FRIVÄRLD

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PUTTING THE RUSSIA PROBLEM IN PERSPECTIVE

Today no serious discussion of transatlantic security can ignore the role played by Russia, which (after NATO) remains the most significant determinant of the continent's security environment. Although at times it has been considered a down-and-out power, Russia continues to shape the security dimension of European politics. Indeed, it is not Russian resurgence, but Russian absence as a principal driver of security considerations in Europe that represents a recent historical aberration.

Unfortunately, history suggests that if Russia is not a part of the security architecture in Europe, and no sustainable understanding can be reached, then that framework will inevitably have to consider Russia a potential threat. Despite the best intentions, or perhaps romantic optimism, of those who sought to craft post-Cold War security arrangements, that logic has thus far proved inescapable. This article briefly considers the challenge posed by Russia, both militarily and via other means, in an effort to distill what constitutes the Russia problem set. The objective is not to exaggerate or aggrandize the potential challenge; neither is it to cast Russia as a paper tiger, a temporary menace whose power is ultimately brittle.

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Russian strategy also merits better examination, since Western strategies have a tendency to reflect establishment prerogatives, while Russia at best plays a minor role. The US National Defense Strategy of 2018 is a good example: Russian military capabilities at the tactical level are considered, but Russia itself as an adversary fails to make a recognizable appearance. Despite the U.S. predilection to classify most problems as a capability gap, a significant cognitive gap exists in Western understandings of Russian thinking at the operational and strategic level.

Framing the strategic challenge

The contest could be helpfully reduced to three strategic problems that will bedevil European security for the coming decades. First, Moscow's desire to revise the post-Cold War settlement in Europe. Russian leadership has determined that they have no stake in the continent's

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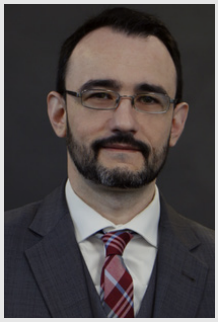

current security architecture, and have sufficiently restored Russian power to challenge what was established during a time of Russian weakness. While Russia may not offer a suitable alternative, beyond a retrograde great power division of spheres of influence, it is unwilling to accept that which has been built. By the mid-2000s, Russian elites had decided that further integration into Europe was undesirable, in part because it is impossible without regime change at home (always implicit Western integration efforts), dashing hopes that economic and political interdependence would overcome divergence over security.

The second problem stems from the ongoing fragmentation of Russian influence in what constitutes the former Soviet space, and Moscow's fight to arrest said decline. The EU has emerged as a leading (though not especially thoughtful or deliberate) competitor in what Russian leadership still considers its privileged sphere of influence. The EU is bureaucratically expansionist, representing an alternative model for doing business that is mutually exclusive of Russian rent-seeking and Russian desires to reintegrate the former Soviet space around itself economically and politically.

The USSR was formally dissolved in December 1991, but Russia is still in the throes of imperial collapse, a process playing out over decades. Recent conflicts are de facto wars of succession of what is still a collapsing Russian empire. Russia's imperial dissolution and attempts at revanchism are not so different from the decline of other notable twentieth-century imperial powers, except that Russian military power has been revived within a generation. Consequently, Russia lacks the economic dynamism to contest the attractiveness of the European Union (or China), but retains the military power to impose its will on neighbors.

The third problem is borne of Russian strategy, both to attain security for itself, and to compel the US to accept a new settlement. In Europe, Russia clings to extended defense, premised on buffer states, which implicitly requires Moscow to limit the sovereignty of its neighbors and influence their strategic orientation. Because buffer states are rarely neutral but are typically one side's buffer against the other, competition ensues over the orientation of neighboring states and those considered 'in-between.' Extended defense has been an enduring Russian strategy in contemporary history. Russia's ability to execute it without the use of conventional military power is questionable, given the decline of its political and economic influence.

More important is the visible switch in Russian strategy towards the US and the EU to what was once termed by Jack Snyder as 'offensive detente,' representing a series of direct and indirect measures designed to illicit restraint and compel the US to negotiate a new understanding. This is arguably a return to the Soviet strategic consensus in the period 1953-1985. Given how cheap US foreign policy was in the post-Cold War period, and how ideologically ambitious it has been , the arrangements sought by Moscow would constitute a substantial retrenchment and retreat. Although the USSR was considerably weaker than the US, Soviet strategy was rather successful during the 'first' Cold War. It would be foolish for American or European leaders to ignore the possibility that Moscow will prove a capable competitor, despite the relative asymmetry of resources. This is not to say that working to reach an understanding or compromise with Russia should not be undertaken, but rather that success will depend on which side is better positioned to dictate terms.

Plans are worthless, but planning is everything

There is much to be said about the implications of Russia's restored military power, but U.S. and European planners would spend their time wisely focusing on what matters. First is the Russian emphasis is on decisive engagement in the initial period of war, specifically preventing the US from being able to achieve a decisive victory early on. While in the abstract NATO may appear superior when glancing at tables of forces, in reality Excel spreadsheets

don't fight, and a sustained conflict is unlikely between peer nuclear powers. The Russian General Staff would not expect the decisive phase of conflict to last beyond 2-3 weeks, at which time most precision-guided munitions would be expended and the war liable to escalate to nuclear employment. This is an optimistic assessment, since during much of the Cold War the conventional phase of operations was only expected to last 2-10 days.

Planning to win a long war on the basis of economic or manpower superiority is a luxury NATO simply does not have. European history demonstrates how great powers with superior manpower and economic strength can be defeated in continental Europe within a matter of weeks (for example see French and British performance in May-June 1940). What matters more is the relationship of forces in theater that could be deployed or encountered within an operationally meaningful time, versus a general military balance that exists in the abstract. The latter fails to play much of a role in shaping political decision-making, and historically does a terrible job of impressing adversaries sufficient to deter them.

From a Russian perspective, the initial period of war will be decided by the contest between aerospace assault and aerospace defense, and the ability of the two sides to destroy each other's critical infrastructure. Ground forces matter little, and little significance is attached to their performance or ensuring their survivability. While only ground forces can hold terrain, in an environment where battle space depth can range safely 500-1500km behind the line of contact, the terrain they occupy does not represent a frontline, but rather a zone of non-contact engagement between troops, supported by fires or distant strike systems.

The Russian military correctly assesses that NATO force multipliers come chiefly from air power, a robust ISR architecture that enables the use of precision-guided weapons and service integration at the tactical level enabled by good command and control. Their chief concern is with long-range precision-guided weapons that they believe will make a strategic impact if used against Russian military and civilian infrastructure. Certain air defense, missile defense and radar systems belonging to Russian Aerospace Forces are designated strategic because they defend this infrastructure, rather than because they protect Russian forces. In general, the Russian military does best at the operational level of war, organizing the tools it has available to achieve operational success versus tactical outcomes.

Divergent visions on great power war

There is poor alignment between Western expectations of what a war might look like with Russia, and the Russian perspective. This is natural, given that more than 70 years have passed since the last great power war and nobody can say with confidence what a modern great power conflict will entail (except that it is best avoided). While Moscow expects any war with a coalition to constitute a regional war, there is a perplexing notion in the West that conflict can be localized to the Baltics. Not only is it not feasible to localize the conflict in such a manner given the modern character of war, it is equally unlikely that the other side would agree to such a match. Basic operational requirements, along with expected escalation into global domains like space and cyberspace, relegate this type of confined engagement between major powers to contrived wargames. Ironically, because of the considerable effort undertaken by NATO to reinforce deterrence in the region to deal with the prospect of a localized war, a conflagration in the Baltics is a low probability event relative to other contingencies.

In part due to this mismatch of expectations too much attention has been given to Russian area denial/anti-access capabilities, which do not represent a strategy or doctrine in the Russian armed forces (there is no Russian term to describe it). This creates a misperception that military technology lends itself to favor defensive strategies, which is certainly not the Russian interpretation. Russian strategic culture emphasizes deterrence by punishment and

preemptive attack as the preferable method to deny an adversary their objectives. A defensive strategy, or perhaps an offensive followed by area defense, is largely borne of Western mirror imaging. This makes for a great assessment of Egyptian military strategy in 1973, but it certainly is not representative of Russian military doctrine in 2020.

Instead, Russian forces are organized under a series of strategic operations, which are both offensive and defensive in nature, but intend to take the adversary apart as a system rather than engage in some sort of 'zonal defense.' Those familiar with the last several decades of US combat operations would recognize that A2/AD as a strategy against US airpower is not especially viable, which is why Russian literature on the subject clearly indicates that they consider defense to be cost prohibitive. Russian strategy can be summarized as consisting of operations to deflect and suppress aerospace attack, attrition high-value assets and conduct disorganizing strikes against C3 infrastructure.

Russian operational-level thinking has leaned more towards the offensive, dating back to concepts of deep-battle and the development of strategic operations. This has always been coupled with planning and preparation to absorb and deflect an adversary's offensive blow, so as to not be knocked out early on in the fight. Hence, far too much attention is paid in the West to the problem of getting forces into the theater, while not enough time is spent on the question of attrition in the initial period of warfare.

The common fixation on Russian defensive capabilities in Kaliningrad is equally unhelpful, as this represents a single army corps of Russian forces and does not reflect a theater-wide conflict (i.e. from Norway to Turkey). While NATO might prevail in a battle with 'Kaliningrad' (assuming the US led the fight), this is hardly a significant accomplishment. Focusing on Kaliningrad or the 'Suwalki corridor' is seeing the problem through a straw, while many of the proposed solutions can engender larger problems in theater.

A fixation on the potential for a territorial fait accompli, which have occurred so rarely between nuclear powers they're almost nonexistent, misses what truly matters. The reality, which hopefully will never come to pass, is that in a conflict both sides will be proven wrong in their assumptions and the one best able to adapt, with the better hedge strategy and flexibility, will come out ahead. Therefore building a force around a limited deterrence-by-denial concept against an adversary with a panoply of options and theater-wide reach is a dubious strategy. The problem with gearing force structure to a preferred scenario is that if any fight happens other than that particular fight you might end up in deep trouble. A limited fait accompli by Russian forces is far from the worst scenario facing European security, while the geographic fixation on the Baltics invariably comes at the price of ignoring much of the actual continental theater along with the security concerns of European partners who are not NATO members.

Thinking about escalation management and war termination

Dealing with Russia's escalation management strategy is no less important than solving for warfighting scenarios. The Russian military has developed a series of options, which could be considered forms of calibrated escalation, intended to deter within the conflict spiral or encourage restraint. These include deterrence by intimidation, the use of single or grouped strikes with conventional precision weapons, nuclear demonstration, and selective nuclear strikes in follow-on phases of conflict. Such operations are more significant during the threatened period of war leading up to conflict, and the initial stages of active combat.

Iran's crude 2019 strike against Saudi oil facilities provides a reasonable small-scale example of what such an operation might look like. The extent to which Moscow is confident that it can manage escalation will determine its willingness to take on risk in coercive gambits, various forms of indirect warfare, and military aggression. In general, NATO

needs a viable framework for escalation management and war termination, something Russian military thinkers have spent decades developing. Disappointingly, discussions on both sides of the Atlantic remain fixated on warfighting and deterrence of conflict, with little to say on the subject of escalation management or conflict termination. In a war between major nuclear powers victory is not possible without successful escalation management. In the absence of a viable escalation management strategy, the responding side is likely to be self-deterred from taking direct action, especially in cases with relatively low stakes.

Potential answers could include acquiring the capability to respond to such strikes in kind, investing in the ability to deflect or intercept limited strikes, and ensuring the survival of critical military and civilian infrastructure. Escalation management is less about having things and more about having a vision for how they can be used to shape adversary behavior in a manner different from warfighting. Without adequate investment, political leaders will hesitate to enter a conflict in which they are likely to incur immediate costs, without any viable defense or real prospect of retaliation. There are inherent risks in believing that force can be selectively applied to limit escalation, but they are not as great as embarking on a conflict with a peer nuclear power having no plan at all.

Beyond tactical considerations and technology fetishism

At the tactical level, system-on-system comparisons tend to be misleading. Analogous systems on both sides are integrated differently, and do not necessarily have the same missions. For example Russian Aerospace Forces integrate tactical aviation as a component of air defense. Meanwhile artillery is used to enable combined arms maneuver, or deny areas to advancing forces. The difference in performance between Western capabilities and Russian capabilities is not that important depending on the role and mission considered. Comparing systems one for one typically disguises the actual problems that need to be addressed. Does having a more capable vehicle matter if it fires ammunition that cannot penetrate adversary armor? Will buying heavier armor make a difference if it is unprotected from air attack? Would having 5th generation aircraft make a tremendous difference if your air force is likely to be destroyed on the ground in the opening minutes of the war?

Furthermore, most capability advantages sought contributes to warfighting, but not to deterrence. Russian discourse on correlation of forces and means does not elevate to the level of national political thought, i.e. for deterring Russia it doesn't matter if a European nation buys tactical system A over tactical system B. A new type of anti-tank missile, rifle, or piece of artillery may get individual services excited but it won't make a difference at the level of strategic deliberation.

However, certain capabilities are indeed seen as strategic, such as long-range strike systems, missile defenses, cruise missile-carrying naval platforms, tactical nuclear weapons and the like. This is because they affect escalation management strategy, the strategic vulnerability of Russian critical infrastructure, and the theater-wide potential for Russian strategic operations to succeed or fail. If the initial period of war is indeed decisive, then mobility and logistics are what matters, along with the key enabling capabilities that effectively address adversary advantages, but more importantly make an impact at the operational level. All of this means that some capabilities will matter much more than they should in terms what the adversary thinks about them, while most make little impact on the overall calculus. Much the same can be observed of Western reactions to a handful of Russian systems such as Iskander-M or S-400, which make an outsized impression.

A final note on territorial defense and various national total defense concepts - these make sense for small frontline nations, but often compete with prudent defense procurement elsewhere. In select cases where an isolated and/or sparsely-populated territory may be particularly vulnerable

the deployment of armed defense units makes sense, to demonstrate interests at stake and serve as a 'tripwire' force. However their military value against conventional threats is low. Recent conflicts, such as the Russia-Georgia War in August 2008, demonstrate that against large militaries these units are not especially meaningful. Reserves lacking mobility, firepower, and training add no value against heavily-equipped combined arms formations.

In general, a country that does not share a land border with Russia need not spend money establishing a force that is unlikely to contribute to their national defense or their role in a military coalition. As recent conflicts demonstrate, the contribution these forces make to deterrence in practice is minimal. One can admire the determination of frontline states to improve their own central deterrent as part of a porcupine strategy, but most others are better off investing their resources elsewhere. National defense units might prove useful in the event of an externally-sponsored insurgency, but only if they are established as auxiliary to the military and civil authorities.

Addressing the indirect warfare component of Russian strategy

There is nothing new about the indirect approach, which seeks to spread out confrontation to fronts where there is less resistance, forcing the adversary into a contest on numerous fronts. However, it is becoming apparent that in the twenty-first century, unlike previous bouts of competition between the US and USSR, certain forms of indirect warfare can involve vital interests that political systems value. Arguably, this was not the case during the Cold War. Various forms of political warfare proved relevant in targeting allies, partners, and third nations, but were largely a nuisance in terms of protagonists' vital interests. The US reaction to proven Russian meddling in the 2016 election reflects the changed potential for indirect approaches like political warfare, information warfare and offensive cyberwarfare in combination with the aforementioned dark arts. Its actual efficacy will continue to be debated, but the political reaction to the perception that adversaries are attempting to alter the political and social fabric of society is undeniable.

Though often treated separately from military contingencies, or the conventional military balance, in reality the intensity and degree of risk-taking via indirect means has increased the more militarily confident Russia becomes. The more credible Moscow's conventional and nuclear deterrent, the greater the expectation that it can deter any forceful retaliation. Hence the space for indirect approaches becomes more open, including deniable acts of war, as the military balance becomes more stable, i.e. both Russia and NATO grow confident that they can deter a military response.

The Russian strategy for indirect competition is based on weakening the political system and overt cost imposition. Overt meaning that Moscow wants it clearly known that it is the responsible party for the hostile acts in question. Whereas in Europe, Russia has three broad objectives: prevent collective decision-making, separate Europeans from the US and reduce the cohesion of Europe as a political entity. The reasons are straightforward: Russia is more powerful than any individual European country, and therefore prefers bilateral engagement. Europe as a political entity not only forces Russia to deal with a bloc of countries that together are far stronger economically, but it is expansionist as a bureaucratic system and trade regulatory framework. Hence the EU is the long-term competitor for the former Soviet space, which Moscow still clings to.

Crowning the list is the fact that Europe remains an American political project, and a part of the US grand strategy, which helps grant the US legitimacy and of course affords the potential for the projection of American military power on the European continent. Therefore, if Moscow can drive a wedge between Europe and Washington, it will try to do so (or capitalize on the many cleavages that already exist). Much can be said about centrifugal forces afflicting Europe,

together with nationalist sentiments. These are not the products of Russian machinations but Moscow rarely misses an opportunity to take advantage of them.

Getting beyond NATO worrying about NATO

Most notably, Russian indirect warfare is largely not about NATO, or the Alliance's decision-making. Undoubtedly, NATO officialdom believes that most Russian actions are about NATO, but this is a self-validating proposition. Of course, there are cases, as during the Cold War, in which Moscow seeks to influence European decision making to block US efforts in Europe. However, much of the NATO conversation is navel-gazing. NATO is incredibly difficult to destroy, because it is a sprawling bureaucracy and a political institution as much as it is an alliance. Certainly, indirect warfare will not get the job done easily, if it could then the Soviet Union would have accomplished this task during the ample 40 years it had to do so. Military confrontation is only likely to strengthen the alliance, and increase its membership - that's certainly been the track record for recent great power wars in Europe.

Although NATO has come to define European security (much to Russian chagrin), when the Russian leadership says 'NATO', they mean the US. Moscow never saw NATO as anything other than America's Warsaw Pact, a platform for the projection of US power in Europe. From Moscow's perspective all that is necessary is a small coalition of key states to permit the introduction and basing of US forces. Whether NATO collectively responds to aggression is immaterial as long as the US commits and is afforded the opportunity to do so by the necessary allies. Conversely, without the US, even if all of NATO responds its chances of success in the initial period of war are slim. Therefore much of the Russian effort is not aimed at NATO's destruction, but at neutralizing its utility for US purposes.

Despite the fixation on NATO in Russian official pronouncements, a handful of European countries are particularly significant to Russian aims. Moscow seeks to create asymmetric dependencies in bilateral relationships with states it sees as key nodes, comprising a hub-and-spoke system international politics. These European countries sit atop important nodes in the global economic or information infrastructure and the US needs them to be effective in any strategy of punishment or containment. Some are also critical to US logistics or the ability to project power in Europe. The Russian ambition is to neutralize them politically as tools or instruments in Washington's hands, taking away America's advantages.

The strategy behind Russia's indirect approach has ultimately been to weaken counterparts, making its own power relatively stronger, absent the ability to generate economic means at home. When the USSR pursued detente, it did so in the expectation of winning the global competition at a time when its economic and military resources were growing. Russia's economy is stagnant, while the military looks much better in relative parity (but cannot claim superiority). Therefore, the Russian leadership is concentrating on weakening adversaries in a sustained confrontation, or reducing their ability to engage in collective retaliation. Thus, indirect warfare in the twenty-first century shares some important characteristics with that of the medieval period, prior to the establishment of the nation state, or industrial-scale warfare. Forms of sustained raiding to coerce adversaries, weaken them economically, and destroy their internal political cohesion were commonplace strategies between the leading powers of the time and have returned via different means today, with the intention of coercing the other side to negotiate.

Just because strategy is impossible doesn't mean it's not necessary

Dealing with indirect competition requires focusing efforts on what is defensible, what can be deterred, and delineating what are tolerable acts of hostility. Defense is only possible via a conscious selection of where resources are best concentrated rather than perpetual handwringing

about the myriad of vulnerabilities that exist in any liberal society. As Frederick the Great said, 'he who defends everything defends nothing.' Therefore it is advantageous to ring fence vital processes, or set boundaries that constitute thresholds which can be communicated to the other side. It merits recognizing that much political warfare, indirect attacks via proxy forces, and similar efforts, comes to naught or results in blow back. These campaigns are difficult to control, frequently yield adverse consequences and reputational damage. For example the disastrous Wagner attack in Syria, the numerous fumbled attempts tied to GRU operatives across Europe from Macedonia to Catalonia, and the blowback from hacking campaigns during European elections. Riposte is a worthwhile stratagem based on counters, which may yield results over time.

Much of the indirect competition can be handled by a strategy based on intra-conflict deterrence, seeking to encourage restraint and prevent further escalation. In certain cases one cannot deter the adversary from pursuing their desired ends, but shape the means through punishment, dissuasion, and establishing mutually accepted rules. For example targeted assassination will always be a feature of indirect warfare, but the use of chemical weapons or radiological material as the means can and should be deterred. Similarly, demonstrating the capability and will to use offensive cyber capabilities either in retaliation, or preemptively, should give adversaries some pause about the potential costs they would pay relative to the gains sought.

Real strategy is about choices. Currently the US struggles to pursue a meaningful deterrent because it is engaged in an active pressure campaign, the objectives of which are unclear. Washington has chosen active pressure over deterrence in the overall confrontation, and prefers defense to deterrence in Europe. Notably deterrence remains a common place slogan for policies that are about anything except deterrence. Meanwhile, there is no strategy for dealing with Russia beyond sanctions, spending on military capability in Europe, and wishful thinking in Washington that a new Russian leader may capitulate to Western demands. The absence of any strategic thinking about how this ends, or how the confrontation can be managed to avoid steady escalation, is the main challenge to overcome in the West.

Consequently Moscow believes that there is no benefit to restraint, and perversely, that this campaign is working by virtue of the response it receives. Russian leaders assume that giving ground to Western demands would validate the active pressure campaign, and lead to further demands. Hence, they are reluctant to step back on anything, including strategic missteps or moribund positions that they might prefer to abandon. For deterrence to work, threats and punishments must come with the assurance that they are not part of an unconditional campaign to simply inflict pain regardless.

Thus far, the West has fired a significant percentage of its ammunition for no discernible coercive or deterrent effect on Moscow. To be sure sanctions have made an impact on Russia, and proved an important tool in managing alliance politics, but just because they do something does not mean that one cannot envision doing something smarter. This is publicly recognized by experts and politicians alike. For now the West is tethered to this campaign, despite self-evident diminishing returns. However, there may be a better way than simply hoping that something positive will happen, or making decisions one crisis at a time. Policy-making in response to the last crisis does not play to European strengths, and in the current American political environment yields unpredictable results. Even if a deliberate strategy is impossible, a good way forward would be to develop a strategic vision for the confrontation, and make iterative attempts at shaping Russian behavior.