

Michael Kofman**DRIVERS OF****RUSSIAN****GRAND STRATEGY**

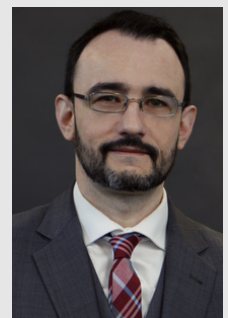
Russia is seemingly resurgent in international politics, entrenched in an escalating confrontation with the United States, while posing an increasingly global challenge for a state that was only recently regarded by the former U.S. President as a regional power in decline. While politics may often be a matter of perception, in Western conception Russia typically exists in one of two analytical states, decline or resurgence. Such depictions are often paired with another dichotomy, a Russia that is tactical and opportunistic, or one driven by a coherent centrally organizing strategy. These conceptions are not especially useful. Opportunism should be assessed within the framework of a Russian leadership with a vision, and relative consensus on the country's desired role in international affairs, i.e. tactical decisions in pursuit of a desired end state. Decline and resurgence are relative terms, based more on perception, than useful metrics of economic and military power.

In truth, Moscow has historically been tethered to cycles of resurgence, following periods of decline, with stagnation often following expansion. Yet stepping back from this cycle, one can readily see that over centuries Russia has been, and remains today, an enduring great power. Russia is best characterized as a relatively weak great power, often technologically backward compared to contemporaries.

Hence Moscow's strategic outlook has always been shaped as much by perceptions of vulnerability, threats foreign and domestic, as much as ambition and a drive for recognition.

The Soviet Union was by far the weaker of the two super powers, despite having proven a capable adversary to the United States in the latter half of the 20th century. Similarly the Russian empire, despite moments of geopolitical strength, found itself contending with more capable and technologically superior adversaries in its own time, and centrifugal forces from within. Russian decision making, strategy, and military thought remains deeply influenced by the country's history, a shared vision among the ruling elite of Russia's rightful place in the international system, and a strong belief in the efficacy of the military as an instrument of national power.

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Past it not necessarily prologue, but history has a profound influence on Russian strategy, the state's theory of how to attain security for itself and expand influence in international politics. While lacking the economic dynamism of present day competitors, the Russian state has a demonstrated propensity to take on stronger powers, that is compete effectively in international politics well above its relative power, or to put it more simply, bench above its weight. At the same time, the Russia has suffered from periods of stagnation, internal instability, and occasional state collapse, often engaging in cycles of rebuilding rather than building.

The Russian strategy for great power competition begins with a decision to establish effective conventional and nuclear deterrence, directly shaping the military balance, which paradoxically grants Moscow confidence to pursue an indirect approach against the United States. This is a strategy of cost imposition and erosion, an indirect approach which could be considered a form of raiding. As long as conventional and nuclear deterrence holds, it makes various form of competition below the threshold of war not only viable, but highly attractive. Moscow hopes to become a major strategic thorn in America's side, engaging in geopolitical arbitrage, establishing itself as a power broker on the cheap, and effectively weakening those institutions that empower Western collective action. Ultimately, Russia seeks a deal, not based on the actual balance of power in the international system, but tied to its performance in the competition. That deal can best be likened to a form of detente, status recognition, and attendant privileges or understandings, which have profound geopolitical ramifications for politics in Europe.

The Russian challenge

Russia measures itself first and foremost against the United States, and when seeking recognition, attention, or pursuing a deal, it is Moscow's desire to parlay with Washington more so than any other power. Moscow sees

NATO as America's Warsaw Pact, not a collective defense alliance where the policies or views of the individual states matter. The Russian challenge, and consequently the inputs into Russian strategy, can be narrowly defined as a contest born of conflicting visions for the security architecture of Europe, Russia's drive to restore a privileged sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union, and a fundamental difference in normative outlooks on the conduct of international relations, that is how states should behave in international politics and therefore what the character of the international order should be.

First and foremost, Russian leaders seek a revision of the post-Cold War settlement in Europe, having concluded that they have no stake in the current security architecture of Europe. Moscow sees the post-Cold War period as one akin to the treaty at Versailles, an order imposed at a time of Russian weakness. Russian borders that most closely mirror the 1918 Brest-Litovsk Treaty signed by Bolsheviks with the Central Powers of World War I, and while Russia may not be principally expansionist, it has always sought geographic depth against the stronger powers of Europe. Having no stake in the current European security framework, Russia's leadership has instead pursued a traditional strategy for attaining security via establishment of buffer states against political-economic or military blocks. This is a strategy of extended defense, borne of vulnerability, and a consensus that emerged after 1941 in Russian strategic circles that Russia must never be placed in a position again to fight an industrial scale conflict on its own territory.

Buffer states are not neutral by design, but represent a zero-sum calculus, in that they are either Russia's buffers against NATO, or conversely NATO's buffers against Russia. Moscow believes it must impose limited sovereignty on its neighbors, so as to control their strategic orientation. Russian leaders have come to see neighbors as liabilities, who will often side with opposing great powers. This process has led to a self-fulfilling prophecy, by using

force to impose its will, Moscow inspires the apprehension and hedging behavior amongst its neighbors which drives them to balance and contain Russia in the first place. Though Moscow always seeks to redress these trends through non-forceful instruments to retain its influence, when faced with loss or geopolitical defeat, it invariably resorts to use of force, casting itself as a potential revisionist threat to its neighbors.

Beyond chasing security, Russia seeks to restore a privileged sphere of influence, believing itself to be the rightful hegemon in its own region, and reintegrate the former Soviet space to the extent possible around its own leadership. However, Moscow lacks the economic means, or an attractive model of development for other states, still witnessing a steady fragmentation of influence over its 'near abroad.' There are other forces at play. A century ago Russia found itself between two dynamic rising powers, Germany and Japan. Today it is sandwiched between two expansionist economic powers, China and the European Union, both more attractive to neighboring states.

Russian long term thinking is driven by a vision of Moscow at the center of its own sphere of influence, but in practice Russian policy is defined by loss aversion, trying to check the slow unraveling of Russian influence in what once constituted the former Soviet empire. Not unlike other powers, strategy is also the product of reactions to crises, and becomes more emergent than deliberate in nature. Moscow sees the United States as instrumental behind this geopolitical entropy, and while Russian elites do not see their country in decline, they are nonetheless vexed by the gravitational pull of more dynamic states, and their own lackluster economic stagnation.

Beyond extended defense, and restoring itself as a dominant regional hegemon within its own region, Russian strategic culture has not shed itself of the perception that the country is a providential great power. Moscow views this status as de facto hereditary. Russia has a special role

in the world because it is Russia, and Moscow believes it has a mission. Born of its Soviet inheritance, today Russia sees itself as being responsible for international security, in large part because of its strategic nuclear arsenal and substantial military power, and equally because it can play the role of a conservative counterweight to American ideological revisionism. Whether in Syria, or Venezuela, Russia considers itself a defender of the international status quo, and of the nation state system, while seeing the United States as a radical force revising international affairs.

The Russian outlook is hardly dissimilar from other classical great powers, most of whom practiced a form of great power exceptionalism and hypocrisy. Yet Moscow's vision lends intellectual coherence to the baser drives of its foreign policy, beyond mere pursuit of security at the expense of the sovereignty of others, or simply more power. Russia is a cynical power, but Russian elites do have a vision, and a story they tell themselves about the 'why' in Russian foreign policy. The current Russian conception of their role in international affairs is inextricably linked to the United States, which is why Moscow is on a perpetual quest for recognition, and a deal with Washington.

A clash of visions

Less recognized is the fundamental clash in outlooks on international politics, and the conduct of affairs among states. Moscow wants to sit on all the institutions governing the current international order, and be engaged in contact groups or forums of discussion for various international issues, that is to advance its interests and be seen as a system determining power in international affairs. This is not unusual, nor is it the source of the conflict with Washington. The problem is that Russia retains a view of the international system that sees only great powers as having true sovereignty, and the ability to conduct an independent foreign policy. Small states inherently have limited sovereignty from this perspective. More importantly, the purpose of international politics is to ensure

stability or 'predictability' of relations among the great powers, avoiding a great power war. Therefore, in Russian conception, not only are nuclear powers first among equals, but the interests of other states are subordinate to this pursuit. Moscow thinks that a world stabilized by spheres of influence (Yalta 1945), and arbitration among a concert of powers (1815 Concert of Europe), is the more stable system and one where it has the greatest chance of pursuing its own interests.

Notably, this vision places primacy on military strength and status as a nuclear power, over the economic performance. Russian leaders have also come to believe that because the West places emphasis on individual sovereignty, and human rights, over the power of the state, it inherently does not see authoritarian regimes as being legitimate or having legitimate interests. Thus emerges a mutually exclusive outlook on international politics, where Russia feels it is on one side of the argument with China, promoting a conservative international order with preference towards the interests of great powers, and on the other an ideological vision that promotes the independence of smaller states and the liberty of individuals within their respective political systems.

The U.S. may see Moscow's agenda as fundamentally retrograde, but the visible ideological core at the center of Washington's foreign policy consensus has convinced Russia's leadership that the United States will always seek regime change in Russia, and will never recognize Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime as having legitimate interests. Moscow's interpretation of U.S. intent tends towards the paranoid, indulging in unfounded narratives of U.S. organized political subversion on Russia's periphery. Yet at the same time Washington's vision for Russia's integration with the West always had an unstated regime change component, presuming it would encourage Moscow to make a democratic transition. Moscow correctly perceives a missionary impulse at the core of U.S. foreign policy.

The ways of Russian strategy

Russia has always been better at leveraging military and diplomatic instruments of national power relative to its economy. Moscow invested heavily in the restoration of conventional military power, building a balanced military that includes a general purpose force for local conflicts, a non-nuclear conventional deterrent, and a capable nuclear arsenal for theater nuclear warfare. This allows Moscow to impose its will on neighbors via limited conventional operations, but more importantly engage in coercive bargaining and manipulation of risk against the United States and NATO. Inherent in Russian strategy is the presumption that interest at stake favor Moscow in these contests, allowing Russia to threaten long range conventional strikes, or nuclear escalation, in crises where adversaries may well back down. As a consequence the challenge for the West is not simply a capability gap, but a cognitive gap in understanding what matters in the modern character of war between great powers.

Russian military strategy is heavily influenced by outlooks on the current and emerging character of war, seeing it as one based on blitzkrieg with long range precision guided weapons, and a contest for information superiority. The Russian General Staff sees warfare as systemic or 'nodal' in nature, whereby a military system has critical nodes which can destroy its ability to fight, and similarly a political system has elements essential to its political will or resolve in a crisis. Russian operational concepts are geared towards shaping the environment during a threatened period of war, and achieving success in a contest of systems during the initial period of war. There is little notion in Russian military thought of a conventional-only war with NATO, or that beyond a decisive initial period of war, there are likely to be other sustained phases, i.e. one side will be proven successful in the early weeks of the contest. From the outset, Moscow is resolved to the prospect of employing non-strategic nuclear weapons should it find itself on the losing side of the war.

In contests Russia has used military power on the basis of reasonable sufficiency, not seeking overmatch so much as coercive power to achieve desired political ends. Recent wars have demonstrated some efficacy in pairing indirect warfare with conventional military power, but it is ultimately hard military power that has achieved desired outcomes in local contests. The Russian General Staff values the utility of political warfare, and believes that a conflict will start with organized political subversion, information warfare and the like. However, they see this sub-conventional challenge as the leading edge of a spear, where the true coercive power comes from Western technological military power and awesome arsenal of precision guided weapons. Moscow sees non-contact warfare, and aerospace blitzkrieg, as the defining elements of the Western way of war, which pair with political subversion to create color revolutions within the Russian self-ascribed sphere of influence. Conventional elements are therefore the finishing stroke of an undeclared war which begins with political subversion.

Buttressed by a growing conventional and nuclear deterrent, Moscow is more confident in pursuing indirect competition via hacking, political warfare, and other forms of coercion against the United States, in the hope of imposing costs over time. This is both a form of retaliation for Western sanctions, and a more 'medieval' approach to great power contests, leveraging the ability to reach in and directly affect political cohesion amongst Western states. It is more effective when considering Western efforts to reduce the role of the nation state, and establish interdependent economies based on the freedom of movement of goods and labor. Russia pairs this form of political warfare with a series of gambits on the global stage to establish an arbitrage role, or become a power broker, in contests, conflicts, or issues that the West cares about. The end goal is similar, create transaction costs for U.S. foreign policy, force the West to deal with Moscow, with the eventual desire of compelling a negotiation on core Russian interests described above.

A third effort is centered on key powers in Europe, creating asymmetric dependencies via energy pipelines, trade, or other deals with their respective elites. Russia is more powerful than any European state, but much weaker than the European Union. Moscow's problem in the relative balance of power is self-evident, hence Russia seeks to weaken European ability for collective action, and the role of institutions that limits its freedom of maneuver in foreign policy. Russia is less interested in NATO cohesion, and more concerned with the attractiveness and economic expansionism of the EU. NATO in Russian conception is simply a platsdarm for the projection of U.S. military power.

The EU is not simply a European project, but also an outgrowth of U.S. grand strategy. That is, Europe does not enjoy strategic autonomy from Washington. Russia refuses to accept a European theater of military operations where the U.S. enjoys military dominance, while its ally the EU has economic and political primacy. Therefore, to the extent possible, Russia will work actively to encourage centrifugal forces on the continent, hoping they will restore the political primacy of the nation-state, and the reemergence of a concert-like system of powers over that of political or military blocks. Russian political influence, information operations, and similar efforts are bound by this overall vision not for geographic revisionism, but for the restoration of Russia's relative power in European affairs.