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Enemy at the Gates

A Strategic Cultural Analysis of Russian Approaches to Conflict in the Information Domain

Nicholas H. Vidal

Abstract: When studying the strategic behavior of a foreign adversary, the act of mirror imaging one's own conceptual frames often risks producing inaccurate assessments. To avoid such outcomes, some scholars promote the study of strategic culture as a framework for generating more empathetic analyses of foreign state decision-making. This article maintains that strategic cultural approaches are particularly useful for conceptualizing contemporary Russian understandings of confrontation in the information domain. To this end, it is argued that while contemporary Russian thinkers view information as a crucial asset in their country's ongoing "struggle" with the West, Moscow's use of informational nonmilitary means remains ultimately a critical, albeit subordinate element of a broader multidomain coercive strategy.

Keywords: Russia, strategic culture, information confrontation, mirror imaging, information space

Introduction

During the past decade, Western scholarship on Russian strategic thought has proliferated. Overall, this conversation tends to be quite polarized; some commentators have hailed the Russian leadership's strategic ingenuity, while others have cast Russian behavior as "reckless," "anarchic," and overly "tactical," as well as organizationally prone to incompetence.¹ Although aspects of either argument may be reasonably defended, both positions reflect a broader inclination among Western commentators and policy makers toward

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occasionally hyperbolic and overly narrow assessments of Russian interests, ambitions, and capabilities.² In the context of near-peer strategic competition, this type of thinking may prove dangerous as it can impair decision-makers' cognitive agility and thus expose the broader security community to strategic surprise.³

Strategic misperception has long been a particular challenge for those seeking to better understand Russia's capabilities, intentions, and objectives in the information domain.⁴ Despite rich discourse within Russian military-scientific circles on the importance of "information space" (*informatsionnoe prostranstvo*) as an emergent arena of interstate competition, however, many Western observers elect to study Russian behavior using Western conceptual frameworks and standards of success rather than those used by Russian thinkers themselves. This poses a problem given that, as contemporary scholar of Russian strategic culture Dima Adamsky claims, "utilizing Western terms and concepts to define the Russian approach to warfare may result in inaccurate analysis of Russian *modus operandi*."⁵

Therefore, to better conceptualize the nuances of Russian thinkers' approach to operational art, it is necessary to study the constituent elements of the Russian security leadership's approach to strategic thinking. A potential means of doing so is through the study of their *strategic culture*, broadly defined as the beliefs, interests, and operational preferences replicated and reinforced by members of a strategic community, as shaped by both ideational and material factors such as collective historical experience, political culture, cognitive style, and geography.⁶ By building a deeper and more contextualized appreciation of these factors, analysts may reach more sympathetic understandings of why elites socialized within different strategic communities may make different decisions when presented with similar challenges.⁷ Applied to the study of Russia, strategic culture offers a lens through which to better understand Russian strategic behavior, as well as identify patterns in the style of thinking, planning, and operating historically characteristic of Moscow's political and military elite.⁸

This article aims to draw from this school of inquiry to develop a more contextualized and *explicative* understanding of contemporary Russian approaches to confrontation in the information domain, namely by isolating the key *cognitive*, *perceptual*, and *behavioral* tendencies animating the Russian strategic tradition. To this end, it is argued that Russian strategic culture has historically been defined by its members' holistic understanding of war and strategy, pervasive sense of geopolitical vulnerability relative to identified adversaries, and preference for indirect counterresponses blending conventional military means with methods of moral-psychological subversion to achieve strategic objectives. The contemporary Russian strategic community's approach to the informational dimension of modern conflict is likewise informed by similar guiding principles, seen through its holistic understanding of information as a tool and resource of statecraft, its acknowledgment of Russia's unique vulnerability to information attacks from the West, and its tendency to promote indirect strategies inte-

grating moral-psychological “nonmilitary means” together with conventional “military means” in support of a broader, multidomain counterresponse.

Moreover, it is argued that the study of Russian strategy in the information domain cannot be abstracted from the larger study of Russian strategy across all dimensions of confrontation (i.e., economic, diplomatic, political, informational, and military). As such, any effort to narrowly study Russia’s approach to cyberwarfare or without considering how Russian thinkers conceptualize the evolving character of contemporary conflict risks producing an incomplete picture of Russian operational art. Given that Moscow has historically placed emphasis on understanding the culture, actions, strategic lexicons, and cognitive processes of its adversaries, it is thus imperative that Western analyses adopt a similar approach in return. In other words, the West must study Russia as Russia studies its adversaries.

The remainder of this article will proceed as follows: the first part provides an overview of strategic culture and introduces an analytical framework on which this thesis will be based. Next, the article applies this framework to the case of Russia, identifying the key elements characterizing the cognitive frames, threat perceptions, and strategic preferences of its dominant strategic community. Finally, the article will apply findings from sections one and two to demonstrate how Russia’s approach to “information confrontation” (*informatsionnoye protivoborstvo*) reflects its dominant strategic culture’s holism, siege mentality, and preference for indirect and combinatory counterresponses, while highlighting that these understandings must ultimately be situated within a broader picture of Russia’s approach to operational art as a whole.

Overview of Strategic Culture

First conceptualized by Rand analyst Jack L. Snyder in the late 1970s, strategic culture emerged initially as a by-product of Cold War Kremlinology. Arguing against the rationalist-deterministic thinking that then dominated postwar U.S. nuclear policy making, Snyder argued that such theories often failed to explain Soviet nuclear brinkmanship and that, more broadly, applying Western cognitive frames to model Soviet attitudes toward nuclear conflict represented a form of “mirror-imaging” that was bound to produce incomplete assessments.⁹ Instead, Snyder argues that to achieve a more contextually rich understanding of Soviet policy, one must properly conceptualize Soviet decision-makers’ *strategic culture*, a term he defines as “the sum total of ideas, conditional emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other.”¹⁰

It is important to note, however, given every strategic community draws on a unique historical experience and set of cognitive frames, that strategic culture represents more of a methodological practice for producing sui generis findings relevant to a given community than it does a unified theoretical approach.¹¹ As such, attempts to overcome these limitations have spawned debate among schol-

ars regarding the conceptual limits of the strategic cultural method, resulting in several still-unresolved intellectual disagreements between prominent scholars in the field.¹² Much of this debate revolves around differing perspectives concerning the circumstances under which strategic culture is best operationalized as well as the presumed relationship between strategic culture, strategic thought (as expressed through official doctrine and national discourse), and strategic behavior (actions pursued by members of a given strategic community).

While it is beyond the scope of this article to resolve all existing points of debate within the field, it remains the contention of this author that single-case, strategic culture-driven analyses represent a useful method for contextualizing otherwise outwardly incongruous or seemingly astrategic state behavior. To this end, this article supports Alan Bloomfield's *interpretivist* model of strategic culture whereby culture is regarded not as an intervening variable that determines behavior but instead as a set of cognitive shortcuts or "schemas" that enable actors to construct "strategies of action" based on "culturally available ways of organizing collective behavior."¹³

Applying this model to the study of Russia, however, it is important to note that the Russian strategic tradition is not monolithic, but instead reflects the impact of various philosophical influences that have evolved over time as shifting ideological sensibilities and new prevailing circumstances have discredited or elevated certain ideas. Snyder acknowledges this phenomenon and highlights the importance of *strategic subcultures*, defined as "subsections of [a] broader strategic community with reasonably distinct beliefs and attitudes on strategic issues." Subcultures have at times been clearly observable in the Russian context, particularly in the interplay between competing power ministries and state security agencies, each of which has historically possessed a unique institutional culture and set of bureaucratic interests.¹⁵ In the contemporary context, many have noted similar dynamics at play through apparent quarrels between the Ministry of Defence and General Staff and, more recently, between the leaders of both institutions and Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin.¹⁶

Still, scholars often emphasize the degree of consistency present across the wider Russian strategic tradition, through tsarist, Soviet, postrevolutionary exile, and contemporary thought.¹⁷ This is not always clear in contemporary appraisals of Russian president Vladimir Putin, many of which prioritize the impact of his personal idiosyncrasies on Russia's strategic decision-making, emphasizing his regime's highly centralized and personalistic nature, as well as its close historical and institutional ties to the Soviet military-intelligence apparatus.¹⁸ Although it is important to appreciate such factors, as well as acknowledge the impact that individual misperceptions and cognitive biases can have on strategic behavior, it is also critical to note the extent to which Putin's Russia reflects a broader arc of continuity within the Russian strategic tradition.¹⁹ While the aim of this article is not to demonstrate this claim outright, it is worth noting the consensus among various scholars regarding the idea that strategic cultures represent the "property of collectivities rather than simply of the individuals

that constitute them.”²⁰ As such, this article supports the idea that “the Kremlin is better understood as a symptom of Russian strategic culture than simply acting at the behest of a charismatic leader” and that “Putin is more a product of Russia than Russia is a product of Putin.”²¹

Analytical Framework

This study thus prioritizes examination of those aspects of Russian strategic culture that have deep historical roots to demonstrate that not only does the current iteration of Russian strategic culture closely resemble its earlier manifestations, but also that such factors may provide valuable insights for those seeking to understand contemporary Russian doctrine and strategic behavior. To frame this analysis, this article relies on a methodological framework first deployed by one of strategic culture’s chief proponents in recent years—Alastair Iain Johnston. According to Johnston, a strategic culture’s “central paradigm” consists of its members’ general assumptions regarding the “orderliness of the strategic environment,” including:

- a. The role of war in human affairs (i.e., war as an aberration versus an inevitability);
- b. The nature of the threat posed by key adversaries (i.e., zero-sum versus variable sum); and
- c. The efficacy of the use of force in shaping strategic outcomes.²²

This concept is adapted in the following to isolate Russian strategic culture’s key *cognitive*, *perceptual*, and *behavioral* tendencies. Whereas Johnston proposes that his central paradigm framework be deployed to model a state’s strategic preferences to predict their future behavior, this article holds that it is more useful to regard the constituent elements of the central paradigm as complementary objects of focus, conceptualized according to an alternative taxonomy. The following components are thus suggested as constituting the key facets of which strategic culture is composed:

1. **Cognitive:** The community’s cognitive style in relation to its understanding of war and strategy (i.e., holistic versus atomistic)
2. **Perceptual:** The community’s overall threat perception (i.e., continuous versus intermittent)
3. **Behavioral:** The community’s preferred tactical modalities when using force to shape strategic outcomes (i.e., brute force strategies versus indirect confrontation)

As such, it is argued that Russian strategic culture can be broadly defined by its *holistic* cognitive style, its tendency toward a continuous and *vulnerability-centric* threat perception, and preference for *indirect* tactical modalities emphasizing the integration of moral-psychological pressure with conventional measures to achieve desired strategic outcomes. The final two sections will serve two purposes: the first will first lay out the foundations of Russian strategic

culture according to the above-mentioned principles; after this, the final section will then apply these findings to build a more *explicative* understanding of Russian approaches to conflict in the information domain.

Dominant Features of the Russian Strategic Tradition **Holistic Approach to War and Strategy**

When seeking to define the contours of the Russian strategic tradition, a fundamental starting point is from the perspective of cognitive disposition. Cultural psychologists tend to describe Russia as a “high-context” society, defined by its members’ inclination toward relational and collectivist thinking and their tendency to seek contextual understandings of worldly phenomena and view the subcomponents of complex concepts as being fundamentally interconnected and interdependent elements within a systemic whole.²³ Critical to the aims of this study, Russian culture’s generally holistic cognitive style bears implications for how its strategic community has historically understood war and the development of strategic art, as seen through its general preference for dialecticism, its rejection of universalism, and regard for war as a natural phenomenon in human affairs.

Understanding the Russian holistic approach (*sistemniy/kompleksniy podhod*) is particularly crucial from a cross-cultural perspective given how it differs from traditional Western European and American modes of cognition. By contrast, individuals in the West often exhibit more “atomistic” cognitive styles, defined by a lower degree of situational awareness and a tendency to eschew systems-oriented thinking in favor of simple heuristic frameworks that “focus on particular objects in isolation from their context,” rather than as “interconnected and interdependent elements of a definite integral formation” or system.²⁴ Translated to the realm of strategy, scholars have argued that such thinking is responsible for many of the cognitive biases common in the Western European and American strategic milieu. These include: a tendency toward highly personalized understandings of political affairs; ethnocentric and often universalized notions of rationality in international relations; a preference for linear and highly path-dependent planning models; and an overemphasis on technological superiority as a key determinant of victory in conflict, among others.²⁵

These tendencies contrast starkly with the Russian strategic tradition that, as Adamsky argues, though more theoretical and less process-oriented than its Western analogues, is characterized by an overarching holism, thus affording its theories a greater degree of conceptual depth and flexibility.²⁶ For instance, instead of relying on paired opposites, Russian thinkers have historically tended to prefer the dialectical approach, a method of arriving at greater philosophical truth, or synthesis, through the reconciliation of opposing viewpoints.²⁷ Dialecticism represents a common tool deployed not only by the Russian artistic and philosophical communities, but also in the realm of scientific inquiry, an area which Russian intellectual circles characterize as fundamentally multidisciplinary and thus suited to synthetic models.²⁸

These philosophical undertones have likewise shaped the development of military science as a field of study within the Russian strategic tradition. For instance, Genrikh A. Leer, a theoretician of the Russian Imperial school, describes the formulation of military strategy as an “art [which], like any art, is based on unchanging laws whose application varies depending on a constantly changing environment.”²⁹ Leer’s analysis, however, emphasizes the flexibility of such laws, which he describes as “general formulas” that “should be adjusted each time according to the situation (*time and occasion*),” distinct from “so-called *rules*” that “apply equally in every situation,” as has traditionally been a more common practice in the Western scientific tradition.

As Ofer Fridman argues, this aversion to universal approaches to strategy, though particularly characteristic of tsarist-era thinkers, is pervasive throughout the Russian strategic tradition.³¹ Numerous authors advocate similar approaches to crafting military strategy, such as Baron Nikolai von Medem, who argues that great commanders have been those who base their actions not on “pre-existing rules, but on a skillful combination of all means and circumstances.”³² These tendencies reflect a common preference for strategy making that prioritizes the conditions of the “prevailing situation,” emphasizing the importance of a commander’s “resourcefulness,” often expressed through Leer’s concept of *glazomer*, defined as “a continuous accurate assessment of the situation, time, conditions and space required to achieve one or more combinations.”³³ Later studies of Soviet strategy would similarly characterize Red Army planners as emphasizing economy of both time and resources to “define a specific problem and apply from what was available, the resources to solve it.”³⁴ This is perhaps best summarized in Soviet general Aleksandr A. Svechin’s oft-quoted adage that “for every war, one must develop a special line of strategic behavior” since “each war represents a special case requiring the application of a special logic, and not the application of some template.”³⁵

Last, Russian strategic thinkers are generally considered “good Clausewitzians,” insofar as they tend to acknowledge, as John J. Dziak writes of Soviet planners, that “warfare and its associated doctrine and strategy constitute supremely political acts undertaken for political purposes.”³⁶ As Fridman argues, however, philosophical disagreement persists regarding the extent to which war as a phenomenon remains wholly unavoidable; nonetheless, Russian strategic thinkers are generally united in their tendency to regard war as “an inherent part of human existence” and “a phenomenon embedded in the meaningful whole of society” and not as “an isolated event.”³⁷ Likewise, given their inclination toward viewing military power as an instrument of policy, Russian strategists tend to view its accumulation not as an “unwanted but necessary burden” but rather “a state objective which subordinates the needs of society to its furtherance.”³⁸ As will be explored in later sections, this holistic understanding of war permeates the Russian strategic tradition, reflected not only in its members’ tendency to view geopolitical threats as integrated and continuous, but also in their preference for indirect and combinatory strategic countermeasures.

Siege Mentality:

Defense-Offense Balance in Russian Threat Perception

Russian strategic discourse has also long been characterized by a deep sense of geopolitical vulnerability, a tendency that has persisted across much of the country's history. This culture of perceived insecurity stems from observable causal factors and bears implications for how the Russian strategic community has historically framed the threats it faces and the strategic options available given its geopolitical position. More specifically, while this sense of "siege mentality" has tended to foster a prevailing defensiveness given Russia's relative material weakness and holistic understandings of war as a natural phenomenon, these factors have also served to incentivize Russian strategists' use of force as a form of "defensive counterattack" to achieve political objectives and preempt further perceived encirclement.³⁹

From the perspective of causality, Moscow's siege mentality can largely be seen as a product of the geopolitical realities facing the Russian state, namely its absence of defensible borders and vast territorial size. Such factors have been at least partially responsible for conditions of near "constant warfare" that have long characterized Russian history.⁴⁰ Given the challenges of maintaining control over such a large and multiethnic territory, periods of acute struggle have often culminated in either invasion and occupation by foreign powers or in periods of uncontrolled internal instability and, in some cases, even state collapse. This experience has fostered a deep sense of besiegement, reflected in Russian thinkers' conceptualization of their country's history as "the history of defence, struggle, and sacrifice: from the first attacks of the nomads on Kiev in 1037 until today."⁴¹

Given the traumatic collective experience of repeated foreign invasion and state collapse, Russian narratives tend to position Moscow as an embattled victim, permanently subject to the "aggressive imperial desires of neighboring states."⁴² Such fears have at certain periods become existential, reflected in the comments of former tsarist and later Soviet general Aleksey A. Brusilov, who, writing during the Russian Civil War, urges his fellow countrymen to enlist in the Red Army so as to "not allow Russia to be plundered since it might vanish forever."⁴³ Later into the Soviet period, the party leadership often projected an image of the Soviet Union as a "besieged fortress" subject to perpetual pressure from the forces of capital, aligning this perspective with Marxist notions of an "innate antagonism between capitalism and Socialism," which annulled any possibility of a "community of aims" between Moscow and the West.⁴⁴ Contemporary Russian discourse reflects a similar zero-sum outlook, albeit one absent the same ideological underpinnings. The 2015 *National Security Strategy* casts Russia as the subject of geopolitical encirclement by "hostile states"—the United States and its allies—which seek to disrupt and contain Russia's efforts to achieve great power status.⁴⁵ Amid rapid North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion and the outbreak of "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine in the early 2000s, this "enemy at the gates" narrative proliferated

among key political figures, many of whom attributed such developments to undue interference on the part of international actors with “Cold War phobia,” seeking to limit Russia’s ability to compete in the international arena.⁴⁶

Against this backdrop of uninterrupted geopolitical confrontation, the Russian strategic tradition has often emphasized the use or threat of military force as a means of exercising state power in pursuit of national objectives, as seen through the Russian Empire and Soviet Union’s “appetite for achieving security and status by expansion.”⁴⁷ Soviet military historian Andrei Kokoshin writes similarly regarding Red Army commanders’ overarching tendency toward “an offensive strategy,” which, as he argues, not only remained consistent throughout the majority of Soviet history but also “did not contradict pre-revolutionary Russian military traditions, which exclusively relied on offense.”⁴⁸ As Adamsky argues, however, Russian strategic culture has historically been defined by an indistinct boundary between offensive and defensive approaches, often viewing both as fundamentally interlinked.⁴⁹ This perception betrays a tendency to view strategic confrontation between states in the context of continual “struggle” (*bor’ba*), understood as a form of “uninterrupted, permanent engagement, with no division between peacetime and wartime.”⁵⁰ Such perceptions also blend with Moscow’s historically tempered awareness of its technological weaknesses relative to that of the United States and NATO, particularly given the latter’s vast long-range precision conventional and nuclear strike arsenal.⁵¹ As the following section will explore in greater detail, given Moscow’s historical appreciation of its strategic vulnerability relative to the West, Russian thinkers have thus tended to prefer low-intensity and combinatory counterresponses aimed at exploiting enemy weaknesses while reducing the risk of direct confrontation.

An Indirect Approach: Combinatory Tactics and Emphasis on Moral-Psychological Factors

Particularly following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, Western discourse on contemporary Russian strategy has at times highlighted Moscow’s use of nonmilitary measures as a novel aspect of the Kremlin’s evolving strategy.⁵² With closer inspection, however, so-called “indirect approaches” can be seen to have far deeper and more idiosyncratic roots in the Russian strategic tradition than is often acknowledged.⁵³ The following section will explore how Russian strategies of interstate competition have long featured this “unique compensatory approach” for overcoming more asymmetrically advanced adversaries, primarily through the artful combination of conventional countermeasures with those targeting an enemy’s moral, ideological, and psychological centers of gravity.⁵⁴

While the term *asymmetric conflict* did not enter the mainstream Russian defense community’s lexicon until the late Soviet period, Russian military thinkers have long emphasized the importance of concepts such as strategic deception, operational ingenuity, and the art of playing to enemy weaknesses, often encapsulated in the concept of “military cunning” (*voyennaya khitrost*).⁵⁵

General Makhmud Gareev holds that tactics such as “deceit of the adversary and cunning stratagem” alongside “dissemination of disinformation” and “malice” (*kovarnye*) have been historically central aspects of the Russian military tradition.⁵⁶ These tendencies betray a preference among Russian strategists not for brute force strategies but rather ones based on “advantage, timing,” and “finding and exploiting enemy weaknesses.”⁵⁷

Drawing from the holistic foundations of the Russian strategic tradition, such approaches integrate the variables of time and situation in combination with a diverse range of strategic elements (moral, geographic, tactical, administrative, political, chance-based), neglecting distinctions between “military” and “nonmilitary” tools.⁵⁸ Medem establishes this notion as early as 1836, arguing against understandings of war that frame it as a strictly military affair, arguing that “any and all considerations should have the goal of weakening or destroying, by whatever means, the enemy’s forces and depriving him of the means to defend himself.”⁵⁹ While such viewpoints grew unpopular during the mid-Soviet period in favor of more restricted, violence-centric understandings of war, similar notions would again emerge nearly 150 years later in the writing of Boris Kanevsky and Pyotr Shabardin who argue that “war is not only an armed confrontation” and that “it implies other means of supporting armed struggle,” including “relatively independent and non-military forms of conflict: economic, diplomatic . . . scientific, technological, and ideological.”⁶⁰

Within this, a key component of the Russian approach is its prioritization of the human terrain of war, often encapsulated by the moral-psychological disposition of an army’s soldiers and a nation’s citizenry. This emphasis on war’s moral dimension is a recurrent theme across the contemporary, tsarist, Soviet, and postrevolutionary emigre communities. Examples include Leer, who highlights Napoléon Bonaparte’s claim that moral elements—not material factors—bear responsibility for “three-quarters of success in war,” though their impact is more difficult to measure and analyze theoretically.⁶¹ Similar thinking can be seen in Joseph Stalin’s concept of the “permanently operating factors” of war. Published in 1942, the concept presents the five key factors highlighted as being chiefly responsible for determining the course of a war, beginning with the “stability of the rear” and “morale of the troops,” alongside (but nonetheless ahead of) material factors such as the “quantity and quality of divisions” and “weapons that the army has”—factors that have traditionally defined Western assessments of military capability.⁶²

These notions are frequently expressed in the operational preferences of those acculturated within the Russo-Soviet tradition, as seen through the high level of effort invested by the Russian military and intelligence services on programs designed to exploit enemy moral-psychological weaknesses. Key examples include Soviet-era “active measures” (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*), a term dating to the 1920s, which has been used to encapsulate a range of subversive activities, including efforts to “influenc[e] the policies of another government” and “undermin[e] confidence in its leaders and institutions,” “disrupt relations

between other nations,” as well as “deceive [a] target . . . and to distort [that] target’s perception of reality.”⁶³ This practice of strategic deception would also permeate various other aspects of Soviet strategy, from its approach to nuclear signaling and arms control negotiations to its attempts to conceal the reality of economic conditions within the Soviet Union.⁶⁴

While active measures often represent the Western policy community’s primary historical analogue for understanding contemporary Russia’s use of subversion, such practices have deeper historical roots.⁶⁵ For instance, writing in 1899, tsarist general Evgeniy Martynov presents a template for engaging in political subversion, one of which he argues is predicated on “studying the enemy’s governmental structure, social life and the ruling classes of its people” to “find collaborators who are dissatisfied with the existing order,” a task which he argues “becomes especially easy when moral decay and the general pursuit of material wealth occupy the [target] society.”⁶⁶ As Fridman points out, however, emphasis on the psyche and “soul” of the soldier and of belligerent nations is perhaps most pronounced within the postrevolutionary Russian emigre community.⁶⁷ This can be seen in the works of Russian military thinkers in-exile such as Anton A. Kersnovski, who defines Russian military doctrine’s core facet as “the superiority of spirit over matter,” as well as Nikolai Golovin, who underscores the importance of the “spiritual element” in achieving victory in war.⁶⁸

Perhaps most striking and prescient are the accounts of Evgeny Messner. Writing in the late 1950s, Messner holds that while targeting the spirit of an enemy’s military and people has always been of significance in the course of war, present sociocultural conditions have made it so capturing “the soul of the enemy’s society has become the most important strategic objective.”⁶⁹ Messner elevates the moral-psychological battlefield to what he terms the “fourth domain of warfare,” arguing that the most important strategic objective in war involves “degrading the spirit of the enemy and saving your own spirit from degradation” since “nowadays it is easier to degrade a state than conquer it by arms.”⁷⁰ Linking such developments to not only the invention of nuclear weapons but also the erosion of traditional divisions between soldier and citizen amid the rise of mass popular national movements, Messner explains the devolution of international relations into four separate states: war, half-war, aggressive diplomacy, and diplomacy—each representing different intensity levels along the spectrum of “struggle,” a notion that must be incrementally understood given that “the line between war and peace has been erased.”⁷¹

To anyone familiar with modern strategic scholarship concerning Russia, these concepts will surely be familiar. As alluded to previously, however, appreciation for Russian thinkers’ focus on moral-psychological and other nonmilitary factors within this struggle should not be abstracted from their equally forceful emphasis on the conventional aspects of war. This argument is made passionately by Golovin, who claims that “the interconnectivity between the spiritual and the material sides . . . of war is so close that they are organically inseparable” and that, as such, the phenomenon of war can only be truly understood “through

synthesis (generalization) and not through contradiction.⁷² As such, it is precisely this holistic appreciation for *combinatory* tactical measures—in tandem with a vulnerability-driven threat perception—by which the Russian strategic tradition is largely defined and, as will be explored in later sections, through which its strategic community has formulated its present conceptualization of threats and opportunities in the information environment into a comprehensive strategic approach.

Russian Approaches to Conflict in the Information Environment

When viewed against the historical backdrop laid out in the prior section, Russia's recent deployment of moral-psychological and other nonmilitary measures in campaigns in Ukraine and elsewhere can be better understood in context—that is, not as a novel development but as the by-product of centuries of Russo-Soviet thinking on the nature and character of war. As this section aims to explore, the Russian strategic community's conceptualization of the role of information in war reflects many of the same core elements of Russian strategic culture previously discussed. This section will thus consist of three main subsections: the first subsection will explore the contemporary Russian strategic community's holistic approach to understanding the nature and function of information in the context of interstate struggle; the second subsection explores how this conceptualization informs Russian elites' perception of information threats, particularly within what they often frame as a state of continual geopolitical confrontation with the West; subsection three will then explore the role that information-centric coercive operations play in contemporary Russian grand strategy. To this end, it is argued that Russia's approach to competition in the cyber-information domain cannot be understood in a conceptual vacuum, but rather as part of a holistic, continuous, and multidomain strategy. As will be discussed, this strategy has taken on various expressions, both indigenously under the rubrics of new-generation war (NGW) and *gibridnaya voyna* as well as, outwardly, in a manner largely in line with Adamsky's cross-domain coercion model, within which information-centric coercive action plays a fundamental role.

Holistic Conceptualization of Information Security

While international interest in Russia's use of information as a tool of interstate confrontation has proliferated since 2014, experts have at times struggled to grasp the essence of Russian thinking.⁷³ This misalignment can be largely traced to key differences between how Western academics and their Russian counterparts tend to think about these issues. For instance, anglophone discourses concerning the strategic role of information tend to be cyber-centric and siloed, treating the defense and exploitation of computer networks as operationally distinct from confrontational activities in the physical and psychological domains.⁷⁴ This thinking promotes a partitioned understanding of cyber issues

(i.e., computer network-enabled threats) as conceptually separate from “other” issues such as disinformation and malign foreign influence campaigns.⁷⁵ By contrast, Russian thinking tends toward a more holistic view that sees “cyber-space” (*kiberprostranstvo*) as a subcomponent of “information space” (*informatcionnoe prostranstvo*), understood according to contemporary Russian doctrine as “the sphere of activity connected with the formation, creation, conversion, transfer, use, and storage of information” as well as its associated impact on “individual and social consciousness, the information infrastructure, and information itself.”⁷⁶

This integrated understanding of information as a commodity capable of weaponization against “both the mind and technical systems” is reflected in Russian discourse’s concept of “information security” (*informatcionnaya bezopasnost*), which consists of two subdomains.⁷⁷ The first is the cognitive-psychological sphere, centered around the defense of the cognitive resources of Russia’s armed forces and its domestic population, as well as the exploitation of those of its adversaries. This conception draws on aforementioned aspects of the Russian strategic tradition, emphasizing the role of propaganda, deception, denial, and disinformation as methods used to weaken a target’s morale and disrupt their decision-making processes in order to achieve desired strategic effects.⁷⁸

The second category concerns the digital-technological sphere, encompassing what generally falls under the rubric of “cybersecurity” (*kiberbezopasnost*) in the West. This area deals with the defense and exploitation of state and military technologies that rely upon networked connectivity for their proper functioning, including global positioning systems, reconnaissance strike capabilities, electronic warfare assets, and satellite technology, among other elements.⁷⁹ Rooted in military thinking from the late Soviet period on how Moscow might best combat Western precision strike technology and other forms of network-centric warfare, Russian theory conceptualizes digital-technological operations as those wherein information is used to disrupt “decision-making processes within [an adversary’s] system of systems,” namely by targeting an enemy’s command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) platforms through the use of electronic warfare or computer network operations.⁸⁰

While conceptually distinct, these two components are understood within Russian theory to be mutually constitutive and interdependent components of a collective whole, both enabling activities that target a common center of gravity: an enemy’s perception (*soznanie*).⁸¹ This emphasis on the management of an enemy’s perception is largely rooted in Soviet-era scholarship on “reflexive control” (*reflexivnoe upravlenie*), a theory of social control that posits that one actor may “transmit the reasons or bases for making decisions to another” through efforts to influence their “cognitive map” and “project a false picture of reality in a predictable way” to achieve desired ends.⁸² While applications of reflexive control in Russian discourse exist outside of military contexts, contemporary Russian thinkers highlight the theory’s usefulness as

an “intellectual method of information war” (*informatsionnaya voyna*), capable of disrupting “decision-making processes at the state level” through the “formation of certain information or the dissemination of disinformation” to exploit “a specific information resource”—whether digital-technical or cognitive-psychological.⁸³

This intellectual foundation forms the basis of the modern concept of “informational struggle” (*informatsionnaya bor’ba*)—a term frequently used interchangeably with “information war” and “information confrontation” (*informatsionnoe protivoborstvo*)—the key aim of which is the attainment of “informational superiority,” achieved through gradual degradation of an enemy’s technical and psychological “informational resources,” thereby creating favorable conditions for the achievement of strategic objectives by concealing one’s own capabilities and intentions and, in turn, degrading an enemy’s ability to compel or employ force.⁸⁴ As will be explored in later sections, this concept of “information struggle” plays a central role in shaping Moscow’s understanding of the informational threats it faces from its adversaries, as well as its formulation of effective strategic countermeasures.

Information (In)security:

Russian Threat Perception in the Information Domain

Russian elite discourses surrounding the nature of conflict in the informational domain also reflect aspects of Russian strategic culture’s prevailing siege mentality. These ideas are often rooted in the notion that since Russia is subject to constant informational subversion by its adversaries, its leadership is justified in pursuing similar courses of action as part of a defensive countermeasure. This subsection will chart the development of this perspective and discuss how this perceptive lens informs modern Russian conceptualizations of Moscow’s ideal strategic counterresponses.

The contemporary Russian strategic community’s understanding of the modern threat landscape cannot be fully appreciated without acknowledging the changes brought on by the technological and information revolutions that took place following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Particularly as networked technology expanded into various security-relevant domains, debate emerged within Moscow concerning the nature of the threat posed by “informatization” and the degree to which the adoption of new technologies might exacerbate preexisting threats to Russian sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political stability.⁸⁵ In national discourse, this discussion has centered around the issue of “information sovereignty” (*informatsionnaya suvernitet*), referring to a nation’s ability to safeguard its domestic information space from sources of undue foreign influence and manipulation.⁸⁶ Elite concerns within Russia regarding Moscow’s vulnerability to informational threats from abroad grew significantly in the late 2000s and early 2010s following the outbreak of color revolutions across Eastern Europe and the events of the Arab Spring, as Russian decision-makers witnessed governments fall to popular revolutions with the

help of social media and—according to various Russian sources—the support of Western clandestine services.⁸⁷

Against this backdrop, Russian experts worked to conceptualize observed transformations in the character of war brought on by advancements in modern information technology. These impressions were notably distilled within Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov's now-seminal 2013 article, which highlights that “the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, has exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness,” noting that states are now increasingly able to “achieve final success in conflict” through the “broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures,” thus “blurring the lines between peace and war.”⁸⁸ Russian thinkers often unambiguously attribute the use of such tactics to the United States, whom many accuse of leveraging a range of tools—including soft power, democratization efforts, the exploitation of humanitarian issues, aggressive diplomacy, clandestine operations, and other forms of “controlled chaos”—to achieve, among other presumed objectives, Russia's containment and gradual subversion and, more broadly, the continuation of American geopolitical primacy.⁸⁹

This perspective is in many ways a by-product of popular discourses and narrativizations concerning the factors deemed responsible for bringing about the fall of the Soviet Union. For instance, many Russian scholars suggest that Moscow's defeat in the Cold War did not occur exclusively due to internal factors, but as the result of a long-term, continual, “invisible and intangible” process of subversion conducted by Washington and waged primarily using a range of nonmilitary instruments.⁹⁰ As Fridman argues, this perspective at least partially explains the contemporary popularity of thinkers such as Evgeny Messner, given the similarities in the perspectives of those who witnessed the fall of the Russian Empire at the hand of Bolshevik subversion to those in Russia today who failed to halt the process of Western-led subversion that many Russians argue ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁹¹ As such, some Russian thinkers are concerned that the United States may seek a similar outcome—that is, the replacement of Russia's current regime with one more favorable to Western leadership through a process of gradual cultural and institutional subversion—ultimately allowing Washington to achieve its operational and strategic goals without employing kinetic force.⁹²

It is therefore possible to view such thinking as evidence of a tendency within the Russian tradition toward “mirror imaging,” whereby Russian thinkers filter their assessments of adversary capabilities through their own culture of thought, attributing enemy intentions according to their image of how Russian strategists would operate if they possessed similar capabilities.⁹³ In this context, the Kremlin's holistic conceptualization of how information is weaponized, alongside its assumptions regarding the uninterrupted character of an American-led information war against Russia, combine to inform the counter-

responses laid out by key members of its strategic community, as detailed in the following section.

New Generation Warfare, Gibrinaya Voyna, and the Current Russian Art of Strategy

While a range of concepts are featured in Western assessments of contemporary Russian strategy, many are nonetheless rooted in a Western “way of thinking and strategic understanding about the way to conduct warfare” and, as such, often prove unhelpful when applied to the study of Russian strategic art.⁹⁴ To avoid the analytical pitfalls implicit in such approaches, this subsection seeks to highlight the indigenous concepts promoted by various Russian strategic thinkers regarding how Moscow might respond to perceived threats of Western subversion and, specifically, how informational and nonmilitary countermeasures factor into this strategy. While this discussion has taken various shapes within Russian discourse, a large portion of thinkers tend to agree that contemporary Russian strategic interests are best served by the pursuit of indirect countermeasures, specifically those that integrate informational and other nonmilitary means with conventional military tactics to undermine enemy decision-making processes and thereby enable Russia to achieve strategic objectives while limiting its need to employ military force.

Practically speaking, this broader discussion has yielded two key operational concepts with differing, albeit reconcilable conceptualizations of Russia’s strategic options: the first being S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov’s new-generation war (*voyna novogo pokoleniya*) and the second being the Russian strategic community’s interpretation of the Western concept of “hybrid warfare,” transliterated into Russian as *gibrinaya voyna*. Differences aside, both concepts present analogous roadmaps of the asymmetric options available to Russia in the face of perceived Western subversion and underscore the importance of combination as a key feature of Russia’s indirect approach.

As the Russian security establishment wrestled with the threat posed by Western information technology-enabled warfighting capabilities and subversive nonmilitary tactics, Russian thinkers set to work formulating countermeasures tailored to the challenges posed by this new Western way of war. Perhaps the most widely influential of these is Chekinov and Bogdanov’s concept of a new-generation war.⁹⁵ This NGW framework represents the intellectual result of decades of Russian scholarship on the evolving character of contemporary war, influenced not only by Russian thought—namely Vladimir Slipchenko’s sixth generation warfare model—but also by various manifestations of Western strategic thinking, such as low-intensity conflict and network-centric warfare.⁹⁶

Within this context, the prevailing assumption underlying NGW rests in what Chekinov and Bogdanov highlight as the steadily increasing importance of “nonmilitary,” “asymmetric,” and “indirect” means of strategic competition over “conventional” military methods.⁹⁷ These ideas echo Gerasimov’s observation that “new information technologies” and strategies of “remote engage-

ment” have created conditions wherein “non-military options have to play a greater role in achieving political and strategic goals” and that such capabilities are even occasionally “superior to the power of weapons.”⁹⁸

Though their analysis of NGW is rooted largely in historical observations of U.S.-led operations, Chekinov and Bogdanov are chiefly concerned with highlighting how Russia might position itself to win in a near-peer conflict, despite possessing inferior technological capabilities.⁹⁹ The key to doing so, according to the authors, is to achieve “informational superiority” in the critical initial period of war. They argue that this is attainable through both digital-technological and cognitive-psychological means, either through use of “transformed EW and computer network operations” against C4ISR platforms and “communications systems of the enemy’s control bodies at all levels” or via “disinformation efforts” and “information and psychological warfare” aimed at “depress[ing] the opponent’s armed forces personnel and population morally and psychologically.”¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, both methods would be intended to support the achievement of the same goal—that is, to “neutralize adversary actions without resorting to weapons” and create a favorable setting for “the operations of the allies’ armed forces” to achieve strategic objectives in-theater.¹⁰¹

While NGW prioritizes the use of informational and “nonmilitary tools,” however, its defining elements are its emphasis on the combination of “nonmilitary techniques” with “military means” and its integration of the “full range of military, economic, political, diplomatic, and IT measures” alongside “effective psychological information activities” to achieve desired objectives.¹⁰² The authors emphasize, however, that while elements of informational struggle are necessary to set “the preconditions for achieving victory,” NGW is centered around creating ideal circumstances for the successful “employment of the armed forces” in-theater, thereby implicitly underscoring the critical role of military force in a successful NGW campaign.¹⁰³

This point reflects a distinction present within the wider Russian strategic discourse on the term *information war*, which, as Fridman points out, carries a different meaning in Russian military discourse than in political and academic circles.¹⁰⁴ Military conceptualizations tend to trend closer to Chekinov and Bogdanov’s NGW concept, framing informational nonmilitary measures as a supporting dimension of kinetic operations, deployed to “suppress the enemy’s will to resist” through means that do not involve “direct physical influence on the enemy’s personnel,” to achieve political objectives in a period of armed conflict.¹⁰⁵ This aligns with the notion upheld by Chekinov and Bogdanov, as well as other Russian thinkers from within the military establishment, that without the instrumental use of violence, periods of even acute interstate struggle cannot be considered a “war,” but rather a “political confrontation.”¹⁰⁶

By contrast, Russian political and academic circles adopt a broader definition, viewing information war as a form of confrontation between parties characterized by the use of various methods (political, economic, diplomatic, military, and other) to “interrupt the balance of power” and “achieve superiority

in the global informational dimension” by targeting “the decision-making processes of the adversary” through the manipulation of information streams.¹⁰⁷ As Fridman argues, this conceptualization includes both nonmilitary means (i.e., actions taken in the diplomatic, economic, political spheres to communicate and shape domestic and international perceptions) as well as military means—such as the indirect use of military force for the purposes of strategic communication or deterrence, rather than for realizing battlefield victories—to achieve political objectives without resorting to direct confrontation.¹⁰⁸

In large part, this definition closely reflects the Russian conceptualization of *gibridnaya voyna*, a by-product of the Russian strategic community’s varying interpretations of the Western concept of hybrid warfare. Russian understandings of the term differ from their Western counterparts in several occasionally contrasting ways; however, the majority are alike in that they tend to expand the concept beyond its originally strictly military focus into one more closely resembling political-academic definitions of information war, emphasizing “the creation of external controlling mechanisms,” and a “socio-political pseudo-reality in the media-space” aimed at “dismantl[ing] the socio-cultural fabric of a society,” and ultimately “leading to its internal collapse.”¹⁰⁹

In this way, the predominant Russian conceptualization of *gibridnaya voyna*—in tandem with the political-academic conceptualization of information war—represent a broader process that occurs not alongside armed conflict but instead of it.¹¹⁰ According to various Russian scholars, this type of sustained, subversive, and largely nonmilitary form of confrontation represents the primary method through which the West seeks to contain and undermine Russia—a strategy against which Moscow must be prepared to respond.¹¹¹ In later writings, Chekinov and Bogdanov echo similar observations regarding the nature of the West’s subversive tactics against Moscow and advocate that Russia, in turn, “take asymmetrical measures” that are “comprehensive” and “systematic,” combining “political, diplomatic, informational, economic, military” efforts, among others, as a means of indirectly countering a more powerful adversary coalition.¹¹²

Nevertheless, the authors critically emphasize that, although nonmilitary measures are “critical in the prevention of conflicts and wars” and have “a significant impact on the character of armed struggle,” achieving victory in NGW will still require Russia to maintain an effective and modernized military since “the main characteristic of war is defined by the use of armed forces [and] acts of violence.”¹¹³ This reflects a key distinction between NGW and *gibridnaya voyna*: the instrumental use of force. In other words, while *gibridnaya voyna* may, like information war, be carried out using noninstrumental military force—for instance, for signaling or deterrence purposes—Chekinov and Bogdanov argue that such actions are categorically “not war.”¹¹⁴

It also is apparent that while the concept of *gibridnaya voyna* has gained traction within the Russian political establishment, Russian military figures have instead tended to promote strategic planning and military moderniza-

tion efforts in NGW terms. Chekinov and Bogdanov lay out the answer for this quite clearly, stating that while preparing for NGW should be the responsibility of the armed forces, the nonmilitary measures implied by *gibridnaya voyna* are largely to be conducted by the civilian leadership.¹¹⁵ In this way, both NGW and *gibridnaya voyna* represent intertwined and mutually constitutive elements of a singular strategy rooted in combined civilian-military efforts across a variety of spheres of confrontation aimed at a common goal: the leveraging of various multidomain tools of informational influence to shape adversary decision-making and achieve strategic objectives while minimizing (though not eliminating entirely) the need to employ kinetic force.

Adamsky defines this combined approach, in its operationalized form, as “cross domain coercion,” rooting his analysis in the idea that Chekinov and Bogdanov’s NGW concept constitutes the primary dimension through which Russia views contemporary conflict.¹¹⁶ Through this, Adamsky abstracts the concept of “information struggle” beyond its NGW context as a tactical- and operational-level tool for battlefield preparation into what he claims represents the leitmotif of Russia’s broader, multidomain “strategy of coercion.”¹¹⁷ This strategy, Adamsky explains, is defined by an “uninterrupted” application of reflexive control and deception-based informational manipulation at the strategic level, alongside “nuclear signaling” and conventional “intra-war coercion” aimed at constructing an “immune maneuver space” by projecting an “image of unacceptable consequences” to “paralyze Western assertiveness and responsiveness,” thus allowing Russia to “impose [its] will, preferably with minimal violence.”¹¹⁸

In this sense, Adamsky’s framing of “information struggle” can be read as a stand-in for the political-academic framings of *gibridnaya voyna*, insofar as both represent “a strategy of influence” waged continuously at the strategic level that is “designed to manipulate the adversary’s picture of reality, misinform it, and eventually interfere with the decision-making process of individuals, organizations, governments, and societies to influence their consciousness.” Thus, while the violence-centric “military means” component of Adamsky’s cross-domain model has its core roots in NGW, his holistic conceptualization of information struggle as an uninterrupted set of unified interwar strategic communications and subversion efforts carried out at the strategic level appears to bear more in common with popular Russian understandings of *gibridnaya voyna* and political-academic definitions of information war than with the NGW model alone.¹¹⁹

As mentioned, however, the defining principle of information struggle—and cross-domain coercion more broadly—is its unified nature. Adamsky argues, that, for instance, through the nuclear component of Russian strategy represents an “inseparable part of Russian operational art,” he argues that it “cannot be analyzed as a stand-alone issue” and instead must be “understood only in the context of a holistic coercion campaign.”¹²⁰ In the same way, it must be emphasized that when seeking to understand Russian conceptualizations of

the strategic significance of informational and other nonmilitary means, these elements, too, should be understood as vital subcomponents of Russia's broader approach to operational art and not as singular lines of effort.

Conclusion

Among other aims, this article seeks to demonstrate the importance of considering context when conducting strategic analysis. In contemporary Western studies of Russia, contextual understandings have been occasionally lacking, thereby impeding efforts to decipher Moscow's at times deceptive and "ambiguous" strategic behavior.¹²¹ However, one need look no further than Snyder to appreciate the role context can play in resolving so-called "ambiguity problems" and in enabling the development of more thoroughly explicative understandings of adversary behavior, even amid shifting geopolitical circumstances.¹²²

As such, the field of strategic cultural studies presents itself as a helpful analytical toolkit suited to this process of contextualization—one that enables analysts to eschew one-size-fits-all and nontailored approaches in favor of those rooted in more sympathetic understandings of an adversary's cognitive processes, perceptions, and ritual behavior.¹²³ Moreover, it has been argued that Russia's use of information tools in the context of ongoing interstate competition does not represent a novel development, nor is it particularly useful to study such activities according to the Western concepts of hybrid warfare and cybersecurity. Instead, it is more helpful to view Moscow's behavior through the lens of its strategic community's intellectual tradition, which is rooted in centuries of Russo-Soviet military thinking on the nature and character of war, the threats Moscow faces, and the countermeasures deemed appropriate for addressing such threats.

It is thus maintained that contemporary Russian strategic culture represents a by-product of this long-developed tradition emphasizing holistic understandings of war and strategy, a predominantly siege mentality-driven perception of threat, and an overarching preference for indirect countermeasures combining both nonmilitary and military tools and tactics. Likewise, a deeper look into the Russian conceptualizations of information struggle reflects a similarly holistic outlook in which information is understood as both a resource and tool, representing not only an opportunity but also a source of vulnerability for Russia in its ongoing political struggle with the West. Against this cognitive and perceptual backdrop, contemporary Russian thinkers tend to promote indirect strategies for countering Western aggression and subversion, particularly those that combine nonmilitary informational tools with conventional military methods, to shape adversary decision-making and achieve strategic objectives while minimizing the use of force.

In this context, the Russian conceptualizations of NGW and *gibridnaya voyna* represent differing, albeit mutually constitutive frameworks through which to organize Russian strategic actions, effectively establishing a division of labor between the military and civilian elements of state power for the pursuit

of cross-domain coercive activities that leverage a range of diplomatic, political, economic, informational, nuclear, military, and other state resources to achieve defined national objectives without the need to resort to brute force strategies. Ultimately, however, while the informational element of this broader strategy is critical, both in the wartime context of NGW and in the continual, strategic model laid out by supporters of *gibridnaya voyna*, it must be understood in context—in other words, as an indispensable element of a larger strategic approach and not as a line of effort disconnected from this systemic framework. To reject this advice, as some Western analyses continue to do, whether by isolating analysis of Russian activity in the cyber domain from activities conducted through other means or attributing the success or failure of its overall program to the perceived effectiveness of individual operations, risks missing the forest through the trees and ultimately betrays a deeper unwillingness to “see the affair as a whole.”¹²⁴

There is evidence, however, that this trend may be changing. Part of this is rooted in evolving scholarly understandings of the dynamics and possibilities offered by the cyber-information domain; for instance, some researchers argue that network-enabled actions alone are unlikely to result in cyber war, given that such operations ultimately represent modern manifestations of age-old practices of sabotage, espionage, and subversion. Focusing on the element perhaps most relevant to Russian conceptualizations—subversion—others argue that subversive cyber-informational campaigns often consist of efforts to either manipulate, erode, or overthrow the government of a target polity but note that, conducted independently, such operations are likely only to achieve one of these aims effectively: erosion.¹²⁵

While it is beyond the scope of this article to speculate regarding the specific factors motivating the Kremlin’s decision to launch its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it is worth noting that in both the lead-up to invasion and throughout its campaign, Russia repeatedly demonstrated its capability and willingness to employ coercive measures across a broad spectrum of activities, engaging in economic warfare, aggressive diplomacy, dissemination of disinformation, and, since February 2022, full-scale kinetic military intervention. Not only does this highlight the fundamentally multifaceted nature of the present Russian approach, but it also suggests that the so-called “nonmilitary measures”—on which Moscow had largely relied in advance of their full-scale invasion—were ultimately deemed insufficient for achieving the government’s desired strategic objectives in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, amid the friction, operational challenges, and multidimensional geopolitical change brought on as a result of this still ongoing conflict, Russian military planners will likely continue to, as in the past, advance their learning processes, transform aspects of their doctrine, and conceptualize new theories of victory.¹²⁶ As this transformation process occurs, it will remain essential that scholars continue to invest further in the advancement and enrichment of the strategic cultural approach. Doing so will not only allow for more

enriched understandings of the evolving Russian *modus operandi* but also ensure that an analytical infrastructure exists that is capable of adapting to these changes, regardless of what uncertainties the future may hold.

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