

The Essence of Russia's Strategic Culture

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Abstract

Understanding the origins and nuances of Russia's strategic culture provides invaluable insight into the rationale behind its actions, which often diverge significantly from Western approaches and logic. A comprehensive grasp of Russia's strategic culture will not only illuminate the underlying decision-making processes but will also enhance the ability to anticipate Russia's responses to specific situations. Moreover, it can facilitate the development of more effective strategies that are better equipped to address the challenges posed by Russia. Understanding Russia's motivations is crucial for developing effective policies, managing relations with Russia, and anticipating potential threats, as exemplified by its full-scale aggression on Ukraine. By recognizing the underlying drivers of Russia's actions, policymakers can better prepare for and respond to challenges, ensuring a proactive and informed approach to security and diplomatic relations. This deeper awareness allows for the design of strategies that are not only reactive but also preemptive, fostering a more resilient and adaptive approach to dealing with Moscow.

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Definition of Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is commonly understood as a set of historically formed and inherited concepts, shared beliefs that shape the collective identity of a nation, values that define state interests, and norms that influence a state's choice of means to best achieve its objectives. These elements are key factors determining a state's behavior on the global stage.

Thus, the concept of strategic culture offers a comprehensive explanation of state behavior, including its governance style and even the methods used to formulate national strategies. The term was first introduced in 1977 by American scholar Jack Snyder. In his work, Snyder compared Soviet and American nuclear doctrines, highlighting that Soviet elites exhibited a distinct mindset and a unique approach to developing key components of their doctrine, markedly different from the American. This distinctive approach was shaped by various factors.

Unique historical experiences, distinctive political and institutional relationships, and a preoccupation with strategic dilemmas have combined to produce a unique mix of strategic beliefs and a unique pattern of strategic behavior based on these beliefs. The term “culture” is used to suggest that these beliefs tend to be perpetuated by the socialization of individuals into a distinctive mode of thinking².

In other words, strategic culture manifests in how a state (via its leadership) responds to crises and the decision-making methods it employs to address them. Furthermore, strategic culture can be seen as an expression of public opinion, mediated and articulated by elites³. This is reflected in strategic documents, such as national concepts, doctrines,

² Snyder, J. L. (1977). The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations. URL: <http://surl.li/nigfc>, p.38

³ Snyder, J. L. (1977). The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations. URL: <http://surl.li/nigfc>

and related frameworks. Thus, strategic culture, which is a fairly stable factor affecting the shape of security policy, does not appear once fully formed, but is created through the exercise of leadership, in response to the external security challenges and the influence of internal politics⁴.

A list of factors influencing the formation of national strategic culture can be identified:

- **Territorial and Geographical Factors:** The location of the country (size and configuration of its territory, physical and geographical characteristics of borders, the presence of larger or smaller, aggressive or peaceful neighbors, proximity to major international transportation routes, and overall natural conditions); the availability and accessibility of natural resources.
- **Historical Factors:** Experience in wars (whether expansionist or national liberation) and revolutions.
- **Political-Institutional Factors:** The form of regime, governance, and state structure; the effectiveness of the political system; the nature of the party system; the country's position in the system of international relations.
- **Military-Strategic Factors:** The level of combat readiness and capability of the armed forces; the level of development of the military-industry; the effectiveness of the system for training military personnel.
- **Ethnic Factors:** The degree of homogeneity and national cohesion of the population; the presence and nature of internal interethnic conflicts; the dominant types of self-identification in a multi-ethnic state.

⁴ Lantis, J. S. (2006). Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz To Constructivism. URL: <https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dtra/stratcult-claus.pdf>

- **Religious/Spiritual Factors:** The predominant religions and denominations, their place and role in the country's politics; the degree of ideological unity within the nation; the presence of a "state idea"; the psychological characteristics of the population.

These factors shape national identity and worldview, which encompass traditions, customs, and habits, forming a set of interests and preferences. Thus, strategic culture is a behavioral model rooted in a particular mode of thinking, worldview, and traditions characteristic of a geographically defined security community. Strategic choices of the countries are closely linked to the ideas, norms and beliefs regarding the use of force to achieve certain objectives⁵.

Geography

Russian strategic culture is deeply influenced by its geography, which is not merely a physical feature but a cornerstone of its national identity and historical self-perception. Russia's vast, open plains stretching from the heart of Europe to the Ural Mountains have historically left Russia exposed to external aggression. From Mongol incursions to the Napoleonic and Nazi Germany invasions, these events have shaped a persistent sense of vulnerability and **fear of external invasion**. Russian rulers have historically viewed territorial expansion as the most effective defense, extending the nation's borders to delay or deter potential aggressors. This approach aligns with the creation and maintenance of **buffer zones**, a hallmark of Russian strategy. These buffer states serve as protective barriers from external threats. By creating chaos at its peripheries, Russia seeks

⁵ Antczak, A. (2018). Russia's Strategic Culture: Prisoner of Imperial History? "Athenaeum. Polskie Studia Politologiczne", №60, pp. 223-242.

to secure its borders, turning instability in neighboring areas into a buffer that it perceives as vital for its protection⁶.

Geographical vulnerabilities created the so-called **besieged fortress syndrome**: Russia as a country without allies, surrounded by hostile or relatively hostile states⁷.

Threat perception fosters a defensive posture that paradoxically translates into aggressive territorial expansion and the projection of power into neighboring regions. The best way to prevent invasion is to expand the territory.

In 1721, after the victorious Great Northern War, Tsar Peter I was proclaimed Emperor of All Russia, and Russia became an empire. From that moment, the expansion of the country's territory began. The conquest of Siberia and the Far East by Russia in the 16th to 18th centuries was a result of several interconnected factors, shaped by the historical context and geographical conditions.

The expansion that followed led to a distorted understanding of the country's greatness. As Russia grew in size and power, the emphasis shifted towards territorial acquisition as a measure of national strength. This expansionist mindset contributed to the belief that Russia's greatness was defined solely by the vastness of its territory, rather than by its cultural, economic, or political achievements. The continuous drive for more land fostered a view that power and influence could be achieved through territorial expansion, overshadowing other aspects of national development. This imperial mentality became deeply rooted in Russia's political and strategic culture for centuries to come.

⁶ Marshall, T. (2015). Russia and the Curse of Geography. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/russia-geography-ukraine-syria/413248/>

⁷ Zarobny, S., Sałek-Imińska, A. (2021). Conditions Of The Russian Federation's Strategic Culture And Its Impact On Russia's Foreign Policy, *Security Dimensions: International & National Studies*, №35(35), pp. 65-80.

For those in power, the immense size of the Russian Empire was and is seen as a mark of superiority and strength, reinforcing the narrative of Russia's exceptionalism. The vastness of the land, from Europe to the Pacific, was and often is being portrayed as a testament to the resilience and ambition of the Russian state⁸.

History

History has played a pivotal role in shaping Russia's strategic culture, with key patterns emerging across different periods, from the Muscovite Tsardom to the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and modern Russia. Despite the changes in political systems, several core characteristics have remained consistent throughout these historical phases, shaping the way Russia approaches its statehood, security, and foreign policy.

One defining feature of Russian strategic culture is the central role of a strong, autocratic leader — (tsar, emperor or *vozhd'*) — who is driven by an imagined or constructed sense of mission to preserve the unity and integrity of the state. This idea was reflected in the Russian Empire, where the tsar was considered a divinely appointed sovereign, tasked with safeguarding the nation's territorial integrity and authority.

Similarly, in the Soviet Union, the general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party positioned himself as the ultimate guardian of the state, constructing a narrative of his essential role as the protector of socialism and the Soviet legacy. In modern Russia, Vladimir Putin continues this tradition, presenting himself as the indispensable leader, framing his leadership as essential for the survival of the Russian state, particularly

⁸ Bordachev, T. (2022). On Early History and Geography of Russian Foreign Policy, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20 (3), pp. 71-93.

in the face of perceived external threats, despite the largely fabricated nature of the narrative surrounding his mission⁹¹⁰.

Another characteristic that has shaped Russia's strategic culture is the deep stratification of society, with a pronounced divide between the elite and the broader population. This was evident in the Muscovite Tsardom, where the boyar дума (an advisory council to the tsar), represented the concentration of power among a small elite group. In the Russian Empire, this divide was further institutionalized, with the aristocracy and royal family enjoying significant privileges and proximity to the tsar. The Soviet Union continued this trend with the Politburo, where the upper political leadership made the key decisions, while the vast majority of the population remained subordinate. In the 21st century Russia, this divide persists, with a powerful oligarchy closely aligned with the president, controlling major economic and political influence. The stark contrast in wealth and power between the elite and the general populace has been a consistent feature across Russia's history and remains a defining element of its strategic culture today.

Thus, whether under the rule of the tsar, the Soviet leader, or the modern Russian president, the Russian state has consistently been structured around the idea of a powerful leader tasked with maintaining the nation's territorial integrity and ensuring the loyalty of the elite.

⁹ Rumer, E., Sokolsky, R. (2020). Etched in Stone: Russian Strategic Culture and the Future of Transatlantic Security. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/09/etched-in-stone-russian-strategic-culture-and-the-future-of-transatlantic-security?lang=en>

¹⁰ Kolesnikov, A. (2022). Putin's War Has Moved Russia From Authoritarianism to Hybrid Totalitarianism. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/04/putins-war-has-moved-russia-from-authoritarianism-to-hybrid-totalitarianism?lang=en>

According to Johnston, “[t]he most important strategic preferences are rooted in the early experiences of forming the state”¹¹. In the case of Russia, these include first and foremost the Mongol Invasion and the “Tatar Yoke” (1237–1480). The subjugation under the Mongol Empire profoundly shaped the emerging Muscovite state. The experience of being dominated by a foreign power instilled a deep-seated fear of external invasion and a focus on centralized, autocratic rule. The Muscovite Tsardom inherited the Mongol administrative model, emphasizing hierarchy, tribute collection, and control, which became integral to its governance and strategic outlook.

The adoption of Christianity can also be viewed as one of the major events that shaped modern Russian state. Historical events — the Mongol conquest and Christianization — resulted in the centralization and hierarchization of state power characteristic of Russia, which was typical of both the Eastern Roman Empire and the *orda*¹².

After the dropping of the Tatar-Mongol yoke in the 15th century, one of the fundamental elements shaping the identity of the Russian people was Orthodoxy, and the Orthodox Church gained the status of a state church. It legitimized power and constituted the basis for East Slavic identity¹³.

Another pivotal chapters in Russian history that shaped the foundations of its modern strategic culture is the Time of Troubles or *Smuta* and the subsequent Era of Palace Coups. These periods of profound political upheaval, marked by instability, foreign intervention,

¹¹ Johnston, A.I. (1995). Thinking about Strategic Culture, *International Security*, Vol.19, No.4, pp. 32-64.

¹² Zarobny, S., Sałek-Imińska, A. (2021). Conditions Of The Russian Federation’s Strategic Culture And Its Impact On Russia’s Foreign Policy, *Security Dimensions: International & National Studies*, №35 (35), pp. 65-80.

¹³ Zarobny, S., Sałek-Imińska, A. (2021). Conditions Of The Russian Federation’s Strategic Culture And Its Impact On Russia’s Foreign Policy, *Security Dimensions: International & National Studies*, №35 (35), pp. 65-80.

and internal power struggles, reinforced key elements of Russia's statecraft: a deep-seated fear of disorder, the perception of external threats, and the indispensability of a strong, centralized authority to ensure the survival of the state. Only a powerful autocrat (samoderzhets) can shield the nation from domestic turmoil and chaos, that could be exploited by hostile foreign powers.

Historical events and a persistent sense of insecurity have left modern Russia without a coherent socio-economic development strategy. Instead, its primary objective is ensuring the survival of the state. Development strategies are formally drafted and approved as government programs on a regular basis, but their implementation remains highly uncertain.

Ideology

The concept of the “Special Path” of Russia, deeply ingrained in its national ideology, asserts the country's uniqueness and distinctiveness as a state-civilization. This ideology draws from the historical debates between Slavophiles and Zapadniki (Westernizers), where thinkers like Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Solovyov, and Ivan Ilyin emphasized Russia's exceptional purpose in the world, rooted in Orthodox Christian values. These philosophical underpinnings form the core of Russia's strategic culture and its understanding of its place in the world.

Russia's new foreign policy doctrine, signed into law by Vladimir Putin on March 31, 2023, officially states that Russia is a sui generis civilization. “The unique position of Russia as an independent state-civilization, a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power, has united the Russian people and other nations that make up the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian world”¹⁴.

¹⁴ The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. URL: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/?lang=en>

The “Russian Sonderweg”, as this vision is often called, is not merely a political or cultural narrative; it is a foundational component of Russia’s modern ideological framework.

Russia finds itself at a crossroads in its historical and cultural trajectory. In the past, the Russian Empire was an integral part of the European concert of nations, participating in the shared political, economic, and cultural frameworks of Europe. However, the October Revolution and the subsequent failed attempt to implement communism, followed by the deepening confrontation with the West, led to a significant rupture between Russia and Europe. This long-standing deep confrontation fostered a need for Russia to differentiate itself and distance itself from the West, which, from the Kremlin’s perspective, has taken a misguided path of development, promoting values that Russia considers incompatible with its own.

On the one hand, this ideological shift by Russia has reinforced the notion that the West is pursuing a course that undermines traditional values and national sovereignty. From Russia’s standpoint, this divergence requires a clear distinction between itself and Europe, as the country strives to preserve its own unique civilizational identity. On the other hand, despite distancing itself from the West, Russia does not perceive itself and is not being perceived by other countries as an Asian power. This places Russia in a complex position: while it seeks to distance itself from the Western world, it does not fully align with Asia either¹⁵. Therefore, Russia has developed ideological constructs such as the “Special Path”, positioning itself as a unique Eurasian state with a distinct civilizational identity.

A fundamental component of “Russian” values is Orthodoxy, which has shaped the national identity and worldview throughout Russia’s history. The phrase “For Faith, Tsar, and Fatherland”, a popular slogan during the Russian Empire, encapsulates the symbiotic relationship between religion, monarchy, and national unity. This motto reflects the deep

¹⁵ Сурков, В. (2018). Одиночество полукровки. (Loneliness of the Half-Breed). URL: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/odinochestvo-polukrovki-14-2/>

integration of Orthodox Christianity into Russia's cultural and political fabric, where faith, loyalty to the Tsar, and patriotism towards the Fatherland were intertwined as guiding principles of the state.

The Orthodox Church reinforces national identity by emphasizing shared religious and cultural heritage, legitimizing state authority, and uniting society through traditions and rituals. Russia also uses the Church to present itself as a unique "state-civilization", rooted in moral and spiritual values. Claiming the legacy of Byzantium, Russia portrays itself as the rightful heir to the "Third Rome"¹⁶, the protector of Orthodoxy, and a unique cultural force. This narrative contrasts Russia with the West, depicting it as the defender of "traditional values" and spiritual authenticity against Western secularism and liberalism. By leveraging the Church, Russia positions itself as both a domestic unifier and a global moral counterweight.

Elites

The structure of Russian elites is both complex and unique, shaped by historical legacies and modern political dynamics. Historical events have led to a rigid stratification of Russian society, with elite groups throughout different periods maintaining control over resources and power. In pre-revolutionary Russia, the aristocracy and boyars held immense power and wealth, and while the Soviet era sought to eliminate this elite, it merely replaced one form of ruling class with another — the Politburo, which was similarly entrenched in power.

Today, this pattern endures, with the rise of the Putin-era oligarchy, a modern manifestation of power and wealth concentrated in the hands of a select few, continuing the legacy of societal stratification. When Vladimir Putin became Russia's president in 2000, he quickly installed his own team of loyalists. Most of the political elite originate in

¹⁶ Stremouhov D. (2002). Moscow — The Third Rome: The Source of the Doctrine. URL: http://ec-dejavu.ru/m-2/Moskow_Third_Rome.html

the government bureaucracy in Moscow or St. Petersburg or came to their positions of influence through personal ties to Putin, either in St. Petersburg or in the security services¹⁷. There are four main elite groups that have emerged in Russia in recent decades: Putin's inner circle, oligarchs, siloviki (which translates roughly to “men of force” or simply security official), and state bureaucracy¹⁸. These oligarchs can be divided into two subgroups: the “old” oligarchs, who amassed their wealth and influence during the 1990s under Boris Yeltsin, and the “new” oligarchs, who rose to power during Putin's era.

The rise of oligarchs in Russia dates back to the chaotic 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this period, the privatization of state assets created unprecedented opportunities for a small group of individuals to accumulate immense wealth. These “old” oligarchs (Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky and others) not only dominated key industries like oil, gas, and media but also played significant roles in shaping political outcomes, including the re-election of Boris Yeltsin in 1996. Under Putin, the nature of oligarchic power shifted. The “new” oligarchs (such as Igor Sechin and Gennady Timchenko) rose to prominence not through the chaos of privatization but through their loyalty to the Kremlin. Putin restructured the relationship between the state and big business, ensuring that wealth and influence were contingent upon unwavering allegiance to his administration.

Unlike the Western model of independent business tycoons, Russian oligarchs operate in a system where their fortunes are deeply tied to the state. Access to lucrative industries, protection from competitors, and immunity from legal challenges are granted in exchange for political loyalty and support for state initiatives. However, this dependency also makes them vulnerable; any deviation from Kremlin policies can lead to swift retribution. Russia's

¹⁷ Gorenburg, D. (2020). The Political Elite Under Putin, URL: <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/political-elite-under-putin-o>

¹⁸ Khvostunova, O. The Russian Elites. URL: <https://www.aalep.eu/russian-elites>

powerful oligarchs may hold the majority of the nation's wealth, but they do so at the expense of political power.

Siloviki (security officials) are the representatives of law enforcement agencies, intelligence organizations, armed forces, and other government agencies to whom the state delegates its right to use force. Most are military men or former KGB officers, like Putin himself. The state bureaucracy represents the fourth elite group¹⁹. During the 2000s, the siloviki began to play a key role in reshaping Russia's political and economic landscape. Many of them took over leadership positions in key ministries, state-owned enterprises, and regional governments. Individuals like Igor Sechin (head of Rosneft) and Sergey Chemezov (head of Rostec) exemplify this trend, where former security officers transitioned into high-profile economic and political roles, often overseeing industries critical to the state's interests, particularly in energy and defense.

While the siloviki operate in the realm of security and law enforcement, their relationship with other elite groups — particularly the oligarchs and the state bureaucracy — is one of cooperation and mutual benefit. The oligarchs, though primarily focused on economic interests, rely on the protection of the siloviki to safeguard their wealth and business operations. In turn, the siloviki use their access to the economic and political elites to expand their own influence and control. Siloviki also serve as Putin's personal shield against domestic turmoil, reflecting lessons drawn from Russia's turbulent history. From Smuta, Palace Coups to the Decembrist Uprising, the 1905 Revolution, and the Bolotny protests of 2011–2013, Putin, acutely aware of these historical precedents, has prioritized building a loyal and robust security apparatus to ensure his regime's survival.

One of the defining features of the Russian elite is their ability to maintain a high level of influence and power, regardless of their formal positions. This phenomenon highlights the significance of loyalty in the Russian power structure, where individuals can wield

¹⁹ Khvostunova, O. The Russian Elites. URL: <https://www.aalep.eu/russian-elites>

considerable authority based on personal ties to the president rather than the formal roles they hold within the state apparatus. This pattern of loyalty-driven appointments reflects the broader nature of Putin's Russia, which operates as a highly centralized system, with all branches of power effectively under the president's control.

However, becoming part of the elite in Russia is an incredibly difficult feat; it is an extremely narrow and exclusive club. Access to this inner circle is highly restricted for those who not only demonstrate exceptional loyalty but also possess the right connections and credentials. Once in, these elites often maintain their status for decades, solidifying their positions through a combination of personal loyalty, control over key resources, and strategic influence within the state apparatus.

The Orthodox Church has played a significant role in shaping Russia's strategic culture, particularly in reinforcing a tendency towards hierarchy, pyramid-like structures, and the elevation of the clergy as an elite. This hierarchical framework, deeply embedded in Russian society, has contributed to a political and social order that values centralized control and authority. Moreover, the clergy, often seen as the moral and spiritual leaders of society, have in many cases become entangled with political power, leading to a degree of corruption within the religious hierarchy. The Church's influence has therefore not only reinforced Russia's historical tendencies towards strong, centralized leadership but has also contributed to the creation of a powerful, sometimes corrupt, elite class within the clergy, further cementing the intersection between religion and politics in Russian culture²⁰.

Military Power

²⁰ Soldatov, A., Borogan, I. (2023). Putin's Useful Priests. The Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin's Hidden Influence Campaign in the West. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-useful-priests-russia-church-influence-campaign>

In Russia's strategic culture, military power is not just a tool for projecting force or asserting dominance on the global stage. It is, more fundamentally, a mechanism for neutralising a deep-rooted sense of insecurity and the long-standing mindset of the “besieged fortress” — a nation under constant threat. Historical “traumas” have contributed to the widespread belief that Russia must maintain a powerful military as a defensive necessity to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In contemporary Russian policy, military buildup serves as a dual-purpose tool: it is a defensive mechanism designed to protect the homeland and a deterrent aimed at discouraging aggression by rival states, particularly NATO members and other perceived adversaries. Official Russian rhetoric frequently justifies increased defense spending and military modernization as a response to what it describes as the encroachment of “malevolent powers”, namely Western countries. In the 1990s, Russia's military was unable to produce the fear, and therefore respect, across Eurasia in the way of the old Soviet military. Restoring the Russian military to greatness became a driving policy choice under Putin²¹.

Thus, beyond its role in defense, Russia's military might functions as a psychological measure against what could be described as a “complex of inferiority”. For much of its modern history, Russia has struggled to assert itself as a global power, particularly following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when the country was left weakened and facing numerous internal challenges. In this context, the military becomes an instrument for restoring national pride and affirming Russia's global status. The strong military — especially the nuclear arsenal — is viewed as a means to counterbalance perceived Western dominance and to reassert Russia's great power status. However, Russia's self-

²¹ Kerrane, E. (2022). Militarism In An Era Of Great Power Competition, *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, Special Issue, pp. 69-87.

perception as a great power is rooted in a distorted and idealized interpretation of its history and role in the world politics.

One of the most striking manifestations of Putin's dominance over military leadership is the subordination of professional military judgment to the political and strategic priorities of the Kremlin. Senior military officials, including the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the General Staff, function less as autonomous strategists or advisors and more as extensions of Putin's political will. Their roles are defined by loyalty to the president rather than independent and professional expertise or institutional integrity. This dynamic ensures that military actions align closely with the Kremlin's overarching political objectives, often at the expense of rationalism and pragmatism. Such a rigid hierarchy has profound implications for Russia's strategic behavior. First, it reinforces a risk-prone decision-making style that prioritizes bold political gambits and tactical moves over cautious military strategy. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine exemplifies this tendency, where military planning was subordinated to the Kremlin's miscalculations about Ukrainian resistance and Western unity²². Second, the lack of independent military voices reduces the capacity for internal checks and balances, increasing the likelihood of strategic blunders by Russia.

With regards to nuclear weapons, for Russia, it is not merely a defense mechanism but a symbol of great power status. This perception has been reinforced by historical milestones such as the development of the Soviet atomic bomb in 1949, which marked the USSR's emergence as a peer competitor to the United States²³. Under Vladimir Putin, nuclear weapons have been re-emphasized as a central element of Russia's military doctrine, including the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons in regional conflicts to "escalate to de-escalate". Moreover, nuclear weapons are viewed as the ultimate safeguard of

²² Frederick, B., Cozad, M., Stark, A. (2023). Understanding the Risk of Escalation in the War in Ukraine. URL: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA2807-1.html

²³ Zaloga, S. (1993). Target America: The Soviet Union and the Strategic Arms Race, 1945-1964.

sovereignty, ensuring that no foreign power can impose its will on Russia. This mindset, coupled with modern geopolitical rivalries, positions nuclear deterrence as both a psychological and practical cornerstone of Russia's strategic culture. The Russian term strategic deterrence is thus a clustered term used to describe all of the following: activities aimed at containing any threat from materialising against Russia; activities aimed at deterring any direct aggression against Russia; and, lastly, activities focused on coercing an adversary to cede in a confrontation to terms dictated by Russia²⁴. Thus, one of the objectives of strategic deterrence is to maintain constant political and military escalation control.

Recommendations

Although strategic culture can evolve under the impact of a strategic shock, as was the case in Ukraine, it is highly likely that in Russia, even after Putin's departure from power for one reason or another, the essence of the regime and its strategic culture will remain unchanged. Russia's leadership operates within a framework of deep-seated paranoia, perceiving external actors as existential threats. This mindset complicates diplomatic engagement and demands a calibrated approach.

The "carrots and sticks" approach combines stringent measures to contain Russia with positive incentives to motivate Moscow to reconsider its aggressive stance towards other countries.

The "sticks" aspect of this approach emphasizes deterrence, defense and pressure. Supporting Russia's neighbors — Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova — through expanded military assistance will further signal the high costs of aggression. NATO's Eastern Flank, including the Baltic States, Poland, and Romania, should see strengthened national military capabilities and additional NATO's troop deployments. Apart from that, the provision of a "non-nuclear deterrence package" for Ukraine will be an important step in enhancing the

²⁴ Ven Bruusgaard, K. (2016). Russian Strategic Deterrence, *Survival*, Vol.58, No.4, pp. 7-26.

security architecture of Europe. This initiative, announced in President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's "Victory Plan", is essential for countering further Russian aggression and serves as a vital tool in the broader strategy of managing interactions with Moscow²⁵. By integrating advanced and conventional military capabilities without resorting to nuclear escalation, this approach will strengthen deterrence while adhering to international norms on nuclear non-proliferation. The primary objective of deploying such a package for Ukraine is to create a credible and scalable deterrent that will complicate Moscow's strategic calculus. By introducing advanced precision-strike systems (*deterrence by punishment*) and integrated air and missile defense network (*deterrence by denial*), Ukraine will be able to enhance its resilience. This non-nuclear configuration not only serves as a "stick" in the strategy of dealing with Russia, but also aligns with the Western commitment to avoid direct nuclear confrontation, ensuring a proportional yet effective response to the threat.

The question of Russian "red lines" remains valid. Moscow has adeptly exploited the narrative of "red lines" to maintain strategic ambiguity, compelling the West to engage in speculative forecasting of the potential consequences of crossing these thresholds. This not only undermines collective Western decision-making but also grants Russia greater freedom of action by discouraging preemptive or robust responses. Deploying a conventional deterrence package in Ukraine will address this challenge by reframing the concept of "red lines". By demonstrating a unified and unyielding stance, the West can shift the strategic initiative and escalation control away from Russia. It will signal a clear boundary of unacceptable actions, particularly in the context of continued war against Ukraine.

The establishment of joint weapon and ammunition manufacturing facilities with Ukraine, located on the EU territory (e.g. in Czech Republic, Poland, and Sweden) might be one of

²⁵ Piechowska, M. (2024). Zelensky Presents "Victory Plan". URL: <https://www.pism.pl/publications/zelensky-presents-victory-plan>

important options in addressing the security challenges posed by Russian aggression. This approach will not only strengthen Ukraine's defense capabilities but also serve as a "stick" within the framework of *deterrence by punishment*. Joint manufacturing for Ukraine in European countries will address two critical needs: enabling Ukraine to sustain its defense against Russian aggression and reinforcing NATO's Eastern Flank with scalable, high-quality defense industry production. It might reduce risks associated with production facilities in Ukraine, which remain vulnerable to Russian strikes, while maintaining Ukraine's active involvement in the manufacturing process. The cooperation will ensure a steady flow of advanced weapons tailored to Ukraine's immediate needs, from precision munitions to modernized defense systems. This mechanism will also erode Russia's leverage by countering its narratives of Western fragility and disunity. The deeper cooperation between NATO, EU and Ukraine in weaponry production will exemplify a cohesive and coordinated response, undermining Moscow's efforts to exploit perceived divisions within the alliance.

The "carrots" element includes maintaining communication with Moscow while simultaneously advancing a strategy of deterrence. It can serve as a balanced approach that reflects both pragmatism and strategic foresight. Dialogue is not a concession or a sign of weakness; it is a necessary tool for managing conflict, clarifying intentions, and reducing the risks of miscalculation.

The idea of maintaining dialogue with Russia is not about engaging in negotiations regarding the future of Ukraine or other neighboring countries, nor is it about compromising on fundamental principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Instead, it is about preserving a space for communication that allows for the exchange of views and the management of potential risks, without any immediate objectives or exaggerated expectations.

Communication with Moscow during the transitional period following Vladimir Putin's departure should remain a consideration for the strategic long term, even if it is not a task

for the present moment. Such a transition is likely to be a highly vulnerable and potentially dangerous time for Russia, marked by increased risks of internal turbulence, power struggles, and systemic instability. Ignoring the necessity of dialogue in this context could exacerbate the risks to regional and global security. At present, any meaningful communication with Moscow is significantly constrained by Putin's fixation on Ukraine.

That period of internal reconfiguration could enable the application of targeted political signals that might be perceived as “carrots”, particularly in the context of potential sanctions relief.

While immediate priorities focus on countering Russia's aggressive actions and ensuring Ukraine's sovereignty, it is vital not to dismiss the strategic need for engagement in the future. A carefully calibrated approach to dialogue during Russia's transition could mitigate risks, including internal fragmentation, potential nuclear insecurity, and unpredictable foreign policy actions by interim leaders.

Striking a desired balance between “carrots and sticks” requires a clear strategy. The West should communicate unequivocally that Russia if preserves its current aggressive policy faces two distinct pathways: isolation or cooperation. Firm responses to any violations of international norms by the West are necessary to ensure the credibility of the deterrent measures in the eyes of Russia.

The Western deterrence and defense posture makes clear that any further aggression will have serious and sustained consequences, while dialogue, in this context, serves as a precautionary tool for preventing miscalculations and ensuring that, even in the most tense situations, there is no rush to conflict. Established channels for dialogue to address mutual concerns may help mitigate Russian paranoia. A clear and consistent communication strategy towards Russia is also crucial for balanced “carrots and sticks” measures. Flexibility in rewarding positive actions and decisive responses to aggression might be key to effectively implementing this approach.

Conclusion

Understanding Russia's strategic culture is key to comprehending its decision-making and actions. Shaped by its history, geography, political system, and cultural identity, Russia's approach is often aggressive and expansionist, driven by a deep sense of vulnerability. Historical experiences, including territorial conflicts and foreign relations, have fostered a belief in the necessity of territorial expansion for security. This mindset prioritizes a strong, centralized authority, often personified in a powerful leader, to ensure state stability.

Russia's legacy of foreign invasions, political instability, and religious influences has created a culture that values hierarchy, defense of the territory, and buffer zones. This framework continues to shape its global actions, focusing on security, national unity, and territorial expansion. The pursuit of a "Special Path", reinforced by a unique Eurasian identity and Orthodox Christianity, positions Russia in opposition to Western values and influences its actions both domestically and abroad. The tight grip of the elite, bound by loyalty to Vladimir Putin, further strengthens the Kremlin's power but also creates vulnerabilities in its political system.

As Russia seeks to reassert its place on the world stage, the complex interplay of ideological, elite, and military forces will define its future. Its actions, driven by both deep-seated fears and ambitions, make it a formidable and unpredictable player in global politics. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for dealing with Russia and anticipating its future strategies on the international stage.