



Drivers of Russian State Strategy and Military Operations

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Introduction

Prevailing narratives on Russia tend to focus on Russian tactical successes, while missing the Russian strategic calculus. The notion that Moscow plays a weak hand well speaks to the commonplace personification of strategic problems in United States political culture, ignoring the fact that Russia retains considerable resources, and is not nearly as weak as commonly depicted in U.S. narratives.[1] Rather, Russia retains the capacity for strategic planning, and despite poor implementation, it is a strategic player and a deliberate actor. At times, Moscow plays a relatively strong hand better than its opponents, and at others it is simply more agile, able to iterate quickly and establish facts on the ground.[2]

A Russian Grand Strategy?

The question of whether Russia has a grand strategy remains oddly contested. There are Russia experts who see the nation's elite as opportunists, and the country incapable of formulating strategy or grand strategy.[3] Yet even opportunistic behavior must inevitably take leaders towards a desired end state, or provide greater access to means, which must be necessary towards an objective. As Edward Luttwak argues, "All states have a grand strategy, whether they know it or not. That is inevitable because grand strategy is simply the level at which knowledge and persuasion, or in modern terms intelligence and diplomacy, interact with military strength to determine outcomes in a world of other states, with their own 'grand strategies.'" [4]

Russian strategy is influenced by material considerations, but also reflects enduring preferences and a habituated pattern of responding to challenges with certain solutions. As Stephen Kotkin has remarked, it is "as much a condition as a choice." [5] Those choices are shaped by historical experience; an elite consensus on the country's desired status and role in international affairs; and habits that determine the ways selected to pursue those objectives. Though much is contingent, the past offers lessons for the present, as the USSR had a relative elite consensus on a strategy to attain détente via offensive measures.[6] In this context, détente was not so much a bargain or deal, but instead an understanding to curtail competition over vital interests and make the contest safer. To be sure, Russia is not the Soviet Union, the domestic and international context are different, and political aims are much more limited, or perhaps specific—but strategic predilections endure.[7]

Broadly, Russia has practiced two strategies since the 1950s: first, the pursuit of offensive measures based on material assessments and assumptions that trends in international affairs favor Moscow, and second, a defensive approach when the former fails to deliver. Offensive measures consist of building up military power to deter the United States; followed by a shift of forces to other theaters to expand the competition; as well as indirect warfare to change the global correlation of forces. This restrains the opponent and weakens their ability to concentrate resources. Moscow exp-

ects that in time Washington will be compelled to reach a new understanding which will recognize Russia's position in international politics and its interests as legitimate; as a corollary, it will confer a geopolitical space where Russian influence is predominant. This is not to say that Russian leaders want a "Yalta," or an exclusive sphere of influence; instead, they prefer a lesser version of the deal the Soviet Union got in 1975 with the Helsinki Final Act.[8] Moscow is a soft revisionist, and does not care about the nature of the international order—only its position in it.

Most importantly, Russia wishes to remain an independent and sovereign actor, a center unto itself. This is challenging given the asymmetry of power between itself and the United States. Russia's integration into structures or institutions built around United States leadership, where Washington exerts great influence, makes retaining freedom of maneuver an even greater imperative.

The Russian Challenge to the West

Although the list of grievances in U.S.-Russia relations is innumerable, Russia poses three challenges that can be considered strategic for U.S. policymakers.

First, Moscow has no stake in the current European security architecture established at a time of Russian absence, but is strong enough to challenge it. Russia was able to reconsolidate state and military power within a generation (arguably, as it did in 1922-1939). Russia is not an expansionist power, but it is also not declining relative to U.S. or European powers, and will seek to exert a say over security arrangements in Europe. This means that security on the continent is unsettled, drawing U.S. resources to hedge against potential revanchism, and to assure noisy allies, while Washington would prefer to focus on the military contest with China. Moscow is not joining the West as a political community, but it is back as a military power in Europe.

Second, the echoes of Soviet dissolution continue to reverberate, and Russia seeks to reestablish its geopolitical space through attempts to retain influence in key former Soviet republics.[9] This is both a providential project and a security imperative, because buffer states have historically been part of Russian strategy in Europe. Russia's lack of economic dynamism and political attractiveness have hindered the project—hence the need to use force in prominent cases. Moreover, the EU and China have become de facto competitors for the space that Moscow had sought to reintegrate around itself. The EU represents a system that is mutually exclusive with the Russian structure of patronage networks and rent-seeking; consequently, when Washington is not trying to expand an exclusive security architecture, its allies are competing for Russia's geopolitical space in even more significant ways. Moscow sees the EU as a stalking horse for U.S. geopolitical ambitions in no small part because EU dominance in Europe is a component of U.S. grand strategy.

Third, this confrontation is different because where Russia cannot gener-

ate means, it attempts to reduce the level of organization of its opponents, making itself relatively stronger. Unlike the USSR, Russia cannot expect to build the economic means to contest the U.S., EU, or China. However, Russia is much stronger than any single European state, and can work to disrupt collective decision-making or wedge Europeans away from Washington on important issues.

This indirect approach can improve Russia's own performance relative to the U.S., despite the asymmetry of resources and influence. Russian attempts to expand influence in other regions of the world represent a prospecting campaign, which may distract U.S. attention from the primary theater in Europe.[10] Indirect warfare takes form in political and information efforts aimed at the U.S. and its allies. These campaigns of cost imposition, disinformation, and disorganization are premised on sustained coercion in an effort to exhaust U.S. resolve relative to the interests at stake.

Russian Military Strategy

Presently, Russian military strategy comprises one pillar of Russian strategic planning. It is linked to the political leadership's goals, threat perceptions, and theory for how military investments will encourage restraint on the part of adversaries. In contrast to other Kremlin efforts to generate power from a dysfunctional bureaucracy, the military is an institution where doctrine and strategy matter because they get implemented. The Russian military is configured to manage a range of contingencies from armed conflict to local war, regional war, large-scale war, and nuclear war.

Its principal concern is to deny the U.S. the ability to attain a decisive victory in the initial period of conflict by effectively countering what the Russian military sees as the U.S. way of war—namely aerospace blitzkrieg and standoff power projection. Instead, the goal is to force the United States into a war of attrition over limited interests. The precision revolution has rendered conventional weapons strategic in nature, and Moscow's aim is to avoid suffering unacceptable damage to a degree that would threaten the regime, the state, or the country's territorial integrity.

Russian thinking on large-scale war centers around strategic operations that are offensive and defensive in nature. Where defense is seen as cost-prohibitive, the emphasis is on offense or damage limitation, although the two are difficult to separate given the character of modern warfare. Russian deterrence concepts are chiefly based on cost imposition and the utility of "strategic" capabilities, based on the belief that general-purpose forces are insufficient to deter a power like the United States.

The Russian military also has a structured escalation management strategy, leveraging conventional and nuclear capabilities and premised on deterrence by intimidation and deterrence through limited use of force. These concepts have been integrated under an overarching framework called strategic deterrence, which coordinates non-military and military measures to contain an adversary in peacetime, deter aggression, and de-escalate a con-

flict on acceptable terms in wartime. The imperative to avoid strategic surprise—borne of Germany’s fateful Operation Barbarossa in 1941—remains, and has engendered a strategy based on preemptive neutralization. Although the Russian military also considers the importance of non-military measures, it remains a force defined by the acquisition and employment of hard military power.

Policy recommendations

Where Russia is concerned, the U.S. needs to take a long view. A Russia strategy based on containment won’t work—nor did it work particularly well against the USSR during the Cold War, except in the literal sense of deterring Soviet expansion into Western Europe. Washington needs to decide whether the Russian challenge is sufficiently problematic that it should seek reduced tensions, or if an active pressure campaign, together with deterrence investments, can be cheaply sustained until Moscow chooses to change its own approach. The following ought to be considered in crafting this policy.

1. Policymakers must first embrace a shift in perspective. Moscow knows what it wants from Washington, but there is no discernible Russia strategy in the U.S., nor is it clear what the U.S. wants from Russia. A set of grievances do not make for strategic objectives, and lowest-common-denominator policies premised on active pressure—i.e. sanctions—are unlikely to achieve anything against a resilient power like Russia. Alarmist views tend to overstate Russian aims as expansionist or aggressive, while at the same time underestimating Russian economic and military power. In truth, the fear of opportunistic Russian aggression is an ill-constructed boogeyman.
2. The U.S. benefits from tremendous resources, allies, and position, but these resources must be better managed and allocated. Power must be harnessed from the bureaucracy to solve challenges; otherwise it is latent or misspent. Deterrence can be maintained cheaply in most cases. The existential dread of a potential *fait accompli* is an ahistorical worry, misaligned with the modern practice of conquest by *fait accompli* and overly generalized from the single outlier case of the Crimea annexation in 2014. U.S. security concerns can be managed via modest force deployments, investments by allies in their own capabilities, and regional frameworks to address security dilemmas.
3. Conversely, unlike cases of opportunism, cases of loss aversion are incredibly difficult to deter. This suggests that military crises will continue to erupt over Russia’s self-ascribed geopolitical space, especially if the U.S. chooses to bid for it. Given the Russian state’s threat perceptions and belief that in the event of a perceived threat it is best to strike first, managing force posture in Europe, and day-to-day military signaling, is essential. Crisis stability leaves much to be desired, especially with modern weapons, heightening the chance of

entanglement when offensive capabilities are used in global domains. However, political leaders do not make decisions based on tactical-level capabilities, and as such, the perpetual U.S. worry about losing military advantage overstates the relevance of the military balance. War is most likely in the event of a mismanaged incident, where both sides seek to avert a conflagration and where vital interests clash (such as the orientation of states like Ukraine and Belarus).

4. Responding to Russia's desire to reclaim the Soviet sphere of influence is a related challenge. The question of how to respond to the inevitable expansion of the confrontation to other regions is one of strategy: it is about making choices and prioritizing them. Russia may not repeat the mistakes of the USSR and overspend itself in this global effort, but the United States may easily repeat its own mistakes from the Cold War, becoming distracted and shoring up questionable regimes in an effort to contain great power competition. Here, the U.S. needs to figure out what it is not going to do, and which regions are not strategic or relevant to the contest at hand.
5. Moscow's indirect warfare campaign—which constitutes a form of coercive raiding to weaken the state and confer costs—is perhaps the more vexing challenge to tackle. Due to technological and communication developments of the 21st century, Russia can affect U.S. politics in a way that indirect warfare could not accomplish during the Cold War. Responding will require an approach based on intra-war deterrence, or escalation management, and specific forms of punishment or agreements with Moscow that codify restraint on both sides.

As it stands, the U.S. vision for dealing with Russia is reactionary in nature and does not offer a *modus vivendi*, or a way forward. This exacerbates the Russia problem set for U.S. aims and objectives, since it yields the initiative to Moscow, which—whether effectively or not—is nonetheless able to set the agenda. The U.S. would do well to adopt a more deliberate approach, which seeks to understand and systematically respond to Russian interests and strategy, and recognize it as such.

References

- [1] This argument is partly based on work discussed in Michael Kofman and Richard Connolly, “Why Russia’s Military Expenditure is Much Higher than Commonly Understood (as is China’s),” *War on the Rocks*, December 2019 and Michael Kofman, “Russian Demographics and Power: Does the Kremlin Have a Long Game?” *War on the Rocks*, February 4, 2020.
- [2] Further works by Michael Kofman on Russian grand strategy include “Drivers of Russian Grand Strategy,” *Stockholm Free World Forum Briefing No. 6* (2019); “Russian Demographics and Power: Does the Kremlin Have a Long Game?” *War on the Rocks* (February 4, 2020); “Raiding and International Brigandry: Russia’s Strategy for Great Power Competition,” *War on the Rocks* (June 14, 2018); “Why Russian Military Expenditure is Much Higher Than Commonly Understood (as is China’s),” *War on the Rocks* (December 16, 2019). See also forthcoming pieces by Kofman, “Continuity and Change in Russian Grand Strategy,” *Before and After the Fall: World Politics and the End of the Cold War* (2021); “Soviet Strategy” in *The Cambridge History of Military Strategy*, Vol. II (2022).
- [3] Andrew Monaghan summarizes this debate effectively in his article “Putin’s Russia: Shaping a ‘grand strategy’?” *International Affairs*, Vol.89, No.5 (September 2013) pp.1221-1236
- [4] Edward Luttwak. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2009. p.409
- [5] Stephen Kotkin, “Russia’s Perpetual Geopolitics,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2016.
- [6] This argument and formulation can be found in Jack Snyder, (1987) “The Gorbachev Revolution: A Waning of Soviet Expansionism?” *International Security*, Volume 12, Number 3, Winter 1987/88 p.103.
- [7] This argument is featured in a chapter by the author, in a forthcoming edited volume; expected publication date 2021.
- [8] *Helsinki Final Act*. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. August 1, 1975. <https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act>.
- [9] Serhii Plokhyy, “The Soviet Union is still collapsing,” *Foreign Policy*, June 22, 2016.
- [10] This argument is taken in part from the authors previous work on the subject: Michael Kofman, “Drivers of Russian Grand Strategy,” *Russia Matters*. April 23, 2019. <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/drivers-russian-grand-strategy>.