promote, on a global level, strategic narratives about the world and Russia's place in it. Although Russian official foreign policy narratives are designed to twist reality in ways that promote and justify foreign policy decisions to both domestic and foreign audiences, one common thread tying these narratives together is that all of them have an element of truth at their core. These narratives all connect with prevalent perceptions of the world and of the role of Russia and other leading power in it. By starting with a core element of truth, Russian officials are able to create narratives that resonate with the dominant frames through which their audiences view the world.<sup>81</sup>

Russia has promoted the concept of the "Russian world," a sphere composed of the ethnic Russian diaspora and regions of historic Russian cultural influence. This concept has shifted over time from a non-territorial to a territorialized conception, with the core "Russian world" now including not just the Russian Federation but also parts of Ukraine, Belarus, and northern Kazakhstan. This concept is now defined in Russian ideological circles as a monolithic body that combines the Russian people, culture, values, territory, and the state. This vision supports

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<sup>78</sup> S.G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, "The Evolution of the Essence and Content of War in the 21st Century," *Voennaya Mysl'* 1 (2017): 37-38.

<sup>79</sup> A.G. Sokolov, "Тенденция развития военного искусства," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Apr. 10, 2019, [https://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2019-10-04/1\\_1064\\_tendenzii.html](https://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2019-10-04/1_1064_tendenzii.html); S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, "The Influence of Indirect Actions on the Character of Modern Warfare," *Voennaya Mysl'* 6 (2011): 9.

<sup>80</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, "Ценность науки в предвидении," *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kuryer*, Feb. 26, 2013, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

<sup>81</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russian Foreign Policy Narratives," *Marshall Center Security Insights* #42, Nov. 2019, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2019-11/Security%20Insights%2042%20UPDATED%20.pdf>.

the idea of Russia as a divided nation, which led to the annexation of Crimea being viewed as a natural reunification.<sup>82</sup>

In addition, Russian leaders have sought to promote conservative values and illiberal governance models around the world, both inside and outside of what Russia claims to be its post-Soviet sphere of influence. In his 2013 speech to the Federal Assembly, Putin highlighted Russia's "position on defending traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization in every nation for thousands of years," describing it explicitly as a conservative position that "prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state." He added, "In recent years, we have seen how attempts to push supposedly more progressive development models onto other nations actually resulted in regression, barbarity and extensive bloodshed."<sup>83</sup> Russian leaders believe that such statements and activities help generate support for Russia's controversial foreign policy decisions and promote its ability to challenge the Western liberal order.<sup>84</sup>

## Use of proxy warfare and mercenaries

Russia regularly uses proxies and mercenaries as foreign policy tools. Using these forces has a number of advantages for the Russian government, including the ability to influence the outcome of a conflict without the risks and negative repercussions that often accompany the deployment of military forces abroad. Such forces provide greater flexibility and deniability than regular military units do. Putin has noted that they offer "a way of implementing national interests without the direct involvement of the state."<sup>85</sup>

For example, in the initial stages of Russia's intervention in Syria, Russian air strikes were combined with the use of Syrian and Hezbollah ground forces to stop the advance of opposition forces without the risks that would have been posed by the involvement of regular Russian military units. When that combination proved insufficient to reverse the loss of territory that had already occurred, the introduction of Russian mercenary companies helped the alliance to regain territory, again without the negative press that would have accompanied the

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<sup>82</sup> Mikhail Suslov, "'Russian World' Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of 'Spheres of Influence,'" *Geopolitics* 23:2 (2018): 330-353, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921>.

<sup>83</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," Dec. 12, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/19825>.

<sup>84</sup> Vincent Charles Keating and Katarzyna Kaczmarek. "Conservative soft power: liberal soft power bias and the 'hidden' attraction of Russia," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22 (2019): 1-27, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-017-0100-6>.

<sup>85</sup> "Putin podderzhal ideyu sozdaniya v Rossii chastnykh voyennykh kompaniy," RIA Novosti, Apr. 11, 2012, <https://ria.ru/20120411/623227984.html>.



deployment of regular Russian forces. A similar calculation led to the use of unacknowledged irregular forces to stop and reverse the advances of Ukrainian forces in the Donbas in the summer of 2014.<sup>86</sup>

Proxy forces and mercenaries are also far less expensive to maintain in the field, because of lower logistics costs associated with using local forces and the possibility of mercenary forces subsisting at least in part on revenues received from deals with the governments of the countries where they are deployed. Finally, casualties sustained by these types of forces do not resonate in Russian domestic politics in the same way as casualties among regular forces, also reducing the risk posed by involvement in a conflict.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Пуга Rozhdestvenskiy, Anton Baev, Polina Rusiaeva, "Призраки войны: как в Сирии появилась российская частная армия," *RBC*, Aug. 25, 2016, <https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2016/09/57bac4309a79476d978e850d>.

<sup>87</sup> "The Capabilities and Future Use of Russian Paramilitary Forces," in CNA Russia Studies Program, *Russian-Led Forces in Ukraine and Private Military Companies*, CNA, IOP-2019-U-022408, Jan. 2020, pp. 21-22.



# Russian Assumptions About Adversary Strategies

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Russia's approach to competition is shaped by perceptions about the strategies and intentions of other actors—foremost among them the US, which it sees as a great power rival. Rivalry does not preclude selective engagement and cooperation, it is promotes a zero-sum mentality, but does not confer it in all cases. There is, however, a strong narrative among Russian elites ascribing a predatory strategy to Washington. This assumes that what is good for the United States, advancing US preferences, interests, or power more generally, is often not in Russia's interest. The broad outlines of this perceived US strategy include a desire to contain Russia, deny it an independent foreign policy, prevent the emergence of Russia as a power center, and fragment Russian influence in the former Soviet Union. This is a backwards facing narrative, written in part from the contemporary confrontation in a way that elides periods of sustained cooperation in the 1990s and 2000s.

There is a general sense among Russians that the US has sought to keep Russia down, pursuing a policy of containment and denying Moscow a more prominent place in the international order.<sup>8889</sup> Russian elites believe the US has taken advantage of Russian weakness following the Soviet Union's collapse.<sup>90</sup> As Putin stated in a speech after the annexation of Crimea, "We have every right to assume that the infamous policy of containment, conducted in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position."<sup>91</sup> During his 2014 speech at the Moscow Conference on International Security, Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov stated that, to forestall the creation of new centers of power and preserve its own interests, the US pursues

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<sup>88</sup> Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy."

<sup>89</sup> Tuomas Forsberg, "Russia and the European security order revisited: from the congress of Vienna to the post-cold war," *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2 (2018): 161, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2018.1545182>.

<sup>90</sup> Tuomas Forsberg, "Russia and the European security order revisited," p. 162.

<sup>91</sup> See BBC's "Vladimir Putin: The rebuilding of 'Soviet' Russia," Mar. 28, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26769481>.

policies that would allow it to be the sole state with the power to set the rules in the international system.<sup>92</sup>

Most Russian analysts and officials agree that the US strives to maintain a unipolar world, in which it has the exclusive ability to order the international system as it desires, for example by excluding Russia and other countries that “press for the idea of a ‘polycentric world’ as an alternative to the US concept.”<sup>93</sup> This is sometimes described as a US aspiration for world domination, with Russian experts stating that the US uses “organized chaos” in weak states (i.e., color revolutions, to be discussed later) to gain total control.<sup>94</sup>

Some, more hawkish, Russian elites believe that the US wants to destroy Russia as a sovereign state. In 2015, then-director of the Federal Security Service Patrushev stated that the US believes Russia should not be a state and that it does not deserve its natural resources, an idea he took from a subsequently debunked statement by Madeleine Albright (while he may have genuinely believed it at the time, the statement had its origins in pro-Kremlin internet forums).<sup>95</sup> In the same vein, many Russians view Western initiatives in the post-Soviet space, including attempts to promote democracy, as efforts to encircle and ultimately annihilate the Russian state.<sup>96</sup>

There is a perception that Russia is already actively at war with the US and its allies in a conflict defined by indirect and asymmetric measures. Russia’s most recent military doctrine, published in 2014, lists information as both an internal and external threat, and, since the document’s publication, a number of Russian articles, including those by military officials, have discussed the West’s use of information against Russia.<sup>97</sup> These articles often state that the West uses information, including disinformation, to swing public opinion (both domestically in Russia and globally) away from Moscow.<sup>98</sup> Gerasimov has spoken on this topic numerous of

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<sup>92</sup> “Gerasimov Speech at 2014 Moscow International Security Conference,” Russian Ministry of Defense, May 23, 2014, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=11929743%40egNews&m=](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11929743%40egNews&m=).

<sup>93</sup> Andrey Kortunov, “Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity,” Russian International Affairs Council, Sept. 4, 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/between-polycentrism-and-bipolarity/>.

<sup>94</sup> Martin Kragh, Erik Andermo, and Liliia Makashova, “Conspiracy theories in Russian security thinking,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2020): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1717954>.

<sup>95</sup> Kragh et al., “Conspiracy theories in Russian security thinking,” p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> S. Neil MacFarlane, “Kto Vinovat? Why is there a crisis in Russia’s relations with the West?,” *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 347, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201315>.

<sup>97</sup> *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, 2014.

<sup>98</sup> V. Kutishchev, “In Order for the Enemy Weapon to Misfire.... We Continue the Conversation about Fourth-Generation War,” *Armeyskiy Sbornik* 10 (2018): 10-16; N. N. Bolotov, “The Essence and Content of the Concept of ‘War in the Information Sphere,’” *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk* 1 (2017): 27.

times in recent years. For example, in 2017 he stated that the West is increasingly using information warfare against Russia and painting Russia as malign to justify containment.<sup>99</sup>

## Western-backed color revolutions

Russian officials believe that the US and its allies are convinced of their right to alter not just the international system but also the internal political systems of other countries to their liking.<sup>100</sup> They assert that, to do so, Western states use the ideology and rhetoric of democracy promotion to provide cover for their attempts at achieving political dominance.<sup>101</sup> In 2016, Gerasimov described a color revolution as “a coup d’état organized from the outside” that helps organizing states achieve their political-military objectives with the use of indirect and asymmetric methods, instead of military means.<sup>102</sup> Patrushev echoed this notion in 2020, stating that the West first uses information means, including propaganda, and political and diplomatic pressure to attempt to oust unfavorable leaders, but then turns to “supposedly spontaneous popular demonstrations” if unsuccessful in their initial efforts.<sup>103</sup> Russian officials often mention the use of information tools as key to the manipulation of countries’ protest potential, an idea that plays into the Russian perception of being at constant war with the West. They generally believe, however, that if the use of non-military means and protest potential turn out to be inadequate for the US and its allies to achieve their goals, these countries will then turn to military measures to achieve the desired regime change.<sup>104</sup> The Kremlin believes that the West foments color revolutions as part of a deliberate strategy to surround Russia with hostile states.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Valery Gerasimov, “Tomahawks’ on low start” [«Томагавки» на низком старте], VPK, ВПК, May 2, 2017, <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/36547>; “General of the Army Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the RF Armed Forces, at the MCIS-2016 conference,” Выступление начальника Генштаба ВС РФ генерала армии Валерия Герасимова на конференции MCIS-2016, MCIS, 2016, <http://mil.ru/mcis/news/more.htm?id=12120704@cmsArticle>.

<sup>100</sup> Lukyanov, “Putin’s Foreign Policy,” p. 34.

<sup>101</sup> Lukyanov, “Putin’s Foreign Policy,” p. 34.

<sup>102</sup> Valery Gerasimov, “From the Syria experience,” По опыту Сирии, VPK, ВПК, Mar. 7, 2016, <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/29579>.

<sup>103</sup> Tseplyaev, “Puppetry for action.”

<sup>104</sup> Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, p. 70.

<sup>105</sup> M.K. Bhadrakumar, “Color Revolution in the Caucasus rattles Russian leaders,” *Asia Times*, Aug. 8, 2018, <https://asiatimes.com/2018/08/color-revolution-in-the-caucasus-rattles-russian-leaders/>.

## NATO as proxy and springboard for US power

From a Russian perspective, NATO is often seen as a proxy for US influence and power projection, rather than an entity comprising equal allies. The alliance is thus viewed as America's Warsaw Pact, and a 'platsdarm' for projection of US military power.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, the alliance is a cornerstone of US grand strategy to maintain military primacy in Europe and have a deciding say over security matters on the continent (to the presumed exclusion of Russia). Putin has stated that the US puts NATO forward as a way of expanding American global influence.<sup>107</sup>

According to the Kremlin, NATO acts as an instrument of US strategy, expanding a US-led security architecture into Russia's traditional sphere of influence.<sup>108</sup> Russian officials assert that NATO is not a defensive alliance; as Putin wrote in a 2012 essay, NATO's actions are "inconsistent with a 'defensive alliance,' as its members, particularly the United States, are consumed with the idea of complete invulnerability."<sup>109</sup> Similarly, in 2015 Patrushev expressed the idea that NATO carries an offensive character.<sup>110</sup> According to a 2016 article by Fyodor Lukyanov, editor in chief of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, "Western arguments that NATO is a purely defense alliance ring hollow: it is now a fighting group, which it was not during the Cold War."<sup>111</sup>

## The European Union

After 2008, Russian rhetoric toward the EU began to resemble discourse on NATO, to the effect that the EU had taken advantage of Russia during its period of weakness in the 1990s, forcing its own policies and sidelining Russia in Europe.<sup>112</sup> Just as Moscow views NATO as a proxy for

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<sup>106</sup> This is a commonly used Russian variant of a French term, implying a troop assembly area, or bridge head.

<sup>107</sup> Jonathan Holslag, "Hedging the hard way: Russia's response to world disorder," *Global Affairs* 2, no. 2 (2016): 171, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2016.1166329>.

<sup>108</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, "The sources of Russia's fear of NATO," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51 (2018): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.04.002>.

<sup>109</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin on Foreign Policy: Russia and the Changing World," Valdai Club, Feb. 27, 2012, [https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir\\_putin\\_on\\_foreign\\_policy\\_russia\\_and\\_the\\_changing\\_world/](https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_on_foreign_policy_russia_and_the_changing_world/).

<sup>110</sup> Tsygankov, "The sources of Russia's fear of NATO," p. 107.

<sup>111</sup> Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy," p. 33.

<sup>112</sup> Andrew Foxall, "From Evropa to Gayropa: A Critical Geopolitics of the European Union as Seen from Russia," *Geopolitics* 24, no. 1 (2019): 179, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1417848>.

the US, some similarly consider the EU a “Trojan horse” for NATO expansion, as a number of countries (e.g., the Baltic states, Bulgaria, Romania) have joined NATO in recent years, following acceptance of EU membership.<sup>113</sup> Russia believes that after these states joined NATO, they became essentially an extension of US policy. After 2007, a number of Russian politicians began to speak about NATO and EU as two halves of a whole that seeks to undermine Russian sovereignty and control, for example, its policies and values.<sup>114</sup> An example sometimes invoked is sanctions, which many in Russia believe to be evidence of the EU’s current weakness, stating that the US has been able to force the EU to adopt its unilateral sanctions.<sup>115</sup>

Following the financial crisis of 2008, it became more common for Russian officials to describe the EU in terms of weakness or decay, contrasting it with a Russia that is rising or has already risen.<sup>116</sup> Moscow began to see its relationship with the EU as one of lesser import, particularly given an increasingly strong relationship with Beijing<sup>117</sup>—a necessity born from a desire to engage bilaterally with individual European states, who to Moscow’s chagrin belong to a supranational institution. Senior elites have referred to the EU as “dysfunctional.”<sup>118</sup> Yet despite such rhetoric, many Russian analysts do not deny that even if the EU “at the moment is not in its best shape and individual components of this complex mechanism function with obvious disruptions,” overall it still represents the “most successful integration project” seen in the modern era.<sup>119</sup>

What is the significance of these perspectives? First, there is an assumption that the US, EU, and NATO are interrelated problems and must be confronted. Second, there is a clear Russian view that their expansionism is part of a predatory strategy, and that these organizations represent mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Third, Russia assumes that, to an extent, it is already involved in a conflict, not just with the US but also with members of these organizations. The parameters of this conflict are primarily non-military, but this justifies using indirect means of resistance. These means may include information warfare, political warfare, elite subversion, and backing centrifugal forces that force these organizations to look inward

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<sup>113</sup> Elias Götz, “It’s geopolitics, stupid: explaining Russia’s Ukraine policy,” *Global Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2015): 4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2015.960184>.

<sup>114</sup> Foxall, “From Evropa to Gayropa,” p. 182.

<sup>115</sup> Kortunov, “Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity.”

<sup>116</sup> Foxall, “From Evropa to Gayropa,” p. 182.

<sup>117</sup> Isabelle Facon, “Russia’s national security strategy and military doctrine and their implications for the EU,” European Parliament, 2017, p. 19, [https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/project\\_papers/research\\_network\\_to\\_provide\\_foreign\\_policy\\_expertise/russia\\_s\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_and\\_military\\_doctrine\\_and\\_their\\_implications\\_for\\_the\\_eu](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/project_papers/research_network_to_provide_foreign_policy_expertise/russia_s_national_security_strategy_and_military_doctrine_and_their_implications_for_the_eu).

<sup>118</sup> Holslag, “Hedging the hard way,” p. 172.

<sup>119</sup> Kortunov, “Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity.”

rather than continue expanding. There is a desire to prevent collective decision-making and reduce political cohesion within the EU and NATO. This may reduce their performance or competitiveness, which can be thought of as a function of resources and organization. Within that equation, organization plays a strong determining role. Another approach is driving wedges between the US and these institutions, neutralizing Washington's ability to leverage them in the competition.

# Russia's Understanding of the International Operating Environment

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Russian views of the international environment inform the country's approach to competition, setting expectations, and providing a rationale for why some efforts, versus others, may succeed. Russia's elites see the international operating environment as undergoing a transition, shaped by the following forces:

- Eroding US hegemony
- Emerging multipolarity
- Asia's growing global economic role
- A problematic neighborhood
- Intensifying competitive pressures and growing instability
- Accelerating technological change that threatens Russia's status

These elements are visible in Russia's strategic planning documents and in statements by President Putin and other senior leaders. The broad consistency among the documents and remarks intended for both domestic and international audiences suggests that these ideas reflect Russian thinking and are not simply for public messaging. The planning documents, which include Putin's annual addresses to Russia's parliament, are defined legally as foundations of Russian policy.<sup>120</sup> Because their formal purposes include "the determination of internal and external conditions, tendencies, limitations, disproportions, imbalances, and possibilities," these documents are especially useful in assessing Russia's official perspectives on the international environment.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Федеральный закон "О стратегическом планировании в Российской Федерации," <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody&nd=102354386>. Along with Russia's National Security Strategy, Economic Security Strategy, and subordinate documents in specific fields, Putin's annual addresses to parliament are formally defined as strategic planning documents under Russian law.

<sup>121</sup> Федеральный закон "О стратегическом планировании в Российской Федерации," <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody&nd=102354386>.

## Intensifying competitive pressures and growing instability

The overall perception of the international operating environment among Russian leaders is one of increasing competitiveness and instability. Putin highlighted this perception in his January 2021 speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos:

The pandemic has exacerbated the problems and imbalances that built up in the world before. There is every reason to believe that differences are likely to grow stronger. These trends may appear practically in all areas. Needless to say, there are no direct parallels in history. However, some experts – and I respect their opinion – compare the current situation to the 1930s....

We are seeing a crisis of the previous models and instruments of economic development. Social stratification is growing stronger both globally and in individual countries.... But this, in turn, is causing today a sharp polarization of public views, provoking the growth of populism, right- and left-wing radicalism and other extremes, and the exacerbation of domestic political processes including in the leading countries. All this is inevitably affecting the nature of international relations and is not making them more stable or predictable. International institutions are becoming weaker, regional conflicts are emerging one after another, and the system of global security is deteriorating.<sup>122</sup>

Russia's Economic Security Strategy stated that "the process of transition to multipolarity is accompanied by growing geopolitical instability and volatile development of the global economy as well as sharp aggravation of global competition."<sup>123</sup> Russia's National Security Strategy proclaimed a wide-ranging competition among states that "increasingly involves values, models of social development, and human, scientific, and technological potential."<sup>124</sup> Russia's Military Doctrine noted "strengthening global competition" and "tensions in various areas of inter-state and interregional interaction, rivalry of proclaimed values and models of social development."<sup>125</sup> The Economic Security Strategy connected some of this international

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<sup>122</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Speech at Davos World Economic Forum," *Eurasia Review*, Jan. 27, 2021, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/27012021-vladimir-putin-at-davos-online-forum-transcript/>.

<sup>123</sup> "Стратегия экономической безопасности Российской Федерации на период до 2030 года," May 13, 2017, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201705150001.pdf>.

<sup>124</sup> "Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации," <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/docs/document133/>.

<sup>125</sup> "Военная доктрина Российской Федерации (в редакции от 2015 г.)," Mar. 3, 2015, [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/976907](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/976907).



competition to climate change and fears surrounding potential shortages of food and fresh water.<sup>126</sup>

Russia's Foreign Policy Concept directly linked Moscow's perception of increasing global instability to "attempts made by western powers to maintain their positions in the world, including by imposing their point of view on global processes and conducting a policy to contain alternative centers of power."<sup>127</sup> Some Russian officials have likewise explicitly accused the US of promoting instability as a means to maintain US hegemony. For example, in an apparent reference to the US defense and security community's past discussions surrounding the application of chaos theory (in physics) to international affairs,<sup>128</sup> Patrushev has stated that America used the Middle East as a "testing ground" for "technologies of 'controlled chaos.'"<sup>129</sup> Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, has similarly blamed the US for growing instability, especially in the Middle East.<sup>130</sup>

## Eroding US hegemony

*Hegemony* is described as "the dominance of one group over another, often supported by legitimating norms and ideas."<sup>131</sup> From Moscow's perspective, the post-Cold War international system was defined by Western hegemony, led by the US. Today, Russia's leadership sees US hegemony as eroding because of a combination of backlash against US policy and broader international trends.

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<sup>126</sup> "Стратегия экономической безопасности Российской Федерации на период до 2030 года," May 13, 2017, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201705150001.pdf>.

<sup>127</sup> "Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В. Путиным 30 ноября 2016 г.)," Dec. 1, 2016, [https://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>128</sup> For an overview, see Sam J. Tangredi, "Chaos Becomes Complex," *The Navalist*, May 16, 2018, <https://thenavalist.com/home/2018/5/16/chaos-becomes-complex>.

<sup>129</sup> "Видеть цель," Nikolai Patrushev, *Российская газета - Федеральный выпуск № 254 (8012)*, Nov. 11, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/11/11/patrushev-ssha-stremiatsia-izbavitsia-ot-mezhdunarodno-pravovyh-ramok.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mikhail Bogdanov read Lavrov's statement during a conference. Оприветствии Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова организаторам и участникам конференции "Ближний Восток: новый этап, старые проблемы?", организованной в рамках VIII Ближневосточного диалога Международного дискуссионного клуба "Валдай," Feb. 19, 2019, [https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/conflicts/-/asset\\_publisher/xIEMTQ30vzCA/content/id/3528850](https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ30vzCA/content/id/3528850).

<sup>131</sup> Ben Rosamond, "Hegemony," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hegemony>.

In the past, Russia's National Security Strategies have declared that Russia's "independent foreign and domestic policies provoke opposition on the part of the United States and its allies, striving to preserve their dominance in international affairs."<sup>132</sup> The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept similarly stated that "the possibilities for the historical West to dominate global economics and politics are decreasing."<sup>133</sup> Senior Russian officials have reiterated this idea in their public statements. In 2019, Putin quoted remarks by French President Emmanuel Macron to say that Western hegemony is ending.<sup>134</sup> Security Council Secretary Patrushev has argued that Americans "wrote off" Russia in the 1990s and dismissed China's ability to become a "first-rank global power," perpetuating "the illusion that a liberal world order had been established for all time, founded on American hegemony."<sup>135</sup>

## Emerging multipolarity

Russia's strategic planning documents describe the emergence of new "centers of power," or new poles in the international system, as a defining characteristic of international affairs today. Senior officials frequently refer to this idea in public. For example, Russia's National Security Strategy stated that "the process of forming a new polycentric model of world order is accompanied by the growth of global and regional instability."<sup>136</sup> Likewise, its 2015 Military Doctrine referred to "step-by-step redistribution of influence in favor of new centers of economic growth and political gravity."<sup>137</sup> Russia's Foreign Policy Concept similarly asserted that "globalization has led to the formation of new centers of economic and political power,"

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<sup>132</sup> "Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации," <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/docs/document133/>.

<sup>133</sup> "Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В. Путиным 30 ноября 2016 г.)," Dec. 1, 2016, [https://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCkzB6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCkzB6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>134</sup> "Plenary session of the Eastern Economic Forum," Sept. 5, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61451>. Speaking at a conference of France's ambassadors, Macron said, "We are probably in the process of experiencing the end of Western hegemony over the world." "Ambassadors' conference—Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic," Aug. 27, 2019, <https://lv.ambafrance.org/Ambassadors-conference-Speech-by-M-Emmanuel-Macron-President-of-the-Republic>.

<sup>135</sup> "Видеть цель," Nikolai Patrushev, Российская газета - Федеральный выпуск № 254 (8012), Nov. 11, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/11/11/patrushev-ssha-stremiatsia-izbavitsia-ot-mezhdunarodno-pravovyh-ramok.html>.

<sup>136</sup> "Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации," <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/docs/document133/>.

<sup>137</sup> "Военная доктрина Российской Федерации (в редакции от 2015 г.)," Mar. 3, 2015, [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCkzB6BZ29/content/id/976907](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCkzB6BZ29/content/id/976907).

and that “global power and development potential is becoming decentralized.”<sup>138</sup> Russia’s 2017 Economic Security Strategy stated that “objective signs of the destruction of the unipolar world” had appeared.<sup>139</sup>

Putin has repeatedly referred to “emerging multipolarity,” including in his 2020 recorded address to the United Nations General Assembly,<sup>140</sup> his 2019 annual news conference,<sup>141</sup> and a message to participants in a 2019 summit of government leaders in the Non-Aligned Movement.<sup>142</sup> Foreign Minister Lavrov has often mentioned multipolarity as well,<sup>143</sup> though Lavrov’s statements have typically assumed that a multipolar or polycentric order already exists and have called for the multipolar order to be “fairer” and “more democratic,” an implicit criticism of the leading US role in the international system.<sup>144</sup>

## Asia’s growing international role

Among the country’s strategic planning documents, Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept most clearly describes Asia’s growing international role, both in its statement that global power is “shifting toward the Asia-Pacific region” and in its characterization of the Asia-Pacific as a

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<sup>138</sup> “Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В. Путиным 30 ноября 2016 г.),” Dec. 1, 2016, [https://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>139</sup> “Стратегия экономической безопасности Российской Федерации на период до 2030 года,” May 13, 2017, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201705150001.pdf>.

<sup>140</sup> “75<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly,” Sept. 22, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64074>.

<sup>141</sup> “Vladimir Putin’s annual news conference,” Dec. 19, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62366>.

<sup>142</sup> “Greetings on opening of 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of Non-Aligned Movement heads of state and government,” Oct. 25, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61910>.

<sup>143</sup> For a recent example, see “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s opening remarks at the 28<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Moscow, December 10, 2020,” Dec. 11, 2020, [https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/disarmament/-/asset\\_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4478752](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4478752).

<sup>144</sup> See “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s message of greetings to participants in the 12<sup>th</sup> BRICS Academic Forum, Oct. 22, 2020,” Oct. 22, 2020, [https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/briks/-/asset\\_publisher/RdlyjVvdPAwg/content/id/4401290](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/briks/-/asset_publisher/RdlyjVvdPAwg/content/id/4401290) and “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, Dec. 29, 2020,” [https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/us/-/asset\\_publisher/unVXBbj4Z6e8/content/id/4514920](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/us/-/asset_publisher/unVXBbj4Z6e8/content/id/4514920).

“vibrant geopolitical region” with which Russia should deepen ties.<sup>145</sup> Putin has often echoed these sentiments, commenting in 2014 and 2015 speeches to parliament that “we see how quickly the Asia-Pacific has been developing”<sup>146</sup> and that Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) together account for one-third of the global economy.<sup>147</sup> During a televised event in 2019, he called China and India “drivers of the global economy.”<sup>148</sup>

Lavrov has been especially detailed and consistent in citing Asia’s growing role. In a 2013 article, for example, he wrote that “the role of the Asia-Pacific region is rising as a significant factor that is determining now and will most likely determine the mainstream of international developments in the nearest future, becoming an influential player of the emerging polycentric world order architecture.”<sup>149</sup> Lavrov added that states in the region will “remain the locomotive of global progress” in a “vital center of economic development and progressive political influence” that is a “cross point for interests of key stakeholders and major multilateral institutions.”<sup>150</sup> Notably, Lavrov has publicly rejected the US term *Indo-Pacific* as an “artificially imposed construct,” adding that “the United States, along with Japan and Australia, has begun to promote this within the far-reaching context of containing China.”<sup>151</sup> The new American name for the region is “a clear attempt to get India involved in military-political and naval processes” that undermine the “ASEAN-centricity of the formats that have been created in that region.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> “Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В. Путиным 30 ноября 2016 г.),” Dec. 1, 2016, [https://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptIckB6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptIckB6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>146</sup> “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Dec. 4, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>.

<sup>147</sup> “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Dec. 3, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50864>.

<sup>148</sup> “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin,” June 20, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60795>.

<sup>149</sup> “‘Towards Peace, Stability and Sustainable Economic Development in the Asia-Pacific Region,’ Article by Sergey Lavrov, Foreign Minister of Russia,” Oct. 5, 2013, [https://www.mid.ru/en/atr/-/asset\\_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/93642](https://www.mid.ru/en/atr/-/asset_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/93642).

<sup>150</sup> “‘Towards Peace, Stability and Sustainable Economic Development.’”

<sup>151</sup> “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks and Answers to Media Questions During the Russia-Vietnam Conference of the Valdai Discussion Club,” Feb. 26, 2019, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/foreign-minister-sergey-lavrov-remarks/>.

<sup>152</sup> Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks and Answers.”

## The impact of China's rise

The Russian approach to China is both the logical outcome of a strategy first pursued by the late Soviet Union, but equally driven by the desire to both manage and take advantage of China's rise. In pursuing an alignment and strategic partnership, Russia has sought to make China's rise safe for itself and lucrative in light of growing Western pressure. As Russia's confrontation with the US intensified, positive relations with China became an imperative, resulting in a real pivot of economic and political relations. Long dismissed, the Sino-Russian relationship is a significant alignment, driven by decisions at the senior-most levels of political leadership. While the relationship is not without its challenges, it is defined by a détente that steers competition away from the countries' vital interests, and a de facto non-aggression pact. Moscow continues to see China as an important element in its broader competition with the US, and in pursuing its own desire for greater status and position as a leading international power.

As China increasingly consumes US bandwidth and resources, it makes Washington much more inclined to stabilize and close out the competition with Russia. Here Moscow may attain significant compromises despite its substantially inferior position. Moreover, China's rise heralds the steady deterioration of America's primacy, despite systemic or structural advantages. Finally, China has the ability to change the character of the international system in a way Russia cannot. Moscow sees as a net positive any change that makes the international order less characteristically Western, less US led, and less defined by American norms or prerogatives. China is therefore both a major constraint on US ability to focus its efforts against Russian, and a major driver of a global power transition from which Moscow believes it will yield structural benefits.

Despite turbulent relations between China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the normalization of relations in 1989 under Mikhail Gorbachev began the restoration of relations between the two countries. In truth, this effort began as early as 1985, and has been a consistent foreign policy priority over the last 30 years of political administrations in Moscow. Today, Russian elites tout their increasingly close friendship with Beijing.<sup>153</sup> Moscow pursued rapprochement in the 1980s in part seeking a counterweight, perceiving the West as predatory and capitalizing on Soviet retrenchment and decline. As resentment grew toward the West, Moscow increasingly began to view relations with China as an important diversification to

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<sup>153</sup> "TIMELINE: Russia-China relations," *Reuters*, May 19, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-medvedev-foreign-timeline/timeline-russia-china-relations-idUSL1912530020080519>.

what it viewed as US sidelining of Russia in the international system<sup>154</sup> China is much more aligned with Russia in outlooks and policy positions on a number of key issues—for example, in favoring the emergence of a multipolar system and opposing the promotion of Western democracy in other countries. This comity has led the two to exhibit balancing behavior against the US and the West since the latter part of the 2000s, as both states have sought to chip away at US primacy in international politics and within their own respective regions.<sup>155</sup>

Part of these enhanced relations manifested in bolstered economic ties, particularly after the West imposed sanctions on Russia following its annexation of Crimea.<sup>156</sup> While in the past Moscow viewed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with a degree of hesitancy and suspicion, the trajectory of Russian relations with the West has led it to lean more heavily on Beijing.<sup>157</sup> In June 2015, Putin and Xi Jinping signed 32 deals tying the two countries closer together, including, importantly, by formally linking their primary integration projects: China’s Silk Road initiative and Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>158</sup> Russian elites view the Chinese and Russian economies as complementary, with differing resources and no modernization or human rights requirements imposed on each other.<sup>159</sup> According to Putin, “Essentially, we seek ultimately to reach a new level of partnership that will create a common economic space across the entire Eurasian continent.”<sup>160</sup> Overall, with the BRI and other Chinese economic ambitions, Russia wants to have productive trade relations and generally views these efforts positively, but also wants to avoid becoming too dependent on Beijing and seeks to be an equal partner.<sup>161</sup>

Russian analysts and officials generally speak about Chinese strategy with admiration, at times comparing China to Russia itself by stating that both countries wish to take their rightful places in the international system and refrain from forcing their development models on other

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<sup>154</sup> Rumer, “Russia’s China Policy,” p. 20.

<sup>155</sup> Ian Nechepurenko, “Russia-China Alliance Could Launch New World Order,” *Moscow Times*, June 15, 2015, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/06/15/russia-china-alliance-could-launch-new-world-order-a47401>.

<sup>156</sup> Dina Smeltz et al., *Russians See Greater Reward than Risk in Closer Relations with China*, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Mar. 10, 2021, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/report/russians-see-greater-reward-risk-closer-relations-china>.

<sup>157</sup> Feng Yujun et al., *The Belt and Road Initiative: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing*, Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, Apr. 8, 2019, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2019/04/08/belt-and-road-initiative-views-from-washington-moscow-and-beijing-pub-78774>.

<sup>158</sup> Nechepurenko, “Russia-China Alliance Could Launch New World Order.”

<sup>159</sup> Rumer, “Russia’s China Policy,” p. 19.

<sup>160</sup> Rumer, “Russia’s China Policy,” p. 19.

<sup>161</sup> Yujun et al., *Belt and Road Initiative*.

states.<sup>162</sup> Russian journal articles describe China's rise by stating that, for many years, Beijing hid its aspirations in order to curtail outside resistance.<sup>163</sup> For this reason, China did not seek alliances for much of history, and, according to an article in 2016 by the head of the Department of International Relations at Moscow's Higher School of Economics, it sought to convince those in its region and around the world that its growing power was not a danger.<sup>164</sup> After China originally used the phrase "peaceful rise" to describe its own development, the article says, Beijing determined that the word "rise" might have a negative connotation and started using "peaceful development" and "harmonious world" instead.<sup>165</sup> In more recent years, Russian articles assess that, as China has begun to amass greater power, it has also begun to follow a more forceful foreign policy and has attempted to identify potential allies; some Russian analysts say that a lack of allies now serves to enhance other countries' suspicion of China.<sup>166</sup>

Despite positive Russian public statements, there are also lingering apprehensions. First, a growing power disparity naturally makes Russia wary of future potential Chinese aims, though the disparity has not resulted in China treating Moscow as a junior partner. There is always the danger that China may become revanchist in the wrong direction, remembering the territories it lost to Moscow in the 19th century. Yet taken together, the worst Russian concerns about China's rise have not materialized. Chinese are not flooding into the Russian far east; on the contrary, China's northern regions are depopulating. The border is well defined, demilitarized, and stable. China's territorial disputes focus on India, the South China Sea, and of course its longstanding claims to Taiwan. China's geoeconomic projects do not pose a serious threat to Russia, and the two states have been able to deconflict competition in Central Asia, which is a relative backwater in terms of Russian interests and priorities. Leveraging China's rise, rather than seeking to oppose it, is also favored by the Russian public, which overwhelmingly reports positive views of China. Recent polls show that 74 percent of Russians have a favorable impression of China—much higher than the 45 percent who approve of the EU and the 39 percent who approve of the US.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Alexander Lukin, "Russia in a Post Bipolar World," *Survival* 58, no. 1 (2016), p. 102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1142141>.

<sup>163</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, "Thank God We are Alone" [«Слава богу – мы одни»], *Russian in Global Affairs* [Россия в глобальной политике], July 23, 2014, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/slava-bogu-my-odni/>.

<sup>164</sup> Lukyanov, "Thank God We are Alone"; Lukin, "Russia in a Post Bipolar World," p. 100.

<sup>165</sup> Lukin, "Russia in a Post Bipolar World," p. 100.

<sup>166</sup> Lukyanov, "Thank God We are Alone."

<sup>167</sup> Smeltz et al., "Russians See Greater Reward."



## A challenging neighborhood

Planning documents convey the depth of Russia's interests in its neighborhood as well as concerns about the region's future. In its overview of Russia's goals in key geographic areas around the world, Russia's Foreign Policy Concept placed the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Cooperative Security Treaty Organization first, with Belarus as the first named state.<sup>168</sup> Putin's 2012 decree on Russia's foreign policy course—one of his so-called “May decrees” establishing the country's strategic goals during his 2012—2018 presidential term, likewise put Russia's neighborhood first.<sup>169</sup> Yet Russia's National Security Strategy expressed anxiety that “in regions neighboring Russia, processes of militarization and an arms race are developing.”<sup>170</sup>

Russia's officials—and the documents they produce—have been more circumspect in evaluating Moscow's relations with its neighbors and particularly with the country's allies. However, nongovernmental Russian experts have provided useful assessments of official thinking. Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, has asserted that Moscow is “painfully adapting” to its neighbors' desire to pursue “multi-vector foreign policies” and that Russia's leading alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, is “an alliance in name only.”<sup>171</sup> Accordingly, the country has entered a “post-post-imperial phase” in which “Russia is embracing its loneliness as a chance to start looking after its own interests and needs, something it neglected in the past in the name of an ideological mission, geopolitical concerns, or one-sided commitments built on kinship or religious links.”<sup>172</sup> In this new period, Russian officials have understood that the country “doesn't have allies who would stand by it in its hour of need, but it has also found out that it doesn't really need allies to defend itself against adversaries” because large-scale conventional war is highly unlikely and nuclear deterrence ensures Russia's security vis-à-vis the US.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> “Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В. Путиным 30 ноября 2016 г.),” Dec. 1, 2016, [https://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICk6B6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6B6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>169</sup> “Подписан Указ о мерах по реализации внешнеполитического курса,” May 7, 2012, <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/125/events/15256/>.

<sup>170</sup> “Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации,” <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/docs/document133/>.

<sup>171</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Moscow's New Rules,” Carnegie Moscow Center, Nov. 12, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83208>.

<sup>172</sup> Trenin, “Moscow's New Rules.”

<sup>173</sup> Trenin, “Moscow's New Rules.”



Other analysts largely agree. *Russia in Global Affairs'* Lukyanov highlights the key role of the conflict with Ukraine in ending Russian leaders' belief that Russia could indefinitely maintain a special relationship with at least some of the former Soviet republics. He argues that the long-term illusion that Ukraine was in some sense still a part of Russia led to a series of catastrophic policy errors that culminated in the fall of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich and precipitated a new conflict with the Euro-Atlantic alliance. For Russia, Lukyanov states that the experience with Ukraine can only be considered an example of what not to do in foreign policy. "The eternal Russian obsession with 'strategic depth,' the need to fence off external threats with 'buffer zones,' ... no longer respond to the main challenges [facing Russia]."<sup>174</sup>

Furthermore, following the defeat of Russia's ally Armenia in the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war, and Moscow's limited assistance to Yerevan, Trenin wrote, "Russians are looking at their alliances, and one school of thought in Moscow is that 'if people want our protection, they have to be good allies; they have to stand with us; they shouldn't be ashamed by being closer to us because you know you cannot expect Russia to bail you out and at the same time try to impress the West with how pro-Western you are: you need to choose.'"<sup>175</sup> In further describing official Russian views of alliances, Trenin compared them to marriages: "If you wed somebody, it doesn't mean that you are somebody's vassal, but it certainly means that there are certain rules to be observed, there are certain things that you will not do as long as you want to keep that marriage going. Of course, you can get out of that marriage, and even marry somebody else: it's a free choice."<sup>176</sup>

## Accelerating technological change that threatens Russia's position

Moscow sees technological competition and technological change as a central feature of today's international environment, but one that engenders the perennial fear of being left behind. Russia is not the driver of transformative technological processes, nor is it visibly setting the agenda in how technology shapes the global economy. Russian economist German Gref vividly

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<sup>174</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, "Украинский вопрос для будущего России" [The Ukrainian Question for the Future of Russia], *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 3 (May-June 2018), <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/ukrainskij-vopros-dlya-budushhego-rossii/>.

<sup>175</sup> Vazha Tavberidze, "Trenin: 'The Armenians Will Have to Eat Their Bitter Humble Pie,'" *Georgia Today*, Nov. 12, 2020, <http://gtarchive.georgiatoday.ge/news/23014/Trenin:-%22The-Armenians-Will-Have-to-Eat-their-Bitter-Humble-Pie%22-&-Georgia-Draw-Lessons>.

<sup>176</sup> Tavberidze, "Trenin: 'The Armenians Will Have to Eat Their Bitter Humble Pie.'"

highlighted the perceived risks to Russia of failing to diversify its energy-based economy and losing the technological race when he stated, “The oil age is already over. We didn’t beat the competition...and this is technological subjugation, we’ve simply ended up in the camp of losers, in the camp of downshifter countries.”<sup>177</sup> Putin clearly delineated the risks to his country in his 2018 address to a joint session of parliament, which is considered one of Russia’s formal strategic planning documents:

The speed of technological progress is accelerating sharply. It is rising dramatically. Those who manage to ride this technological wave will surge far ahead. Those who fail to do this will be submerged and drown in this wave.

Technological lag and dependence translate into reduced security and economic opportunities of the country and, ultimately, the loss of its sovereignty. This is the way things stand now.<sup>178</sup>

Following his inauguration in May 2012, Putin signed a series of “May decrees” setting goals for his forthcoming six-year term. They included a decree on developing Russia’s military and modernizing Russia’s defense industrial base that called for providing modern weapons to 70 percent of the country’s military units by 2020.<sup>179</sup> Russia’s top officials and strategic planning documents have prioritized political and economic concerns regarding technological change. “It is not a question of someone conquering or devastating our land,” Putin has said. “The main threat and our main enemy is that we are falling behind.”<sup>180</sup> According to Russia’s Economic Security Strategy, first on the list of “fundamental challenges and threats to economic security” is the efforts of developed countries “to use their advantage in the level of development of the economy and high technologies (including information technologies) as instruments of global competition.”<sup>181</sup>

Russia’s Economic Security Strategy identified several technology-driven challenges to Russia’s future economic prospects. Notably, it considered advances in “green technologies” and energy-saving technologies as threats, connected to “change in global demand for energy

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<sup>177</sup> “Герман Греф: Россия стала страной-дауншифтером,” *Echo Moskvy*, Jan. 15, 2016, <https://echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/1694722-echo/>.

<sup>178</sup> “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Mar. 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>.

<sup>179</sup> “Подписан Указ о реализации планов развития Вооружённых Сил и модернизации ОПК,” May 7, 2012, <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/125/events/15242>.

<sup>180</sup> “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Mar. 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>.

<sup>181</sup> “Стратегия экономической безопасности Российской Федерации на период до 2030 года,” May 13, 2017, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201705150001.pdf>.

resources and the structure of consumption.”<sup>182</sup> The Economic Security Strategy likewise highlighted threats in “exhaustion of the resource-export model of economic development and sharp reduction of the role of traditional factors guaranteeing economic growth, connected to scientific-technological changes.”<sup>183</sup> Russia’s Energy Strategy discussed these concerns as well, though with less urgency.<sup>184</sup> Other technology-related threats to Russia cited in the Economic Security Strategy included “discriminatory measures” (economic sanctions) that limit Russia’s access to technology, “weakness in innovation” in new and emerging technologies, and intensifying international competition for highly qualified personnel.<sup>185</sup> The Information Security Doctrine states that Russia’s “information security in the economic sphere is characterized by a lack of competitive information technologies and the inadequate use of information technologies in the production of goods and services.”<sup>186</sup>

Russia’s government has gradually devoted greater attention to climate change over the last two decades. Russia’s 2004 ratification of the Kyoto Protocol was decisive in bringing the agreement into effect; had Moscow not done so, US and Australian opposition would have killed the agreement.<sup>187</sup> In 2009, then-president Medvedev signed the country’s Climate Doctrine, which described climate change as “one of the most important international problems of the 21st century.”<sup>188</sup> Russia’s 2019 national climate plan states that climate change

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<sup>182</sup> “Стратегия экономической безопасности Российской Федерации на период до 2030 года,” May 13, 2017, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201705150001.pdf>.

<sup>183</sup> “Стратегия экономической безопасности Российской Федерации на период до 2030 года,” May 13, 2017, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201705150001.pdf>.

<sup>184</sup> “Энергетическая стратегия России на период до 2030 года,” Nov. 13, 2009, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/economic/document122/>. Russia’s energy strategy predates developments such as dramatic increases in US oil and gas production, a global surge in solar and wind power deployment, and advances in battery technology that have lent momentum to electric vehicle sales—all trends that could undercut future demand for Russian oil and gas.

<sup>185</sup> “Стратегия экономической безопасности Российской Федерации на период до 2030 года,” May 13, 2017, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201705150001.pdf>.

<sup>186</sup> “Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation,” Dec. 5, 2016, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2563163](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2563163).

<sup>187</sup> Nick Paton Walsh, “Russian vote saves Kyoto protocol,” *The Guardian*, Oct. 22, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/oct/23/society.russia#>.

<sup>188</sup> Климатическая доктрина Российской Федерации, Dec. 17, 2009, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/economic/document121/>.

is disproportionately affecting Russia, with temperature increases 2.5 times global averages in the last decade.<sup>189</sup>

Roshydromet, Russia's weather agency, has publicly reported significant climate-related impacts in the country. In 2014, the agency stated that by 2010, permafrost load-bearing capacity had decreased by an average of 17 percent since the 1970s, with levels as high as 45 percent in some regions; a Roshydromet report warned that "this poses a threat to infrastructure."<sup>190</sup> More recently, Roshydromet's Climate Center produced a report on climate risks, which stated that damaging "dangerous weather events" had become much more common in Russia, rising rapidly from 150–200 per year in the 1990–2000 period to 250–300 in the following decade, with over 400 on average in one of every two years.<sup>191</sup> The report sees looming infrastructure risks to buildings, transportation, and energy; economic risks in agriculture, forestry, access to fresh water, and maritime activities including shipping, port operations, offshore energy, and fishing; and social risks, including impacts on health, demographics, and migration. It concludes by stating that while Russia's "adaptation potential" provides a basis for optimism about its future, the country currently faces a "deficit" in adaptation that requires urgent action.<sup>192</sup> In November 2020, Putin signed a decree on limiting greenhouse gas emissions that ordered the Russian government to guarantee reductions in greenhouse gas emissions of "up to 70 percent" compared to 1990 levels by 2030.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Национальный план мероприятий первого этапа адаптации к изменениям климата на период до 2022 года, Dec. 25, 2019, <http://static.government.ru/media/files/OTrFMr1Z1sORh5NIx4gLUsdgGHyWIAqy.pdf>.

<sup>190</sup> *Second Roshydromet Assessment Report on Climate Change and Its Consequences in Russian Federation*, Federal Service for Hydrometeorology and Environmental Monitoring, 2014, p. 45, [http://voeikovmgo.ru/download/2014/od/resume\\_ob\\_eng.pdf](http://voeikovmgo.ru/download/2014/od/resume_ob_eng.pdf).

<sup>191</sup> Доклад о климатических рисках на территории Российской Федерации, Roshydromet, 2017, pp. 4-5, <http://cc.voeikovmgo.ru/images/dokumenty/2017/riski.pdf>.

<sup>192</sup> Доклад о климатических рисках на территории Российской Федерации, Roshydromet, 2017, p. 101, <http://cc.voeikovmgo.ru/images/dokumenty/2017/riski.pdf>.

<sup>193</sup> "О сокращении выбросов парниковых газов," Nov. 4, 2020, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/45990>.

# Internal Factors

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Domestic considerations play an important role in shaping Russia's approaches to competition. Their implication is that Russia cannot expect to generate the economic means to rival or compete with the US. Russia's state capacity is sufficient to maintain a robust military, but on the whole the country cannot have a means-based approach to its rivalry. Instead it must work to reduce the efficacy and performance of others, while conducting damage control to aspects of state capacity that are either stagnating or in decline. Material constraints are thus an important factor. While Russian elites do not see the country as being in decline, they are also aware that it faces significant challenges and is not competitively positioned relative to the US.

President Putin has likened internal problems to "a serious chronic disease that steadily saps the energy from the body and destroys it from within step by step. Quite often, this destructive process goes unnoticed by the body."<sup>194</sup> In this case, the "disease" is a long-standing one of perceived and real backwardness. Economic constraints have limited military modernization efforts and undermined domestic stability. Russia's demographic decline similarly feeds into domestic narratives of its strategic position, although this challenge is overstated in contemporary discussions, especially among Western commentators. The structures and internal brakes on decision implementation within the Russian government itself impact strategy: the incapacity to ensure that decision-making leads to actual outputs has considerably constrained the leadership's confidence in the state's position overall. Finally, the role of ideology does not appear to be a significant factor in the competition, or in Russia's approaches to it.

## The relevance of regime stability

Predictions regarding the Russian regime's imminent demise have been thick since the early years of Putin's rule.<sup>195</sup> Yet they remain frustrated, in no small part because of the regime's dedicated attention to maintaining a degree of domestic popularity, while using targeted repression when deemed necessary.<sup>196</sup> Stability, understood by the core decision-making leadership around the president primarily in terms of popular quiescence and the

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<sup>194</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Address to the Federal Assembly," Mar. 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>.

<sup>195</sup> Mark Galeotti, *We Need to Talk about Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong* (Random House, 2019).

<sup>196</sup> Admittedly Russian repression increasingly appears less targeted and evinces more blanket forms of suppression, or ways of inducing self-censorship via a general climate of fear.

minimalization of destructive elite infighting, is an obvious prerequisite for promoting a coherent, ambitious great power foreign policy. Considerable effort is thus spent on furthering domestic tranquility and passivity, selectively repressing disruptive voices, coopting and monitoring subordinate elites, and preempting discontent within the populace and among potentially disgruntled, influential regime stakeholders. All the while, the regime is careful to frame strategic goals and activities for domestic audiences, applying Schmittian “friend-enemy” distinctions to foreign interlocutors and connecting domestic opposition agitators to these same dynamics.<sup>197</sup>

Mechanisms for maintaining regime stability in Russia have shifted from a reliance on economic-based performance legitimacy and an informal “social contract” of domestic political passivity to active ideological and great power appeals. Legitimation now relies more on both assertions of moral-cultural conservatism and realist self-images of state and nation, as well as the continued personalization around the figure of Putin himself as national leader.<sup>198</sup> In this sense, the pivot toward state patriotism and great power legitimacy has been aided by the Russian approach to competition in the last decade, creating a feedback effect in which foreign policy goals have been sold to the population as further reasons for supporting the regime itself. This is most clear in the case of the Crimean annexation and Donbas war, which led to a sustained “rally effect” that boosted domestic presidential and broader regime popularity for over four years.<sup>199</sup>

This rally effect was observed in the wider population, and meanwhile Russian elites have also been noted to gain psychological benefits from successful adventurism—indeed, less influential elites now believe themselves to be more influential than better-connected ones on

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<sup>197</sup> See the writings of Carl Schmitt, especially *The Concept of the Political*, for an explanation of this particular framing of interstate and intrapolitical relations. See also the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Carl Schmitt,” Aug. 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schmitt/>.

<sup>198</sup> Henry E. Hale, “How Crimea Pays: Media, Rallying ‘Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support.” *Comparative Politics* 50, no. 3 (2018): 369-391, <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/cuny/cp/2018/00000050/00000003/art00006>; Derek S. Hutcheson and Bo Peterssen, “Shortcut to legitimacy: Popularity in Putin’s Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 7 (2016): 1107-1126; <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1216949>.

<sup>199</sup> Thomas Sherlock, “Russian Society and Foreign Policy: Mass and Elite Orientations After Crimea,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 1 (2020): 1-23, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10758216.2018.1561190>; Mikhail A. Alexseev and Henry E. Hale, “Crimea come what may: Do economic sanctions backfire politically?” *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 2 (2020): 344-359, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0022343319866879>.

foreign policy issues.<sup>200</sup> It is useful to read the connection of unconnected elite and mass publics to strategic success for what it is, as the downstream psychological and behavioral impact of a policy determined decidedly elsewhere that happens to be congruent to identity and emotional appeals that resonate with the Russian population.

Some are tempted to argue that Russian foreign policy is simply a tool for domestic political management by other means. This variant on the diversionary theory of war is quite instructive when explaining the domestic framing of strategic accomplishments, from the Russo-Georgian War's justification as a means to prevent NATO encroachment and the undermining of Russia as a sovereign state, to the instrumental use of the Crimea crisis as a post hoc explanation for Western perfidy in the face of territorial claims for Russian speakers.<sup>201</sup> Yet this theory is too neat, explaining downstream justifications for actions (i.e., how to use a crisis well for domestic consumption) rather than the actual decision-making logic at play.<sup>202</sup>

This debate is still worthwhile, but evidence of using foreign policy revisionism simply to maintain domestic popularity is reading outcome and post hoc legitimating claims for actual decision-making intent. Foreign policy is used as a tool for regime stability, but not as a primary factor for decision-making itself. The use of foreign policy successes as a source of stoking domestic popularity only goes so far, and is contingent on maintaining such dramatic successes over long periods of time. As this is quite difficult—and, as stated above, is not the motivating reason for adventurism in the first place—other means are more regularly deployed to buoy support and suppress discontent.

Regime stability has been managed under Putin, although the approach has to rely on targeted repression. Weakening institutions outside the presidential administration, as well as increasing personalization at the center, suggests decreasing flexibility and greater brittleness. Yet few believe that regime stability will experience a fundamental rupture in the short term, as long as Putin can maintain his unquestioned position at the head of the system.

Certainly, the Kremlin has a problem stemming from the end of the Crimea rally effect, effective opposition mobilization, and discontent from the handling of the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>203</sup> In an era

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<sup>200</sup> Kirill Petrov and Vladimir Gel'man, "Do elites matter in Russian foreign policy? The gap between self-perception and influence," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35: 5-6 (2019): 450-460, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1662185>.

<sup>201</sup> Tobias Theiler, "The Microfoundations of Diversionary Conflict, *Security Studies*," *Security Studies* 27, Issue 2 (2018): 318-343, 10.1080/09636412.2017.1386941.

<sup>202</sup> Elias Götz, "Putin, the state, and war: The causes of Russia's near abroad assertion revisited," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (2017): 228-253.

<sup>203</sup> *Popularity Ratings*, Levada Center, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>.



of reduced and contested opportunities for elites to seek rents, and increasingly restrictive opportunities for easy living partially abroad, managing the spheres of economic, media, cultural, and political stakeholders in the regime will be a source of consternation for the Kremlin. Recent constitutional changes have underlined this problem quite well. Domestic discontent appears less concerning in the short term, as long as elites are coordinated around Putin for the remainder of his current presidential term and dramatic surprises can be avoided in upcoming parliamentary elections.

Whether either elite dissention or domestic unpopularity ends up decisively hindering strategic decision-making remains to be seen; much of the apparatus for regime stability can deal with further degradation of meaningful popular participation in the short term. At the same time, elite discontent over economic conditions access to rent-seeking opportunities remains a concern for the regime, and strategic thinking will remain informed by measures that will strengthen elite cohesion and underline national legitimacy narratives. The competition on the one hand encourages internal cohesion, providing an overriding rationale based on external enemies and the necessity of state mobilization. On the other, mobilization has proven unsustainable and the state can only make domestic use of the competition in so far that it does not appear to be losing. This requires judicious gambits, and measured risk taking, to avoid defeats and embarrassment.

## Decision-making and the power vertical

Russian decision-making processes are increasingly centralized within the Kremlin, especially when it comes to questions of strategy and the coordination of military, political, diplomatic, and economic elements for unitary purposes. This high degree of centralization leads to reliance on what is often termed the “vertical of power,” or a hierarchical chain of authority that is built to provide for the disciplined implementation of decisions reached at the top.<sup>204</sup> This structure has been consciously constructed by Putin over his two-decade tenure as the head of the Russian state, in order to solve the variety of coordination problems that have long bedeviled the government and to prevent alternative centers of power from developing.<sup>205</sup>

Unfortunately, the vertical of power is as well known for its output problems in relation to implementation and oversight as it has been for its construction. The vertical itself is often

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<sup>204</sup> Andrew Monaghan, *Power in Modern Russia: Strategy and Mobilisation* (Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 43.

<sup>205</sup> Andrew Monaghan, “The *vertikal*: power and authority in Russia,” *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2012): 1-16, <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/88/1/1/2326433>.



understood to be dysfunctional, with a continued disconnect between nominal authority and actual operation that reared its head quite early.<sup>206</sup> Reports from the first two Putin terms in the 2000s suggested that as few as half of presidential orders were actually carried out.<sup>207</sup> This has become a growing problem, well known to the presidential administration itself, which has attempted to solve the issue through further institutionalization and centralization of all decision-making processes to within the Kremlin, at the cost of greater inefficiency, fewer checks on authority, decreasing institutionalization elsewhere in the Russian state, and increasing personalism.<sup>208</sup>

Even so, frustrations at the failure to implement presidential decrees and major legislative packages after they have been passed is a consistent bugbear both for the regime and for Putin, who, in public speeches, regularly berates officials and casts aspersions on bureaucratic inertia. In one such characteristic remark, Putin recently noted, “If someone prefers to work in the ‘business as usual’ mode, without challenges, avoiding initiative or responsibility, they had better leave immediately. I already hear that some things are ‘impossible,’ ‘too difficult,’ ‘the standards are too high,’ and ‘it will not work.’ With such an attitude, you had better stay away.”<sup>209</sup> Yet, cajoling has yielded limited results, due to structural problems.

Russia often does not succeed at implementing policies because of considerable bureaucratic reluctance to engage in tasks that would either undermine existing opportunities to extract rents from the economy, or disrupt stable patterns of bureaucratic operation. This extends up to the ministries, whose heads are often far more concerned with maintaining basic stability and gaining personal benefits than engaging in hard, root-and-branch reforms that would make implementation of the vertical’s directives quicker.<sup>210</sup> That several high-profile ministers have been dismissed or even face criminal charges for failed reform efforts (most notably former defense minister Anatoly Serdiukov) further underlines the elite political reality that

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<sup>206</sup> Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, *Resisting the state: reform and retrenchment in post-Soviet Russia*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>207</sup> Monaghan, *Power in Modern Russia*, p. 44.

<sup>208</sup> Fabian Burkhardt, “Institutionalising Authoritarian Presidencies: Polymorphous Power and Russia’s Presidential Administration,” *Europe-Asia Studies* (2020): 1-33, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09668136.2020.1749566>; Carolina Vendil Pallin, “Russia’s presidential domestic policy directorate: HQ for defeat-proofing Russian politics,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25, no. 3 (2017): 255-278, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/665252>.

<sup>209</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Address to the Federal Assembly,” Feb. 20, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/59863>.

<sup>210</sup> Vladimir Gel’man, “Explaining Bad Governance in Russia: Institutions and Incentives,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, No. 634, Jan. 20, 2020, <https://ponarseurasia.org/explaining-bad-governance-in-russia-institutions-and-incentives/>.

structural reforms to improve decision-making efficiency—and which conflict with bureaucratic incentives—are rare on the ground.<sup>211</sup> Although less relevant to issues of strategy, the structure of Russian federalism shows that features among the provinces are similar to implementation issues found at the federal center.<sup>212</sup> As governors have long been prioritized for their loyalty to the Kremlin over their ability to produce economic growth or better provincial living conditions, it is unsurprising that decision-making failures tend to be common.<sup>213</sup> What is more concerning is that the federal center increasingly uses similar metrics of cadre selection based on loyalty criteria over technocratic or politically influential figures, which has further diminished the propensity of leadership figures within the state bureaucracy and government to solve implementation and coordination problems.<sup>214</sup>

Indeed, some scholars believe that the vertical of power works well only under conditions of direct “manual control,” from a given principal—which could be the president himself, an ambitious and forthright minister, or gubernatorial authorities.<sup>215</sup> This leads to one of the more major concerns present in grand strategy considerations—that strategic decisions may not be carried out by agents at lower levels of the bureaucracy. This ultimately impedes planning and engenders significant distrust for decision-making actors in the presidential administration. Outside of economic constraints on strategic capabilities, the incapacity of decision-makers to trust in implementation may be the greatest toll on the strategic ecosystem from a domestic perspective.

The relevance of these institutional capacity issues and problems of multiple layers of indecision, incompetence, and buck-passing, to Russia’s strategy is clear. Such a bureaucratic environment poses considerable limitations on decisive solutions to problems that the Kremlin leadership seeks to solve. It encourages an emergent strategy and approaches that may at times seem disparate. The inability to generate effective power from the bureaucracy and

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<sup>211</sup> Athena Bryce-Rogers, “Russian Military Reform in the Aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War,” *Demokratizatsiya* 21, no. 3 (2013), [https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/21\\_3\\_T0320R1173M61414.pdf](https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/21_3_T0320R1173M61414.pdf).

<sup>212</sup> Emily Ferris, “Corruption, No Confidence, Poor Communication: How Governors Behaving Badly Will Impact Russia’s Regional Elections,” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 664, July 21, 2020, <https://ponarseurasia.org/corruption-no-confidence-poor-communication-how-governors-behaving-badly-will-impact-russia-s-regional-elections/>.

<sup>213</sup> Ora John Reuter and Graeme B. Robertson, “Subnational appointments in authoritarian regimes: Evidence from Russian gubernatorial appointments,” *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 4 (2012): 1023-1037, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1017/s0022381612000631>.

<sup>214</sup> Kirill Shamiev, “Evidence-Based Policymaking in Russia: The Kremlin’s New Magic Wand?” *RIDDLE Russia*, Feb. 3, 2020, <https://www.ridl.io/en/evidence-based-policymaking-in-russia-the-kremlin-s-new-magic-wand/>; Farida Rustamova, “Russia’s PR minister,” *Meduza*, June 3, 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/06/03/russia-s-pr-minister>.

<sup>215</sup> Monaghan, *Power in Modern Russia*, p. 46.

internal processes for problem-solving and de facto implementation is a hindrance that can quickly translate to public embarrassment and private frustration at not achieving goals. That the system, after 20 years of centralization and “state-strengthening,” can still more than hold its own against the political centroid of the state genuinely curtails strategic action by limiting the realm of the possible significantly. In this way, these internal hurdles can also suggest to observers that Russia fails to maintain a singular strategy, given difficult bureaucratic battles and resignation to many repeated areas of failure.

This stark reality flies in contrast to notions that Russia does whole of government well. On the contrary, the matter is better considered as “whole of state,” and Russian institutional capacity is a significant inhibitor to seeing through a coherent approach or strategy.

## Role of ideology

Academics, experts, journalists, and policy-makers have extensively debated the role of ideology as a domestic driver of Russia’s grand strategy. Some have argued that Russia is a neo-fascist state and that this is an important factor shaping its approach to competition. Others have made a related but somewhat more sophisticated case that Russian president Putin has an “illiberal conservative nationalist” ideology and that his approach is a substantial factor in Moscow’s foreign policy. Another perspective has asserted that Russia’s leadership is fundamentally pragmatic, and that ideology plays a more limited part in shaping Russia’s grand strategy.

The case for an increasingly fascist Russia has typically included four key elements. The first two—Putin’s defense of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and his justification of Moscow’s seizure of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine as necessary to defend ethnic Russians living there—seek to establish similarities between Putin and Adolf Hitler. The third element is the argument that Russia has sought to support far-right parties in Europe. The fourth is the contention that, through his speeches, Putin has established a state ideology based on 19th- and 20th-century Russian ethnonationalist thinkers.<sup>216</sup>

Prominent scholars have refuted these arguments. Putin’s statements regarding the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact have consistently defended Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s pursuit of the

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<sup>216</sup> For example, see the work of Timothy Snyder, including “Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine,” *The New York Review*, Mar. 20, 2014, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/03/20/fascism-russia-and-ukraine/>; “Putin’s New Nostalgia,” *The New York Review*, Nov. 10, 2014, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/11/10/putin-nostalgia-stalin-hitler/>; and Ivan Ilyin, “Putin’s Philosopher of Russian Fascism,” *The New York Review*, Mar. 16, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/03/16/ivan-ilyin-putins-philosopher-of-russian-fascism/>.

agreement as a necessary tactical step to delay a war for which the USSR was unprepared and as a pact broadly comparable to the 1938 Munich Agreement.<sup>217</sup> Regarding Crimea and eastern Ukraine, most experts on Russian foreign policy have assessed Russia's intervention (and its earlier intervention in Georgia) as driven by fear of potential NATO membership and its possible consequences for Russian security.<sup>218</sup> Russia's support for European far-right organizations does little to demonstrate Russian fascism, as Moscow also supports far-left groups there and elsewhere.<sup>219</sup> Putin's references to Russian conservative and nationalist philosophers in his public remarks are likewise ambiguous.<sup>220</sup>

The broader argument that Russia's strategy flows from "Putinism" as an illiberal conservative nationalist ideology is more sophisticated, in that at least some advocates have insisted that it is not the sole driver of Russian conduct.<sup>221</sup> One detailed presentation of this perspective contends that Putin's personal ideology matters for three reasons: because other Russian leaders could behave differently (meaning that Russia's strategy originates with the Russian president and is not a reflection of a monolithic elite approach); because some Russian foreign policy actions have had high costs (and are therefore difficult to understand as power-maximizing moves), such as Russia's intervention in Ukraine; and because Russia has an authoritarian political system (which does not constrain Putin to the extent that a democratic system would).<sup>222</sup>

This view is flawed in several important respects. First, it is true that other Russian leaders might behave differently. (Specifically, then-president Medvedev acquiesced in NATO's decision to launch air strikes on Libya, which Putin publicly said he opposed.)<sup>223</sup> But this view ignores the evolution in Russian foreign policy that took place during Boris Yeltsin's second term as president, especially Russia's increasingly competitive approach in the case of

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<sup>217</sup> Vladimir Putin, "The Real Lessons of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of World War II," *The National Interest*, June 18, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982>.

<sup>218</sup> See, for example, Marlene Laruelle, "Accusing Russia of Fascism," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Dec. 24, 2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/accusing-russia-of-fascism/>.

<sup>219</sup> Laruelle, "Accusing Russia of Fascism."

<sup>220</sup> Laruelle, "Accusing Russia of Fascism."

<sup>221</sup> Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy," *International Security* 45, Issue 2 (Fall 2020), [https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/full/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00390](https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/full/10.1162/isec_a_00390).

<sup>222</sup> McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy."

<sup>223</sup> Alexei Anishchuk, "Russia's Medvedev raps Putin's Libya 'crusade' jibe," *Reuters*, Mar. 21, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-russia/russias-medvedev-raps-putins-libya-crusade-jibe-idUSTRE72K5AJ20110321>.

Yugoslavia.<sup>224</sup> More important, however, the fact that past Russian leaders had different approaches to the country's foreign policy says little about whether a future leader might have a different outlook. The Russia of 2021 is not the Russia of 2011 or the early 1990s, and it currently seems unlikely that a materially different Russian leader will come to power when Putin leaves office, whether in 2024 or later.

Russia's advance assessment of the risks of its Ukraine strategy is similarly important and unknown. Moreover, there are strong theoretical and empirical foundations for a high-risk Russian strategy in Ukraine in prospect theory—an effort to explain individual decision-making that does not align with rational choice models. Prospect theory predicts that individuals will be more risk tolerant when they frame choices as choices between losses rather than choices between gains; empirical research has supported this.<sup>225</sup> If Putin saw the Ukraine strategy as a choice between losses (costs of accommodation versus costs of his eventual strategy), he might have been more risk acceptant than a strictly rational model of Russian decision-making would predict. Thus, the risks in Russia's Ukraine strategy do not require an ideological explanation.

Checks and balances can be more significant in constraining leaders and often exist within authoritarian systems, especially when institutions or factions compete for power.<sup>226</sup> There are therefore checks imposed by other elites, a so-called selectorate, on the leader's ideology. This is so even in a personalized authoritarian regime. In general, ideology-based depictions of Russian approaches to competition are not compelling and are unnecessary to explain Russian behavior or significant foreign policy choices. If anything, the main role of ideology is its absence and the relative freedom it provides Moscow to pursue avenues in the competition unencumbered by a particular ideological doctrine or the need to maintain ideological orthodoxy to retain the support of domestic elites.

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<sup>224</sup> Yeltsin's ouster of Western-leaning foreign minister Andrey Kozyrev and his replacement of Kozyrev with Yevgeny Primakov is one indication of this; Russia's "dash to Pristina airport" following the NATO war with Serbia over Kosovo independence is another.

<sup>225</sup> Jeffrey D. Berejikian, "Prospect Theory in International Relations," *Oxford Bibliographies*, Feb. 25, 2016, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0163.xml>.

<sup>226</sup> "Checks and balances," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/checks-and-balances>.

## Conclusion

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Russia's strategy for competition can be described aptly as offensive in character. It is designed to revise the status quo and compel opponents to change their policies. It is fundamentally an activist approach that seeks to bolster Russia's position and contain its opponents (namely the US). The resultant approaches can be divided into direct and indirect categories, reflecting a desire to achieve political objectives via indirect means, while developing the ability to deter or coerce opponents via classical military instruments. They can also be parsed as forceful or non-forceful, although here the divisions are perhaps less clean or parsimonious. Nonetheless, such typologies exist in Russian national security concepts which delineate the different categories of means applied in competition.

Russian approaches are informed by Russia's understanding of the strategies and intentions of other major actors, the international environment, and domestic political influences. Within these, internal factors such as domestic politics or ideology appear relevant but not deterministic. External sources are more significant drivers relative to internal ones, as are assumptions about the international political environment. Perhaps the most prominent of these include the notion that US relative power is in decline, that the US seeks to contain Russia as part of a long-running strategic competition, and that China offers a distinct opportunity for alignment and riposte against US primacy in international politics. Taken together, these encourage an activist approach, operating under the assumption that Russia is on the right side of a global power transition.

This report may not settle the debate on whether Russia has a deliberate grand strategy. However, it does argue that the strategy versus opportunism debate is a false dichotomy, and an erroneous dialogue in the analytical community. Opportunism is a characteristic of the Russian approach, an indicator of revisionist aims, but it is also part and parcel of any effective strategy, rather than evidence of its absence. Consequently, opportunism tells us something important about Russia's approach to competition, but it is not a useful or predictive lens. It does not mean that Russia's approaches are incoherent, lacking in general organizing principles or long-term aims. There are visible limitations in Russia's strategic planning process, including hamstrung implementation and difficulty managing the bedlam of competing elite interests, patronage networks, national security clans, and the like. These limitations are in part responsible for an erroneous perception that the country has no strategic approach and is making largely operational or tactical decisions. Yet this is very much not the case, and Russia does appear to have a theory of victory, integrating the direct and indirect in its approach to competition.

While Russian leadership is seemingly agile, on the whole it struggles to generate power from its bureaucracy in pursuit of answers to challenges. Because of these constraints, it is often unable to consistently organize the resources of the state or implement priorities. However, judging from the system's overall management of the state's macroeconomic performance and the regime's ability to retain stability despite numerous crises, scandals, and other political storms, there is good evidence that Russia is able to implement effective hedge strategies. That is, Moscow is successful at investing in, and building up, its resilience to external and internal shocks, thereby securing the political regime and, by extension, the state (which the regime identifies as one and the same).

The implications for US strategy are that Russia will prove an enduring challenge on the international arena, and that the issue of whether the country is in stagnation, becomes resurgent, or enters decline, is immaterial to the larger questions of how to tackle Russia's power and its role in the international system. The Russian state has a remarkable penchant for resurrection, and a strong tradition of using force in international politics. It has historically been dismissed as a power in decline only to return as a significant force shaping international affairs, affecting US interests, and those of American allies. Therefore, whatever priority US policy-makers may choose to give Russia in the overall future, they must be cognizant that Moscow retains a vote on the matter.

Given that Russian elites believe they are in a sustained confrontation, and in some respects have a co-dependent strategic relationship vis-à-vis the United States, it is unlikely that Russia's assertive or "active" foreign policy will diminish. Russia retains the resources—i.e., the potential to remain one of the major powers in the international system— and its leadership appears to have the will and desire to maintain a confrontational course in pursuit of political aims. This is in part because of the perception that a more assertive approach premised on a combination of direct and indirect forms of competition will work, and has worked in the past. Leaders tend to fall back on ideas or familiar patterns that they feel have worked for their state previously. Russia's leadership has judged this overall approach more suitable to tackling a stronger rival than one premised on accommodation or concessions. This course is not immutable, but absent a dramatic change in internal or external conditions, there should be no expectation that a new strategic consensus will emerge in Moscow in the near term.



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