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From the Editor

I am honored to serve as the guest editor for the fall 2023 edition of the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* (JAMS), dedicated to the topic of Russia, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and Ukraine.

Russia launched an unprovoked, full-scale invasion of Ukraine 18 months ago. In spite of the length of the conflict, the Kremlin has yet to achieve any of its objectives in this war, and the Russian Army is suffering damage that will take years to repair. With Western support, Ukrainian forces have liberated significant portions of Ukraine's territory, reversed many of Russia's gains, and have initiated counteroffensive operations. In spite of these advances, Ukraine still faces an existential requirement to liberate its people and territory. Russia's war has evolved through various stages, which are discussed in "Russia's War in Ukraine: Two Decisive Factors," by Gilbert W. Merckx. While the battlefield situation remains dynamic, this issue seeks to explore interim lessons learned.

Intent, capability, and the perception of intent and capability are shaping the trajectory of this war. Much of the current Western analytical debate revolves around these three dynamics, a holistic assessment of which is complicated by the Kremlin's deliberate efforts to manipulate Western decision-making.

Alex Hughes's article, "Plan Z: Reassessing Security-Based Accounts of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," explores the debate on the origins of the Russia's war against Ukraine. Hughes observes that realist scholars argue that Russia chose to invade Ukraine as a last resort to reverse Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration, while critics of this point of view contend that Ukrainian accession did not seriously threaten Russian security, and that Vladimir Putin launched the invasion in the hopes of achieving one or more non-security objectives. Hughes concludes that the available evidence is difficult to reconcile with a primarily security-seeking interpretation of the Russian government's war aims.

The Kremlin's goals in Ukraine have always included countering NATO. Despite Russia's anti-NATO rhetoric, their actions and force posture have demonstrated little serious concern about a conventional military threat from NATO.¹ Despite Western assumptions, Russian president Vladimir Putin has never been satisfied with the territorial gains he made in Ukraine in 2014 because territory alone was never his goal; full control over Ukraine was and remains his intent.² The Kremlin has tried to gain control over Ukraine for years:

first by trying to dominate Ukraine's politics in the 2000s and early 2010s; then by military intervention in 2014 and trying to force Ukraine into the manipulative peace frameworks for the following years. When these efforts failed, Putin launched a full-scale invasion in 2022, including a campaign to eradicate Ukrainian statehood—a maximalist goal the Kremlin has not abandoned as of September 2023 despite Russian military setbacks.

Ukraine is not the only country the Kremlin seeks to control. Russia's goal to subordinate Belarus militarily and politically remains unchanged. The Kremlin has not abandoned its attempts to regain control over Moldova either. Russian military setbacks in Ukraine slowed both efforts. However, if Russia solidifies its gains in Ukraine, the Kremlin will most certainly try to complete the absorption of Belarus and, over the long term, could try to integrate other territories that Russia illegally occupies, such as Transnistria.³

Anthony Roney II explores the question of Transnistria in his article, "The Devil's Advocate: An Argument for Moldova and Ukraine to Seize Transnistria." He outlines the policy suggestion for Moldova and Ukraine to bilaterally invade the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, otherwise known as Transnistria, to eliminate the risk of Russian influence and interference from posing a larger threat in the future for these states. Roney conveys the reasons, risks, and benefits for a joint invasion of Transnistria and gives strategic and tactical suggestions on how to accomplish this task.

Russia's war in Ukraine is shaping the requirements for U.S. global posture. The Kremlin's future ability to threaten NATO depends on Russia's gains or losses in Ukraine. Russia is weakened, but the Kremlin seeks to neutralize NATO and undermine the United States. The Kremlin is preparing Russian society for a long fight against the West and has expressed unambiguous intent to rebuild Russia's large-scale warfighting capability. The United States should not underestimate Russian capabilities in the long term.

If Russia is defeated in Ukraine, many of Russia's remaining sources of power will further decrease. If Russia retains its gains in Ukraine, the Kremlin will have a chance to reconstitute its forces, launch future attacks against Ukraine, and connect its military gains in Ukraine and Belarus. This would mean additional requirements for NATO and the United States, because in the event of future Russian aggression, the United States will have the same obligation to support its allies in Europe but will be forced to do so under worse conditions in this scenario.

Major Maxwell Stewart explores the issue of U.S. global posture in his article, "Revisiting the Global Posture Review: A New U.S. Approach to European Defense and NATO in a Post-Ukraine War World." Stewart argues for the United States to draw down its permanent presence in Europe to refocus on the Pacific while retaining NATO unity. He recommends a time line for a reduced U.S. force posture in Europe from the present to 2035 and an approach to maintaining strategic flexibility while assuring the NATO allies.

Russia's influence in what the Kremlin considers its core theater is also at

stake. In his article “The Russian Bloodletting Strategy in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: From Success to Hubris,” Spyridon N. Litsas explores the nature of Russian relations with one of its key partners—Armenia. Litsas argues that Russia implemented a “bait and bleed” strategy in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 to discipline Armenia for its pro-Western agenda. In addition, he discusses Turkey’s role as a supportive apparatus for Azerbaijan’s military efforts against Armenia, evaluating the connection established between Moscow and Ankara.⁴ According to Litsas, the Nagorno-Karabakh case marked a new manipulative Russian strategy to influence the balance of power in regions with geostrategic significance for the Kremlin.

Russia took advantage of two separate crises in 2020 to expand its influence over Armenia and Belarus. The Kremlin used the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War to reassert Russian influence in the Caucasus. Putin has strengthened Russia’s relations with Azerbaijan, expanded Russia’s military foothold in the region via its peacekeeping force, and expanded Russian influence over Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan.⁵ The Kremlin also used the protests against Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko in 2020 to expand Russian influence over Lukashenko along with the Russian military presence in Belarus in advance of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Russia’s war in Ukraine, however, limits the value the Kremlin can offer to its partners and the threats it can credibly make. Russia’s redeployment of peacekeeping elements from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine is likely straining the Kremlin’s ability to play a larger mediating role in that conflict. The Kremlin also remains unable to force Belarus to fully commit its forces to Russia’s war in Ukraine, despite monthslong efforts to do so and billions invested in controlling Lukashenko. If Russia loses in Ukraine, the military and economic leverage Russia can exert over its neighbors will decrease.

Russia’s ability to influence adversarial and partners’ perceptions remains a core capability. For years, the Kremlin has manipulated perceptions to advance its goals beyond the limits of its hard power.⁶ Russian information operations continue to profoundly shape Western perceptions about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, including assessments of the objectives and means.⁷

Two articles touch on the issue of the Kremlin’s information space. In his article, “Enemy at the Gates: A Strategic Cultural Analysis of Russian Approaches to Conflict in the Information Domain,” Nicholas H. Vidal explores strategic culture around the Russian approach to conflict in the information domain. Vidal lays out the key cognitive, perceptual, and behavioral pillars of Russia’s strategic culture to facilitate a better understanding of their behavior in the information domain. He concludes that contemporary Russian thinkers tend to view information holistically—that is, as both a tool to be leveraged and a resource to be protected—and thus as a critical asset in what they see as a state of fluid and continual geopolitical struggle with the West. Contemporary Russian thinkers argue that Moscow must respond asymmetrically, utilizing military and nonmilitary means to achieve its strategic objectives. In his article,

“Tackling Russian Gray Zone Approaches in the Post–Cold War Era,” Major Ryan Burkholder also examines the Kremlin’s use of the information space in the context of Russian gray zone approaches in the post–Cold War era. He concludes that Russia has adapted Soviet Cold War techniques for the digital and globalized age and integrates instruments of power against the United States by targeting seams within the culture, maintaining ambiguity, and controlling narratives. He argues that countering these tactics requires that the United States modify its mindset toward conflict and improve integration of its own instruments of power.

The Kremlin’s threats to the West aim to diminish Western support to Ukraine, but they do not match Russia’s conventional ability to escalate. Ukraine’s will to fight and Western support of Ukraine remain the centers of gravity in this war. If Ukraine and its partners persist, the Kremlin is unlikely to achieve any of its objectives in Ukraine. Instead, Putin is betting on outlasting the West’s will to support Ukraine. Russia, however, presently does not have the ability to carry out an effective conventional military operation against the West.

Nuclear blackmail remains a key Russian information effort aimed to deter Western support to Ukraine. For example, the Kremlin launched a major phase of its nuclear information operation in fall 2022 after Russian forces’ humiliating defeats in eastern and southern Ukraine. The Institute for the Study of War assessed the information operation was aimed specifically to deter the West from immediately reinforcing Ukraine’s counteroffensives by creating irrational fears that Putin might react to further Ukrainian battlefield successes with nuclear escalation.⁸

In her article, “Russia’s Nuclear Strategy: Changes or Continuities,” Arushi Singh explores the evolution of Russia’s nuclear strategy from the USSR through modern Russia. Singh assesses the reasons behind the changes in Russia’s nuclear strategy in the twenty-first century, the major factors that influence Russian nuclear strategy under Putin’s leadership, and evaluates the possible geopolitical implications of the current Russian nuclear strategy.

Disregard for ethical norms remains a central component of the Russian way of war in Ukraine and beyond. Brutality and deliberate attacks on civilians are but a part of the Kremlin’s efforts to offset the limitations in Russia’s military power and the lack of a value proposition to the people the Kremlin is trying to occupy.

In his article, “The Ethical Character of Russia’s Offensive Cyber Operations in Ukraine: Testing the Principle of Double Effect,” Ian A. Clark explores the ethics of Russia’s offensive cyber operations in Ukraine. Clark writes that Russia’s current invasion of Ukraine is not the first time that cyber weapons have been deployed for military purposes; however, it is likely the first example of cyber warfare tactics being deployed in a sustained and strategically significant manner in the context of conventional warfare. He argues that Russia’s

offensive cyber operations in Ukraine represent an unjust use of force and proposes ways to enhance the ethical character of cyber warfare in future conflicts.

Russia's war against Ukraine further spotlights the impact of economic coercion tools. Two articles touch on the economic dimension of warfare. In his article, "The Cold War Computer Arms Race," Bryan Leese looks back to the Cold War computer arms race. Leese notes that the Soviets bought and stole versus creating their own computer technology. He discusses how a U.S.-led coalition integrated economic, diplomatic, and information mechanisms, embargoing computer technology to disadvantage the Soviets. In the second such article, "Substitute to War: Questioning the Efficacy of Sanctions on Russia," Brent Lawniczak questions the efficacy of sanctions on Russia. He examines several critical concepts including the instrumental effectiveness of sanctions, the significance of state identity, the pitfalls of mirror imaging, and aspects of prospect theory as they relate to the effectiveness of sanctions.

Eighteen months of war have demonstrated that the Western sanctions and export controls are effective when aimed at an appropriate objective of diminishing Russian capability to sustain the war, instead of trying to change the Kremlin's inflexible intent. Russia's intent regarding Ukraine has remained the same for years, and sanctions are unlikely to change that. However, the Kremlin's capability is a variable, which Western sanctions can affect significantly.⁹ The Kremlin's ability to sustain its war directly depends on the Russian defense industrial complex's capacity to produce, restore, and maintain heavy weapon systems. Russia's defense industrial base remains dependent on access to Western technologies and markets despite efforts to achieve self-sufficiency. Putin's system of governance has been largely antithetical to genuine capability development and innovation. Sanctions have created shortages of specific component parts used in Russian weapon systems, forcing Russia to replace them with lower quality alternatives and invest in ways to circumvent sanctions; efforts, which, even when effective, still require time and resources.¹⁰ The West today has significant ability to deny Russia's military-industrial complex access to global markets if it chooses to.

The West overall continues to have a profound ability to shape the outcome of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Its collective resources dwarf Russia's, while the West's known capability obstacles remain surmountable.

Nataliya Bugayova
Institute for the Study of War

Endnotes

1. George Barros et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment," Institute for the Study of War, 14 February 2023.
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- Tracker by the Center for Preventive Action. “War in Ukraine,” Center for Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 10 August 2023.
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Russia's War in Ukraine

Two Decisive Factors

Gilbert W. Merkx, PhD

Abstract: The various stages of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and of Ukrainian responses, are analyzed in terms of two decisive factors: 1) force structures and 2) command and control. Both these factors are in turn conditioned by characteristics of the governing political regime and the evolution of that regime.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russian invasion, force structure, command and control

Military Invasions

Most wars begin with invasions. The success of an invasion is determined largely by the relative strength of the opposing armed forces and by the strategy and tactics employed by those forces.¹ The comparison of force structures (and the determinants of these forces) in the Ukraine war is one of the two focuses of this analysis. The second focus is the comparison of command and control (C2), which determine the strategy and tactics employed by both sides in the Ukraine war.

There is a considerable literature on the force differentials needed for an invasion, leading to the classic rule of thumb that a frontal assault requires a 3:1 force ratio to compensate for the higher casualties suffered by an attacking force.² This ratio was incorporated in the 1976 revision of the U.S. Army's *Operations*, Field Manual 100-5, supervised by General William E. DePuy, and in Soviet Army doctrine by Colonel A. A. Sidorenko.³ The corresponding rule of thumb for maintaining control of an occupied area is usually given as 20 troops per 1,000 civilians.⁴

The literature on command and control is even more extensive, as docu-

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mented in Martin van Creveld's magisterial *Command in War*, which distinguishes between command, control, and the C2 system, illustrated by case studies.⁵ A later Rand corporation study, *Command Concepts*, updates van Creveld's work and offers additional case studies.⁶ The authors of this study conclude that "the quality of a commander's ideas is a critical factor in the functioning of C2 systems."⁷

Van Creveld's incisive analysis recognizes the important technological advances in C2 systems, but draws similar conclusions, which, given their relevance to the Ukraine war, are worth quoting at length:

Attempting to generalize from the historical experience studied here, I suggest that there are five implications [for the organization of command systems]: (a) the need for decision thresholds to be fixed as far down the hierarchy as possible, and for freedom of action at the bottom of the military structure; (b) the need for an organization that will make such low-decisions possible by providing self-contained units at a fairly low level; (c) the need for a regular reporting and information-transmission system working both from the top down and from the bottom up; (d) the need for the active search for information by headquarters in order to supplement the information routinely sent to it by units under its command; and (e) the need to maintain an informal, as well as a formal, network of communications inside the network.⁸

Force structures and command and control are embedded in regimes and nation-states and will reflect the priorities of those regimes and the cultural norms of the society of the nation-state. Societies where freedom of expression is possible are more likely to have access to diverse information and to have more participation in decision-making. Conversely, limitations on freedom of expression tend to result in conformity and authoritarian decision-making. These qualities will also be infused into military institutions.⁹

Force structures and C2 may also be embedded in external alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the former Warsaw Pact. Ukraine was not a NATO member, despite its desire to join, and the Warsaw Pact was defunct. However, Ukraine's force structure and C2 were to benefit from substantial military assistance by NATO countries, whereas Russia's remaining allies, such as China, North Korea, Belarus, and Serbia, were to primarily provide moral support.

Russian Invasion Planning

Russian president Vladimir Putin had systematically consolidated his power by eliminating other forms of authority and all rivals, arriving at a one-man dictatorship. Fiona Hill and Angela Stent write that "after 23 years at the helm of the Russian state, there are no obvious checks on his power."¹⁰ Putin's successful

invasion of Crimea met little resistance at a time of political turmoil in Ukraine, and it proved enormously popular in Russia. His establishment of pro-Russian puppet zones in the Donbas region of Ukraine mimicked similar Russian enclaves in Georgia and Moldova.¹¹

Putin then began to promote his long-held rationale for restoring Russia as a world power presiding over a modern equivalent of the Soviet Union. Hill and Stent explain that “Putin and his cohort’s beliefs are still rooted in Soviet frames and beliefs, overlaid with a thick glaze of Russian imperialism.”¹² The key to this reconstituted system was to be the absorption of Ukraine into the Russian Federation, presumably to be followed by Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova, later the Asian “stans” of the former Soviet Union, and eventually the former European provinces and satellites of the Soviet Union.

Russian decision-making prior to the invasion almost entirely top down. Putin’s obsession with secrecy meant that consultations were limited to a small circle of trusted military advisors. Not even Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, was included in this group. He was informed of the invasion on 24 February, the day it took place. Russian field commanders on the ground in Belarus for military exercises had no idea that they would be leading an invasion. Publicly, Putin’s regime posed as nonbelligerent, even while it planned the invasion. As a result, neither the Russian people nor the Russian field commanders were expecting a war.

The obsession with secrecy came at a high cost: there was no opportunity for critiquing the invasion plan and no consideration of fallback strategies should something go wrong. Due to this lack of critique, “The plan itself, while theoretically plausible, compounded optimism bias in each of its stages. . . . There is no evidence in the Russian planning that anyone had asked what would happen if any of its key assumptions were wrong.”¹³

Among these mistaken assumptions were that: (1) a high-speed invasion would demoralize the Ukrainian military, (2) the Russian military would defeat the Ukrainian military on the battlefield, (3) the top Ukrainian leaders would be quickly captured and executed, (4) the vast majority of Ukrainians would either welcome the Russian invaders or remain passive, and (5) the large Russian intelligence network inside Ukraine would not be needed for military victory but only for post-victory pacification and control.¹⁴

Ironically, U.S. intelligence quickly learned of Russia’s planning and alerted not only the Ukrainians but also NATO allies. Some NATO allies were skeptical, but Ukraine, while publicly accepting Russia’s peaceful declarations, quickly ramped up its preparations for defense, while trying, with only partial success, to conceal them from Russian intelligence.¹⁵

Putin’s strategy relied on faulty intelligence given to him by the SVR, Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service. The SVR had an extensive network of pro-Russian sympathizers inside Ukraine, whose self-serving assessments proved to be worthless. Putin was advised that the Ukrainian government would provide

little resistance to a Russian invasion, that many Ukrainians would be apathetic or inactive, and that large numbers of collaborators would constitute cheering crowds to welcome Russian troops.¹⁶ All of this intelligence was inaccurate.

Russian intelligence was also wrong about the response of macroenvironmental actors to a Russian invasion of Ukraine. The successful Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 had not led to major interventions by other countries, and after 2014 Western Europe had grown increasingly dependent on flows of Russian natural gas. Russian intelligence predicted that European objections to an invasion of Ukraine would be pro forma rather than substantive.

Another major problem was that Putin had been misled about the state of readiness of the Russian military. On paper, the Russian force structure significantly outnumbered Ukrainian forces in every category. However, in an authoritarian system, reports of achieving targets are rewarded, while failure is punished. As a result, the information flows from the bottom up about force structure capabilities were exaggerated. Most Russian military units from platoons, companies, and battalions on up were severely undermanned.¹⁷ Moreover, like many authoritarian regimes, the Russian state had become such a vast kleptocracy that corruption was expected and tolerated. Military institutions were no exception, from the procurement system to senior commanders to ordinary soldiers, who sold weapons and fuel on local markets. As a result, the Russian force structure had been seriously weakened. As an example, many of the battalions doing exercises in Belarus were low not just on manpower but also on fuel when ordered to invade.¹⁸

The planning of the invasion was a symptom of the top-down C2 culture inherited from the old Soviet Union. Every one of van Creveld's five recommendations for effective command systems were violated. Another surprising element of Putin's invasion plan is that it violated the Sidorenko force requirements in Russian military field manuals. At the start of 2022, the Ukrainian military had 196,600 active-duty personnel, which, according to the 3:1 force ratio rule, would have required an invasion of 590,000 Russian personnel. Instead, the Russians planned an invasion with 190,000 personnel, actually smaller than the combined Ukrainian armed forces.¹⁹ Using the standard figure of 20 military occupiers per 1,000 inhabitants, the Russians would have needed an occupation army of 880,000 to pacify the 44 million Ukrainians, about the size of the entire military of the Russian Federation. The actual invasion force of 190,000 would have given them a ratio of only 4.5 per 1,000 Ukrainians.

Instead of massing force to achieve a breakthrough at one point, the Russians decided to attack on six different axes: from the Black Sea in the southeast; from Crimea in the south; from Donbas in the east; from Belgorod in the northeast (toward Kharkiv); from Kursk in the northeast (toward Kyiv); and from Gomel, Belarus, in the north (toward Kyiv). The Russians thought that they had planned an invasion of sufficient scale, speed, and pressure to cause a catastrophic breakdown of the Ukrainian state. The Russian emphasis on this shock and awe strategy simply assumed that it would be sufficient, an assump-

tion that was never questioned. The Russians also ignored the potential for breakdown in their command and control of an extremely complex invasion by a military with unprepared field officers and slow top-down decision-making.

Ukrainian Preparations

The Ukrainian context had been defined by several previous and very popular uprisings against political corruption, election rigging, and Russian domination, including the Revolution on Granite (1990), the Orange Revolution (2004), and the Revolution of Dignity (2014), also known as the Maidan Revolution. The Maidan Revolution was triggered by the decision of the pro-Russian then-president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, to withdraw from negotiations with the European Union in favor of closer ties to Putin's Russia. Prior to Maidan, Yanukovich's government had been systematically lowering missile and artillery troop strength. When the Maidan Revolution led to Yanukovich's ouster in February 2014, he fled to Russia. Putin responded within days by occupying Crimea and then annexing it on 18 March 2014. The new Ukrainian government was unable to prevent the occupation of Crimea, but when the Russians tried to install breakaway republics in the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces, the Ukrainian army successfully resisted the further expansion of these regimes in a series of hard-fought battles.²⁰

Two results of this political history stand out. First, there was considerable disenchantment with traditional Ukrainian politicians and parties. Second, there could be no doubt that the vast majority of Ukrainians did not want to be part of Putin's Russia, despite information to the opposite sent to the Kremlin by Russia's spies.

In May 2014, Petro Poroshenko was elected president of Ukraine. As one of the richest men in Ukraine, he was not a traditional politician. An outspoken proponent of closer ties to the West and the first president to speak Ukrainian as his mother tongue, Poroshenko faced daunting challenges, such as bolstering Ukrainian identity, improving a weak economy, defending the front lines in the Donbas region, and dealing with a church subservient to Moscow. His nationalist policies were summarized in a three-word slogan: "military, language, faith." With economic assistance from the European Union, Poroshenko was able to stabilize the economy. Broadcast media were required to use more hours of Ukrainian than Russian, many Russian place-names were replaced by Ukrainian ones, and dozens of Soviet-era monuments were removed. He established the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which was recognized as autonomous (from Moscow) by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.²¹ Most important, Poroshenko did his best to rebuild the capacity of the Ukrainian military.²²

In the latter part of Poroshenko's presidency, the pace of reform slowed, the Donbas war slowed economic recovery, and allegations of public corruption continued. In Poroshenko's effort to be reelected, he was decisively defeated by Volodymyr Zelensky, a television star who ran on an anticorruption platform

and promised to seek peace in the Donbas. Zelensky's government was mostly composed of a younger generation of technocrats uncompromised by previous political involvements.

The main problem that the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) faced was low pay in comparison to civilian sectors. As a result, there was a constant turnover of personnel, particularly of technicians and specialists, which meant that the Ministry of Defence had to spend large amounts to train new personnel. On the positive side, this meant that the military reserves and Ukrainian society had a large pool of military-trained people who could be mobilized in an emergency. At the start of the war, the size of Ukrainian reserves was 900,000, almost one-half the size of Russian reserves.²³

The Ukrainians also established elite units of special forces where turnover was less of an issue, including seven brigades of air assault forces, two regiments of special operations forces, and special units within the Main Intelligence Directorate, the Security Service, the National Guard, the State Border Service, and the Foreign Intelligence Service.²⁴ In January 2022, the Territorial Defense Force (TDF) was also established, but it was not fully equipped and trained when the invasion began a month later. By May 2022, the TDF had enrolled 180,000 volunteers and was playing an important role.²⁵

Artillery was another priority for the UAF. At the 2014 low point under Yanukovich, the UAF had only one missile brigade, two artillery brigades with howitzers, and three regiments with multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS). By February 2022, the UAF had 10 army artillery and missile brigades and one artillery regiment and an additional brigade and regiment as part of the navy.²⁶ When the Russians attacked that month, they had approximately a 2:1 artillery advantage (2,433 barrel artillery systems versus 1,176, and 3,547 MLRS versus 1,680), well below the 3:1 ratio of military doctrine.²⁷

Armor was a category of weapons in which the Russians did exceed the 3:1 ratio. Although Ukraine had added 500 main battle tanks to the UAF, the total number of tanks the UAF was able to deploy in February 2022 was 900, whereas the Russian Army fielded 2,800 and their Donbas proxies another 400. The Ukrainians were able to deploy significant numbers of anti-tank guided weapons, some imported, like Javelins, and some manufactured in Ukraine, like the Stugna-P. However, they faced significant shortages of ammunition.²⁸

Ukraine also devoted resources to expanding air defense systems, which included the deployment of modernized radar systems superior to those used by the Russians, anti-aircraft missile forces, and extensive deployment of man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS). Fighter airplanes were also part of the air defense system, which in February 2022 included about 50 older Mikoyan MiG-29s, 32 Sukhoi Su-27s, and some Sukhoi Su-24s and Sukhoi Su-25s, for a total of about 120 fixed-wing aircraft. Efforts were made to modernize these planes, and the air force was trained to deploy from major airports to subsidiary airfields in case of attack. Nonetheless, Ukrainian fighter jets were

outclassed by the 350 modern and better-equipped fast jets deployed by the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) for the Ukraine invasion.²⁹

The Ukrainian Navy was the weakest component of the defense forces. After the Crimean debacle of 2014, it focused on building the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance of its coastal defense, installing modernized radar systems and coastal artillery. The navy also commissioned the Neptune ground-to-sea missile system, which became operational shortly after the Russian invasion.³⁰

The Initial Phases of the Six Fronts of the Invasion

The Russian invasion began on 24 February 2022 on six axes. One of these fronts quickly proved a failure. The Russian Navy had planned to land two amphibious task forces of marine brigades in three large amphibious ships along the Kherson-Mykolaiv-Odesa axis to seize key intersections and choke points. This was to pave the way for a rapid advance of Russian ground forces to Odesa, leaving the entire coast under Russian control.³¹ However, the Ukrainian coastal defense defeated the initial Russian efforts at reconnaissance landings by special forces, sinking their boats and inflicting heavy casualties. The Russian Navy called off the landings. The navy's success on the first day of the invasion in capturing Snake Island south of Odesa also proved to be a failure, as it was within easy reach of Ukrainian artillery. After heavy losses of manpower and equipment, the Russians were eventually forced to evacuate.³²

The Russian spearhead north toward Kherson and Melitopol from Crimea was more successful. Russian jets took out the Ukrainian air defenses in this area. Both Kherson and Melitopol were captured with little resistance, and the larger city of Mariupol was largely encircled. At this point, the Russian advance slowed, with the Ukrainians successfully defending Mykolaiv, north of Kherson. To the east, the Ukrainian Azov Battalion fought a spirited resistance in Mariupol that inflicted heavy losses on Russian troops and tied them down for almost three months, before finally surrendering on 16 May.³³

The Ukrainians had expected that the main Russian attack would come from the Donbas in the east, and there was indeed a major Russian assault from that direction. After fierce fighting, the Russian forces made little progress against the Ukrainian defense line. However, they succeeded in making it impossible for the Ukrainians to transfer troops from this theater to other fronts where they were needed.

The primary Russian assaults came from the northeast and north. The Russian spearhead toward Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, came from Belgorod in the northeast and was led by the *6th Combined Arms Army* and the *1st Guards Tank Army*. This had been anticipated by the Ukraine Army, which had mobilized an artillery brigade, a heavily armed mechanized brigade that included a tank battalion and several artillery battalions, units of the National Guard and TDF, and several volunteer regiments. Although some Russian units, after taking heavy casualties, were able to fight their way into the outskirts

of Kharkiv, they were quickly surrounded and cut off. The Russian offensive stalled, and over the next six weeks the Ukrainians were able to push the Russian forces nearly back to the border. The Kremlin dismissed the two lieutenant generals in command of the Kharkiv front.³⁴

The most serious threat to Ukraine came from the two Russian spearheads toward Kyiv. Immediately north of Kyiv sits a large reservoir known as the Kyiv Sea that has a surface area of more than 900 square kilometers and is filled by rivers from Belarus. The Russians launched one assault group from Kursk toward Chernihiv and Sumy to the east of the Kyiv Sea, and one from Gomel, Belarus, toward Chernobyl to the west of the Kyiv Sea. The Ukrainians had placed their 1st Tank Brigade near Chernihiv, but they were taken by surprise by the Russian assault from Gomel.

In addition, Russian air forces struck the major Ukrainian airports and military airfields. Anticipating such attacks, the Ukrainian Air Force had emptied its hangars near Kyiv, moving its fighter plans to secondary airfields and hiding them under camouflage. Russian aircraft destroyed the empty hangars. The Ukrainians then photographed the damage from above, printed the images on sheets, and used these to cover new shelters for the airplanes they returned. This ruse deceived the Russians into concluding that the airports were still in rubble and debating whether the Ukrainians were using underground shelters.³⁵

Hostomel Airport on the edge of Kyiv was a particular target. The Russians planned to capture the airport with Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) and proceed to capture and execute the Ukrainian president and his entire cabinet, as well as to arrest all members of the Ukrainian parliament. To this end, after strafing Hostomel with attack helicopters, 20 VDV transport helicopters in two waves carrying 300 troops were dispatched. Two of the transport helicopters in the first wave were shot down by Ukrainian MANPADs. After landing, the VDV came under heavy artillery fire and then were eliminated by a Ukrainian counterattack with heavy armor.³⁶

The Ukrainians also acted swiftly to confront the Russian assault from Gomel, which was approaching the outskirts of Kyiv. They committed most of their available special forces and special units of other security units, called up all their reserve units, and mobilized the cadets and staff of their military academies into new battalions, supported by two brigades of artillery and one mechanized brigade. Even so, the Russians had a 12:1 troop advantage on the Gomel axis.³⁷ On 27 February, their advance units were able to capture the suburb of Bucha, just west of Kyiv. The Russian effort to enter Kyiv was repulsed, so Russian units then tried to encircle Kyiv. Bucha was retaken by Ukrainian forces on 3 March and fell again to the Russians on 12 March.

The 24 February Russian assault from Kursk toward Chernihiv and Sumy had been ordered to bypass Ukrainian combat units to speed their advance. The Ukrainian 1st Tank Brigade found itself encircled. However, the Russians, trying to advance through 200 km of dense woods, suffered heavily from ambushes and tactical assaults by the Ukrainian mechanized units and special forces of

the 1st Tank Brigade. The Russians reached Chernihiv on the third day of the invasion, but they were successfully repulsed when they tried to capture the city. They surrounded it and tried to press on toward Kyiv, but their advance stalled in the face of Ukrainian counterattacks and they were unable to continue. The Russian assault on Sumy, which began on the same day, was driven off with heavy losses. The Russians then encircled Sumy and pressed on toward Kyiv. This Russian spearhead was able to reach Brovary, an eastern suburb of Kyiv, on 9 March, where it was ambushed and stopped.³⁸

The Russian Air Force, which earlier had conducted long-range attacks, was now assigned to provide close cover for their ground forces. The Ukrainians were well equipped with MANPADS, however, and the loss of Russian aircraft was so high that Russian pilots began to refuse to fly support missions. The obsolescent Ukrainian fighter jets, which had suffered losses against Russian aircraft in the opening days of the invasion, became more effective in low-altitude attacks on Russian columns as Russian air coverage diminished.

As the Russian columns stopped moving, their losses multiplied. The Russian advance units that had reached the suburbs of Kyiv were short on fuel, ammunition, and manpower, but they were confident that these would soon arrive. They proceeded to terrorize the local population, perpetrating atrocities that were to attract international condemnation. The expected Russian reinforcements failed to arrive, and the advance Russian units were suddenly on the defensive. On 16 March, the Ukrainian government announced a counter-offensive in the Kyiv region, and by the end of March Russian ground forces were retreating north from the Bucha area and northeast from Brovary. By 2 April, the entire Kyiv Oblast was back in Ukrainian hands, including the area bordering Belarus.³⁹

Why did the initially successful Russian invasion from Gomel ultimately fail? Russian secrecy about the invasion had left the Russian ground forces in Belarus completely unprepared. They were informed of their roles in the invasion only 24 hours before it took place. As a result, they lacked ammunition, fuel, food, communications, and an understanding of their tactical roles. They were not anticipating heavy fighting. Old maps led them to congregate on just a few roads, causing traffic jams. They encountered entire towns that were not on their maps, requiring them to stop and ask civilians where they were. Residents reported the Russian positions, permitting Ukrainian artillery to target the Russians. The Ukrainian forces knew the territory well, giving them a huge tactical advantage, and they were able to assault the slow-moving Russian columns almost at will, causing panic, abandonment of equipment, and blockage of the roads.⁴⁰

The failure of the Russian attacks from the north was a classic case of an almost complete breakdown of command and control in terms of planning, intelligence, operations, and communications. It also reflected paralyzing weaknesses in the Russian force structure, including understaffed units, inappropriate equipment, lack of support infrastructure, and low troop morale.

First Stalemate

From early April through the end of August, the Russian-Ukrainian fronts were marked by a relative stalemate. Russian forces made gains in the south and east, but at a high price in casualties. A constant barrage of Russian artillery along the eastern front, accompanied by missile strikes on the Ukrainian interior, failed to dislodge the defenders. Russian forces then made a major effort to capture the twin cities of Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk facing each other on the Siverskyi Donetsk River, at high cost. Sievierodonetsk fell on 24 June and Lysychansk on 3 July. At that point all the Luhansk Oblast was in Russian hands, but the territorial gains were limited.

On the southern front, Russian forces were able to conclude their siege of Mariupol on 16 May when the Ukrainian defenders holding out at the Azov steelworks finally surrendered. On 25 June, the Ukrainians began to deploy newly supplied high-mobility artillery rocket systems (HIMARS) from the United States, along with wooden HIMARS decoys to deceive the Russians. Russia has claimed to have destroyed many of these HIMARS, but the Pentagon has repeatedly confirmed that the HIMARS were still operational. The HIMARS soon forced Russian artillery and command posts to move farther away from the front lines.⁴¹ On 22 July, Russia and Ukraine signed a United Nations/Turkey-sponsored agreement to resume grain shipments from the Black Sea.⁴² On 26 July, Russian forces captured the Vuhlehirsk power station on the approach to Bakhmut, but nine months later their siege of Bakhmut was still not fully successful.

Fighting continued along the entire front throughout the remainder of July and August, with minor Russian gains and Ukrainian counterattacks. The prevailing Western opinion was that the war had settled into a stalemate. On 13 August 2022, Lieutenant General Sir James Hockenhull, the departing head of the UK Strategic Command, was quoted by the BBC as saying, "Neither Russia nor Ukraine is likely to achieve any decisive military action in Ukraine this year."⁴³ The defense and security editor of *The Guardian*, Dan Sabbagh, wrote on 24 August that "the war is essentially deadlocked" and that "Ukraine has no means of effective conventional counterattack."⁴⁴ Such views were soon proven wrong.

The First Ukrainian Counteroffensive

Beginning on the 9 July, Ukrainian officials had been openly hinting about a coming counteroffensive in the Kherson region, although these comments were widely discounted. On 29 August, Ukrainian authorities announced that the Kherson counteroffensive had begun with a major assault near Kherson that broke through the Russian line of defense. In response, Russia began to transfer troops from the northeast toward Kherson. The Kherson offensive, while eventually successful, was really a feint to weaken Russian defenses against a larger Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region to the north.

On 6 September, Ukrainian troops attacked the Kharkiv front near the Rus-

sian border, and on 9 September Ukrainian mechanized units broke through. Russian resistance crumbled, and Ukrainian forces raced north and east. The cities of Kupiansk and Izium fell to the Ukrainians on 10 September. By the next day, the Russian forces north of Kharkiv had retreated over the border, leaving the Kharkiv Oblast under Ukrainian control.

Pressing on to the east, Ukrainian forces on 12 September crossed the Siverskyi Donets River, and on 13 September broke a Russian attempt to stop them at the Oskil River. On 1 October, the Ukrainians recaptured Lyman, a major railway hub, and took as prisoners an estimated 5,000 Russian troops trapped inside the city.

With Russian forces now rushing to the northeast front, on 2 October Ukraine launched its actual counteroffensive in the Kherson region. By 9 October, Ukrainian forces had retaken 1,170 square kilometers of territory, pressing on toward the Dnieper River and the city of Kherson. On 9 November, with Kherson surrounded on three sides by Ukrainian forces, Russia began to withdraw from Kherson across the Dnieper. On 11 November, Kherson was occupied by the Ukrainians.

Second Stalemate

The second period of stalemate dates from 12 November 2022 through the end of May 2023. During this period, Russia launched massive missile and drone attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure throughout the entire country, with a particular concentration on the electrical grid and railroad network. Ukrainian air defenses took out the majority of these attacks, but damage was still severe. Remarkably, the Ukrainians were able to restore power and railroad service repeatedly. By 9 April 2023, Ukraine was able to resume electricity exports to Western Europe.

Russian ground forces conducted a winter-spring offensive that cost them major losses, but it was largely unsuccessful. These included their sieges of Avdiivka (started on 21 February 2022), Huliaipole (5 March), Marinka (17 March), Bilohorivka (5 May), Bakhmut (1 August), Pervomaisk/Vodiane (15 August), and Vuhledar (24 January 2023), all of which were still being contested in May 2023. In Bakhmut, the most intense of these battles, recent estimates suggest that Russian forces suffered between 32,000 and 43,000 dead and 95,000 wounded, with Ukrainian losses at about 15–20 percent of that. The battle of Vuhledar, viewed by Ukrainians as an effort to divert attention from Bakhmut, also led to major Russian losses, including 130 units of equipment and 36 tanks. The fighting resulted in the almost complete destruction of the *72d (Tatar) Motorized Rifle Brigade* and the *155th Separate Marine Brigade*.⁴⁵

Consequences of the Second Stalemate

The second stalemate bought time for the NATO countries to rearm. It also allowed the process of NATO expansion to continue, with Finland admitted on 4 April 2023 to full membership and Sweden waiting in the wings. Their

abandonment of neutrality in response to Russian aggression was an ironic confirmation of the failure of Russian intelligence. With the exception of Russia's traditional allies Serbia and Belarus, all the former Soviet satellites and most of the newly independent former Soviet republics are fearful of being absorbed into the new Russian empire that Putin is promoting. These states have conspicuously avoided providing military support for Russia's invasion.⁴⁶

The stalemate has provided time for the Russians to learn from previous mistakes and to adapt their tactics to a situation in which Ukrainian defenders were inflicting disproportionate casualties on Russian attackers. Russian infantry are now assigned to four types of units: disposable, specialized, assault, and line infantry. Disposable infantry are used as cannon fodder to identify Ukrainian firing positions. These positions are then targeted by specialized units such as snipers, artillery spotters, or drone operators. If the Ukrainians withdraw or their position is deemed weak enough, then Russian assault units move in. Line infantry are used to hold ground and prepare defenses. Russian infantry now also use Orlan-10 drones to identify Ukrainian positions.⁴⁷

Russian electronic warfare has improved dramatically, with a focus on disrupting Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). As a result, Ukrainian forces are now losing about 10,000 UAVs per month. The speed of Russian artillery has been sharply accelerated through their use of drones, allowing artillery strikes within five minutes of target detection. The Russian Strelets system, using multiple feeds of information from ground-based sensors and spotters, although much slower, has greatly improved accuracy. As a result, artillery is currently Russia's most important tactical weapon system.⁴⁸

After heavy losses in frontal assaults, Russian tanks and other armor are now used primarily for artillery purposes rather than assaults.⁴⁹ Likewise, due to improved Ukrainian air defenses, the Russian Aerospace Forces are now used for launching missiles from across the border rather than direct assaults, with a considerable loss of accuracy.⁵⁰ In compensation, Russian air defenses also have improved, reducing the ability of Ukrainian fighters jets to attack. Russian engineers have been effective in designing and building defensive trenchworks, minefields, tank traps, and other obstacle belts.⁵¹

Russian command and control remain problematic. Communications between headquarters and forward command posts have been hardened and are more reliable, but brigade command posts remain 20 km behind front lines and only the battalion command posts are near the front. Commands downward from the battalion level tend to be sent by radio and are not encrypted. The entire system remains top-down oriented, with little communication across units at the brigade or battalion levels.⁵² The rigidity of this C2 system might not matter with a relatively stable front line, but it would be problematic if conditions change.

All the adaptations made by the Russian military during the second stalemate can be considered problematic if faced with a different set of tactical challenges, such as a Ukrainian breakthrough. Defensive barriers are useless

once bypassed. Ammunition supply networks could be cut off. Strelets systems would not be easily repositioned. Artillery and rocket launchers could be stranded. Antiquated tanks and armored vehicles could be repositioned but might not be a match for modern Western armor. Morale problems among ground forces could lead to panic. Lack of coordination among Russian units could prevent unified resistance. And, of course, the delays caused by centralized decision-making might lead to orders that are already bypassed by events.

Ukraine's officials have been outspoken in asking for more military equipment to upgrade their existing stocks and equip new forces. The fact sheets of the U.S. Department of Defense on security assistance to Ukraine, cited above, provide evidence of new weapons and equipment, although they may intentionally understate the extent of support. According to an article in *Forbes*, the Ukrainian Army is creating a dozen new brigades, including six mechanized brigades, an assault brigade, an air assault brigade, and several territorial brigades.⁵³ A Reuters article describes the Ministry of Internal Affairs as training eight "storm" brigades totaling 40,000 personnel for the counteroffensive, with names such as Border of Steel, Hurricane, Spartan, and Rage.⁵⁴

The usual estimates of Ukrainian military personnel cite a figure of about 200,000 active-duty military. In contrast, Ukrainian Minister of Defence Oleksii Reznikov was quoted in the *The Sunday Times* (London) as stating, "We have approximately 700,000 in the armed forces and when you add the national guard, police, border guard, we are around a million strong."⁵⁵

Determining the current strengths of the two militaries from public sources is difficult, given that most sources on the Russian military are outdated and do not take into account Russian losses, and given the silence about Ukrainian assets. However, substantial equipment losses led Russia to deploy T54 and T55 main battle tanks from the 1940s as early as 22 March 2023. On 30 May 2023, an independent Ukrainian source estimated Russian losses of military personnel at 220,000 of which 50,000 were killed.⁵⁶ By mid-August 2023, the official Ukrainian count of Russian losses had reached approximately 257,000 military personnel, 4,300 tanks, 8,400 armored combat vehicles, 5,200 artillery systems, 700 multiple rocket launch systems, 490 air defense systems, 315 fixed-wing airplanes, 316 helicopters, 4,300 tactical unmanned aircraft, and 7,650 vehicles and tankers.⁵⁷ Ukrainian losses are not available but are commonly estimated to be less than 20 percent of Russian losses. For example, the Dutch outlet Oryx reported that Ukraine had lost 558 tanks, about 14 percent of Russian tank losses. Oryx also reported that Ukraine had captured 545 Russian tanks.⁵⁸

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III said on 21 April 2023 that the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, an alliance of 54 nations working to assist Kyiv against Russia's invasion, had delivered more than 230 tanks and 1,550 armored vehicles.⁵⁹ By early July 2023, the Kiel Institute reported that 471 tanks had been delivered to Ukraine by NATO countries, with another 286 scheduled to arrive.⁶⁰ These included German-made Leopard 1A5, Leopard 2,

British-made FV4034 Challenger 2 tanks, and Swedish Stridsvagn 122 tanks, all far superior to Russian models. Abrams M1A1 tanks are being refurbished by the United States and will be delivered this fall. Ukraine now has more tanks than Russia.⁶¹ Ukraine can field as many as 2,000 main battle tanks, of which at least 500 are superior to Russian models.

The United States has delivered at least two U.S. Patriot missile defense batteries, eight advanced surface-to-air missile systems, more than 230 howitzers, 38 HIMAR systems with advanced rockets, more than 4,000 BGM-71 TOW missiles, 4,000 Zuni aircraft rockets, 7,000 Hydra-70 aircraft rockets, 109 Bradley Fighting Vehicles, 400 armored personnel carriers, and vast quantities of other equipment and munitions.⁶² NATO allies have delivered French CAESAR self-propelled howitzers, German Flakpanzer Gepard anti-aircraft tanks, Swedish Combat Vehicle 90 infantry fighting vehicles, Finnish 120 KRH 92 heavy mortars, and Swedish Bofors L/70 anti-aircraft guns. Training of Ukrainian troops by NATO militaries has been enlarged and accelerated. On 19 May 2023, President Joseph R. Biden announced that the United States had approved training Ukrainian pilots on General Dynamics F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter jets. A day later, the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Portugal announced plans to transfer F-16s to Ukraine.

Given that NATO countries have been providing Ukraine with new equipment and that the Russians have been drawing on their reserves of old equipment, the sizable Russian advantage in equipment at the start of the invasion has been considerably degraded. As mentioned, most sources conclude that Ukraine now has more main battle tanks than Russia. Both sides in the conflict have faced supply issues with ammunition, although the Russians have an advantage both in stores and production of munitions.

The present Ukrainian counteroffensive is the subject of considerable anxiety among Ukraine's allies, including the U.S. government. The headline of the lead story in the *New York Times* of 25 April 2023 sums up this anxiety: "Battle Looms, and for Kyiv, Immense Risks—'Everything Hinges' on Spring Offensive."⁶³ In part, this anxiety reflects the same pessimism among Western observers that preceded the initial Russian invasion of February 2022 and the first Ukrainian counteroffensive of September. The earlier pessimisms were based on an overestimation of Russian military capabilities. Whether that is also the case now is an open question.

Western overestimation of Russia's military is the counterpart of Russian overoptimism. The *New York Times* article cited above quotes a senior European official as observing that Russian minister of defense Sergei Shoigu in recent conversations "came across as supremely confident that Russia would eventually prevail."⁶⁴ Russian overoptimism has been fueled by inflated battle damage assessments. To give just one example of many, in June 2022, Lieutenant General Igor Konashenkov of the Russian Ministry of Defence reported that Russia had destroyed 207 Ukrainian aircraft, 132 helicopters, 2,043 artillery systems, and 3683 tanks and armored vehicles since the invasion began. However, at the start

of the war in February 2022, Ukraine had only 120 aircraft, 55 helicopters, 1,176 artillery systems, and 3,307 tanks and armored vehicles.⁶⁵

Counteroffensive Scenarios

By May 2023, Ukrainian forces were supporting various “shaping” operations to unsettle Russian strategy prior to the counteroffensive. These appear to have included a drone attack on the Kremlin on 3 May, a 22 May incursion into Russian Belgorod Oblast by two right-wing Russian partisan military units, a 24 May attack on the Russian intelligence ship *Ivan Khurs* by three sea drones, and various attacks on Russian command posts, ammunition stockpiles, and fuel depots. None of these attacks were decisive, but their intention was to embarrass the Kremlin, cause controversy, and undermine morale.⁶⁶

There are three scenarios for the coming Ukrainian counteroffensive. The highest value for Ukraine and the highest cost to Russia would be a breakthrough in the south from the Kherson region that resulted in the liberation of Crimea. To prevent this, the Russians have constructed formidable defenses and troop concentrations. The Dnieper estuary also would be difficult to cross under the best of circumstances. The Russian destruction of the Kakhovka dam on the Dnieper south of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which flooded Kherson, made that temporarily impossible. However, as retired UK vice air marshal Sean M. Bell observed on 8 June 2023, Russia blew the dam prematurely.⁶⁷ The flood waters receded, the Dnieper returned to its normal banks, and warm summer weather dried the ground. A Ukrainian assault across the Dnieper can no longer be threatened by destruction of the dam.

The second scenario would be a Ukrainian breakthrough in the Zaporizhzhia region in the center of the current front, which would split Russian ground forces in half and enable the Ukrainian Army to strike either north, or south, or both. The Ukrainian Army has been conducting probing attacks in this region and has made minor progress.

The third scenario would be a breakthrough farther north in the Donbas region, where battles are currently raging around Vuhledar and Bakhmut. This would permit Ukrainian forces to attack south and east toward the Sea of Azov, also splitting Russian ground forces. Again, the Russians have made a substantial troop buildup in this area, while the Ukrainians are probing and have recovered some ground.

As noted earlier, the September 2022 Ukrainian counteroffensive began with a feint in the Kherson region, was followed by the successful Donbas counteroffensive, which in turn was followed by the real Kherson counteroffensive, also successful. The Ukrainians will again follow a deceptive strategy. This will probably include the deployment of decoy MLRS, artillery, and armored vehicle mockups and the conspicuous buildup of real or fake ground forces in all three regions. The initial assaults may also be feints.

The Ukrainians will rely on U.S. military signal intelligence and imagery/geospatial intelligence to advise them on Russian weak points, although they

will not inform the United States of their actual battle plans. A breakthrough by Ukrainian forces would be the prelude to an all-out effort to destroy the Kerch Bridge linking Crimea to Russia. This would create immediate problems for the resupply of Russian ground forces. Well aware of the striking power of Russian airplanes, the Ukrainians will deploy real Patriot missiles where they plan to attack and deploy decoy Patriots where they do not. If they can bring down enough Russian jets in the early days of their offensive, Russian pilots may again refuse to fly.

As previously noted, the Russians face a number of serious problems. Many of their infantry units have low morale and are poorly trained and equipped. They have a shortage of experienced field officers and a sclerotic command structure. Communication across battalions and brigades is poor. Russian satellite imaging remains mediocre, and its signals intelligence is weak. Russia has lost most of its modern armor and it now relies on models that are decades old. However, the Russians continue to have superiority in sheer manpower, artillery barrels, and munitions, as well as vast reserves of outdated equipment.

The mutiny by Prigozhin and his Wagner Group troops in late 28 June 2023 was another illustration of C2 problems. Prigozhin's widely disseminated criticisms of Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov cast doubt on their capacity as commanders. While it appears that Prigozhin's mutiny was ill-conceived, ultimately unsuccessful, and without immediate consequences for fighting along the front, it nonetheless was damaging to Putin's regime. President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, by negotiating Prigozhin's withdrawal, is the only figure involved to have enhanced his position.

The mid-July 2023 dismissal of Russian major general Ivan Popov, the major general commanding the *58th Combined Arms Army*, which has been engaged in heavy fighting in the Zaporizhzhia region, is further evidence of C2 issues. Popov's departing statement to his troops, which was unexpectedly circulated, said, "Our senior commander hit us from the rear, treacherously and vilely decapitating the army at the most difficult and tense moment."⁶⁸

Predictions

At some point, Ukraine will break through Russian lines and use their superiority in armor to strike toward the Sea of Azov, dividing Russian forces and cutting off Russian land access to Crimea. A reasonable prediction is that the first breakthrough will come in the Zaporizhzhia region, after a feint attack in the Donbas. If that breakthrough were successful in creating panic among Russian defenders, it would be followed by a second breakthrough either from Kherson or the Donbas.

The Russians believe they have at least achieved a stalemate, but there is a real possibility that they may be fully ejected from Ukrainian territory. If that happens, a consequence might be the ouster of Putin.⁶⁹ Alternatively, the Ukrainian counteroffensive might be relatively successful, but fail to retake all

the Ukrainian territory held by Russia. Thus, one aftermath of the counter-offensive might be a settlement, albeit one negotiated on terms far more favorable to Ukraine than it can expect at present.

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has not been a thorough failure in strictly military terms, given that Russia still controls a large swath of eastern Ukraine. However, given Putin's strategic objectives, it has been a disaster. The invasion has strengthened Ukrainian nationalism and discredited Ukrainian sympathizers of Russia. It energized NATO, led to the expansion of NATO membership, and doubled the length of the NATO frontier with Russia. It destroyed the myth of Russian military superiority. It ended Russian natural gas exports to the European Union, which had been carefully cultivated for decades. It led to the emigration of more than half a million of Russia's best and brightest young educated professionals. It caused Western countries to block exports of technology and strategic goods to Russia. It led to the confiscation of Russian assets abroad and the expulsion of Russian spy networks. Ironically, it made Putin an international pariah and Ukrainian president Zelensky an international celebrity.

The Russian failure occurred in all five of the command-and-control priorities identified by van Creveld. Russian decision thresholds were fixed as far up the hierarchy as possible, blocking freedom of action at the bottom of the military structure. Russian military organization made lower-level decisions even more impossible by not making lower-level units self-containing. There was no regular reporting and information-transmission system working both from the top-down and from the bottom-up. There was no active search for information by headquarters to supplement the information routinely provided. There was little or no effort to maintain an informal, as well as a formal, network of communications.

The Russian force structure proved to be far below expectations for reasons that have already been discussed, such as lack of maintenance, inadequate support, understaffed units, corruption, and low morale. Equipment and manpower losses were massive. This forced Russia to employ obsolete equipment and poorly trained troops. Russia's air force and navy maintained their dominance, but its land forces had been degraded.

Ukraine's command-and-control system reflected all the van Creveld priorities. Decision thresholds were set as far down the hierarchy as possible. Freedom of action at the bottom of the structure was encouraged. Lower-level units were as self-contained as possible. Reporting and information transmission was frequent and worked from the bottom-up as well as the top-down. Headquarters actively searched for supplemental information. New ideas were encouraged and implemented. There were informal communication networks operating at all levels of the hierarchy.

The Ukraine force structure exceeded all expectations, despite its numerical inferiority in equipment. Initial losses of armor and artillery were rapid-

ly replaced by captured Russian equipment. Ukraine's manpower losses were far less than Russian losses and were replaced by highly motivated and previously trained reserves. Troop morale remained high. Ukrainian technicians proved masterful at repair and maintenance of damaged equipment, as well as retrofitting old equipment to serve new purposes. Flows of equipment and ammunition from NATO countries began to ramp up, eventually including Western tanks, howitzers, MANPADs, and missile systems (such as Javelins and HIMARS) that were better than Russian models. By mid-summer of 2023, Ukraine's ground forces were superior to Russia's. However, Ukraine was unable to equal Russian air and sea forces.

As noted earlier, C2 systems and force structures reflect the priorities of the regime of which they are a part, as well as the culture of the society governed by that regime. Authoritarian regimes are by definition top-down systems in which dissent is either ignored or punished. In contrast, democratic regimes encourage debate and protect the right to disagree. Authoritarian regimes also tend to allow increasing levels of corruption in their societies, as a reward for compliance and as a potential excuse for punishment. Democratic regimes, while not immune from corruption, fear it because of its potential electoral costs.

As Putin's "special military operation" has dragged on, his regime has become increasingly authoritarian. Levels of dissent that were previously tolerated are now banned, not only in the media but even in private conversation. The only sources of information for most Russians are now the state media, especially television. Russia is again experiencing Soviet levels of punishment for dissent, as well as Soviet levels of corruption.

The contrast with Ukraine is again noteworthy. As the invasion proceeded, Ukraine has become more democratic, not less. Its various ministries are decentralized and able to act autonomously. Dissent is accepted. Debate is encouraged. The rationale for government decisions is made public. The regime has actively publicized and prosecuted cases of corruption. The popular demands for honesty in government and in elections, and for the removal of Russian influence, which motivated the Granite, Orange, and Maidan revolutions, seem to be increasingly realized.

The Russian war with Ukraine has therefore become in more than one way an exemplar of the contrast between democracy and dictatorship. It has been commonplace to observe that this is a war to prevent Western democracies from falling under Russian control. This is also a war that demonstrates that democracy is an asset on the battlefield for command and control and for the armed forces themselves, whereas an authoritarian dictatorship is counterproductive for both.

Endnotes

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Russia's Nuclear Strategy

Changes or Continuities

Arushi Singh

Abstract: Contemporaneous events such as the invasion of Ukraine in 24 February 2022 by Russia has brought to the front debates and discussions concerning nuclear weapons and their potential uses in warfare that encompass nuclear strategy, tactics, and doctrines. The current nuclear strategy of Russia has been informed by the nuclear strategies under different leaders of its predecessor state, the Soviet Union. This article attempts to understand the evolution of the USSR's nuclear strategy and its continuation toward Russia's strategy; to assesses the reasons behind the changes in Russia's nuclear strategy in the twenty-first century; to study the major factors that influence the nuclear strategy of Russia under Vladimir Putin; and to evaluate the possible geopolitical implications of the current Russian nuclear strategy.

Keywords: Russia, technology, nuclear, USSR, strategy

Introduction

Warfare is conducted in various distinct conditions and under different contexts.¹ Every country has a driving strategy based on the rationale to assist its defense establishment in fulfilling policy objectives efficiently for both times of war and peace. Therefore, warfare is to be guided by a strategy that is a dynamic process that transforms “military power into policy effect.”² However, the strategy related to nuclear power is operational and based solely on the theoretical and conceptual purview as the nuclear strategy is concerned with the strategy of the “non-use” of nuclear weapons.³

The earliest nuclear weapons were employed in the Second World War by

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Allies for effective strategic bombardment. The Soviet Union conducted its first nuclear test in 1949 and thermonuclear test in 1953. The 1950s were a time of innovative development for the Soviet Union regarding technology, henceforth referred to as revolution in military affairs.⁴ The country's technological advancements encompassed ballistic and cruise missile technology, which transformed armed struggle on a strategic level, notably where nuclear weapons were considered. However, nuclear strategy gained incredible relevance especially in the 1960s, after the Soviet Union attained nuclear capability parity with the United States wherein both countries possessed the ability to absorb a first strike and to launch a second strike. Other strategies included limited forward deployment while numerous flexible responses were likewise developed. This led to a reliance on nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional force vulnerability.⁵ Furthermore, in the 1970s, the Soviet Union's revolution in military affairs, or *military-technical revolution*, the term utilized by the Soviets, wielded great effect.⁶

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union commenced a reduction in prominence of nuclear weapons in its strategies under Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev.⁷ After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia modified and amended the Soviet nuclear strategy in accordance with the post-Cold War environment. In 1993, Russia unambiguously disregarded the Soviet Union's no-first-use pledge, thereby showcasing incorporation of nuclear weapons in its nuclear strategy as a key aspect of its defense and security strategies. Furthermore, Russia likewise did not retain the Soviet Union's strategic considerations of surprise and preemptive nuclear attacks.⁸

The Evolution of the USSR's Nuclear Strategy and Its Continuation toward Russia's Strategy

Nuclear weapons have not been used since the Second World War. However, the significance of nuclear strategy has never diminished. Nuclear strategy came to the fore during the Cold War, which remained laden with emphasis on nuclear strategy and on strategic stability contingent on nuclear weapons.⁹ The genesis of nuclear strategy, however, commences with initial postwar stances wherein nuclear weapons were thought to be formidable means of airpower. This line of thinking persisted until 1949 when Bernard Brodie accentuated the importance of nuclear weapons in averting war.¹⁰ This aversion of war was spoken about in the perspective of deterrence where the threat of force is applied to thwart conflict influenced by factors involving the ability, credibility, gravity, and guarantee of following through with the threat.¹¹

Furthermore, these strategic concepts were formulated into a coherent strategy that included military organization, nuclear doctrine, weapons systems, and the weapons themselves.¹² Moreover, nuclear weapons as such have been classified into tactical and strategic. Tactical nuclear warheads have shorter yield and are envisioned for combat zone usage. Strategic nuclear warheads commonly have a greater range yield and range.¹³ The means of delivery of these warheads

employ the triad of air, sea, and land, which is strategically important in case of a second strike. Other terminologies also started emerging such as counterforce, mutually assured destruction, countervalue, tailored deterrence, and deterrence by punishment and by denial, which remains relevant to this day.¹⁴

Deterrence has been viewed as the coaxing and persuasion of a prospective foe that the self-interest must be observed through the avoidance of assured sequence of actions. The realization of deterrence requires three general conditions, which includes adequate understanding of the capacity of the antagonist, credibility, and the clear articulation of the threat to the antagonist.¹⁵ Other elements remain: the threat must be planned to increase the perceived cost of an adversary who takes a particular course of action and incentives to make the adversary refrain from undesirable action.¹⁶

Joseph Stalin

At the advent of the nuclear age, Joseph Stalin grasped the significance of nuclear weapons particularly pertaining to defense and political spheres. Nevertheless, his *modus operandi* was still based on the operational setting of assumptions and familiarity of the pre-nuclear age.¹⁷ Yet, Stalin led the formation of a military-industrial complex that established the apparatus with the potential for his inheritors to attain strategic parity with America.¹⁸ At the time, however, considerations related to the strategic dimensions of the military use of nuclear weapons were based on the emergence of the two power blocs. This was demonstrated after the United States used nuclear weapons against Japan, this steered Stalin to authorize a Special Committee on the Atomic Bomb to undermine the U.S. nuclear monopoly.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Stalin was reluctant to incorporate nuclear weapons into the strategic calculations of the Soviet Union, and thus diminished their significance to the Soviet strategic realm. Nevertheless, the formation of balance of power through the development of nuclear weapons remained one of the considerations in the emerging Soviet nuclear strategy.²⁰ Additionally, Stalin considered that nuclear weapons were intended to “deprive the Soviet Union of strategic gains in the Far East and more generally to give the United States the upper hand.”²¹

Notably, the Soviet Union, in the wake of the attainment of nuclear weapons by the United States for the first five years, seemingly spurned the incomparable advantage of nuclear weapons. Stalin’s distinctive methodology to security was autarchic and territorial wherein the security of the USSR was contingent on the “insecurity of others.”²² The time under Stalin from 1949 to 1953 has been referred to as the “Stalinist lag,” and this is crucial in respect to understanding the emphasis placed by the Soviets on a single cohesive leadership wherein the political leadership prevailed over the military tacticians and strategists.²³ More important, historically, Russia relied on its numeric superiority to prevail and this influenced the thinking of the Soviet leadership. Hence, the Soviet approach to nuclear weapons has also been referred to as “war fighting” because of its stress on winning rather than deterrence.²⁴

Moreover, the Soviets during the 1950s were disinclined to be predominantly dependent on any one weapon system such as an “absolute weapon” or one weapon strategies.²⁵ The Soviet military establishment at the time believed no one weapon could solve all the complications in the combat zone but rather the combined effect of all kinds of weapons leads to victory.²⁶ The focus, however, was on the conclusive obliteration of the enemy forces including a surprise nuclear attack at the most expedient moment of escalation as well as on the deep offensive operation.

The Soviet nuclear strategy advocated for preemptive use of nuclear weapons for enormous and concurrent devastation of strategic and tactical targets in addition to facilitating full infiltration of adversary space at the inception of nuclear operations.²⁷ The Soviet nuclear strategy focused on reconnaissance, concealment, the covert nature of operations, and high war preparedness. Stalin focused on winning a war of attrition against capitalism, which had to be reflected in Soviet nuclear strategy where the fact had to be overlooked that nuclear weapons could compress years of effects of a war of attrition into a few days.²⁸ Soviet nuclear strategy at the time also advocated for the utilization of nonstrategic nuclear weapons in strategic missions in the different theaters of operation to strengthen conventional forces in order to assist the Soviets with the attainment of victory, while adversarial armed forces were rerouted away from its territorial interests.

Another dimension of Soviet nuclear considerations included the Soviet strategic policy, which has been described in the terminology utilized by the Soviets as the military facets of the actions taken by the Soviet regime to avert war while affording a pedestal of strength to the Soviets when dealing with other nations as was warranted by its recently minted status as a superpower.²⁹ The policy was likewise concerned with winning a war in case the deterrence did not work anymore.³⁰

Additionally, there are four foundational factors that are essential for the construction of Soviet strategic policy. These are the extent and geographical location of the Soviet Union; the might of Russian national heritage; the duality of the Soviet state that entails considerations regarding not only the function of the Soviet Union as a nation's government as well as the leadership of the Communist sphere; and the bearing of nuclear weapons and missiles on warfare.³¹ The first two have always been a consideration from the times of the tsars and have compelled the Russians to seek new frontiers and buffer areas, however, the last were the phenomenon of the twentieth century. The Soviets were able to overcome these problems, however, attacks from a U.S. bomber into the Soviet territory emerged as a threat at roughly the same time as these other threats subsided with the Soviets taking a damage limitation role.³² The deliberations then included a strategic clash with the American, Chinese, and European theaters of war and the use of military around the world in peace times to effectively assist the Soviet foreign policy.

Notably, in 1957, aspects for the formulation of a nuclear strategy were

constructed through a series of seminars. However, in 1962, military strategists under Marshal Vasily Sokolovsky worked on military strategy. Sokolovsky believed the adversary and its collaborators could be defeated through enormous nuclear strikes. The effect was thought to be dual, for the achievement of the “final victory” the destruction of the enemy infrastructure along with the will of the enemy to continue, thereby leading to limitation of destruction that otherwise might have occurred due to a retaliatory strike.³³

Nikita Khrushchev

While the successor of Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev had an important role and a range of options such as the adoption of minimum deterrent strategy and the preventive war strategy. The considerations, however, were many as well, encompassing the balance of power, which would deter both sides from general war; the intentions of the West; repercussions of conventional war; and the efforts to be expended to acquire multiple levels of capability.³⁴

Under Khrushchev, nuclear weapons gained a major place of prominence, and the Strategic Rocket Forces was established.³⁵ The Soviet nuclear strategy under him was based on preemptive international and theater nuclear weapons usage. Khrushchev was also concerned with deterrence, a concept of a preemptive nuclear strategy aimed at denial to the United States amid the USSR’s manpower reductions.

Leonid Brezhnev

With the removal of Khrushchev from power in 1964, Leonid Brezhnev was in charge of the Soviet Union. Brezhnev did not see much need to threaten Europe with his country’s vast nuclear arsenal.³⁶ The USSR’s overwhelming advantage in tanks, artillery, and personnel meant that the United States had to be ambiguous about the first use of its nuclear weapons to stop a potential Soviet juggernaut.³⁷ Brezhnev held the advance of Soviet military might, with the realization of strategic parity with the United States as a critical element in the change toward détente.³⁸

Moreover, under Brezhnev, the concept of a controllable nuclear war was a prominent thought and retaliatory strikes with both regional and global reach took prominence. Brezhnev championed deterrence and the principles of deterrence became part of the doctrine. Furthermore, Brezhnev organized arms control talks with American presidents Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford, and James E. “Jimmy” Carter.

Yuri Andropov

Yuri Andropov succeeded Brezhnev and he was convinced that the West was intent on a “surprise nuclear missile attack” and developed Raketno Yadernoye Napadenie in response, referred to as Project RYaN.³⁹ The surprise nuclear missile attack was thought to be proposed to incapacitate the Soviet leadership along with Soviet nuclear potential to accomplish a victory in an ensuing war.

Moreover, Andropov worked on achieving Soviet military preparedness for the eventuality when need arose of a Soviet preemptive strike and it became the focus of the Soviet nuclear strategy at the time.⁴⁰

Konstantin Chernenko

Konstantin Chernenko emerged out of the fray as the seventh leader of the Soviet Union. More importantly, Chernenko was a protégé of Brezhnev who favored détente and his term in office witnessed the commencement of negotiations on restricting the strategic and intermediate-range missiles as well as space-based weapons.⁴¹ Notably, Chernenko has been accredited with facilitating the revival of arms limitations talks with the United States. However, under his leadership the concept of surprise during the initial stages of a nuclear war was given special attention, referred to as a “surprise nuclear strike,” which could decide the progression of the war as well.⁴²

Mikhail Gorbachev

Gorbachev succeeded Chernenko and was part of a new generation of Soviet leaders.⁴³ When Gorbachev came to power, the technological gap between the United States and the Soviet Union portended a vast military vulnerability for the Soviet Union in the future.⁴⁴ Additionally, Gorbachev had moved beyond the thinking that nuclear-strategic parity as being vital as a guarantor of peace.

One of the driving factors for Gorbachev was the peril of nuclear disaster, which motivated him to push for disarmament.⁴⁵ To that end, Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and in the process eradicated the Saber SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missile, an important constituent of the Soviet conventional strategy. Gorbachev likewise approved the decommissioning of the OTR-23 Oka tactical nuclear missile as well as the industrial units to manufacture those missiles in 1987.⁴⁶ This resulted in Russia possessing an extremely limited cache of tactical missiles whose range was too short to reach targets in Europe.

The Transition from Soviet Nuclear Strategy to Russian Nuclear Strategy

However, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and transition into Russia and 14 newly independent nations, priorities transformed related to nuclear strategy.⁴⁷ The disintegration of the Soviet Union led to the decision that a single nuclear successor state should emerge, which was to be Russia rather than multiple small nuclear states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union.

The immediate post-Soviet period witnessed two coups, termination of the ruling Communist Party in Russia, extensive privatization, the suspension of state sanctioned price controls combined with liberal market reforms resulting in hyperinflation, as well as the formation of an oligarchy.⁴⁸ This period also saw decreased defense procurement of approximately 90 percent and drastic nuclear disarmament in conjunction with the United States.⁴⁹

Boris Yeltsin

The Yeltsin era started with great promise for arms control such as the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaties (START I and II), which contributed to strategic stability, reduced the risk of accidental nuclear attacks, and disarmed counterforce nuclear strike and fortified the nonproliferation framework.

Experts have put forth the concept of strategic stability as being in force when the country that was the victim of an attack could inflict unacceptable damage on the aggressor under any conditions. Strategic stability additionally determined minimal nuclear deterrence. Moreover, in the Yeltsin era, the strategic nuclear forces concepts came to the fore, which included a preemptive strike, launch on warning, and retaliatory strikes. However, financial constraints, war in Chechnya, and internal conflicts acted as great impediments for further actions. Notably, a document was adopted in 1993, referred to as the Basic Guidelines of Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation.⁵⁰ Most significantly, under Boris Yeltsin, Russia, which from 1982 had a no-first-use policy, altered its policy due to its vulnerability stemming from its conventional forces that could not possibly deter the United States while being deprived of the threat of use of nuclear weapons.⁵¹

Vladimir Putin

The early years of Putin's leadership saw the implementation of minimal sufficiency in place of strategic parity due to the implausibility of nuclear war.⁵² However, Putin rescinded this strategy in a speech in 2004 and emphasized the strategic significance of the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Under Putin, the Russian nuclear doctrine has maintained its nonstrategic nuclear forces emphasis and as such has concentrated on developing huge, varied, and advanced nonstrategic systems capable of being utilized for both conventional and nuclear weapons. Russia is also expanding the aggregate quantity of these weapons in its cache while substantially enhancing its delivery competencies.

A typology of war is utilized to decide on the approach and instruments to be used including nuclear weapons. One of the factors that influences Putin's nuclear strategy is the classification of conflicts by the impact on different weapons and different deterrence approaches to be undertaken. Therefore, a typology for conflicts has been compiled and armed engagements have been divided into armed conflict, local, regional, and large-scale war as part of an escalation management strategy through dissuasion of head-on aggression, thwart or preempt the application of decidedly detrimental capabilities against the Russian territory or the regime, and dismiss antagonisms on terms deemed satisfactory to Russia.

Moreover, escalation management has been founded on deterrence through "fear-inducement" as well as on deterrence based on restricted utilization of force. Other elements of Russian nuclear strategy include the dissuasion approach, "dosed" damage, progressive application of force to increase the costs to an adversary, coercion, or realization of de-escalation at crucial transition stages and initial periods of conflict.⁵³ These strategies operate by assimilating

the threat to impose destruction with conventional means as well as nuclear capabilities. Furthermore, there are assumptions that underpin de-escalation strategy such as the implausibility of a large-scale conflict with the United States; limited level utilization of conventional forces by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against Russia; understanding of the asymmetry of stakes between Russia and the United States; and the assumption that credible strategic deterrence acts as a stabilizing foundation.⁵⁴

Putin's office released "On the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence," a document on Russian nuclear strategy that focused on preemption to avert an incapacitating first strike and highlighted nuclear doctrine concentrating on guaranteeing deterrence and less on nuclear intimidation.⁵⁵

The Reasons behind the Changes in Russia's Nuclear Strategy in the Twenty-first Century

The reason Russia increased its dependence on nuclear weapons in its strategy has been attributed to multiple factors including the disintegration of the Soviet Union followed by the economic disruptions that put limitations on the amount of conventional army forces that could be retained. This was followed by the First Chechen War from 1994 to 1996, Russo-Georgian War in 2008, and the Second Chechen War from 1999 to 2009, which shined a light on the vulnerabilities of Russian military forces. Contemporary Russian strategic thinking was that nuclear weapons could augment Russian power to prevent analogous regional wars and increased threat perception posed by NATO enlargement. NATO's bombardment in Kosovo in 1999 accentuated Russia's mounting vulnerability as it underscored NATO's rising inclination to imperil Russian geopolitical considerations. Subsequently, Russia determined that it was necessary to retain nuclear forces adept at ensuring the imposition of the preplanned preferred degree and magnitude of destruction to any hostile state or coalition of nations under all circumstances.

The government resolved to upgrade and develop nonstrategic nuclear weapons in 1999, soon after the war in Kosovo. President Yeltsin concurred that Russia should build up and deploy both strategic and tactical strategic nuclear weapons. Vladimir Putin, who was the chairman of the Security Council, affirmed that President Yeltsin advocated for the development and utilization of nonstrategic nuclear weapons.⁵⁶ Yeltsin also agreed to the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, which was a non-legally binding agreement of mutual independent obligations.

However, the twenty-first century saw Russia struggling to maintain its sphere of influence, preserve its strategic parity with the United States, and maintain its border security while simultaneously dealing with an economic crisis and stagnation with revenues being crippling dependent on hydrocarbons exports and incapacitated by sanctions. Moreover, policies of other countries whose objective is to revise the status quo in contradiction to Russian interest

in strategic areas including the Arctic and the Caspian Sea could lead to military action under certain circumstances, thereby contributing to the threat perceptions that might impact the Russian nuclear strategy decision-making process.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, in the international milieu, Russia has chosen the path wherein it exhibits belligerence in Ukraine. Its repeated “nuclear saber-rattling” has emphasized the presence and significance of nuclear weapons, Russian military exercises, and nuclear weapons delivery systems to establish Russian competencies, coupled with an inclination to confront NATO’s member states. Russia’s “escalate to de-escalate” strategy appears to be devised to compel a retreat of forces or to cease a dispute on conditions and provisions beneficial to Russia.⁵⁸ Nonstrategic nuclear weapons seem to perform a substantial part in Russia’s doctrine, for instance, in case of assistance for probable military actions west of the Urals.

Notably, Russia has amended its strategy in the twenty-first century with different versions emerging to place a larger dependence on nuclear weapons. For instance, in 1997, nuclear weapons were to be used only when there was a risk to the survival of the Russian Federation. However, the doctrine in 2000 extended the conditions for the employment of nuclear weapons to embrace occurrences wherein weapons of mass destruction were directed toward Russia or its partners. The 2001 doctrine also included large-magnitude assault using conventional weapons in circumstances crucial to the state security of Russia, which could warrant the use by Russia of nuclear weapons in retaliation. Moreover, the evolving threats premised on instability, violent nonstate actors, and terrorism have the potential to undermine Russian national sovereignty, and the vastness of Russian borders makes it marginally probable that a local conflict could potentially escalate to include the usage of nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, Russia has been focusing on modernizing its nuclear triad, however, some have opined that procurement and acquisition have been excessive due to influence of the industry, which has encouraged overreliance on nuclear weapons. Another consideration has been securing latent exposure in Crimea and Kaliningrad, a Russian western enclave that straddles the borders of Poland as well as Lithuania, both NATO members. This perception is reinforced by the Aegis Ashore launchers, part of the European Phased Adaptive Approach missile defense system, which increases Russian vulnerability.⁵⁹

Russians have also been managing the development of nonmilitary along with conventional capabilities to decrease its dependence on nuclear weapons at initial phases of engagement along with nuclear capabilities for use in both times of peace and war. Moreover, as a measure of strategic deterrence, emphasis had been placed on tailored escalation to gain a lead over a rival.⁶⁰ Russian experts stress that one of the factors has been repudiating the adversary’s claim to escalation dominance while securing victory in the early phases of the conflict itself.

Furthermore, Russian involvement with cognitive electronic and cyber warfare, coupled with mobilization along with deterrence signaling against the West and its NATO allies has shifted the Western defense deterrence posture.⁶¹

Concerns have also been raised from Russian defense and military establishment figures of an “aerospace attack” that could wreak destruction utilizing traditional precision-strike weapons on Russian strategic nuclear forces.⁶² The lethal combination of precision strikes and cyber and electronic warfare have been theorized to possess the possibility of inadvertent nuclear escalation.⁶³

Major Factors that Influence the Nuclear Strategy of Russia under Vladimir Putin

Since Putin came to power, the threat perceptions of the Russian Federation have been evolving. In the mid-2000s, the Russian defense establishment was focused on a conventional strike during a relentless airborne operation poised to perpetrate unacceptable damage not only to Russian vital infrastructure but to armed forces. The threat perception has evolved into concurrent attacks including a large-scale aerospace attack and political struggle simultaneously. As such, in contemporary Russian strategic thinking, there exists a persistent dread of strategic bombings coupled with the conviction that in the likelihood of escalatory behavior, Russia should be on the offensive rather than on the defensive. Furthermore, a persistent comparison persists in Russia of its current capabilities with its Soviet counterpart.

Nevertheless, the Russians have been focused on seeking solutions based on deterrence, which encompass management of escalation, contemplation of scenarios that are not receptive to warfighting and their resolutions, and seeking answers wherein the escalation dilemmas proliferate due to an inflexible force structure with an incapability to deter conventional attacks. However, Russian nuclear forces have undergone extensive modernization over the last two decades. Russian officials contend it as an effort to maintain parity with the U.S. nuclear arsenal and to shed Soviet legacy systems.

Nonetheless, both U.S. and Russian forces are bound by numerical limits and tracked by both sides through an intrusive reciprocal verification and transparency arrangement under START. They are also observable through national technical means with which both sides have pledged not to interfere. This verifiable balance is the cornerstone of present-day “strategic stability” between the United States and Russia. The Russian military pursues a course wherein easy victories are denied in the initial periods of war.

However, under Putin, the implications conveyed through the nuclear strategy encompass the understanding that any conflicts with Russia will always tacitly stress its nuclear options.⁶⁴ Moreover, to drive this point home Russia has been conducting theater exercises with simulated nuclear weapons use such as the Russian Vostok 2010 and Vostok 2014 exercise, which involved the Kuril Islands where territorial claims remain contested by long-time U.S. ally Japan.

The Possible Geopolitical Implications of the Current Russian Nuclear Strategy

A modernized nuclear arsenal remains of vital interest to Russians to uphold

strategic deterrence based on conventional weaponry to safeguard against prospective enemies and to abjure aggression from them. A nuclear arsenal to Russia signifies power, authority, and protection for its international standing along with its capability to counter developing threats.⁶⁵ Additionally, nuclear weapons have been regarded as an imperative in the preservation of the sovereignty of Russia and the Russian homeland along with the ability of nuclear weapons to deter regional and large-scale wars, particularly in the current context of worldwide challenges and heightened threats. However, modernization coupled with an enhanced size and scope of exercises conducted by Russia in addition to the threatening demeanor has resulted in increased defense expenditure as well as the launch of a phase of modernization programs.

Consequently, Russia has sustained its focus on the crucial part in its strategic and security stance of nuclear forces to compensate for its conventional vulnerability concerning the United States, NATO, and China.⁶⁶ The contemporary nuclear doctrine has showcased the lowering of the Russian nuclear threshold, and when taken together Russian mobilization abilities have been revealed to be quicker than NATO's 30-30-30 strategy, which has led to increased threat perception in the region.

Further, in Putin's 2020 decree, there exist statements that proclaim that Russian nuclear deterrence policy is to defend and assure the "sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Russia and its partners in the event of an armed conflict by thwarting the escalation of military actions and focusing on the culmination of the armed conflict to be on terms that favor Russia.⁶⁷ However, this has massive implications as "territorial integrity" could apply to contested regions such as Crimea where an endeavor to utilize force to return could warrant the use of nuclear weapons. Therefore, Russia has linked the first use of nuclear weapons to sovereignty. This becomes especially challenging keeping in mind the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine.

The usage of nuclear weapons in retaliation to attacks on nuclear forces by nonnuclear means leads to the likelihood of a nuclear reaction to multiple non-nuclear strikes on a wide range of Russian military infrastructure including air and army bases as well as ships operated by the Russian navy. This is an effort by the Russians to use the threat of nuclear escalation to contravene American conventional as well as cyber abilities. It has been opined that the new nuclear doctrine justifies any kind of serious threat to warrant the use of nuclear weapons.⁶⁸

The United States' position along with NATO allies has been implicitly conveyed with the positioning of ballistic missile defenses. For the INF Treaty, missile systems, both nuclear and conventional, as well other advanced weaponry that are non-nuclear weapons placed in countries adjacent to Russian borders is enough to make them subject to Russian nuclear deterrence. This development has been, in part, a response to NATO's progress in relation to small-yield nuclear weapons and propositions of transportation of American

tactical nuclear weaponry closer to Russia. Moreover, the timing of the Russian nuclear deterrence policy guidelines signals that Russia understands the fragility of the arms controls regime and has been organizing for it.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Strategy is not simply a theory that gains importance during times of war but an inextricable constant component of “statecraft.”⁷⁰ Nuclear weapons drive strategy to extraordinary limits as an ostensibly goal-directed and coherent structure of connecting capabilities and ends.⁷¹ Moreover, over the decades, defense revaluation has been fused with political sensitivities to shift military doctrine in the direction of and in tune with tenets of defensive adequacy.⁷² Issues include credibility deterrence and fulfilling three criteria, which are “capability, commitment and communication” that have also come to the fore.⁷³

The Soviet Union attained certain technological triumphs in the nuclear domain including nuclear warhead technology with the development of the hydrogen bomb as well as advanced warheads and spearheaded a strategic progression largely encompassing missiles; early warning mechanisms; delivery systems; interceptors; and command, control, and communications systems. There were likewise intangible achievements such as considerable levels of deterrence that acted as a bulwark against the United States and NATO. These achievements accelerated the race to the fulfillment of parity with the United States and compelled the leaders to institute greater emphasis on the Soviet strategy concerning nuclear weapons.

The West’s apparent superiority in non-nuclear armed forces currently has been utilized to justify the Russians’ right to a first nuclear strike. Moreover, the updated doctrine under Putin states that in the event of an armed struggle, the usage of nonconventional arms that ensure state survival is warranted. However, securing nuclear weapons may possibly start the escalation of the conflict into a nuclear military conflict. This can be construed as recognizing the likelihood of nuclear weapons use by nations not officially recognized but castigated with prolonged politically strained exchanges, which may start off an unpredictable escalation.⁷⁴

This likewise sheds light on Russian strategic thinking wherein Russia maintains a substantial advantage over China in both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons as a regional conflict can occur. This probable regional conflict requires investing in increasing Russia’s conventional capabilities or when the Russian state’s existence is threatened by some other nation in its region.⁷⁵ Space for bilateral regulatory mechanisms is kept open. It has also been observed that Russia appears to perceive nuclear weapons as more defensive and retaliatory in disposition rather than a deterrent. However, Putin’s Russia, as opportunistic as it has demonstrated it is, would not spare the occasion to use the nuclear weapon as it would also discourage the West from activities in Russia’s area of influence.

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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 “cyberspace” (*kiberprostranstvo*) as a subcomponent of “information space” (*informatsionnoe 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” (*informatsionnaya 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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Revisiting the Global Posture Review

A New U.S. Approach to European Defense and NATO in a Post-Ukraine War World

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Abstract: This article revisits the 2021 Global Posture Review's determination for a status quo European force posture in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Considering the poor Russian performance and attrition in the war, and the likely frozen conflict that will emerge, the article lays out the process by which the United States can draw down its permanent presence in Europe to refocus on the Pacific and restructure its relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), all while maintaining alliance unity. The article has two main recommendations. The first is a time line for a reduced U.S. force posture in Europe from the present to 2035 while placing more emphasis on a European role in NATO leadership. The second is focused on how to maintain strategic flexibility while reassuring NATO allies of U.S. commitment. It then identifies and provides mitigations for the anticipated risks associated with the recommendations.

Keywords: Europe, Global Force Posture, rebalancing, Russia, Ukraine, dynamic force employment, deterrence, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO

Background

In November 2021, the much-anticipated Global Posture Review (GPR), an assessment on the current and desired global U.S. military presence, was finally concluded with underwhelming results. As one source put it, “after

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a nine-month deep-dive by Defense Department planners and policy experts billed as a holistic look at where and how America is deployed around the world, the Pentagon has concluded that no major changes to its military posture are needed.”¹ This largely status-quo assessment included Europe, where the GPR did little more than reverse the controversial Donald J. Trump administration drawdown initiatives on the continent.²

However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine reinitiated high-level discussions regarding the future of U.S. force posture in Europe. Despite the Joseph R. Biden administration’s 2022 *National Defense Strategy*, which describes China as the “most consequential strategic competitor and the pacing challenge for the Department [of Defense]” (DOD) and is to be prioritized over Russia, there are voices advocating for an expanded and enduring U.S. presence in Europe.³ During congressional testimony that same year, though, and in the wake of the Russian invasion, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) General Mark A. Milley indicated the DOD was planning for a future force posture in Europe that might not align with the published strategy, indicating the likelihood of expanding the permanent U.S. force presence in the theater.⁴ A year later, in March 2023, that became a reality when the U.S. Army established a permanent forward presence of its Fort Knox, Kentucky, based V Corps at Camp Kościuszko, Poland.⁵

However, some analysts are urging caution. As more U.S. forces head to Europe either permanently or on rotation, “it will get increasingly difficult to pull them out due to external pressure from allies and internal pressure from advocates who believe a larger U.S. military presence on Europe is required, said Rachel Rizzo, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Europe Center.”⁶ The United States cannot and should not continue to split its attention between both Europe and the Pacific, especially given the lackluster performance of the Russian army and that forces’ severe attrition during the last year and a half of conflict. With this in mind, the Biden administration should revisit the 2021 GPR decisions made concerning U.S. force posture in Europe, as well as those that have occurred in the wake of the Russian invasion, while taking into account the changing security situation on the continent. What follows is a recommended course of action that capitalizes on the current situation to both fundamentally reshape the United States’ long-term presence in the theater, as well as its relationship to NATO, to ultimately build a more enduring, equitable, and secure transatlantic security architecture.

Planning Scenarios

This reassessment of the ideal U.S. force posture in Europe is based on the most likely outcome of the current Ukraine-Russia War, identified as the “frozen conflict” scenario. However, other considered war-termination scenarios are also listed below for context and consideration.

Frozen conflict: In this scenario, both Russian and Ukrainian forces exhaust their offensive capacity along a settled “line of control” somewhere in

eastern Ukraine. Various cease-fires are negotiated but unenforced and broken regularly. Diplomatic negotiations continue but bear little fruit. In a best-case scenario, this resembles the “new normal” in eastern Ukraine that was achieved after the 2014 invasion. In the worst-case scenario, it resembles the Korean War’s “stalemate” phase from 1951 to 1953 in which both sides, knowing that negotiations were ongoing, conducted limited offensive operations to seize advantageous terrain to solidify new territorial claims at the conflict’s termination.⁷

Escalation to conventional NATO-Russia conflict: This would likely not be from a direct attack by Russia on NATO, or NATO against Russia, but rather via escalation from miscalculation or accidental engagement. The force posture in response to a direct NATO-Russia conflict is outside the scope and classification of this policy recommendation and will be directed via the execution of the appropriate NATO/European Command (EUCOM) war plans. These plans doctrinally include the detailed planning “necessary to determine force deployment, employment, sustainment, and redeployment requirements.”⁸

Russian regime collapse: Despite the belief at the outset of the conflict that military failure, in combination with economic sanctions, could lead to the end of the Vladimir Putin reign in Russia, that scenario has become less likely. Instead, the world has seen the Russian political and media elite double down on their support for the invasion and see themselves as victims in a necessary war against the West. Even if the recent short-lived Wagner Group mutiny launched by Yevgeny Prigozhin had succeeded and the mercenary chief had arrested his rivals in the Ministry of Defence, there is little indication that it would have caused an end of hostilities in Ukraine. As the Wilson Center published last year:

With the widespread blindness of the populace with respect to the actions of the Russian ruling elites, a blackout on real information, and the fear of consequences of dissent, the political system remains strong: Putin has learned from the late-Soviet experience that any weakening of a repressive stance, any letting up on the propaganda machine, spells the end of an autocracy. . . . The absence of powerful alternative regional elites to take up the reins of governance puts “paid in advance” to any notions of dismantling Putin’s regime. And trust in Vladimir Putin personally remains high in all the regions.⁹

Nuclear escalation: The most likely scenario in which nuclear weapons are used is a Russian attempt to “escalate to de-escalate.” In this instance, they would utilize a low yield tactical nuclear weapon on the battlefield to force a cessation of hostilities for fear of vertical escalation. If this attack were met in response by NATO tactical nuclear strikes, it is not inconceivable that the tit-for-tat strikes could result in the strategic nuclear arsenals of both sides being deployed against one another’s homeland. The long-term outcome of this sce-

nario is not only horrible, but impossible to accurately plan for and outside the scope of this policy recommendation.

Recommendation

As a result of the significant attrition to Russian forces and the likely “frozen conflict” scenario, the United States should utilize European and NATO confidence to reduce its existing force posture in Europe during the next decade, while maintaining the strategic flexibility to rapidly redeploy forces to the theater in the event of crisis and maintain the DOD infrastructure required for contingencies.

Line of Effort 1: Reposture for a New Normal

Line of Operations 1: Immediate Response (Remainder of 2023)

The intent of this line of operation is to initiate the drawdown of U.S. forces deployed in response to the current crisis and return to the status quo force posture. There are 65,000 troops normally stationed in Europe, with 10,000–15,000 additional troops that rotate through annually, bringing the normal number to 80,000. That figure has swelled to more than 100,000 troops in response to the invasion, the most since 2005.¹⁰ These initial surge forces were critical to establish deterrence and reassure American allies immediately following the invasion as U.S. forces generally maintain higher levels of readiness and ability to deploy than their NATO counterparts. However, as early as April 2022, NATO had mobilized and deployed up to 40,000 troops to its shared border with Russia, a massive increase in the 4,000 personnel “tripwire force” that previously existed in the Baltics.¹¹ Even still, more than a year after the initial invasion, the United States has maintained its expanded presence in Europe.¹² The successful mobilization of the NATO militaries along their eastern flank, in addition to the accession of Finland (and soon Sweden) into the alliance, as well as the severe and long lasting degradation of Russian conventional offensive capacity, should set conditions for the 20,000 U.S. forces deployed in response to the crisis to be returned home to rebuild their readiness in preparation for follow-on contingencies.

Line of Operations 2: Creating a New Normal (2024–2029)

The creation of a new normal would occur during the next five years and capitalize on the period before which the Russian military industrial complex can regenerate new offensive conventional capacity.¹³ This is the time frame in which NATO countries who have promised to increase defense spending and expand their militaries in the wake of the invasion will likely begin fielding these new forces.¹⁴ These expanding NATO militaries will enable a limited drawdown of permanently stationed U.S. forces in Europe. This would not mimic the hasty, ill-conceived, and impromptu Trump administration planned withdrawal of 12,000 troops that at the time was called “sudden and dangerous” by the Council on Foreign Relations. Unlike that decision, taken without the consultation

of NATO allies, this would be conducted as an iterative process done in consultation with other NATO members.¹⁵ That is not to say they would not be hesitant to see U.S. troops leave, but they would be actively part of the process to identify the requisite force needed to stay.

The intent would be to leave a smaller force in Europe with a more narrowly scoped but still decisive mission. The current U.S. force posture in Europe is one in which the United States provides the bulk of an all-domain deterrence force against Russia. The new posture would create a force built around blunting Russian aggression and surging forces into theater should a conflict begin again. This means forward deploying combat credible forces capable of rapidly transitioning from training to real-world operations predominately in the eastern portion of NATO. Forward posturing forces in Eastern Europe would free up certain intratheater movement aviation platforms to be redeployed to the Pacific. The new European posture should also primarily be land and air forces, as the land is the decisive domain in which a European conflict would be decided. NATO member naval forces would be primarily responsible for the maritime fight, allowing U.S. ships to be permanently repositioned to the Pacific as well.

Line of Operations 3: Alliance Reimagined (2029–2035)

The remainder of the decade and the first half of the 2030s would allow for this force posture to be modified to meet the needs of the environment with modest rebalancing to achieve an optimized topline U.S. force number in Europe. Once this is solidified, the focus should then shift to institutional reforms in NATO. Currently, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) is always an American general officer while the NATO secretary general is always a European. The alliance should develop a rotation that allows SACEUR to be a European officer with their deputy position filled by an American as well as an American filling the role of the secretary general.¹⁶ This would serve to ensure that the newfound confidence and sense of burden sharing in the European NATO allies does not dissipate after the current crisis. While there are always concerns about the placement of U.S. troops under the operational control of foreign officers, it has happened many times in the past.¹⁷ Allowing for a European SACEUR and American secretary general would truly place the emphasis for European defense on the shoulders of Europe, while also maintaining a credible and enduring U.S. commitment.

Line of Effort: Posture for Contingencies

Line of Operations 4: Preserving Strategic Flexibility

To preserve strategic flexibility, the United States should keep the current infrastructure, or as necessary develop new infrastructure in Europe to allow it to surge forces back into the theater. This would include prepositioned stockpiles of weapons, vehicles, and ammunition. These weapons and vehicles allow U.S. forces to fall in on assets in theater after a conflict begins, reducing the requirement to

float or fly large formations overseas. These prepositioned stockpiles could either be expansions of the existing sites or the development of new ones, ideally near highways or rail heads. To enable this intratheater movement, DOD can develop new contracts with regional heavy lift companies to ensure logistical support for the larger projected formations that will flow into Europe during a crisis.

Furthermore, the United States and European allies should invest in developing additional military-use airfield and port infrastructure to enable what is called joint reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (JRSOI).¹⁸ Finally, NATO should streamline administrative requirements for movement, as “within Europe, virtually any movement of U.S. or allied forces requires crossing multiple borders of sovereign nations. Border crossings require customs processes, diplomatic clearances, route approvals, timing, and escorts, which vary widely amongst European nations.”¹⁹ Simplifying this process before a crisis is imperative to ensure the United States’ ability to rapidly redeploy large formations to theater is credible.

Line of Operations 5: Assuring NATO

To continue to assure NATO and demonstrate enduring U.S. resolve and commitment to the alliance, the United States should maintain the current average of 10,000–15,000 U.S. troops, primarily from ground combat formations, on rotational deployments to Europe annually.²⁰ This will not only benefit the alliance, but it will continue to provide certain enduring advantages to continental United States (CONUS)-based units. These advantages include the opportunity to gain firsthand knowledge of the terrain of the likely conflict zone, practice at deploying to Europe, and the maintenance of critical interpersonal relationships between U.S. and European commanders at the tactical level. This last aspect is key and critical to true interoperability.

Additionally, the United States should also conduct episodic dynamic force employment (DFE) rotations through EUCOM with bomber task forces, armored brigade combat teams, Marine Air-Ground Task Forces, or other elements of the Joint force. DFEs are meant to allow the United States to be “strategically predictable, but operationally unpredictable.”²¹ Unlike normal rotational deployments that are planned years in advance, DFEs are conducted on short notice specifically to demonstrate the agility and responsiveness of U.S. forces and to complicate adversary decision-making.

Finally, the United States and its NATO allies should conduct more large-scale exercises on the continent, demonstrating the credible ability to field the large formations required to fight and win during conflict. In recent years, the Defender Europe series of exercises have grown in scope and complexity, with Defender 23 including 17,000 NATO troops from 26 nations. This included the deployment of more than 9,000 CONUS-based U.S. troops and 7,000 pieces of CONUS-based equipment for the multimonth exercise, with an additional 13,000 pieces of equipment drawn from prepositioned forward stockpiles.²² As the U.S. permanent presence in Europe decreases, its contribution

to these types of large-scale exercises should increase in a commensurate fashion. The eventual goal should be the deployment of tens of thousands of U.S. troops to Europe for short duration multinational NATO exercises, utilizing and validating the JRSOI infrastructure investments, and serving as operational rehearsals before returning these forces back to their CONUS home stations.

Justifications

China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been and continues to rapidly expand its capabilities in the Western Pacific: "The Chinese Navy is already acknowledged as being larger than its American counterpart . . . [and] has also spent two decades investing in anti-access/area-denial weapons to push both the American Navy and Air Force back far from its shores."²³ The former Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) commander, Admiral Philip S. Davidson, shocked the members of the Senate Armed Services Committee when he stated in 2021 that China may seek to reunify with Taiwan in the next six years. The newfound confidence of the NATO allies and their increased defense spending provides the United States the opportunity to shift forces to the Indo-Pacific during the period of strategic vulnerability from now until 2027, aptly titled the "Davidson Window."²⁴

Furthermore, there is a need to reassure allies and partners in the region. The Biden administration has already taken steps toward this goal, including high-profile visits and consultations with Pacific partners. However, these must also be backed up by a credible military posture in the region. The Ukraine crisis has stiffened the resolve of some Indo-Pacific allies and partners, specifically South Korea, Australia, and Japan; with Japan increasing its defense spending, reinvigorating its defense industrial base, purchasing offensive precision strike weapons, and debating amending its own pseudo-pacifist constitution.²⁵ The United States should exploit this by reinvigorating status of forces agreements with these countries and others such as the Philippines and Singapore, to expand access, basing, and overflight rights.

A force reposturing of combat credible air, naval, and reconnaissance forces from Europe to the Indo-Pacific is also critical to avoiding a Chinese *fait accompli* against Taiwan or other regional targets. A *fait accompli* is defined as something "accomplished and presumably irreversible."²⁶ In a military sense, this is a tactic designed to deter external intervention. . . . By rapidly changing facts on the ground, the aggressor could achieve its territorial goal before any third party could intervene. Once faced with an accomplished fact, third parties could only intervene by attempting to roll back the aggressor's territorial gains, which usually demands the use of force. Since using force is costly and risky, third parties are less likely to intervene after the *fait accompli* had already occurred.²⁷

The placement of these forces complicates the People's Republic of China's (PRC) desire for a short and decisive *fait accompli* against Taiwan—or any oth-

er objective—and risks the potential lengthening of a conflict. This introduces the possibility that the United States and its allies and partners would have the time required to muster a sufficient force to intervene and/or develop the international consensus required to levy devastating sanctions.

There is also the enduring and unavoidable risk of crisis erupting on the Korean Peninsula. Despite the sometimes-singular focus on China among senior U.S. decision-makers, North Korea remains a disruptive and potentially dangerous actor in the Indo-Pacific. With the arrival of the more conservative Yoon Suk Yeol administration in Seoul, there has been a distinct uptick in bellicose rhetoric coming from either side of the border. In April 2022, after the South Korean defense minister boasted of the ability to hit any target in North Korea with ballistic weapons, the north released a statement threatening to use nuclear weapons in retaliation. Any miscalculation or unintended escalation on the Korean Peninsula could have disastrous consequences throughout the region. Even if Kim Jong Un's nascent nuclear weapons arsenal was not used in a conflict, his regime still maintains the conventional capability to devastate large parts of South Korea. The capital of Seoul sits within range of more than 5,700 North Korean artillery pieces across the border, estimated to be capable of inflicting more than 200,000 casualties in the first hour of any conflict.²⁹ While there is already a credible U.S. force permanently stationed in South Korea, the reallocation of troops from Europe to posture against this threat increases deterrence and reduces the time required to respond to crisis with decisive force.

Risk and Risk Mitigation

Risk #1

The primary risk incurred with this reposturing of U.S. forces out of Europe during the next decade is the emboldening of Russia to attempt another opportunist military move in Eastern Europe. While the Russian military has taken significant losses in the current conflict, it is conceivable that over time it will be able to rebuild its military via a combination of conscription, easing of sanctions, and support from China. There is also the possibility that the intense sanctions against the Russian people, in combination with the West's contribution to mounting Russian casualties, will develop a desire for revenge among the Russian population. The withdrawal of U.S. troops during the next decade could send the message of a lack of commitment to the NATO alliance and Europe. With a newly rebuilt military, the lessons learned during their experience in Ukraine, and an angry populace at home, the Russians could look for a face-saving opportunity to strike back against the West.

Mitigation for Risk #1

This risk can and will be mitigated through a combination of military and economic means. Militarily, the continued rotation of U.S. troops to the eastern flank of NATO will serve as a demonstration of the continued American commitment to the alliance. While the overall force structure may decrease, this

deployment of combat credible formations to the most likely areas in which conflict would occur codifies the U.S. willingness to fight alongside its allies during crisis. Furthermore, the various DFEs and large-scale exercises will induce doubt in the minds of Russian decision-makers that they could achieve a quick victory before the United States could deploy a decisive war-winning force from CONUS. Finally, while it is unlikely that all of the current economic sanctions against Russia will continue in perpetuity during a frozen conflict scenario, some certainly will. It is recommended that the sanctions that most drastically impact the Russian people are gradually lifted over time in an attempt to reconnect them to the global community and avoid an extended feeling of victimization that could lead to demands for revenge. However, those sanctions currently in place targeting the Russian defense industrial base should remain and, where possible, expand to slow or stop Russia's ability to rebuild its military post conflict.³⁰

Risk #2

The second major risk is a loss of U.S. leadership in NATO during the next decade. This risk can manifest itself in several ways. The first is an appearance of a reduced U.S. interest to NATO, which could drive the European member states to question the commitment of their transatlantic ally. The second could be a hit to U.S. weapons exports if NATO member states expand their own domestic industrial base and increase their exports on the continent. This would be a major hit to U.S. defense firms who, from 2016 to 2020, sold \$51.3 billion in arms to NATO countries.³¹ The final way this risk could manifest itself would be a European-led NATO alliance taking unwanted military action contrary to U.S. strategic goals. Until now, all NATO use-of-force operations have been U.S.-led and supported to include Bosnia, Kosovo, Libya, and Afghanistan. Debates have existed for years to determine what type of out-of-region operations, if any, NATO should conduct.³² In the most extreme circumstances, the risk exists that a European led NATO could result in a Suez Canal-type crisis moment in which the United States found itself fundamentally at odds with a military action taken by its allies.

Mitigation for Risk #2

This risk can be mitigated by developing an official or unofficial rotation requiring the deputy SACEUR and NATO secretary general to be Americans when the SACEUR is European. The absence of an American SACEUR does not need to mean a commensurate absence of U.S. leadership. The United States can continue to drive NATO initiatives and actively avoid the creation of a power vacuum in the alliance. Even after a decade-long partial drawdown in Europe, the United States will still be the largest single contributor to NATO and able to exert significant influence over the alliance. Furthermore, the United States still dominates in certain military capabilities, such as intratheater maritime and air lift as well as cyber and ballistic missile defense, which make it

indispensable to the alliance. The United States can simultaneously encourage an increase in European leadership and confidence in NATO, while maintaining its stewardship of the organization.

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The Ethical Character of Russia's Offensive Cyber Operations in Ukraine

Testing the Principle of Double Effect

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Abstract: Cyber weapons have the potential to achieve strategic military aims in a manner that reduces physical harm, but they can also be used to enhance and expand the lethality of conventional weapons and tactics. When designed to collect private data, cyber weapons can facilitate assassination, kidnapping, torture, and other severe violations of human rights and international law. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not the first time that cyber weapons have been deployed for military purposes; however, it is likely the first example of cyber warfare tactics being deployed in a sustained and strategically significant manner in the context of conventional war. To assess the ethical character of Russia's offensive cyber operations against Ukraine, it is helpful to leverage the principle of double effect, which enables a more precise evaluation of the relationship between the intentions that motivate an act and the effects of the act once it has been taken. Drawing on this principle, this article argues that Russia's offensive cyber operations in Ukraine represent an unjust use of force and proposes ways of enhancing the ethical character of cyber warfare in future conflicts.

Keywords: cyber warfare, cyber ethics, Vulkan Files, virtue ethics, just war, principle of double effect

Within minutes of President Vladimir Putin's announcement on 24 February 2022 that Russia was to commence hostilities in Ukraine, explosions could be heard in major Ukrainian cities. Simultaneously, military vehicles and personnel crossed the Ukrainian border.¹ While Moscow sought to downplay the significance of its actions by referring to them

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simply as a “special military operation,” it was clear that Russia had initiated a war of aggression against Ukraine.² Russia’s attacks, however, were not simply kinetic in nature. Silently, and away from the news cameras, another invasion was also taking place in the domain of cyberspace. In concert with conventional forces, teams of hackers were busy assaulting communications satellites, critical infrastructure, media outlets, financial institutions, and more. Many of these cyberattacks commenced well before the start of physical hostilities and have continued to proliferate in the months since the invasion began.³ While much has been said and written about the ethics of Russia’s wider invasion, this article seeks to explore distinctly the ethical character of Russia’s offensive cyber warfare operations against Ukraine.

According to the principles of many ethical systems, assessing the ethical character of an action requires an evaluation of its underlying intentions. To conduct such an evaluation, one might find it helpful to turn to the works of Thomas Aquinas, the medieval theologian and philosopher on whose work much of the contemporary just war theory is built.⁴ Beyond his specific comments on war, which this article will also address, Aquinas addresses the ethical use of force more broadly. On the question of whether it is licit to kill in self-defense, Aquinas remarks that “nothing prohibits one act from having two effects, of which only one is within the [agent’s] intention, while the other is outside of the [agent’s] intention (*praeter intentionem*).” Aquinas goes on to note that “moral acts are of a particular kind based on what is intended and not according to what is outside the intention.”⁵ For Aquinas, then, the moral character of an act is rooted in its intention: even if the act produces some adverse outcomes (such as the death or injury of another), it can still be considered morally just if the action is undertaken with a morally right intention (for example, protecting one’s own life).⁶ While it is customary to understand Aquinas’s conclusions as barring intentional killing, Gregory M. Reichberg, a noted scholar of Aquinas, suggests that Aquinas may have sought to differentiate instead between “killing as a means and killing as an end.” Within this reading of Aquinas, it is possible to suggest that killing may be an intentional outcome of an action so long as the force that caused that death is “necessary and proportionate” to the threat.⁷ Whether one considers killing in a localized manner (such as the killing of an armed intruder in a home) or at the aggregate level (such as a military killing in war), it seems clear that, for Aquinas, what is ethically central is the intention that one has for the end state of a situation.

Aquinas’s logic, which has come to be known as the “principle (or doctrine) of double effect,” has had vast implications not just in terms of examining cases of self-defense but also regarding how other violent or harmful acts are evaluated, including acts of harm, which occur in the context of armed conflict.⁸ Applying this analysis tool to the context of war is not without criticism.⁹ The classical just war tradition, for example, takes considerable interest in the effects of military action: militaries must certainly have the right intentions for waging war (*jus ad bellum*) but, significantly, must also conduct themselves in

a restrained manner while prosecuting the war (*jus in bello*).¹⁰ For professional militaries, unintended but foreseen harms need to be carefully considered. Nonetheless, the principle of double effect cannot simply be rejected as incompatible with just war, and it has been used with significant effect in the ethical evaluation of conflict.¹¹ Michael Walzer, for instance, employs it extensively within his classic work *Just and Unjust Wars*. However, he proposes a slight modification—or perhaps clarification—to Aquinas’s argument by suggesting that the double effects of an act (the positive and negative outcomes) are defensible only if they are the product of a *double intention*:

- 1) like Aquinas, one’s intention needs to be a “good” or moral outcome, while
- 2) the foreseeable evil must be reduced to the fullest extent possible.¹²

This article will apply Walzer’s slightly revised rendering of Aquinas’s argument by suggesting that an ethical assessment of Russia’s offensive cyber operations requires an examination of both their intentions and their desire to reduce harm. This nuance is important generally, but especially so in the context of cyber warfare, as military action in the cyber domain has a particular capacity to be carried out in a manner that minimizes human suffering when compared with conventional arms.

The Vulkan Files: Shedding Light on Russia’s Cyber Capabilities

At the end of March 2023, the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, in conjunction with global journalistic partners, published an extensive body of reporting based on a yearlong analysis of documentation leaked by someone with access to critical files maintained by NTC Vulkan, an information technology consulting firm based in Russia. Publicly, Vulkan boasts corporate relationships with well-known firms such as IBM and Toyota Bank. However, according to *Der Spiegel*’s analysis, the firm

is home to programmers and hackers with a sinister mission: sowing chaos and causing destruction. For example: Paralyzing the computer systems of an airport so that the tower can no longer communicate with planes. Or triggering train derailments using a software program that deactivates all safety controls. Or interrupting power supplies.¹³

It is no secret that Russia has made cyber warfare a central component of its overall warfighting strategy in Ukraine. According to analysis by Microsoft, Russian cyberattacks against Ukraine have been “destructive and relentless” and often utilized in a manner “likely aimed at undermining Ukraine’s political will and ability to continue the fight, while facilitating collection of intelligence that could provide tactical or strategic advantages to Russian forces.”¹⁴ This reality aligns to the reported efforts being undertaken at Vulkan on behalf of Russian security and defense agencies where tools were developed relating to “all aspects

of modern-day cyber warfare, ranging from censorship and the manipulation of social media content to attacks on critical infrastructure,” including a system code named Amezit, which was designed to gain control over electronic communications within specific geographic regions such as the Donbas or Crimea. The leaked documentation also indicated that Vulkan was charged with training personnel on deploying cyber weapons “to execute attacks on critical infrastructure,” including rail, aviation, shipping, electricity, and water. Additionally, the files demonstrated that linkages exist between Vulkan and notorious hacker collectives such as Sandworm and Cozy Bear, both of which have been responsible for considerable cyberattacks, including attacks against the United States.¹⁵ As the scholar George Lucas reminds us, “cyber weapons and tactics [that are] designed to attack civilians and civilian (noncombatant) targets” are “illegal, and decidedly immoral, in the conventional case.”¹⁶

Has Real World Harm Been Caused?

Designing cyber weapons capable of inflicting significant damage on an adversary is one thing. It is another for them to be deployed successfully in war. The current conflict between Russia and Ukraine is not the first time one nation has deployed cyber weapons against another.¹⁷ For example, Russia is believed to have launched a significant and far-reaching distributed denial of service attack against Estonia in 2007 and used similar tactics during their short war with Georgia the following year.¹⁸ Arguably the most famous example of cyber warfare was the deployment of the Stuxnet computer worm, which was purportedly developed in a joint Israeli-American venture and deployed against the Islamic Republic of Iran’s nuclear program. Discovered in 2010, Stuxnet’s deployment resulted in physical damage to Iran’s nuclear infrastructure.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine is the “first major conflict involving large-scale cyber operations.”²⁰ Like other aspects of Russia’s war, these cyber operations have been largely ineffective. Having previous experience with Russian cyberattacks, Ukraine was well-prepared defensively, and the nation was “assisted in its cyber defense by friendly countries and private actors with whom it had developed cooperative relationships before the conflict,” a reality that underscores the vital link between defense in the cyber domain and the “soft power” of Ukraine’s relationship with “allies, global tech firms, and networks of information security researchers.” All of this enabled Ukraine to “mobilize defenses unavailable to others.”²¹ It is possible also to suggest, as some have, that Russia has demonstrated some restraint in the cyber domain in order to limit the risk of “spillover effects,” which “might in turn expand the conflict beyond its kinetic geographic boundaries,” a risk that can materialize “much faster and more widely in the cyber domain.”²²

Nonetheless, suggesting that Russia’s cyber operations have failed to generate real-world harm would be wrong. In March 2023, for example, the Human Rights Center at the University of California Berkeley law school filed a communication with the International Criminal Court (ICC) regarding “cy-

ber war crimes” committed by Russian personnel against Ukraine. Adopting a broad definition of “violence,” which includes the means of an operation and its effects, the communication alleges significant violent practices often directed against civilians and critical infrastructure such as Ukraine’s power grid. The complaint states bluntly, “Russian cyber forces have committed serious crimes against victims who suffered real harm.”²³

Ukraine has made similar claims of cyber war crimes. Victor Zhora, chief digital transformation officer at the State Service of Special Communication and Information Protection, has claimed that Russia has launched cyberattacks on Ukrainian thermal energy facilities while simultaneously attacking those facilities with lethal weapons. Zhora notes that similarly coordinated attacks have been carried out against energy production facilities in the cities of Odesa, Lviv, and Mykolaiv. Each of these attacks used cyber weapons to expand the harm caused by conventional attacks to degrade “data services, IT infrastructure, power grids, telecommunications, and critical infrastructure.” Zhora notes that all of these resources and utilities are relied on by noncombatant citizens. In addition, Zhora has claimed that Russia has used “filtration procedures” to access private data owned by noncombatants. This data has been utilized to determine whether individuals were involved in military or political service. In some cases, this illegally seized information was used to capture, kill, or torture those individuals.²⁴

A Just Intent?

While the revelations about Russia’s offensive cyber operations are startling, they are not surprising. It has long been known that Russia has been investing in and utilizing offensive cyber capabilities.²⁵ It is equally valid that many of the ambitions behind the Russian cyber weapon program (degrading critical infrastructure and supply channels, undermining command and control capabilities, and exhausting the civilian population) are not unique to the cyber environment.²⁶ Throughout the history of war, seemingly all nations have sought these same aims through conventional arms and tactics. One could find similar examples in nearly every conflict, modern or ancient.

Not only are these actions common in warfare, but a case can be made that cyber weapons, as a less destructive and less lethal alternative to conventional arms, are morally preferable to the kinetic alternative. In a chapter titled “Moral Cyber Weapons,” Dorothy Denning and Bradley Strawser thoughtfully noted that “under certain conditions, [the use of cyber weapons] can actually become morally obligatory. When these conditions are satisfied, states not only have the morally permissible option of using cyber weapons, but a moral duty to do so.” They go on to argue that

states are morally obliged to use cyber weapons in place of kinetic weapons for a just attack whenever doing so does not result in a significant loss of capability. The reason for this moral obligation is that cyber weapons reduce both the risk to one’s own (putatively just) military

and the harm to one's adversary and non-combatants. Overall, cyber weapons are more humane, less destructive, and less risky than kinetic weapons for achieving certain military effects.²⁷

Arguments like those made by Denning and Strawser are essential. However, they assume an “either/or” approach to weapon selection wherein states select the weapon system that provides the least lethal means of securing mission accomplishment. A different reality has materialized since Denning and Strawser's work was initially published. Within this new reality, states have tended toward using cyber weapons not as a means of de-escalation or harm reduction but, instead, as a means of supplementing and enhancing the efficacy of conventional attacks. This has been demonstrated in combat, especially in the contemporary Russia-Ukraine conflict, as well as in wargaming, where “substitutive cyber operations play a much more limited role in players' strategies.”²⁸ Modern conflict integrates warfighting capabilities from across all domains, and wargamers are increasingly aware of this reality.

The rise of multidomain warfare, including the cyber domain, has understandably generated considerable interest from major corporations in the technology industry, which are increasingly vital industrial partners for militaries. For example, in the Ukrainian context, Microsoft has provided extensive analysis related to the threats faced by Ukraine's cyber infrastructure. In their determination, Russia has extensively linked its cyber operations and kinetic operations. They note,

We observed that cyber and kinetic military operations appeared to be directed toward similar military objectives. Threat activity groups often targeted the same sectors or geographic locations around the same time as kinetic military events. Analysis of Microsoft signals with open-source kinetic attack data shows high concentrations of malicious network activity frequently overlapped with high-intensity fighting during the first six plus weeks of the invasion.²⁹

Such trends have continued, and while many cyberattacks have lacked destructive capability or have been otherwise thwarted by Ukrainian cyber defenses, they have continued to be used to enhance and expand the destructive potential of Russia's conventional weapons and tactics.

For Russia, the strategy of using cyber operations alongside rather than as a substitute for conventional weapons and tactics should not be surprising. In 2013, for instance, General Valery Gerasimov, then the chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces, wrote in the military journal *Military-Industrial Kurier* that the “rules of war have changed” and that non-military actions were increasingly critical in achieving strategic success by way of destabilizing an adversary's population. Nonetheless, General Gerasimov notes that the success of these nonmilitary actions “is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational

conflict.”³⁰ Thus, one can readily conclude that Russia, for at least a decade, has been cultivating a strategy where cyber operations (informational conflict) are seen as a supplement to more lethal forms of military engagement.

Alternative approaches do exist. Understanding cyber weapons as being a potentially morally preferable option to conventional arms can be demonstrated through historical case studies. Consider the Stuxnet computer worm, which caused Iranian nuclear centrifuges to self-destruct. As Lucas points out, Stuxnet was designed to comply with all applicable humanitarian constraints in international law; it only targeted military hardware, did not kill or injure anyone, and resulted in no collateral damage.³¹ Additionally, its deployment did not lead to armed conflict, demonstrating that cyber weapons can be utilized as a strategic deterrence tool. Stuxnet demonstrates that an ethical cyber warfare strategy is possible while further underscoring how Russia has intentionally chosen to avoid such a strategy. As Ariel Levite points out in a working paper for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “What sets these operations apart is primarily the Russian willingness to cause extensive collateral damage during its operation, contrasted against the United States’ exceptional caution to avoid doing so.”³²

The Principle of Double Effect

Jus ad bellum principles require a state to have a just cause if its wider warfighting efforts are to be considered just.³³ Examples of a just cause include self-defense against an armed attack, supporting an ally, or intervening in dire humanitarian emergencies.³⁴ In the case of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the United Nations General Assembly has overwhelmingly condemned Russia’s actions as lacking a just cause.³⁵ Arguably, this renders any military activity conducted by Russia unjust (save, perhaps, for lifesaving efforts). However, even if it were to be assumed that Russia’s cause was just—or that it might be just—the essential question that must be asked regarding cyber warfare is this: Is Russia utilizing cyberattacks as a means of reducing the harm experienced by their adversary? This question returns us to our initial “double intention” criteria for assessing this issue through the lens of the principle of double effect.

As Denning and Strawser point out, it is quite possible that a state could use cyber capabilities to answer this question in the affirmative, even while engaging in multidomain warfare.³⁶ One can imagine a moral actor concerned principally with strategic mission accomplishment while significantly reducing harm to people and property, as was the case with Stuxnet. If this were Russia’s ambition, one could see that the principle of double effect could validate the morality of Russia’s use of cyber weapons. After all, while some harm might be done to civilians, that harm would ultimately be in pursuit of resolving hostilities less destructively, leading to fewer deaths and reducing the death and destruction associated with war. Such a dual intention would broadly satisfy the ethical standards set forth by the principle of double effect in the context of armed conflict.

This, however, does not appear to be Russia's intent. Far from seeking to reduce harm, Russia's use of cyber weapons appears designed to enhance and expand the lethality of its military's conventional weapons and tactics. For example, Russia's most notable success in the conflict to date in cyberspace was its effective disruption of Viasat satellite services immediately preceding its land invasion, an apparent attempt to undermine communications systems on which the Ukrainian armed forces relied for command-and-control purposes. However, while this attack seems to have fallen short of its broadest goals, it is also apparent that it and other cyber operations conducted before the invasion were not designed to deter hostilities but to better enable them.³⁷ The intent of this cyberattack seems clear: Russia's aim was not to reduce harm but to expand its ability to make war through more violent and destructive means. This tactic appears to be part of a broader strategy for cyber operations as opposed to isolated cases of malfeasance.

Like previous versions, Russia's most recent 2021 *National Security Strategy* makes limited reference to military ethics and does not provide a moral theory that constrains or guides military activity.³⁸ It does, however, give much greater priority to the information domain than previous versions, suggesting that "the retention and multiplication of traditional Russian spiritual-moral values" are "the foundation of Russian society" and that some of the greatest threats to these "spiritual-moral values" comes vis-à-vis the cyber domain.³⁹ It is clear that the Russian Federation seeks to justify an expansion of military activity in this domain by linking it not only to national security but also to national identity and values. At the same time, the *National Security Strategy* does indicate prioritization of "quality of life" and the "wellbeing of Russian nationals" as key goals and guides.⁴⁰ While Ukraine, and the wider international community, would strongly disagree with the suggestion that Ukrainians are "Russian nationals," this is indeed a claim that Russia itself has made. Russia has used this as justification for its invasion. President Vladimir Putin, for instance, has regularly referred to Russians and Ukrainians as "one people."⁴¹ In a 2019 interview, President Putin claimed, "I believe that Russians and Ukrainians are one people . . . one nation, in fact."⁴² If Russia genuinely believed this to be true, any attack on the Ukrainian people or their infrastructure would seem to conflict with the nation's stated ethical and moral intention of protecting the wellbeing of Russian nationals within their defense strategy. There is a glaring inconsistency between Russia's political and moral rhetoric.

It is true that the notion of "intent" can be somewhat nebulous, which is why Just War criteria also demands consideration of specified and permissible just causes.⁴³ One might suggest that every nation that has ever gone to war has done so because they believed, from their unique perspective, that their cause was just. Those on the receiving end of military action rarely agree. How, then, can outside parties assess the intent of another? In the case of Russia, we can take their public statements seriously. Russia has made several public statements about its intentions behind invading Ukraine. President Putin, for instance,

has spoken of the threat of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) expansion into the former Soviet bloc, as well as baseless claims of genocide against ethnic Russians and a desire to "denazify" Ukraine, which he addressed when announcing the start of his "special military operation" on the morning of 24 February 2022.⁴⁴ While we may acknowledge that there will always be some asymmetric knowledge on this account, it is also important to note that the principle of double effect demands harmony between intent and its corresponding acts. Thus, the principle can be examined in reverse. If we cannot fully understand one party's intent, we can examine their actions and decide whether they have any reasonable connection to the pursuit of justice and peace. In *Ethics and Cyber Warfare*, George Lucas makes space for "an impartial court of public opinion" in determining the legitimacy of cyber vigilantism.⁴⁵ This suggests that public perception has a valid role in assessing a given reality's ethical character. A similar logic can be applied here: if this connection cannot be reasonably determined, then we can reasonably conclude that the intention that motivated the action is unjust and, as such, the military action fails to satisfy the principle of double effect.

Let us return to Aquinas's initial example of one who kills in self-defense. For him, the actor's intention is the central locus in judging an act's morality. One can be confronted with two dead bodies: one killed by someone defending themselves and another killed in anger. While the result is the same in both circumstances, only the former can be considered a just act because the intent was not the evil of death but the goodness of self-preservation. However, Aquinas also notes that "an act proceeding from a good intention may be rendered illicit if it is out of proportion to the end."⁴⁶ In other words, the harm that is caused must not be excessive or needless. If one needs to kill to defend one's life, so be it. However, if one can defend one's life with other-than-lethal force, all the better. In that case, killing would be unjust because the intention becomes to kill rather than simply do what is necessary to preserve one's life. In this, we can see that Aquinas and Walzer's view of the principle of double effect are well aligned: it is not merely enough to possess a right intention, but one must also fight for that right intention in a manner that does not artificially amplify or justify excessive force.⁴⁷ To borrow the language of the International Committee of the Red Cross, it is prohibited to use "means and methods of warfare which are of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering."⁴⁸ While this prohibition has generally not yet been extended to cyber weapons, it does provide a particular moral direction about how any instruments of war can be ethically and legally utilized. Such a determination of whether an outcome is "superfluous" or "unnecessary" depends on reconciling those actions to a just intent and reconciling them to what is both necessary and proportionate to realize that intent.

Russia's cyber operations against Ukraine continually fail to satisfy even these basic ethical principles. Whether one examines Russia's cyber warfare strategy through the lens of the court of public opinion, leaked documentation,

or simply by referencing the real-world effects of its actions, the conclusion must be made that Russia's intention for its cyber warfare program is not the deterrence of conflict or the minimization of harm in war, but rather to enhance the lethal and destructive force of their conventional military power while, simultaneously, expanding the war's adverse impacts on noncombatants.

Just Cause and Military Necessity

As previously indicated, the principle of double effect does not always neatly fit within the just war tradition, despite both being derived in large part from the work of Aquinas. This is likely because Aquinas's comments on killing in self-defense imagine a singular individual, while his remarks on war envision the work of a public authority. Aquinas draws a vital distinction between private self-defense and the use of force by representative governments.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, their conceptual linkage centers on a shared desire for peace. Just as an individual who needs to defend themselves does not desire to harm another person, the goal of states should be to avoid conflict and, if that is not possible, to achieve victory in a manner that limits war's harmful effects, primarily on noncombatants.

The principle of double effect informs the just war tradition, particularly as it relates to the *jus ad bellum* principle of just cause and the *jus in bello* principle of necessity, both of which are cornerstone elements of the just war tradition. Carefully considering the principle of double effect enables political and military leaders to reflect on their true intentions in carrying out armed conflict and, secondarily, to consider what is necessary to realize that intention.

Interestingly, within his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas differentiates between a "just cause" and a "proper intention." His assessment of the former is brief, simply saying that "those who are attacked deserve to be attacked on account of some fault." For some additional depth, he quotes Augustine who wrote (in his *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*) that just wars "avenge wrongs" when another city or state "has to be punished either for refusing to make amends for what was done unjustly by its subjects or to restore what was wrongly taken." Thus, we can conclude that within the works of Aquinas, a just cause for war can only be a response to harm caused by another party. By contrast, Aquinas explains that a "proper intention" is either the advancement of the good in the world or the avoidance of evil. Quoting Augustine again (in his *On the Words of the Lord*), Aquinas shares that a just war should be "carried on with a zeal for peace, that evil be restrained and the good assisted."⁵⁰ In this manner, Aquinas concedes that a war can be prosecuted with a just cause (correction of injustice) and still be morally illicit if the ambition of the military response is vengeance, cruelty, lust for power, and other immoral motivations. This distinction, while nuanced, helps assess Russia's offensive cyber operations in Ukraine because it reveals an essential truth: even if one were to take seriously Russia's claim that their cause is just, it could also be said that their warfighting enterprise remains illicit because their intentions are so ethically distorted.

Regarding military necessity, the principle of double effect requires that any harmful or destructive actions must be in pursuit of a right intention (the restoration of peace) instead of being pursued for their own purposes (the desire to kill or harm). Referencing the English philosopher Henry Sidgwick, Walzer notes that it is not permissible to do “any mischief which does not tend materially to the end [of victory], nor any mischief of which the conduciveness to the end is slight in comparison with the amount of mischief.”⁵¹ Said another way, a target is deemed a military necessity—and thus a just target—if and only if striking it is clearly purposeful in relation to achieving the just intention or goal. It is clear, then, that Russia’s offensive cyber operations against Ukraine fail to meet these standards.

Conclusion and Application

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been characterized by egregious breaches of military ethics and human decency, many related to indiscriminate targeting or intentional attacks on civilians. Compared to destroyed apartment buildings, sexual violence, torture, and ruined hospitals, Russia’s military activity in cyberspace may seem relatively minor, especially when one considers that they have not been as effective as they were designed to be.⁵² Nonetheless, Russia’s cyber operations have been extensive, and the nation has long sought to develop disruptive cyber capabilities intended to have an outsized impact on civilian infrastructure and amplify the effects of conventional weapons and tactics. Ukraine and others have suggested that Russia’s cyber activity is at least complicit in aiding war crimes.

As the Vulkan leaks have demonstrated, there is a growing potential for cyber operations to bring about significant harm to civilian populations, as well as a genuine appetite for such harm to be realized. The Russia-Ukraine conflict may be the first major conflict that leveraged large-scale cyber operations, but it will not be the last.⁵³ Countries worldwide, including the United States, are investing in offensive and defensive cyber capabilities, and it is reasonable to assume that cyber will play an ever-expanding role in future conflicts.⁵⁴ This is especially true as an increasing share of the world becomes connected to the internet and as the Internet of Things continues to proliferate.⁵⁵

Learning from Russia’s ethical failures in the cyber domain, those who desire to fight with honor would do well to remain focused on both their intentions and the effects of their corresponding actions. Ethics demands that war be waged for just purposes, but it also demands that the actions that states take in war—including those taken in cyberspace—be done with the right intentions and in a way that seeks to minimize harm. Cyber weapons do have the potential to achieve these goals while helping nations fight well. However, as Russia has demonstrated, they can also amplify violence, adversely impact noncombatants, and degrade targets that are not of military necessity. Such actions must be avoided in future conflicts. The United States recently released a public fact sheet on the 2023 Department of Defense cyber strategy that concludes with

these words: “With a robust and integrated cyber capability, the Department will work to deter conflict where it can and prevail where it must.”⁵⁶ This guiding ethos conforms well to the principle of double effect: the stated mission is to deter conflict and minimize harm. However, if it must engage in conflict in the cyber domain, the United States will prevail in accordance with a just intent.

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The Cold War Computer Arms Race

Captain Bryan Leese, USN, PhD

Abstract: The Cold War computer arms race illustrates the military's role in strategic competition. The Soviets bought and stole, versus creating computer technology themselves. A U.S.-led coalition integrated economic, diplomatic, and information mechanisms, embargoing computer technology to disadvantage the Soviets. President Ronald W. Reagan's offset strategy integrated military power, openly demonstrating computer-infused weapons lethality that jeopardized Soviet quantitative military advantage. President Reagan's use of the computer arms race shows a way to conduct and integrate a strategic competition campaign of deterrence that includes coercive diplomacy with diplomatic efforts that can deter China and Russia while encouraging them to reverse harmful foreign and domestic policies.

Keywords: Cold War, competition, computers, deterrence, coercion, technology, embargo, industrial espionage

In 1992, former assistant secretary of defense Leslie H. Gelb recalled an off-the-record conversation with Chief of the Soviet General Staff Marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov that had taken place in 1983. The plainspoken, hardline general of the Soviet state made it clear that, in his opinion, the Cold War was essentially over. In Ogarkov's mind, Gelb recalled, the West had won because [The] numbers of [Soviet] troops and weapons mean little, he said. We cannot equal the quality of U.S. arms for a generation or two. Modern military power is based upon technology, and technology is based upon computers. In the U.S., he continued, small children—even before they begin school—play with computers. Computers are everywhere in America. Here, we don't even have computers in every office of the

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Defense Ministry. And for reasons you know well, we cannot make computers widely available in our society. Then came his portentous punch line: We will never be able to catch up with you in modern arms until we have an economic revolution. And the question is whether we can have an economic revolution without a political revolution.¹

Ogarkov recognized that within the competition that defined the Cold War, the Soviets had lost the computer arms race to the United States. Without computers, no number of men or weapons could overcome the United States' asymmetrical technologic advantages.

This article examines the competition over computer technology during the Cold War. It highlights the importance of technology in shaping competitive strategies and illustrates some of the military's role in a successful, integrated strategic competition campaign. The Cold War computer arms race provides context for current and future competition with China and Russia.

The Problem

Ogarkov's Cold War observation regarding competition is prescient today. Seeing peace and war as binary conditions does not help us understand the great power competition (GPC) with China and Russia. Peace does not exist, just the absence of war. Competition, some cooperation, and the fear of a possible conflict are the reality. The U.S. Joint force is shifting to a strategic competition paradigm that better fits today's reality by leveraging its dominance in the technology arena.² However, the United States' technical superiority in conventional and nuclear weapons has lessened. China is now considered a peer military threat.

The United States is increasing its emphasis on research and development of artificial intelligence and autonomous unmanned weapons systems, among other technologies, to grow the capabilities gap between it and China. At the same time, the United States must control technology transfer to slow China, Russia, and others. But the U.S. defense acquisition system is seen as too slow and its controls too weak. Even its recent efforts, like the Adaptive Acquisition Framework, to speed up weapon system development and deployment have yet to significantly increase the United States' technological comparative advantage.³ China's technology and weapon systems development keeps pace by supplementing its efforts with academic and economic espionage.

A recent *New York Times* article reported a multiyear FBI investigation exposing a pervasive, systematic, and vast "economic espionage offensive . . . waged unilaterally by China" against U.S. military technology companies.⁴ Economic and academic espionage is a strategic competition mechanism, leveraging theft to shorten technology development and fielding time lines. The technologically advanced side's desire to manage competition escalation through cooperation often makes theft possible. Finding ways to cooperate on a narrow set of common interest areas, like medical technologies or fighting climate change, re-

duces pressure in military and economic competition areas prone to escalation. However, the cooperation aids in technology transfer and theft.

Today's Chinese industrial espionage appears eerily like the Soviet Union's during the Cold War. As seen with détente, the United States' desire to use academic and economic cooperation created Soviet access to dual civilian and military use technologies. And the Soviets, like the Chinese today, benefited especially from access to the computer and digital technologies. The United States' technology dealings with China in the twenty-first century seem to have forgotten the 1970s and 1980s Cold War computer arms race lessons.⁵

The Cold War Computer Competition Begins

Following the Second World War, the U.S. Navy reflected on the difficulty of air defense battle management during Japanese kamikaze air attacks. They realized that air defense in the jet age was untenable without automation. The Navy blended technologies from cryptography, analog gunnery computers, and the calculation of ballistic missile trajectories to create a series of information management computers called the Naval Tactical Data System (NTDS) for air battle management.⁶

At the same time, the U.S. Air Force worked to create an integrated early warning and national air defense battle management system called the Semi-Automatic Ground Environment (SAGE). NTDS and SAGE developed intercomputer and teletype datalinks, improving human-to and computer-to-computer interaction. The two programs forged links with military research laboratories, commercial industry, and academic institutions that developed, built, and evolved computers. Throughout the 1950s, the collaboration produced the transistor, the integrated circuit (computer chip), the printed circuit card, and the Univac series of computers. The continually miniaturized computers using newly developed materials and techniques made them fit into ships and aircraft.⁷ The civilian-academic-military development provided technologies that International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), Control Data Corporation (CDC), and Honeywell adapted for commercial business and industry use.

In 1959, the Department of Defense created the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to exploit advanced ballistic missile defense and nuclear test detection technology. The space mission shifted to the newly created National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). ARPA focused on computer "internetting" (or what we call networking today) technology.⁸ Networking computers increased the overall computing power available and allowed data sharing. The 1962 Cuban missile crisis showed that the inability to share data across the national and military command and control (C2) systems almost resulted in a nuclear weapons conflict. The 1960s effort to consolidate and internet C2 systems created the Worldwide Military Command and Control System (WWMCCS, pronounced Wimex).

The theory critical to the success of networking was "distributed commu-

nication,” proposed by Paul Baran at Rand in the early 1960s.⁹ The human brain, Baran observed, overcame damage to the neural network by rerouting messages across its distributed pathways. He argued that a computer network could do the same by breaking messages into many blocks. Each block had an identity or handover code and destination address. The blocks were stored and forwarded through the “shortest instantaneously available path through the network.” Baran dubbed the store and forward approach as “hot-potato” heuristic routing. As the blocks arrived, the message was reassembled using the handover code.¹⁰ ARPA’s network project (ARPANET) focused on expanding computer time-sharing using distributed communication networks.¹¹

Baran widely published his research and simulations. His concepts were radical, disruptive thinking that challenged the current voice and data transmission approach. It took several years before the concepts were adopted.¹² Finally, on 29 October 1969, two computer nodes, one at Stanford Research Institute (SRI), Menlo Park, CA, and another at UCLA’s Boelter Hall, Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA, some 563 kilometers apart, were able to internet. Today’s World Wide Web (WWW), a global system of interconnected computer networks, was born with the simple networking of those two computers.

In the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, the U.S. and Western computer industries produced more and more computers, making them smaller, more powerful, and more connected. The West’s computer industry validated the increasing rate of technology growth that Gordon E. Moore, the cofounder of Fairchild Semiconductor and Intel, posited in 1965.¹³ In the Soviet Bloc, however, the computer industry lagged and struggled.

Soviet Cybernetics Development

Computer science theories, called cybernetic theories in the post–Second World War era, were pitched to top Soviet party leaders and condemned as a capitalist plot.¹⁴ Soviet military and economic planners, however, recognized the need for computers. It was a conundrum Ogarkov alluded to in his 1983 statement to Gorbachev. In classic Soviet doublespeak, the Soviets secretly pursued military computing while “condemning the West for doing the same.”¹⁵

After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, cybernetics slowly returned to the academic institution and Russian industry. Nikita Khrushchev broke with Stalin’s isolationism in the mid-1950s. Khrushchev felt that Stalin had culled many specialists needed to grow the economy. Under his de-Stalinization policy, Khrushchev somewhat liberalized society and reformed the Soviet industrial infrastructure. The problem with the economy, Khrushchev believed, was the oppressive centralization of its management. His policies looked to undo the party hierarchy by promoting specialists and creative thinkers above long-term party members.¹⁶

Khrushchev’s new policies had some initial success. The sale of consumer goods grew and so did the Soviet economy. Increased weapons sales to the Third World improved the economy while increasing Soviet influence and spreading

Communism. Budget reductions were also needed, and Khrushchev cut military manpower by 5.7 million from 1956 through 1957. He also increased the production of new technologies. Even with these changes, by 1959, the optimism that the Soviet economy would “bury” capitalism, as Khrushchev had exclaimed at a 1956 embassy reception in Moscow, was fading inside the party.¹⁷ Khrushchev believed he needed to decentralize economic policy making further. He removed the planning from the Kremlin, pushing it down to regional economic planning subcommittees. However, decentralization only works if the regional subcommittees share production and economic planning data. To do so required using cybernetics, the computers and integrated networks that Stalin had been against.¹⁸

The widespread administrative decentralization was anathema to the Soviet system. University of Tulsa professor Benjamin Peters argued that the decentralization contributed to the derailment of the Soviet cybernetic efforts. By marginalizing many party officials, the decentralization “further contribute[d] to the disarray and discontent associated with his [Khrushchev’s] leadership.” By the 1962 Cuban crisis, the Soviet national economy remained lethargic, and the “information management behind its planning were proving increasingly inadequate.”¹⁹ Disenfranchised top-party members took every opportunity to derail decentralization and the effort to “carry out wide-scale cybernetic structural reforms.” Seeing that his reforms were not working, Khrushchev found that decentralization left him “without the control over the very reforms he wished to enact.”²⁰ Though the Russian cyber science that led the cybernetic structural reform effort was solid, Peters argues, its demise was due to the unregulated internal competition between top party leaders for primacy.²¹

Like the Americans, the Soviet military used computers to improve strategic warning and decision-making. Unlike the American’s Wimex, the Soviet military created three separate warning and C2 networks for air defense, missile defense, and space surveillance. The three Soviet systems tried to match the centralized U.S. Air Force’s SAGE. However, they chose instead to develop three unconnected systems.²² A 1972 U.S. national intelligence estimate (NIE) reported that the Soviet ballistic missile warning network provided only negligible capability and “show[ed] no prospect of becoming effective against a major attack.” The air defense network was better, providing a “formidable defense.” The space surveillance system could track and likely intercept orbital satellites.²³ Soviet cybernetics was a series of “stovepipe” efforts limiting the collaboration required for large-scale computer production and implementation.

Soviet military cybernetics innovator Anatoly I. Kitov’s efforts to break the “stovepipes” illustrate the shortcomings of the Soviet’s effort. In 1956, Kitov proposed an ARPANET-like nationwide internet network, though it differed in the details of its design. In a 1959 report meant to go directly to Khrushchev, Kitov recommended that the military share its information management systems to improve civilian economic planning through internet-connected computers. The military dismissed Kitov’s recommendation, removed him as the

director of Computational Center-1 of the Ministry of Defense, and revoked his party membership for good measure.²⁴

The Soviet system continued to privilege highly classified military cybernetic efforts by defense ministries and institutions while isolating efforts by the civilian sector. There was no governing body to force cybernetic cooperation between the organizations. Khrushchev's reform had unwittingly created ministries and institutions "not only unwilling to cooperate . . . [but] often in hostile competition with their peer institutions."²⁵ Thus, Soviet cybernetic theories grew slowly, but throughout the 1960s, their practical application and the creation of a civilian computer industry lagged behind the West's.

Buy and Steal

In the Spring of 1970, the Communist Party realized they required more and better computers to compete with the West. The State Planning Committee (Gosplan) released a five-year economic plan directing a 260 percent increase in computer production. The Soviet computer industry could never meet this demand. The small industry leaned heavily on the IBM/360 platform, pirating the design for their Ryad model computers. But the industry could not produce the quantities desired.

Since the Soviets could not build the numbers directed, they looked toward détente to buy Western computers. It was a fateful decision.²⁶ Historian Simon Doing offers that the Soviets chose as they did because the West's computers were better than anything the Soviets were making. By buying computers, the Soviet states unwittingly adopted American technology and its standards. The dominance of English language-based computer operating software allowed American programmers to set the de facto standard for the world.²⁷

The Soviets throttled back on developing their computer production industry because the West seemed willing to fill the gap. Then, the Soviets discontinued most of their independent computer technology and industry development.²⁸ The Soviet's "take" approach was adequate if the West continued to sell them computers. The Soviets realized that the West might be unwilling to sell them computers at some point. Thus, they began an aggressive effort to steal the technology. The theft approach was not new.

As early as 1924, a steady stream of Soviet spies operating illegally under fake business or diplomatic credentials stole intellectual property from the West. By the 1980s, the Soviets had become experts at stealing industrial technology. The thefts occurred even during the Second World War when the Soviets, British, and Americans were allies.²⁹ Eugene S. Poteat, a senior Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) executive during most of the Cold War, wrote that the Soviet intelligence services stole "virtually all the West's military and defense technology secrets" in the post-Second World War era. The thefts saved the Soviets time and the expense of research and development; it allowed them to keep pace with the technology competition in the early days of the Cold War.³⁰

The West had a growing concern about selling computers to the Soviets. By

1973, the West sought to strengthen the diplomatic and economic sanctions used since 1948 to slow technology transfer to the Soviet Bloc. The control measures forced the Soviets to always “play catch-up” to the West in technology. The embargo’s trade controls were overseen by a consultative group of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members and Japan called the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Control (CoCom). There were more than 500 items embargoed from export to the Soviet Bloc and China. Embargoes are a double-edged sword; they also impeded the West’s economic expansion.

Historian Frank Cain wrote that the embargo policy created a growing divide “between the UK and USA concerning whether the trade should prevail over ideology.”³² Keeping the allies and industry on the same side regarding the embargo was challenging. Britain disagreed with many export strictures and used “exception provisions” to justify to CoCom the sales of computers. Further, the Soviet Bloc’s “general progress toward self-sufficiency” made some export controls seem obsolete. The list of export-controlled items and individual nations’ requests for exemption to the list was in constant tension.³³

Under détente, the strict export controls on the sale of computers lessened, replaced by a series of loose post-sale control mechanisms. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger codified the “free trade with conditions” position and post-sale controls of the Richard M. Nixon administration in the March 1974 national security decision memorandum (NSDM) 247. The memorandum increased the maximum computer processing rate requiring special export licenses, simultaneously expanding and strengthening the “post-sale safeguards.”³⁴ The safeguards were costly and extraordinary since they were executed on Soviet soil after export, a unique penetration of the closed Soviet state. The controls included on-site inspections by Westerners permanently based in the Soviet Union. Inspectors were authorized to scale down systems on-site if the computing power exceeded the agreed-upon requirement.³⁵ To Nixon, the controls were enough to maintain security and détente. Not everyone agreed.

Members of Congress perceived that selling technology to the Soviets eroded the United States’ technological advantage, no matter the strictures used. A 1970 intelligence community memorandum regarding the CoCom countries’ sales to the Soviet Bloc assessed a lessening of export control efficacy. The report, viewed through an alarmist lens, provoked further concern and analysis of détente-related trade relaxations.³⁶ A 1973 Rand report prepared for the Department of Defense and the Council on International Economic Policy offered that the computer gap between the United States and the Soviets had been reduced. The Soviets closed the gap by buying computers, conducting illegal technology transfers, and through industrial espionage.³⁷ None of the post-sale controls outlined by Kissinger was satisfactory to technology “protectionists” inside the military or Congress.

The United States feared the Soviets were catching up even when data countered the shrinking computer gap argument.³⁸ “Gap” theory, or the belief that an adversary has superiority in technology, weapons, and national power

compared to the United States, dominated U.S. strategic culture during the Cold War. Intelligence and defense communities hotly debated atomic weapons, bombers, and missile numbers.³⁹ While not as prominent as the weapons debates, the computer gap underpinned many technologies needed to develop and employ the weapons.

Trade issues with the Soviet Bloc came to the forefront in 1973. Nixon desired further reforms that opened trade, setting up a traditional domestic battle between “free trade” and “protectionist” groups.⁴⁰ Some protectionists in Congress claimed CoCom safeguards protected the use of the systems, not the transfer of technology.⁴¹ The debate continued throughout 1974 and 1975. The transfer of tangible technology, the systems, leading to a loss of intangible knowledge, the know-how, to the Soviets was the foundation of the J. Fred Bucy-led panel’s recommendation (the Bucy Report) in 1976. The report successfully advocated a conceptual shift from regulating physical goods to controlling know-how. The Bucy Report’s primary concern was not reverse engineering; it rejected that concern as an ineffective way of technology transfer. The real fear was that the Soviets might acquire so much experience operating and maintaining cutting-edge technology that they learned how to design and manufacture the computers themselves.⁴²

Computers Enhanced Warfare and Reagan’s Strategic Competition

Ronald Reagan saw “peace through strength” as the only approach to dealing with the Soviets; he swept into power. His predecessor, President James E. “Jimmy” Carter, had a stagnant national security strategy that looked to maintain the status quo of détente. His strategy failed. In 1976, new Soviet SS-20 intermediate-range missiles were deployed, forcing NATO to take a “dual-track” response. NATO negotiated the removal of the SS-20s while planning to deploy Pershing II and a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) version of the Navy’s Tomahawk.⁴³ The year 1979 became a year of crisis as the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the Shah of Iran was overthrown, American hostages were seized in Tehran, and the socialist Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua. Carter increased defense spending by around \$8 billion (\$32.6 million in 2022 dollars), focusing money on the technology-based offset strategy begun in 1972. Nevertheless, it was too late.⁴⁴

In 1981, Reagan reinvigorated the 30-year-old containment strategy and integrated it with more aggressive competition. By 1983, Reagan’s strategy was formed and in operation. Security Decision Directive 75 expressed his intention to “contain and over time reverse Soviet expansionism by competing effectively on a sustained basis with the Soviet Union in all international arenas.”⁴⁵ The United States would compete across a variety of security areas. Competition would include nuclear and conventional weapons development and employment using openly discussed war fighting strategies, economic sanctions, promotion of human rights, and efforts to undermine Soviet advancements in the

Third World by using open and covert support for anti-Soviet resistance movements in Eastern Europe, Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua.⁴⁶

Reagan started by emphasizing the expansion of U.S. military forces. He asked for an increase of \$43.4 billion in defense spending.⁴⁷ Expanding the force and making it more capable created symmetry and restored the military balance with the Soviets, an essential mechanism for deterrence. It also allowed for U.S. military "action across the entire spectrum of potential conflicts."⁴⁸ By preparing for conflict, the military provided a foundation of deterrence and coercion that countered Soviet competition, allowing the full range of U.S. and Western policies to be used against the Soviet Bloc.⁴⁹

However, increasing the military only mattered if the United States was willing to use the force. Removing the self-imposed post-Vietnam restrictions regarding the use of military force was Reagan's next goal. The willingness to use military power to achieve limited objectives that resulted in greater political ones was vital.⁵⁰ Reagan employed military force at least five times during his two terms in office.

Each time he used force, Bruce W. Jentleson argues, it was part of a broad coercive diplomacy effort. The use of force strategy "was more than deterrence but less than a quick, decisive military" outcome, Jentleson wrote, a methodical approach to force foreign policy restraint on the Soviets. For example, the CIA covertly supported Afghanistan mujahideen against the Soviet invasion. Conversely, the U.S. Marines deployed to Lebanon with the Multinational Force (MNF) in 1982–84. The Navy pressured Libya and eventually conducted a bombing in 1986. The Navy again was used in the 1987–88 reflagging of Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Arabian Gulf and the attack on Iranian naval forces.⁵¹

Short, sharp conflicts, like the invasions of Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989), and the display of new military technologies increased the perception of the lethality of U.S. military power. It supported the deterrence and coercive diplomacy effort.⁵²

The U.S. military's technological advantage gave Reagan an asymmetric offset in the military power competition. Détente had shrunk the computer gap, lessening the U.S. military's offset strategy. For Reagan, détente was dead. He restored and increased controls over technology transfers and sales to the Soviet Bloc. More critical technologies and equipment were added to the Co-Com embargo list, and national licensing procedures were changed to increase the effectiveness of enforcement efforts. Additionally, the United States began to unilaterally place export restraints on technology and equipment beyond the CoCom structure. In particular, the United States unilaterally embargoed computer technology associated with gas and oil production to impede Russia's petroleum-based economy.⁵³

There were vulnerabilities inside the growing, almost ubiquitous application of computer technologies. It was not enough to use embargoes to restrict transfers yet leave the computer networks themselves vulnerable. Since 1972, the National Security Agency (NSA) warned that the current computer internet

technology and policies were inadequate. For example, there was no separation of classified and unclassified networks, NSA and the Air Force noted, and users without clearances worked at the same consoles as those accessing classified data. The dual-use consoles were more convenient and saved time, but they created a significant risk of “accidental disclosure.”⁵⁴

In the early-1980s, revelations about U.S. information security and command and control systems weakness came to light. Soviet economic and military espionage was more extensive than previously understood. In 1981, KGB (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*) science and technology collector and informant for the French intelligence service, Vladimir Vetrov (code name Farewell), provided a list of KGB targets and the extent to which industrial espionage had penetrated U.S. and Western technology industries.⁵⁵ Geoffrey Arthur Prime, a British Government Communications Headquarters employee, was arrested in 1982. Retired U.S. Navy chief warrant officer John A. Walker was arrested in 1985. The arrests revealed that for at least two decades, defense secrets were stolen from the information systems; it drove home information network security concerns.⁵⁶

If the espionage unearthing was not enough, an incident in 1979 showed that data stored on a network could be manipulated, causing confusion that could lead to war. Someone at North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) inadvertently entered nuclear weapons attack simulation data. A missile attack warning was sent from the computer, and a short, sharp panic ensued before the alert was canceled. But little would be done to secure U.S. military networks until the 1983 movie *WarGames* was released. The movie’s premise was that a high school student deliberately hacked a Department of Defense computer, almost starting a global thermonuclear war. The movie inspired actions in the real world. A few high school students in Wisconsin hacked into unclassified Department of Defense computers that same year. Reagan acted quickly, creating policies and strictures that secured vital Department of Defense computers. Legislation, in the form of the Computer Security Act, would not catch up to policy until 1987.⁵⁷

Reagan continued to leverage the U.S. military to create force legitimacy by openly discussing conventional weapons development and employment strategies to defeat Warsaw Pact forces. The approach added a new narrative dimension to the competition. The United States was so confident in its technology overmatch, so went the narrative, that it was willing to reveal some of its capabilities. The capabilities, and unifying thinking regarding how to use them, are expressed through military doctrine.⁵⁸ For example, the AirLand Battle doctrine promulgated in 1982, and later, the new maritime strategy revealed in 1986 influenced how the United States and NATO thought of and planned-for war against Warsaw Pact land forces in Europe.⁵⁹

New U.S. military doctrine embraced emerging technologies that increased after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Combined with the lessons from the Vietnam War, the Yom Kippur War reinforced the necessity of air power in conduct-

ing modern land warfare. The Soviets had drawn the same lesson. They began modernizing their military in the late 1960s. Throughout the 1970s, the Soviets developed a concept of strategic operations using conventional force in Europe. The Warsaw Pact ground forces would attack in depth using initial and reinforcing echelons. The initial attacking units, operational maneuver groups, penetrated NATO defenses while the follow-on echelon exploited the breakthrough.⁶⁰

AirLand Battle was at the end of a doctrinal evolution addressing a series of technological improvements in both maneuver and reconnaissance-to-strike complexes. The improvements focused on attacking Soviet armor units in the initial and follow-on echelons to delay, disrupt, and destroy them before the Soviet Army could mass irresistible combat power. The U.S. Army would handle defeating the initial attacking units and the Air Force the follow-on echelons. AirLand Battle looked to exploit the perceived Warsaw Pact weakness of tactical rigidity, predictable echelonment, and technological inferiority.⁶¹

AirLand Battle doctrine drove an explosion in computer technology integrated battlefield systems development and procurement. The Air Force's battlefield air interdiction mission against follow-on forces led to the development of several standoff attack systems: the General Dynamics–Grumman EF-111 Raven standoff-jamming and reconnaissance platform, the laser-guided antitank Maverick air-to-surface missile, the McDonnell Douglas F-15 Eagle's beyond-visual-range radar missiles, and the specifically designed close-air-support tank killer, Fairchild Republic A-10 Thunderbolt II.⁶² Despite the Air Force's deep battle systems development, the Army also developed the highly maneuverable Boeing AH-64A Apache helicopter. The Apache could attack the initial echelon and follow-on forces using its advanced weapons targeting system with a 20-mm chain gun and laser-guided Hellfire missiles to attack troops and armor. They also developed the MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS). With a 306-kilometer range, the surface-to-surface missile ATACMS fired antipersonnel and antiarmor submunitions from a mobile multiple-launch rocket system.⁶³

Probably the most significant weapon system developed was the Assault Breaker demonstration program. Assault Breaker integrated several technologies developed during and after the Vietnam War, including lasers, electro-optical sensors, microelectronics, data processors, and radars. Its surveillance and targeting system supported surface (the ATACMS) and air-launched, long-range conventional weapons delivering a mass of smart submunition (bomblets) that could break up massing follow-on echelons. The program led to developing an airborne moving target indication radar called the "Pave Mover." The system could detect, track, and target slow-moving armored vehicles allowing long-range surface and air missiles to launch attacks.⁶⁴

The Soviets took notice of Assault Breaker when DARPA publicly demonstrated many of the required technological capabilities in 1976. In 1979, the Soviets simulated the Assault Breaker concept in a wargame. The game revealed

their European strategy was useless if Assault Breaker worked as advertised. By 1982, the United States had publicly demonstrated the Assault Breaker system; by 1983, some of the system's components were in production. In 1984, Marshal Ogarkov declared that the United States had achieved a "military-technical revolution" with its systems.⁶⁵

Both the Soviets and Americans recognized that the switch from analog to digital technologies and the increasing use of space-based systems for reconnaissance and communication allowed for the necessary real-time command and control of cross-domain operations. The Soviets further recognized that their estimate of a 10–12-year rearmament cycle had now greatly compressed. The current Soviet economy and the lessening of access to advanced Western technology in the post-détente environment resulted in a lack of capacity to match the U.S. military rearmament.⁶⁶

The Soviet military was concerned. The requirement for computers, machine-tool manufacturing, and microelectronics was essential to compete in the military-technical revolution. Yet, Soviet industry no longer sufficed, and the political support to fix the problem seemed limited. Marshal Ogarkov, wanting to keep pace with a growing Western military technology advantage, constantly argued for more money and improved military industry practices.⁶⁷ There was no money to be had. The Cold War landscape evolved, and a generational change occurred within the Soviet leadership. Ogarkov, mainly because he continued demanding that more money be poured into revamping Soviet conventional forces for a war no one wanted, was demoted in September 1984.⁶⁸

Computer Arms Race Comes to a Head

What led to the rise in U.S.-Soviet tensions were the events of 1983. On 8 March, Reagan called the Soviets the "focus of evil in the modern world" and advocated for deploying the Pershing II and GLCM missiles (delivered in November 1983) to Europe.⁶⁹ Fifteen days later, he announced his support for developing a Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) against ballistic missiles. Soviet-U.S. tension continued to increase. In September, Soviet air defense forces mistook Korean Airlines 007 for a U.S. military reconnaissance aircraft. They downed the aircraft, killing all on board. A month later, terrorists killed 241 U.S. Marines in Lebanon, and the U.S. invaded Grenada to prevent the presumed "Soviet-Cuban militarization of the Caribbean."⁷⁰ In November, U.S. and NATO exercise Able Archer 83 confused the Soviet air and missile commands. The confusion, false warnings of U.S. missile launches from the Soviet's orbital early-warning system, and the heightened tension almost resulted in war.⁷¹

SDI, Reagan touted, rendered ballistic missiles "impotent and obsolete."⁷² Such a system undermined the current strategic deterrence system by reducing the concepts of mutually assured destruction, seemingly violating the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Dubbed the "Star Wars" program, the SDI announcement's timing and television delivery was dramatic. A spectacular Ce-

cil B. DeMille-esk event by the former movie actor leveraged the technology narrative to the utmost. Reagan believed in the SDI, or at least the concept's power to force the Soviets to reevaluate the current competitive landscape. However, many in his administration and America's European allies did not believe in the system, its feasibility, nor its goal. Reagan, nonetheless, oversold SDI's capabilities with significant effect on the Soviets.⁷³

The technology for a weaponized laser system, the foundation of SDI, was still in its infancy. Developing such a system and a space-based platform to place it on was technically feasible. But the cost to develop the system was so great that it could cripple the U.S. economy before it was operational. Despite Reagan announcing the program, the U.S. military technology sector quietly argued to abandon the effort.⁷⁴ Soviet science and technology communities, according to informant Farewell, felt the same about developing a space-based laser system. The Soviets had abandoned the development of a similar system years earlier.⁷⁵

Here, the Soviet's take versus make approach to the computer arms race came home to roost. The CIA saw an opportunity to exploit the Soviet's industrial espionage reliance Farewell had revealed. The CIA allowed certain documents to be "taken" by KGB operatives. The documents and other measures deceived the KGB into believing the United States' laser program had solved the vast technical problems and was building a weaponized laser.⁷⁶

The confident Soviet empire of the 1970s, which had gained 10 countries since the Communist victory in Vietnam, was fading.⁷⁷ The Soviets could ill afford to spend more on a theoretical ABM system. They already spent 10–15 percent of gross national product (GNP) on the military and another 3 percent on operating the Soviet empire.⁷⁸ The spending was a drag on an already shaky economic system. Worse, the spending was gaining them little. The war in Afghanistan was not going well, and the CIA was secretly helping the mujahideen to ensure it remained that way.

Andrew Busch provides a summary of Reagan's doctrine at this time. The use of SDI, economic sanctions, improved U.S. and NATO military doctrine and weapons, coercive diplomacy, and an ideological offensive created for the Soviets what Eduard Shevardnadze, the last Soviet minister of foreign affairs (1985 to 1990), described as a "Gordian knot. . . . No matter where we turned, we came up against the fact that we would achieve nothing without normalization of Soviet/American relations."⁷⁹

Reagan's doctrine honed the West's computer exceptionalism narrative and thrust it deeply into the Soviet psyche. Reagan wanted to "lean on the Soviets until they go broke." Information operations and the leveraging Assault Breaker, among other successes, supported the coercive diplomacy narrative of the West's technological superiority. The information approach used a narrative of military lethality to mold perception, what Edward Luttwak called "armed suasion."⁸⁰ Other U.S. offset technologies, however, were not openly revealed. The United States' decision regarding what and when military technologies were re-

vealed, if at all, was part of the information campaign. It exploited Soviet weaknesses of over relying on economic espionage by creating a subtle undertow in the technology superiority narrative. “What technologies do we not know about?” sowed doubt and uncertainty in Soviet military planning.⁸¹

Conclusions

The Cold War evokes powerful memories and important lessons for the national security community. The case of the computer arms race provides an opportunity to consider the integration of the military with the economic and diplomatic levers in strategic competition. Like during the Cold War, today’s world continues to shift inside the information environment. Creating Wimex, new reconnaissance-to-strike complexes, and smart weapons was critical to the Cold War technological revolution in military affairs. Today, the growth of the cyber domain and artificial intelligence (AI) creates another technology revolution.

But the world today is different than in the 1980s. The 1970s and 1980s science and technology explosion were fueled by the capitalist market-oriented economy that created power far greater than the Soviet’s government-controlled system. China has learned from the Soviet’s Cold War mistakes. They have central party control of the economy but embrace a form of capitalism that makes it more resilient. China continues to look for comparative advantage through taking instead of making technology. They produce many products but less unique intellectual capital. The West’s willingness to cooperate, often to create a better bottom line on the ledger sheet, provides China access to legal and illegal mechanisms allowing them to take the technology. The West makes China’s theft easier. Using embargoes to protect the science and technology sector, as seen in the Cold War, has limited effects. Bolstering the embargoes by improving security within the defense industry and academic community is essential.

Using a strong narrative that ties efforts across the national levers of power is essential. Reagan’s effort in the 1980s is an example of integrated strategic competition campaigning, a concept being discussed in current U.S. military doctrine. The military’s role in Reagan’s campaign was to create and maintain the narrative of peace through strength. He increased the U.S. military in size, creating, at least in certain areas, symmetry and a quantitative balance of power with the Soviets. More importantly, Reagan leveraged asymmetry in computer technology as an offset strategy. He honed the narrative of U.S. technological exceptionalism and the lethality of computer-infused warfare. Then, he plunged it deep into the Soviet psyche, creating deterrence, coercion, and strategic paralysis.

The role of today’s U.S. military is as it was in the late Cold War. Certainly, symmetry is required, and some increase in the U.S. force and the addition of allies must balance China’s increases. Asymmetry, the offset strategy, is where the United States must focus. New U.S. and allies’ competition concepts and doctrine must lay the foundation for the technology offset effort. Demonstrat-

ing ever-increasing lethality and battlefield competency should be a goal. Increasing military power is deterrence, forcing China to consider foreign policy restraint, as Reagan did with the Soviets in the Caribbean. Showing a willingness to use the military, or at least the weapons systems, as in the case of support to Ukraine, helps legitimize technology-driven lethality. But these actions must be coupled with diplomatic efforts that deter China and Russia while encouraging them to reverse harmful foreign and domestic policies.

Computer technology and the social changes it brought were too significant to deny the Soviet Union access completely. Competing and cooperating became, for the Soviets and Americans, a delicate yet often exhausting dance. In the U.S. and China dance, the latter seems to be leading, initiating the transitions and steps. As China already has, the United States and the West must accept that competition with some cooperation is a more effective way to remain free of conflict. Remaining free of conflict buys time. And time is needed for the West's integrated strategic competition campaign of deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and generational leadership and societal changes to take effect against China, as they did against the Soviet Union.

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The Devil's Advocate

An Argument for Moldova and Ukraine to Seize Transnistria

Anthony Roney II

Abstract: This article outlines the policy suggestion for Moldova and Ukraine to bilaterally invade the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) to strengthen their respective national security interests. The article examines the historical background of Moldova and the PMR, otherwise known as Transnistria, to provide context for the relationship between the two actors. As the PMR has acted as a tool of covert foreign influence for Russia, it is recommended that Moldova and Ukraine act now to eliminate the risk of Russian influence and interference from posing a larger threat in the future for these states. This article conveys the reasons, risks, and benefits for a joint invasion of Transnistria. It details the justifications for such a proposed action, but it also outlines its possible consequences. The policy suggestion is further justified when viewed under the lens of defensive realism, contrasted with Russia's aggressive expansionist actions under President Vladimir Putin. Finally, the article gives basic strategic and tactical suggestions on how to accomplish this task.

Keywords: Moldova, Ukraine, Transnistria, Russia, frozen conflicts, military operations, defensive realism, offensive realism, foreign influence

Since 24 February 2022, one thing has become abundantly clear within the geopolitical landscape: for whatever reason, Vladimir Putin's Russia has confirmed a pattern of revanchist imperialism and aggression. This hostile

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behavior to physically interfere or reclaim the states that were once solely under the Russian sphere of influence has been fully demonstrated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With its seemingly fragile democracy and capacity for corruption, followed by a half-hearted protest by the West after Russia's invasion of Ukrainian Crimea, the country had been deemed an attractive target. However, time was a larger factor than anyone could have guessed. From the moment of the invasion of Crimea to the attack on Kyiv, Ukraine had militarily prepared far better than most of the world had expected. Repelling Russian forces from the Ukrainian capital, in addition to successful counteroffensives taking swaths of Russian-occupied territory in the east, has put a halt to President Putin's plan of reclamation. This failure has halted even further and far easier steps to this plan, the next being the subjugation of Moldova.

This article will assert the policy suggestion that Moldova and Ukraine should jointly invade Transnistria while Russia is waging its war against Ukraine. Providing an initial background, the article will convey the reasons why both Moldova and Ukraine would have sufficient justifications to gain control of the region. This claim will be analyzed from a practical standpoint and supplemented through a theoretical lens of defensive realism for both allied countries while being contrasted to the aggressive expansionist actions of the Russian Federation under President Vladimir Putin. The article will also state basic recommendations on how they could achieve this goal at the strategic and tactical levels. Counterpoints to explain why an invasion would be ill-advised at this moment will also be necessary to understand the related limits of such an operation with its aftermath and to properly weigh options.

Background

Moldova, a former Soviet republic and one of the poorest countries in Europe, has been at the forefront of Russian interference since its very existence. This is because of the presence of the internationally unrecognized (not even by Russia) breakaway state of fervent Russia supporters within its territory, Transnistria. This region, as with much of the surrounding area, was defined by empires and kingdoms changing hands over the centuries. Before 1792, modern-day Moldova—the regions of Bessarabia and Transnistria—had largely consisted of a Romanian-speaking population (with estimates being around 95 percent in 1810).¹ Following the 1792 Treaty of Jassy, the Ottoman Empire ceded the area between the Dniester and Bug Rivers to the Russian Empire, while later expanding into Bessarabia in 1812.² During this period, the Russian Empire consolidated political and resource control by enacting Russification policies while importing and colonizing Ukrainian and Russian immigrants, thereby diluting Romanian-speaking concentrations, especially in Transnistria.³

After the onset of the Russian Revolution in 1917, all Russian-controlled Bessarabian areas voted in favor for independence, which was subsequently unified with the Romanian Kingdom in 1918.⁴ Following this, Bolshevik officials declared the areas of Transnistria along with some areas of southwestern

Ukraine to be the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) in 1924, an autonomous republic that acted as an oblast within the Ukrainian SSR.⁵

With the burgeoning of power in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, the two nations sought to delineate their respective interests in Europe and declare nonaggression with the procurement of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.⁶ In a secret additional protocol of the pact, the USSR claimed Bessarabia, which was agreed on by Nazi Germany.⁷ In doing so, Adolf Hitler effectively ceded Romanian territory, which was also a fascist nation, to Joseph Stalin for when the time came to invade their neighbors. This invasion came the following year in June 1940 along with the parallel invasions and occupations of the Baltic states by the Soviets. The subsequent emplacements of the various Soviet republics, including the Moldavian SSR, solidified a hegemonic influence for Russia within the region for the rest of the twentieth century. After acquiring the area from Romania, the Soviet Union realigned the territory to include a Russian-speaking Soviet population on the eastern side of the Dniester River (the former MASSR). This new influence helped assimilate the territory into Soviet uniformity via population restructuring and further Russification policies.⁸

Consequentially, however, the drastic instability and repressive policies within these areas, especially during and around World War II, led to war crimes, pogroms, and genocidal acts to become common occurrences. Nazis, Soviets, Romanians (all that led invasions through Moldova) and their respective sympathizers each committed atrocities to maintain control through fear and wipe out ideological or ethnic groups that were inimical to their own. Incidents like mass deportations and famines by Soviets against Romanians, massacres of Jews and Russian sympathizers by Axis soldiers in Transnistria, or the Jewish pogrom of 1903 in Chişinău during the Russian Empire era have likely led many Moldovan citizens to entrench their political identities with either a “safety from Russia” stance or “safety with Russia” stance.⁹

When perestroika began to take effect across the Soviet Union, nationalist movements began growing rapidly and Moldovans were no different.¹⁰ However, Transnistrians saw this as the writing on the wall for their separation from Russia, which led to major protests from Tiraspol, condemnation of independence movements, and minor military engagements.¹¹ After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Moldova’s recognition by the United Nations in 1992, tensions between the Republic of Moldova and the already self-proclaimed Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) escalated to a brief war in March 1992.¹² Hastily recruited forces from both sides fought over the region until Russian forces came to the assistance of the PMR to grant de facto autonomy to the breakaway state.¹³ Elements from the Russian *14th Army* that arrived in Moldova to intervene would stay as peacekeepers for Transnistria.¹⁴

From here, the situation between Transnistria and Moldova has been classified as a frozen conflict, where there is neither a hot war nor resolution between the two actors. Sentiments again solidified to the point of noncooperation. Re-

Map 1. De facto and de jure territorial control of Transnistria



Note: this map is from a non-English source; 1) part of the core of Moldova (area that is not disputed) is included by the Moldovan government into a common district (outside of the Transnistrian autonomous region) with some Transnistrian territories.

Source: Sidorov et al., *Transnistria după Asybaris*, adapted by MCUP.

lying on older methods for political coercion, Igor Smirnov, then president of Transnistria, had even referred to the government in Chişinău as a “fascist state” and “war criminals.”¹⁵ Furthermore, Russia’s involvement with the two actors has implicated its parallel foreign policy to other regional actors. Indeed, Russia does not recognize Transnistria as an independent nation, but it does treat it

unofficially as a legitimate government, one that is entirely reliant on Russia. It even supplies the breakaway state with free natural gas (Russia still claims this as an accrued debt of the Chişinău government currently estimated at about \$9.5 billion that will likely never be paid), where it is resold by the breakaway state's power plant and steel plant to Chişinău to generate half of Tiraspol's budget.¹⁶ To say that Transnistria is reliant on Russia for its existence would be a gross understatement. So, why would Russia be willing to do such business with a state it does not even recognize as actually existing? One word: interference.

Why Now for Moldova?

The Russian government sees Transnistria the same way as Stalin did so many years ago. The nonrecognition of the region exposes both Moldova and Ukraine to multiple vulnerabilities from Russian-aligned actors. First, the nonrecognition allows Russia to export influence onto the Moldovan government via numerous methods. Even in the course of writing this article, Russian interference has increased perceptively. Allegedly, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB, an intelligence service) has been funding anti-Western Moldovan politicians to undermine the current pro-Western government.¹⁷ Further external pressures from Russia have imposed greater political corrosion within Moldova.

While both Moldovan and Transnistrian figures have publicly called for peace between the two during the war in Ukraine, Transnistrian authorities and their proxies have consistently challenged and sought for destabilization in Chişinău to gain a better foothold in national politics. In essence, they have acted as a tool for Russian interests. Transnistria's de facto sovereignty acts as a cancer to Moldova's prosperity and is a direct threat to their security.

If history is any indicator, without powerful friends, Moldova is a very vulnerable country. Moldova's end goal should be to maximize their security with legitimate security guarantees and economic potential provided by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). The existence of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic is the ultimate yet still conquerable hurdle to these goals. It should be noted that there is no immediate threat of invasion by Transnistrian or Russian forces from the PMR into Moldova or Ukraine. However, even if they fail entirely in their current invasion of Ukraine, the security threat of Russian interference, with time, would continue to grow with further embedding and actions taken by Russian actors under the protection and aid of Transnistrian figures. With a joint offensive into Transnistria, these problems can be mitigated before they even occur.

Energy Security

One of the more precarious vulnerabilities of Moldova is its energy dependence on the more industry-capable Transnistria and its natural gas dependency on Russia's state-owned Gazprom. Though the Chişinău government has weaned off of liquid natural gas (LNG) directly from Russia, it still heavily relies on energy derived from Russian gas imports.¹⁸ Transnistria, which supplies the entire

nation with 80 percent of its electricity, depends entirely on Russia for its liquid natural gas.¹⁹ After Moldova's drastic shift from neutrality in favor of the West in 2022, Russia's state-owned gas company, Gazprom, cut supply to Moldova and, consequentially, Transnistria. Russia's energy blackmailing of Moldova has forced the country to resort to ad hoc more expensive methods of gas imports to wean off its once 100-percent reliance on Russian energy products.²⁰ Such methods have included purchasing LNG supply from Romanian and Greek energy companies and storing winter gas reserves in Romania and Ukraine.²¹ Other alternative natural gas markets such as Azerbaijan or Turkey have either been solicited or just recently used via reverse-flowed pipelines like the Trans-Balkan Pipeline.²² Additionally, in recent years the construction and designated expansion of the Iași-Ungheni-Chișinău Interconnector Pipeline has allowed direct access to the Romanian natural gas supplies.²³

However, even with the beginning of these changes, Moldova has still simply been at the mercy of Russia's predatory energy blackmailing. Much of these mitigations require much more expensive transportation costs and require either modifications to current pipelines or entirely new infrastructure including power plants to be constructed.²⁴ This also makes Moldova vulnerable to Transnistrian officials in the long term.

Energy security is one of the foremost problems facing Moldovan society. Though an offensive will likely risk losing the primary natural gas supplier to the country, Gazprom, it is argued that this will ultimately be more beneficial than remaining at the status quo. Without an intervention in Transnistria during the war in Ukraine, Moldova will continue to be subject to predatory blackmailing that will likely eventually destabilize the country enough to swing back into the Russian sphere of influence. Although there is a risk of facing an energy crisis caused by a natural gas embargo from Russia after an intervention in Transnistria, the negatives of this scenario would likely be mitigated with urgent EU and American assistance and cooperation, given their security interests in the area. If an intervention in the PMR is not undertaken, Western allies may view their future efforts to aid Moldova against Russian influence as a more exhaustive, never-ending option. Conversely, a one-time crisis that is more intense but shorter in duration may be a preferable alternative. Moldovan officials would be wise to choose the option that would give them more support from the West.

With full administrative control over Transnistria, contracts and agreements with predatory Russian energy companies would likely be either severely damaged or terminated entirely. Additionally, Russian ownership of energy companies like the dominant MoldovaGaz (Gazprom owns 50 percent) would likely also be nullified.²⁵ This would highly destabilize the economy of Moldova, but it would allow for full autonomy in a short period of time. Leverage could be swung much more in favor of Moldova when new energy contracts are written once free from Russian ownership of companies. If the intervention takes place in the appropriate window of time, which will later be discussed, this could al-

low enough time for Moldova to prepare for an emergency energy crisis. Drastic as this would be, once the crisis has passed and security concerns have resided, it is highly likely that economic growth would rise to unprecedented levels with Moldova in full control of its own destiny.

Interference and Diplomatic Pressures

From these pressures, in conjunction with the Russian-caused energy crisis, the cost of living has increased significantly.²⁶ This has led to pro-Russian constituents protesting and solely blaming the pro-European Moldovan government.²⁷ However, allegedly, these protests have been accused of being organized and paid for by Russian-influenced politicians like Ilan Shor.²⁸ Shor, a spearheading figure for Russian influence in Moldova, has been sanctioned by the United States and has been convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison for fraud and money laundering amounting to approximately \$1 billion.²⁹

According to numerous officials, including Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Moldovan president Maia Sandu, there is even a plot to overthrow the government in a coup in order to keep Moldova under the control of Russia.³⁰ In March 2023, an FSB document was obtained and released to the public outlining a 10-year plan by the Kremlin to garner more influence within Moldova.³¹ It sought for the “creation of stable pro-Russian groups of influence in the Moldovan political and economic elites” as well as “the formation of a negative attitude towards NATO in Moldovan society.”³²

Other grievances include Russian missiles flying through Moldovan air space or public threats from senior Russian officials calling them the “next Ukraine” or that attempting to join NATO “may lead to its destruction.”³³ Even former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev said that Moldova did not exist as a country as “local leaders sold it to Romania,” among other threatening statements.³⁴ It is clear here what designs Russia has for Moldova. Transnistria is its tool to fuel antidemocratic and anti-Western sentiments. Although Russia is often blamed for causing instability in Moldova, some actors accused of being under its influence point fingers at pro-Western officials and organizations. Given Transnistria’s role as an institutional bastion of Russian influence, it is crucial to eliminate such institutions that wreak havoc then manipulate Moldova’s citizens into thinking otherwise.

Organized Crime and Administrative Control

Transnistria is essentially a legal black hole that allows for organized criminal activities, supported by Russian corruption, to spread throughout neighboring countries and even neighboring continents. In 2004, Dr. Mark Galeotti summarized the Transnistrian criminal community as being “characterised by a distinctive and dangerous mix of old-style corruption and an entrepreneurial zeal to embrace the opportunities offered by today’s global underworld, the enclave therefore poses the outside world some serious criminal and security challenges.”³⁵ He highlights that state organizations designed to combat crim-

inal activities, like the Ministry of State Security (Ministerstvo Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti or MGB), act as extensions and enforcers of organized crime groups or figures that often include national political leaders or businessmen.³⁶ Numerous studies and government publications have indicated that these problems have continued into the present, with certain exceptions during the war in Ukraine.

The PMR has served not only as a source of corruption and illicit activities, items, or substances but also as an effective intermediary highway for these in multiple directions. Many Transnistrian criminals have developed extensive intertwined alliances with other Russian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan criminal groups to traffic their illegal products.³⁷ There is a vast range of these products, as well. Traffickers from Transnistria, Russia, Moldova, and Ukraine have been arrested and convicted of making deals and smuggling uranium along with other radioactive materials capable of being weaponized.³⁸ The Transnistrian gray area of smuggling has allowed the breakaway state to serve as a base for the entire region's trafficking business.

Transnistria has been identified as a major source of weapons, arms, and ammunition for trafficking around the world, with the Cobasna ammunition depot serving as a significant hub for illegal trade.³⁹ The breakaway state is also used as an exporting point for illicit arms to Africa and the Middle East.⁴⁰ Notably, Viktor Bout, the infamous "merchant of death," played a central role in the illicit arms business operating in Transnistria.⁴¹ These characters further exemplify the disruption Russia causes for Moldovan and Ukrainian efforts to maintain stability within their countries. Many of these criminals find refuge in Russia. While many of the key players originate from or find refuge in Russia, Kremlin authorities have consistently ignored or rejected international efforts to bring them to justice.⁴² These criminal organizations bring another facet of instability to target states that cannot be refused by the Russian government.

The PMR has also served as a major source and avenue for human trafficking.⁴³ While the Republic of Moldova is also a source of human trafficking, there have been growing efforts to combat these crimes in recent reports from the U.S. State Department. While falling behind in some areas, the Moldovan government has taken measures such as convicting more traffickers, identifying significantly more victims, creating a national action plan with dedicated funding, providing protection programs, and participating in bilateral work agreements with EU counterparts against human trafficking.⁴⁴

This is, again, in contrast to the PMR, outside of Moldovan administrative control, where victims from Eastern Europe (especially Ukrainians and Moldovans) are either exploited for sexual or working purposes.⁴⁵ The U.S. State Department states that

the breakaway region of Transnistria remains outside the administrative control of the Government of the Republic of Moldova; therefore, Moldovan authorities are unable to conduct trafficking investigations or labor inspections, including for child labor and forced child labor,

in the region. Furthermore, *de facto* authorities in Transnistria do not communicate their law enforcement efforts to authorities in Moldova.⁴⁶

Again, due to corruption and cooperation from PMR officials, human trafficking will continue without taking control of administrative capabilities within Transnistria.

Conducting a coordinated offensive into Transnistria would immediately crack down on these smuggling and organized criminal operations based in Transnistria. By granting full prosecutorial jurisdiction to the legal Moldovan government and ousting PMR officials who protect or aid in these operations, law enforcement could gain a foothold and begin to grow over time. Even more so, it would allow European Union officials and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to penetrate the area in an unprecedented manner to assist in combating these criminal activities.

Given Moldovan and Ukrainian aspirations to join NATO and the EU, these criminal practices will continue to infect and likely spread to corrupt both countries' officials in a way that would otherwise make it impossible to join said organizations. Without elimination of the base of operations and thoroughfare for illegal activities in Transnistria, their prospects and goals for legitimate accession and stability will continuously be forestalled without action.

Strategic Implications and Time

There are more immediate factors on why it is necessary to launch an offensive sooner rather than later. With the Russian military being wholly occupied in eastern Ukraine, the Russian response to an allied offensive into Transnistria would be quite limited in its capability. Not only are Russian military resources being spread thin, but they are also being reduced daily on the front in Ukraine. However, this is not even the most pressing issue for the Russians if they want to attempt a defense of Transnistria. First, they would have to effectively conduct either an amphibious assault landing in the Odesa Oblast (and most likely have to take the city in the process), then maintain a narrow ground line of communication through to Transnistria or conduct a far-reaching (approximately 563 kilometers) logistically sustained offensive through western Ukraine from Belarus. Both of these options, based on previous actions in the war in Ukraine, are extremely unviable for the Russian military, who consistently opt for attritional warfare with incremental gains rather than maneuver offensives and have had very little success in general.⁴⁷ Ground warfare to relieve Transnistria is virtually impossible for the Russian military.

Essentially, the only way to respond to a seizure of Transnistria would be through long-range missile strikes, the same kind that are already seen in Ukrainian cities. While this would be devastating for many Moldovans, Russian resources and their targets are, as mentioned, already vastly dispersed. As Russians are targeting numerous civilian, governmental, and military infrastructural locations across every oblast of Ukraine, potential targets in Moldova would

most likely have a similar or lesser level of intensity of missile strikes as western Ukrainian areas.

Moldova has significantly increased its military spending in recent years and is currently developing its military capabilities. This is presumably in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine. On multiple occasions, Moldovan officials have stated the imperativeness for air-defense systems to be the focus of these expenditures, undoubtedly in a response to Russian choices for offensive capabilities in Ukraine (air strikes).⁴⁸ It should be noted, air-defense systems not only counter missiles but also military aircraft. However, even Moldovan authorities are skeptical at the effectiveness of the military, with Defense Minister Anatolie Nosatii saying in 2022 that 90 percent of the nation's military equipment is outdated.⁴⁹ Secretary of State for Defense Policy and National Army Reform Valeriu Mija stated that the military would require up to \$275 million to modernize the Moldovan military.⁵⁰ The Moldovan government is trying to resolve these issues with increased spending, conjunctive training efforts with Western militaries, and receiving newer Western military donations.⁵¹

However, this is not taking into account the air-defense systems and physical ground defenses the Ukrainian military has emplaced in oblasts surrounding Moldova, most significantly in Odesa, where the country's most critical seaport is.⁵² Even more so, Moldova's southern and western borders, as well as its access to the Black Sea via the Danube River, are shared with Romania, a full-fledged NATO and EU member state. This would assuredly be an effective deterrent of Russian missiles entering Moldovan air space through Romanian air space, albeit with limited effect given its border with Ukraine. This is not a hypothetical defense either. The Ukrainian government has recently stated its solidarity with Moldova and pledged its assistance to its neighbor, if needed.⁵³

Moldova would also be able to capitalize on the financial aid packages provided by the United States, United Kingdom, and European Union being coupled in with Ukraine. For example, the United States has now pledged to donate \$300 million to Moldova to assist in weaning the post-Soviet state completely off of Russian energy dependence including "\$80 million in budget support to offset high electricity prices, \$135 million for electric power generation projects and \$85 million to improve its ability to obtain energy supplies from alternative sources."⁵⁴ This is part of the massive \$45 billion aid package for Ukraine to help defend itself from Russian aggression.⁵⁵ Due to the intensive coordinative efforts between the Ukrainian and Moldovan governments, lobbying to be attached to further funding (specifically defense funding) in the name of casting out Russian influence in Europe would likely be attractive for Western countries. This is especially likely considering that the United States has signaled numerous times that it would support Moldova's democracy, if needed.⁵⁶

Moldova would proportionally benefit the most from regaining control of Transnistria. As stated, it would allow for the government to stamp out major criminal activities and Russian interference. Giving the Moldovan central government full de facto sovereignty over its territory would consequentially propel

the country into esteemed international organizations, increasing stability and development. Organizations like the European Union and NATO (arguably the two most paramount for Moldova) require candidate states to either be a stable democracy or have total control over their territory to proceed further in accession processes.⁵⁷ For Moldova, joining NATO would be a very important step in assuring its survival as an independent state. This alliance security would not only prevent Moldova from being invaded by an aggressor state, but it would also allow for more resources in defending against hybrid aggression from Russia or pro-Russian actors. And indeed, this is what Moldovan leaders are striving for. Prime Minister Dorin Recean stated after being sworn into office that “we must not confuse defence with neutrality. Neutrality does not insure us in case of aggression.”⁵⁸ To gain this security, both militarily and economically, it is maintained that Moldovan lawmakers must take the necessary steps to achieve the goal of full territorial integrity.

Potential Negative Consequences for Moldova Western Support

It is asserted that a significant negative consequence, primarily for both Moldova and Ukraine, would be the reduction in Western nations’ popular support. The unsavory idea of a preemptive (debatably) invasion would certainly be seen to some as nonpeacekeeping. This point, however, will be argued against under the lens of defensive realism later. This would be especially contingent if there was a large resistance movement by insurgents in Transnistria. Yet, the narrative is important to control against Russia. Russia has already made attempts to negatively spin the narrative of a possible offensive into Transnistria by stating Ukrainian forces would conduct a false flag operation.⁵⁹ Indeed, it is claimed an underhanded operation like this, such as the one the Russians had used in Crimea, would bring negative connotations to Ukraine and Moldova and, therefore, a reduction in support. Forthright public responsibility and transparency of both governments during the seizure would be key for more positive imaging.

Casualties

As previously stated, the consequences for Moldova would most likely be much simpler, but far deadlier. Russian responses to Moldova would be extremely limited militarily, except for long-range missile strikes. Most likely the whole country would be targeted, but particularly vulnerable would be critical areas like heavily populated areas, energy infrastructure, hospitals, and government buildings, as in Ukraine now.

Energy and Economic Crisis

Another major and expected retaliation of the Russians could be shutting off energy completely to Moldova. In the event of an invasion, Transnistrians would likely not discontinue energy production at the Cuciurgan power station to Moldova because that would mean their own people would also be left without

energy. But, given Moldova's sheer vulnerability in energy and Russia's history of energy blackmail along with the destruction of infrastructure, Russian officials would most likely have no qualms in exposing both anti- and pro-Russian actors within Moldova to a complete embargo of natural gas.

This consequence is likely the most inevitable to destabilize the country that would already have a destabilized region from a military operation. If Moldova was to take the step to jointly take over Transnistria with Ukraine, then the Sandu government would need to overhaul its energy infrastructure by allocating donated Western aid money from "capacity building" to restructuring of the Moldovan energy market.⁶⁰ Though accomplishing much progress in the area already, Moldova will need to accelerate the modification of Soviet-era laws or business practices to EU standards to attract more foreign direct investments.⁶¹ An example of this would be hastened unbundling of the dominant gas company MoldovaGaz into three separate companies to respectively purchase, transmit, and distribute natural gas.⁶² This would be done in conjunction with the fair promotion of alternative private energy companies to stake a claim in Moldova, which would provide more options in the energy sector.

Occupation, Repatriation, and Possible Insurgency

Politically, Moldova would face a major dilemma in occupying Transnistria. The region has genuine support for Russia, and many identify themselves as Russian nationals. It is a very similar situation to other illegitimate substates within the Russian sphere of influence.⁶³ Though the population and area are not particularly large, approximately 465,000 people and 4,163 square kilometers, it is a fervently pro-Russian population.⁶⁴ Reintegration into the Moldovan state would likely be difficult and costly for the poorer nation. In all probability, this would require a military occupation for an uncertain amount of time.

With that said, Moldova has already created somewhat of a road map for this issue with the Turkish-speaking regions of Gagauzia. This region, ethnically and linguistically distinct from the rest of Moldova, initially wanted to separate from the former Soviet state.⁶⁵ In contrast to Transnistria though, the Moldovan government brokered a deal to fuse powers with Gagauzian figures and granted regional autonomy.⁶⁶ However, again, attempts by Russian and pro-Russian actors to influence the region have led to an increase in opposition voices against the pro-Western government there.⁶⁷ Indeed, even Shor party leaders in the region have called for actions that were planned in the aforementioned Kremlin document from March 2023, such as the opening of an envoy or consulate within Gagauzia.⁶⁸

An armed insurgency could also be possible given the political ardor of the Transnistrian population. It would be a realistic threat facing both Moldovan government forces and Ukrainian border troops. However, if there was an insurrection consisting of guerrilla-type warfare, Transnistria, or the whole of Moldova, would not be areas that would be fruitful for this type of operation. First, the main resources of arms trading would be either neutralized or utilized

by a policing military. With reduced access to resources and trade networks, now under the control of Moldovan and Ukrainian officials, there would likely be far less materials to wage an irregular conflict against authorities.

Second, though Transnistrians are currently heavily politically opposed to both Moldovan and Ukrainian sentiments (i.e., against Russian interests), all regions have similar or mixed elements of linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. While this would not stop an insurgency, studies have indicated that it would likely reduce the amount and duration of participation, in contrast to countercultural insurgencies conducted by the United States in Iraq or Afghanistan or by Russia in Siberia.⁶⁹

Finally, a strong facet indicating a failure for a post-intervention Transnistrian resistance would be the geographical limitations for the insurgents. Geography has been repeatedly named as a key factor in how successful an insurgency can be. If the terrain is rugged, mountainous, swampy, or in deep jungle, it becomes far more difficult to locate and eliminate insurgents waging a guerrilla war. This could also be witnessed in anti-insurgency operations in Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Liberia, among others.⁷⁰ Neither Transnistria nor Moldova have these types of terrain in even a moderate amount. Residing on the western edge of the Eurasian Steppe, the country has vast expanses of pasture and farmland with comparatively very little forest cover or rough terrain. Additionally, if an insurgency were to take place just within Transnistria, the area of operations to quell this by Moldovan and/or Ukrainian officials would be a small and very narrow area. Rebels would essentially have much less areas to run or hide.

This begs the question, “What would be next in Moldova?” This is not an easy question to answer. If Moldovan officials intended to conduct this coordinated offensive, their economy would be on the verge of collapse, if not collapsed, given the amount of industry within the Transnistrian jurisdiction. Depending on the effects of the occupation and repatriation of Transnistrians, they could face anywhere from a smooth transition of authority to a fully armed insurrection. Most likely, Western officials would have to determine if Moldova would be worth supporting temporarily, which would be costly to say the least. Again, with security interests, it may just be required, though.

Why Now for Ukraine?

While Moldova’s reasoning to participate in an offensive into Transnistria would serve to benefit more in the long term rather than short term, it is asserted that the Ukrainian justifications and motivations are more urgent. Specifically, the benefits that would apply for Ukraine would primarily serve at the strategic level in the war against Russia. That being said, there are still long-term benefits in committing to an operation like this in their backyard.

Weak for Russia Now, Strong for Russia Later

First and foremost, the apprehension of Transnistria by the armed forces of Ukraine, undoubtedly the most qualified entity to do so at the moment, would

neutralize a national security threat on the western border of the nation while it is weak. With a presence of approximately 1,500–2,000 Russian troops (with only 50–100 of these actually being native Russians and the rest being Transnistrians with Russian passports), Transnistria represents an unacceptable threat to Ukraine, especially with the highly critical seaport of Odesa being so close.⁷¹ However, it would be ignorant to just look at a shallow number of Russian soldiers and state that as the correct strength. To start, these troops are not entirely comprised of purely combat forces. They are divided between a smaller group of peacekeeping forces (officially no larger than 450 troops) and the larger Operational Group of Russian Forces, the latter being primarily charged to guard the Colbasna ammunition depot.⁷²

This peacekeeping force has committed numerous aggressive actions against journalists and civilians, resulting in lethal situations.⁷³ Both of these troop contingents must wait an extensive time to rotate from these posts, as Moldova and Ukraine have effectively banned official Russian military access since 2015.⁷⁴ This lack of access has most likely led to a certain amount of corrosion within military resources and/or training. Also, one must take into the consideration that, before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian forces were highly esteemed and thought to be thoroughly trained until numerous, consistent failures revealed otherwise.

The armed forces of Transnistria, with approximately 4,000–7,500 active and 15,000 reserve personnel, are an additional factor.⁷⁵ While the quality of this military force is questionable, one scholar assessed that the Transnistrian military consisted of “four motorized rifle brigades, a tank battalion, an artillery regiment, and an anti-aircraft artillery regiment,” including 18 tanks as of 2009, donated during the 1992 war.⁷⁶ The assumption here is that the military equipment in Transnistria derives from pre-1992 Soviet stockpiles, significantly older than much of what is being used in the Ukrainian military now. To sum up, the Critical Threats Project described the situation by stating, “These troops engage in regular military exercises, but they are very poorly equipped. The poor performance level of Russian troops fighting in Ukraine suggests that the troops in Transnistria would perform poorly in combat.”⁷⁷

With its eight years of NATO-grade coordinated training, current experience in combat against Russian forces, and its continuous massive donations of Western military equipment, the Ukrainian military would likely be able to conduct advanced maneuver warfare with efficacy in this narrow region, especially in coordination with Moldova. Donated tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and aircraft would most likely serve effectively when considering logistical supplies would be virtually on-site. While Moldova also suffers from a lack of modern equipment within its armed forces, a coordinated invasion from both borders of Transnistria would likely at least match or slightly overwhelm the limited force in Transnistria.⁷⁸ However, Moldova’s intermediate level of recurring conjunctive training efforts with American and other Western militaries may allow for slightly more effective combat capabilities than expected.⁷⁹

Considering Ukraine's potential to overpower the much weaker PMR forces, it may be logical to leave these forces alone. However, a joint offensive now would be prudent as an investment move, rather than an immediate battlefield tactical move. Although Transnistrian and Russian forces in the PMR are currently unlikely to launch a military operation into Moldova or Ukraine, there is still significant potential for these forces to invade later with greater strength.

Whether or not Putin succeeds in his war in Ukraine, given a retention in power, Putin will still continue to employ interfering assets throughout Eurasia. Long after Western support and media coverage about Russian aggression has waned, Putin and his successors will use stealthy, underhanded tactics to cripple Russia's neighbors' development. This complacency is where Russia will thrive in rebuilding its assets in Transnistria. Though impossible now with border closures, the PMR could later be bolstered with regular Russian troops once these border policies are relaxed. Furthermore, these troops could funnel resources to and train PMR forces to legitimize a real security threat in Moldova on the border of Ukraine.

Given the pattern of the Russian Federation reinvading after an initial failure or mere minor victory (Crimea, Chechnya, and Donbas), it is realistic for Russian officials to do the same for Ukraine, once again. While it would take time to rebuild the Russian military, it could be done within a reasonable time frame. There would be a possibility of reinvansion in an attempt to finish the job, especially if in a frozen conflict. This is when the utilization of Transnistria as a disembarkation point would be highly likely to execute this task. With the unstable nature of Moldova's political attitude toward Russia, just as there could be a pro-EU government that bans Russian soldiers from entering the country, there could also be a pro-Russian one that has a more lax view or neutral view of military forces flying to Chişinău, then traveling to Tiraspol. The long-term security of Ukraine would be further assured with a joint invasion into a hostile but still developing region that lines its western flank.

Resources

Another potential motivation to invade Transnistria would be for the aforementioned Colbasna ammunition depot. This infamous stockpile of Soviet-era ammunition is a prime target for Ukraine. Lying approximately 1.6 kilometers away from the Ukrainian border, this depot is the beating heart of the ammunition supply for the PMR. As of 2009, Russian data indicated that the depot consisted of "21,000 tons of equipment; about half of the 42,000 tons that existed in 1994," which was donated by the Russian *14th Army* during the war.⁸⁰

However, Colbasna has been implicated as the primary source of illegal arms exportation from Transnistria, so this quantity has likely been reduced even further.⁸¹ While this ammunition could be seen as potential war booty to use against the Russian military in the eastern front, it is argued that such munitions would most likely be too unreliable for active military usage when considering age, known Russian storage mistakes, and Soviet ammunition qual-

ity, as has been evidenced in the current war.⁸² It may be more prudent to safely destroy the arms and ammunition within. However, utilized or not, the acquisition of arguably the largest ammunition stockpile in Southeast Europe would neutralize the tools for a major security threat.⁸³

Organized Crime

As mentioned, crime groups consistently have exploited Ukrainian territories, citizens, and official channels to conduct illicit operations from Transnistria. Since the full-scale invasion by Russia in February 2022, Ukraine has severely limited border traffic and monitored the border with Transnistria.⁸⁴ While this has temporarily cut down on illicit trade traffic going into Ukraine, it is very likely that without intervention from Ukraine in the PMR, this trafficking will resume to full levels once the war is over and the Ukrainian military eventually demobilizes.⁸⁵ Essentially, these problems will remain a major thorn in the side of Ukrainian authorities unless preventative actions are taken. Additionally, by capturing the Colbasna ammunition depot, they would also halt a source of arms smuggling operations affecting Ukraine and Moldova.

Ukraine has almost as much to benefit from the neutralization of organized criminal activities in Transnistria as Moldova. Aiding the Moldovan government here with military assistance would neutralize an international problem and heavily assist in stifling blatant organized crime throughout Eastern Europe.

Nonrecognition

Transnistria's peculiar status of recognition also allows Ukraine justification for an offensive with Moldova. As stated, the Ukrainian and Moldovan governments have vowed to work together to strengthen Moldova's sovereignty and democracy. Ukraine, obviously, does not recognize Transnistria, and neither does the Russian Federation. In fact, all countries in the United Nations deem Transnistria as a part of Moldova's sovereign territory and do not recognize it as a nation. While the Russian Ministry of Defence has recently announced that an attack on Transnistria would be treated as "an attack on the Russian Federation" and that Putin would no longer explicitly recognize Moldova as fully sovereign, this still opposes a whole 30 years of Russian foreign policy, including in Putin's era.⁸⁶ Legally, the Russian Federation still does not officially recognize, as of today, Transnistria as legitimate. This framing allows Ukraine to strike at a time when Russia's diplomatic claim to retaliate in any sense, most notably nuclear, is limited. But none of this excludes a possibility where Putin sees the threat of existence to Transnistria as too large and annexes the territory as a piece of the Russian Federation. Overall, the suggestion for Ukraine comes down to one colloquial saying: strike while the iron is hot, and hot it is *now*.

Potential Negative Consequences for Ukraine

Tangible negative consequences for Ukraine to invade Transnistria during the

war, either in coordination or by the explicit approval of the Moldovan government, are also limited. The reprisal by Russian forces would virtually be unseen in light of the total war being engaged entirely within Ukrainian territory. However, there are consequences that can be applied to Ukraine's military and overall funding with the war effort.

Casualties and Resources

The most direct consequences for Ukraine would be immediately on the battlefield. This consists of military casualties and a diversion of resources from other critical areas of the Ukrainian front lines. However, Russia simply does not have the military manpower or resources to respond to such a threat in the western sphere of Transnistria. Essentially, the response would be a similar level of civilian bombings (if not less with responding missile strikes in Moldova) and combat intensity as before.

Depending on the effectiveness and duration of other counteroffensive operations, military forces and equipment already may not so easily be spared for an operation that is more beneficial in the long run rather than in the short term. If an offensive into Transnistria were to take longer than expected, then these resources would be even further diverted and strained for longer than would be expected. Even more so, Ukrainian forces would likely have to serve as additional occupational troops if there was an extended armed insurgency.

In addition, if counteroffensive operations by Ukrainian forces entirely falter in Ukraine against Russia, then there are far larger issues to divert resources and manpower to. But the long-term benefits of greater security for both countries in conjunction with the opportune timing brought on by Russia's preoccupation in Ukraine still outweigh the immediate physical negative consequences.

Occupational Hazards

As previously mentioned, Ukraine would likely be faced with a similar issue as Moldova in maintaining peace in Transnistria. Spillover of pro-Russian insurgents may occur at Ukrainian borders with irregular attacks. This would require a diversion of military resources that would last even longer. However, with the reasons given in the Moldovan section, discussing this insurgency would likely not be expansive or long-term in nature without institutional support from a pseudo-government type like Tiraspol now.

Western Support

Another risk shared by Ukraine with Moldova is, of course, the reduction in Western aid and support. If Western officials shied away from supporting Ukraine either in military aid or purely financial aid, it would be a devastating blow to the war effort. To reassert, it would be crucial to control the narrative and convey that this operation would be necessary in the fight against Russian aggression and expansionism on other sovereign states' territories. Finally, this is not a guaranteed product of a joint invasion into Transnistria. It is possible

Table 1. Consequences and benefits for Moldova and Ukraine

	Potential consequences	Potential benefits
Moldova	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy/economic crisis • Integration (lack thereof) of pro-Russian population • Casualties • Air-based Russian retaliation • Decrease of Western support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term control of energy security • Full sovereign control of territory • Future Russian military intervention neutralized • Severely reduced institutional Russian interference • International organizational appeal • Full prosecutorial control of crime/corruption • Colbasna depot utilized and/or neutralized
Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversion of resources • Casualties • Decrease of Western support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future Russian military intervention neutralized • Colbasna depot utilized and/or neutralized • International organizational appeal • Crime/corruption source on border under government control

Source: compiled by the author.

that, given Western allies' security interests in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, that Western military support could continue without skipping a beat.

The Defensive and Offensive Thoughts

For both Moldova and Ukraine, the aforementioned reasons in support of an invasion are entirely justified under a defensive realist lens in response to Vladimir Putin's pattern of aggressive expansionist actions. Putin's foreign policy has been centered around the maximization of power and maintaining hegemonic stature in Eurasia, specifically regarding former Soviet states. Moldova and Ukraine are both typical former Soviet states that Putin's Russia has destabilized. Wielding power in the form of intimidation, nuclear arms, oil and natural gas blackmailing, and underhanded influence, post-2000 Russia has devoted its foreign policy to the undermining of delicate post-Soviet states to maintain power. In conjunction with these actions, Russia could support unrecognized breakaway regions that Russia claims to be legitimate in one way or another. These policies and actions undertaken by Putin suggest that he subscribes to geopolitical strategies consistent with aggressive offensive realism.

Putin's Offensive Aggressive Pattern

Steven Lobell outlines that "for offensive realists, expansion entails aggressive

foreign economic, political, and military policies to alter the balance of power; to take advantage of opportunities to gain more power; to gain power at the expense of other states; and to weaken potential challengers through preventive wars or ‘delaying tactics’ to slow their ascent.”⁸⁷ This is the quintessential form of foreign policy wielded by Putin. However, one could argue that this view of Putin’s strategic philosophy could classify as classical realism: where leaders’ personal lust drives the state for more power and that weaker actors must endure.⁸⁸ In contrast, offensive realism states that the anarchic international system and fear drives states to maximize power to increase the odds of survival.⁸⁹ It is asserted that Russia’s twenty-first century invasions under Putin have a mixed characterization of both classical realism and offensive realism strategies, producing a unique strategy of “aggressive offensive realism.” It should be noted that this claim is not to convey an example of how the geopolitical system operates, but how Putin may see it himself and base his actions off of.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian figures found themselves in a desperate situation to maintain international power. In brutal fashion, they went on the offensive and supported separatist movements in Moldova and Georgia, while attempting to quell separatist movements within their own borders in Chechnya. However, these conflicts highlighted the weaknesses and insecurities within the new Russian Federation. The First Chechen War (1994–96) proved a humiliating disaster for the Russian Army. Even in their more successful endeavors, the military forces of the newly created countries of Moldova and Georgia were very weak and poorly trained. While Russia’s military was weak in the 1990s, they were simply not as weak as these smaller, fledgling independent nations attempting to organize stability.⁹⁰ This is the argument of Russia’s offensive realism in maintaining power and stifling any challenges in their previous sphere of power.

However, once Vladimir Putin was elected as president, he capitalized on the damaged nationalism of the Russian people after the fall of the Soviet Union and increased the frequency and intensity of both military interventions and subversive influence. Similarities can be found between these actions taken against the regions of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea, and Donbas with Moldova, which highlight’s Putin’s aggressive offensive realist strategies.

Following his rise to power, Chechnya suffered and lost in a brutal war against Putin’s new regime. For Georgia, 2008 would bring a more substantial Russian invasion and occupation in their internationally recognized territory. Of course, after its public rejection of Russian influence with the Euromaidan Revolution, Ukraine would see the beginning of their war against Russia in 2014 with the invasions of Crimea and Donbas. In Moldova, there was a significant shift in policy when President Putin was initially elected. At the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)-coordinated 1999 Istanbul Summit, the Russian government promised to withdraw all military presence from Moldova by the end of 2002.⁹¹ However, this agreement was clearly reneged on with Russian troops still residing in Transnistria. So, this

could be the argument for a classical realist that Putin's lust for power has caused this expansionism. However, the historical track record supports evidence for both: an absolute established pattern of aggression, expansion, and interference that has only increased under Putin.

Furthermore, as with Ukraine and Moldova, Vladimir Putin has primarily targeted areas with an underlying conflict that are weakened because of this. In a way, these tensions, consisting of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and/or political reasons, can be accelerated by Russian influence to maximize their power over the region. Additionally, influence can be far more than just economic or passively political. Prior to the 2022 war, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova had remarkable similarities in threats faced from Russia. Each had Russian troops within their borders that were residual from previous invasions. Even more, the Russian government had supplied and supported separatist groups in each region. This provided a security base for Russian or pro-Russian actors. Each country faced a set of economic challenges where their respective breakaway or invaded regions were either tied with Russian interests or entirely separated, losing valuable resources and capital.

A study on breakaway states found in a comparison to the situations in Donbas and Crimea that "Russian influence and intervention, as well as the relations between Russia and the West, certainly conditioned the outcome of the two Georgian secessionist conflicts [South Ossetia and Abkhazia] as well as the one in Moldova. Russian troops are on the ground in all three of these regions today . . . Russian financial support is vital to their survival."⁹² Russia is fueling the same exact tensions with Moldova as it did in Georgia and Ukraine. The conclusions to those, albeit not finished, have proven a Russian invasion follows consistently with Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.

Required Defensive Realist Strategies from Moldova and Ukraine

Though defensive realism originated as an amalgamation of ideas from numerous authors, the theory can be traced to arguments from Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* from 1979. Waltz argues that states seek to balance power in the world by coalescing with other weaker states in order to survive and do not maximize power, as the larger hegemonic states they ally against are usually the actual threats to their survival.⁹³ Waltz writes, "The first concern of states is not to maximize power but maintain their positions in the system."⁹⁴ This is the crucial motivation of states that practice defensive realism.

Lobell added that "defensive realists maintain that the international system encourages states to pursue moderate and restrained behavior to ensure their survival and safety, and provides incentives for expansion in only a few select instances."⁹⁵ In essence, defensive realism conveys that states should not seek to maximize power but maximize security on their scale. It also finds that conflict is sometime necessary in the face of a true security dilemma or aggressor state.⁹⁶ Defensive realism also argues that there are indeed certain occasional incentives for states to expand their power, but that these upset the international system

and balance of power.⁹⁷ Essentially, defensive realism contends that while some states use anarchy to bolster their power to secure themselves, all other states will utilize the international system to secure themselves against these aggressive hegemons.⁹⁸

It is argued that the absolute optimal way to counter this particular aggression, while the opportunity is present, is to treat this parallel threat in Transnistria and Russia in a defensive realist strategy. Defensive realist strategies would allow smaller states such as Moldova to maintain security in the chaotic environment produced by Russian aggression. An offensive into Transnistria could not be seen as a gratuitous move by either Ukraine or Moldova as neither has previously displayed overly aggressive behavior in the international system. While Moldova conducted offensives during the Transnistrian War, it was still in response to violation of territorial precedence during its time as a Soviet republic and clearly limited in number.⁹⁹

To supplement, this does require a brief comparison to claims that Putin has acted as a defensive realist. Claims such as these usually outline the generality that Putin's invasions are in response to an eastward encroachment by NATO. Additionally, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova are simply too close for comfort to be a part of this organization and that it is within Russia's sphere of influence. However, the fact remains that defensive realism requires *restrained* or *limited* actions. In contrast, it usually punishes those who seek expansionism. While Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia have all seen either invasions or occupations by hostile troops among numerous other hybrid threats, Putin's Russia has portrayed itself as constantly being threatened by these smaller, far weaker countries. In actuality, it is a massive state with nuclear weapons domineering as a regional hegemon (at least for now) that simply bullies smaller countries. This is not consistent with defensive claims.

Balancing against these aggressive attempts at hegemonic power grabbing by Putin's Russia is necessary for survival in both Moldova and Ukraine. This cooperation recently set goals for international organizations, and commitment to internal security highlights the mechanisms within the defensive realist theory. While conducting an offensive into Transnistria can be seen as provocative, it must also be asked: What is there to provoke? As stated, Putin recently signaled that Russia no longer respects the full sovereignty of Moldova. He even rescinded a decree confirming their sovereignty, clearly a threat to national security for Moldova.¹⁰⁰ Ukraine is already in the middle of a war against Russia within its *own* territory. The illegal breakaway state of Transnistria is certainly a security threat considering that approximately 1,500–2,000 Russian soldiers are based there, which has been a violation of international law since 2002.¹⁰¹ Even more so, the very existence of the Russian-aligned Transnistrian armed forces, consisting of approximately 4,000–7,500 active personnel, is a threat to national security for Moldova.¹⁰² Additionally, Transnistrian authorities have made requests to Moscow for an increased number of Russian peacekeepers.¹⁰³ For Ukraine, if Moldova were to completely fall under the influence of Russian

will, which has been rumored multiple times, it would allow a base of operation for the Russian military in the western part of the country.¹⁰⁴ Under defensive realism, neutralizing a security threat like Transnistria would bring stability to the region and support each nation's national security interests.

While the call for an offensive by Moldova and Ukraine into Transnistria could be called preemptive, the reality of the situation is that Moldova would not be invading another recognized, sovereign country; they would be resolving a long-term security issue *constrained* to their own borders. Even with the invitation and bilateral cooperation of Ukraine (act of balancing), it would still be a reasonable and singular incident in an attempt to restore national security to internationally recognized officials for Moldova. This is consistent with defensive realist strategies.

The reader is reminded that the ultimate end goal of Moldova and Ukraine would be the accessions into a defensive alliance, NATO, that was originally designed to balance against the USSR and has again found itself doing the same against its successor state. Additionally, both countries aim to join the European Union, which is also designed to enhance the security of smaller states. It can be concluded that the appropriate reaction from Moldova and Ukraine regarding Russian aggression are these goals in order to tip the balance of power in favor of survival. Defensive realism dictates this is the appropriate method of dealing with this larger and mutual threat.¹⁰⁵

When to Seize the Day?

The ideal timing for a proposed operation into Transnistria would have to fit a window suitable for both Ukraine and Moldova. The overall requirement would have to be during the current war against Russia. Mobilization of the Ukrainian military along with funding and aid from Western support will likely be never higher than now. As previously mentioned, it can also serve as an extension of offensive operations for Ukraine. However, the time to invade would also have to be sustainable for the whole frontline operations. This would likely be after primary counteroffensive operations, but, of course, it would be contingent on the successes of those.

For Moldova, there would need to be time to rapidly prepare for restructuring their gas and energy systems, which is not an easy thing to do. Similarly, the Moldovan military would need time to prepare and standardize their forces for relevant operations. The ideal window of opportunity would still be during the war against Russia by Ukraine. With the current nonrecognition status of the PMR, diversion of Russian equipment in Ukraine, and the assistance pledged by Ukraine, it would be likely this type of opportunity will not arise again once peace is made. It is wise to make the short-term sacrifice now, rather than the long-term sacrifice later.

How to Seize the Day

Though the breakaway state is approximately 209 kilometers long, Transnistria

Figure 1. Typical example of the geography of the Dniester River near Popencu, Moldova



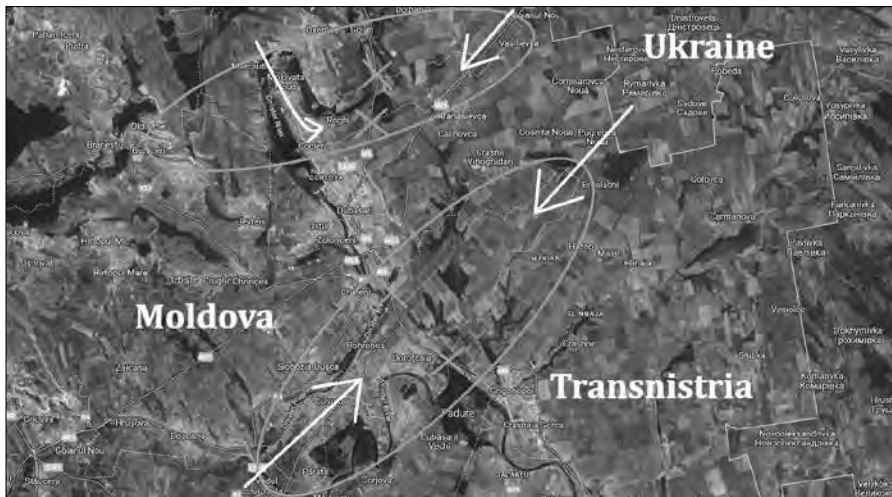
Source: Alexey Averiyarov, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, adapted by MCUP.

has its greatest width at approximately 24 kilometers. Geographically, it is extremely vulnerable to a two-front offensive from Moldovan and Ukrainian directions and can be easily divided. However, it would be considerably more difficult for Moldovan forces to advance from the west as Transnistria's western border largely consists of the Dniester River. There are seven river crossing structures over the Dniester consisting of road bridges, railroad bridges, and reservoir dams. These do not include roads leading into Tiraspol, crossings already under de facto Moldovan control, or river ferries. Indeed, the Moldovan armed forces do possess numerous types of amphibious armored vehicles (most of them being Soviet made), though the actual number of these are unclear and suitable landing zones for them would be limited with numerous marshes and large, sloping bluffs lining the river.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, it should be noted that neither Moldova nor Ukraine could conduct this offensive unilaterally. If Moldova intended to conduct this type of operation on their own, this would be highly unlikely to succeed given the country's shortcomings within their military. Not only would it fail, but it would also destabilize the country further and possibly give PMR forces reason to conduct a counteroffensive onto Chişinău. For Ukraine, while they would be the muscle of the operation, and would likely succeed, it would be a major violation of territorial integrity if they decided to invade without bilateral consent from Moldovan officials. The international consequences of this for Ukraine, which relies on Western aid, would be devastating.

But, as mentioned, the state of the Moldovan military could be described as developing, so an optimal role here would be to act more statically and divert Transnistrian and Russian firepower as near to the western border areas as possi-

Map 2. Possible areas for Moldovan and Ukrainian forces to advance within the Dubăsari District



Source: Roney, "Transnistrian Tactical Map," Google Maps, adapted by MCUP.

ble, so Ukrainian forces can more easily move in from the east. The most fitting role for Moldovan forces would be to secure and blockade portions of the Moldovan M4 highway. Possibly the most ideal places to do this would be the two east-west land corridors of the Dubăsari District they partly control through Transnistria near Doroțcaia and Roghi. These proposed areas are optimal to advance on because Moldovan forces have control of villages on the east side of the river. Already there are effective bridgeheads (especially for the southern Doroțcaia area where control is much more substantial and there is an actual highway bridge crossing) that would allow for additional forces to cross the river.

The M4 highway passes through these land corridors (effectively serving as the de facto border of control in these areas) and virtually the entire length of Transnistria (see maps 1 and 2). Cutting off this route would divide and isolate Transnistrian forces into numerous areas, as well as secure control over the entire land corridors. Supplementation from the Ukrainian Army would be relatively unchallenging given that these land corridors almost touch the Ukrainian border within a mile and one runs parallel with the M21 highway. From these Moldovan-held corridors, Ukrainian forces would be able to attack PMR forces both from their eastern border, as well as within Transnistria, effectively defeating in detail these forces by dividing them. However, given the numerous potential objectives within the shallow depth of territory of Transnistria, any conquered area could also be utilized as an isthmus to attack from. Ukrainian forces themselves could also bisect thinner, vulnerable areas of Transnistria, and, by default, the M4 highway. A prime example would be cutting off the highway near Mihailovca where it is as little as 2.4 kilometers from the Ukrainian border to the western river border.

Map 3. Land isthmuses and vital areas attractive for initial advances in Transnistria

Source: Roney, "Transnistrian Strategic Map," Mapcreator, adapted by MCUP.

The Ukrainian role in an offensive would be dynamic and paramount with its extensive and increasing access to Western equipment, vast armored resources, and overall tested quality. These capabilities would allow for Ukrainian forces to advance rapidly into an extremely thin enemy territory. A blitzing advance would be imperative to overwhelming a very possibly complacent, inexperienced, and resource limited Transnistrian and Russian security force excluding near the Colbasna ammunition depot.¹⁰⁷ This brings the author to the two basic objectives to neutralizing Transnistria: Colbasna and Tiraspol. The reasons regarding Colbasna have already been stated. The depot, 1.6 kilometers away from Ukrainian territory, would be the top priority to severely limit any resupply to other troop concentrations in the region. However, given the high value of Colbasna, it would serve in the interests of a Ukrainian offensive to avoid where this strength is and attack where weaknesses or less effective troops are.

Tiraspol, being the capitol and largest city of Transnistria, would be absolutely essential in dismantling the region. Capturing the city would not only cut the breakaway state in two, but it would most likely lead to the capturing of prominent political figures within the Transnistrian government, pacifying the political stature within the breakaway state.

Finally, there are two important factors that must be heavily utilized during this offensive. First, controlling the narrative and reminding domestic and international audiences the threats to national security will be required to maintain popularity. The idea that this threat of thousands of enemy soldiers is either,

for Moldova, in their sovereign territory, or for Ukraine, in their backyard at the border, is a frightening thought for populations that can maintain popular support. Allies like the United States or United Kingdom would provide crucial voices in maintaining international support, so their cooperation would be needed. Second, absolute communication and coordination between the Ukrainian and Moldovan militaries and governments will be imperative to effectively execute conjunctive operations and further strengthen diplomatic ties in a time of crisis. With the capturing of these essential objectives, it is asserted that the Moldovan government with the assistance of the Ukrainian military would obtain its full de facto sovereignty over its entire territory.

Conclusion

Ukraine opens a new front to the war; Moldova regains control over its territory; and Putin's Russia falters in its offensive realist strategy to undermine its former allies and keep control. It is easy to see what positive outcomes may come out of an invasion of Transnistria. The target is vulnerable. However, it is also easy to forget that with these policy suggestions, consequences would be imminent. In a sense, though, Moldova is stuck between a rock and a hard place in their decision here. If a decision is taken to regain legitimate authority over Transnistria, Moldova will be faced with a national crisis of losing energy security and maintaining peace in a temporarily highly destabilized post-conflict state, however brief it is. However, both Moldova and Ukraine would find that the long-term security and stability benefits would outweigh the alternative of allowing the status quo of the gray zone of Transnistria to continue onward and regain the capacity of full interference in the region, whether it be in 10, 20, or more years. In the context of defensive realism, it becomes abundantly clear that for Moldova and Ukraine to survive and counter Vladimir Putin's aggressive offensive expansionism, they must cooperate in dealing with this creeping, yet crucial threat. In this case, the seizure of Transnistria must take place in the right time to maintain stability in the long term. If left alone, not only will Ukraine and Moldova be at risk of future increased destabilization and corrosion but so will all of Eastern Europe.

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Tackling Russian Gray Zone Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era

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Abstract: To undermine U.S. military strength, state actors are increasingly operating in the ambiguous environment between peace and war known as the “gray zone.” These actions test U.S. response by exploiting the West’s rigid notion of conflict. Soviet actions toward the United States and other nations during the Cold War shared many similarities with contemporary Russian strategy. There is no current uniform definition of the gray zone, and the United States has not developed doctrine to address this challenge. Russia has adapted Soviet Cold War techniques for the digital and globalized age and effectively integrates instruments of power against the United States by targeting seams within culture, maintaining ambiguity, and controlling narratives. Countering these tactics requires that the United States modify its mindset toward conflict and improve integration of its own instruments of power.

Keywords: gray zone, Russia, Cold War, political warfare, active measures, hybrid warfare

Introduction

Subversion, utilization of unmarked military forces, foreign interference, and other methods designed to influence policy have long been tactics of many state actors. Russia has employed several iterations of these methods both during and after the Cold War to influence perception and undermine the strengths of adversarial governments. Since the conclusion of the Cold War, advances in technology, globalization, and other factors have contributed to a

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widening gap between war and peace. The speed at which information now moves limits decision space for leaders, resulting in inadequate responses that open new channels for adversaries looking to capitalize on diminished status while increasing their own influence. Intensified economic interdependence caused by globalization has created new competition for resources in markets where reputation is an increasingly important asset.

As the character of warfare continues to transform, the United States must formulate doctrine to counter these tactics and determine how success is measured. These tactics occur in what is currently known as the “gray zone,” the space on the spectrum of conflict between war and peace. By blurring the distinction between the two and fostering uncertainty, states can exploit the West’s concept of war and peace as mutually exclusive. Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea showcased how an irredentist power could manipulate this perceived distinction to its advantage, couple this manipulation with hybrid warfare, and create a pretense resulting in gained territory with few shots fired. Russia used similar tactics prior to its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, blaming its western neighbor for increasing tensions via “Russophobia” and the need to “de-Nazify” as justification for action.

These actions continue to raise numerous questions concerning the nature of conflict. Is the gray zone concept worthy of its own place on the spectrum of conflict or merely a contrived term for a continuing evolution in strategy? How might the United States respond to these actions in the absence of current gray zone doctrine in an environment where elements of operational and strategic warfare are rapidly converging?

The Contemporary Gray Zone

Owing to the complexity, evolving characteristics, and nebulous nature of the gray zone, attempts to formulate both doctrine and potential countermeasures lack specificity and purpose. Some argue that America is organizationally and psychologically unprepared for unrestricted warfare and has a strategic culture that make it temperamentally unsuited to fighting gray zone conflicts.¹ With adversaries using a wide-ranging array of tools to undermine governmental legitimacy, there is a tendency to view these actions as ad hoc rather than as individual elements of an overarching strategy.² Many military strategists argue that this unconventional environment calls for an equally unconventional approach that maximizes strategic and operational flexibility across the spectrum of conflict.³ Indeed, a problem at the outset concerning potential responses is the continued view of the gray zone as an area of conflict. The gray zone should be categorized appropriately as an operational environment. *The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, definition of operational environment provides a useful framework for construction; it includes a composite of conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of capabilities.⁴ Treating the gray zone as an operational environment allows greater military flexibility for response while

also shifting focus away from the military as the only suitable instrument of national power.

Some argue that the United States already has a marked advantage in mitigating gray zone competition based on four factors: constitutional tenets, the character of American civil society, alliances and partnerships, and the capacity of the U.S. government.⁵ Leveraging these assets with specificity, improving intelligence warning, and adopting a campaign mindset will help to proactively shape conditions in America's favor.⁶

Recommendations concerning doctrine and responses to gray zone activities are often couched in generalities or address only the adversary's tool kit. U.S. statecraft, economic policy, and information operations are rarely covered as options for both defense and counteraction. Additionally, success in the gray zone is undefined. Synthesizing current doctrinal recommendations will help to provide measures for success and better define winning.

Defining the Gray Zone

The scope of behaviors used to describe so-called gray zone activities is consistently becoming broader as the opportunities for exploitation and boundary testing by adversaries increase. New technology, changing leadership, and an ever-shrinking connected world ensure that defining the gray zone will remain a moving target. While analysts agree on general characteristics, such as aim and methods, none have provided a comprehensive comparative study to better shape a present-day definition.

Although the term did not become popular until 2015, the concept of the gray zone strategy has existed for centuries. Carl von Clausewitz identified in *On War* that conflict is complex and limitless in its variety.⁷ He also recognized a key challenge in what would become gray zone strategy in describing uncertainty regarding adversary intent.⁸ This element, often referred to as the "fog of war," is easily applied to gray zone theory when those actions are viewed as part of a larger campaign.

George F. Kennan, in his most well-known 1948 memorandum, described Russia's own form of gray zone strategy, "political warfare."⁹ Kennan defined political warfare as "the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives."¹⁰ It included overt measures such as "white" (overt) propaganda, political alliances, and economic programs, to "such covert operations as clandestine support of 'friendly' foreign elements, 'black' psychological warfare, and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states."¹¹ Countering organized political warfare served as the basis for U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War years and continued for part of President Ronald Reagan's tenure.¹² U.S. Army general Joseph L. Votel would later bridge the parallels between current gray zone activities and Kennan's political warfare of the Cold War era.¹³

Frank G. Hoffman, a retired Marine and research fellow at the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities and a prolific writer on national security

strategy, recognized a trend in both state and nonstate actors of blending multiple forms of warfare in 2007.¹⁴ He coined the challenge presented by this convergence a *hybrid threat*, a term sometimes used synonymously with gray zone conflict today.¹⁵ Using Hezbollah as a model, Hoffman illustrated how nonstate actors can exploit Western weaknesses and how this strategy is being disseminated to other state and nonstate actors.¹⁶ Hoffman predicted that future opponents would set engagements away from the preferred U.S. fighting style, avoid predictability, and seek unexpected advantages to accomplish their objectives.¹⁷

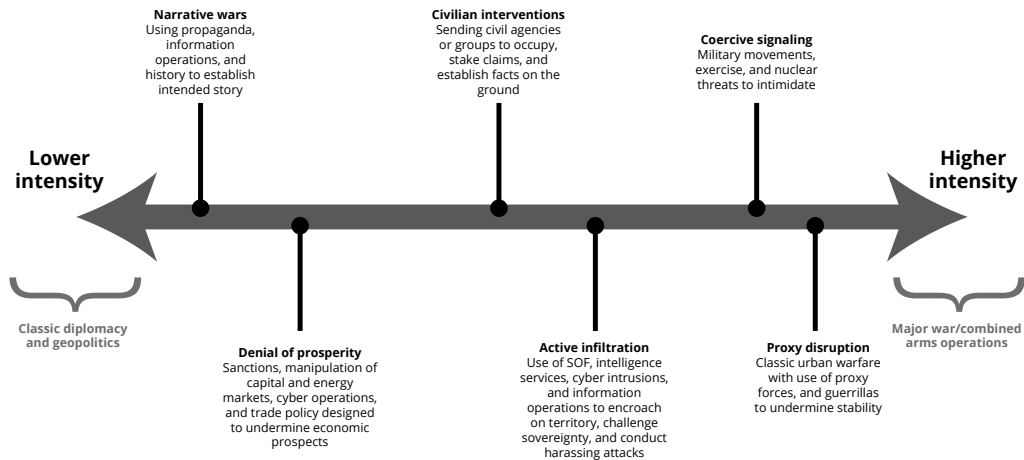
The contemporary conceptualization of a gray zone arose in 2014 with Nadia Schadlow's *War on the Rocks* article describing a space between peace and war on the spectrum of conflict.¹⁸ She characterized this space as churning with political, economic, and security competitions that require constant attention, while lamenting American reliance on the military as an instrument of first resort.¹⁹ She noted that policy considerations rarely made a military-political connection, and as a result, there was no U.S. presence in this space between.²⁰ Schadlow presciently explained that because adversaries cannot match American military power, their operations would occur in other more permissible domains.²¹

The astonishing Russian annexation of Crimea and its actions in Ukraine in 2014 produced a torrent of analysis and opinion, most postulating that the world was experiencing a new form of warfare.²² Analysts further exacerbated this notion by unearthing a 2013 speech by Russian chief of general staff Valery Gerasimov. The speech, delivered at the Russian Military Academy of Sciences, published in an obscure Russian outlet and initially ignored by both the Kremlin and the U.S. intelligence community, provided validation to Russia watchers since it provided a salient link between emerging trends in modern conflicts and overall Russian strategy.²³

The Gerasimov "Doctrine"

Gerasimov's 2013 speech at the Russian Military Academy of Sciences was published in the *Military-Industrial Courier*, a relatively obscure publication with limited readership. The title of the article, "The Value of Science Is Foresight" is significant because in the Russian lexicon, "foresight" has a specific military contextual meaning that equates to future war. The circumstances surrounding Crimea's annexation created a thirst for analysis and produced a flurry of commentary. One of these contributors was Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russian security affairs. He published a piece in his *In Moscow's Shadows* blog titled, "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine'," which he would later explain was completely tongue-in-cheek. However, the timing and need to provide a connection between Crimea, the situation in the Donbas, and current military thought gave this "doctrine" momentum, which still unfortunately propels it through many analytical and media channels.²⁴

The first official use of the term gray zone as an item of interest was during a 2015 House Armed Services Committee meeting in which General Joseph

Figure 1. Mazarr's gray zone spectrum

Source: Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2015), 60.

Votel, commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, characterized gray zone activities as designed to secure an objective while minimizing the scope and scale of actual fighting.²⁵ Gray zone activities are “characterized by intense political, economic, informational, and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy, yet short of conventional war.”²⁶ He posited that it was best employed where traditional statecraft was inadequate or ineffective and large-scale conventional military options are not suitable or deemed inappropriate for a variety of reasons.²⁷

Michael J. Mazarr’s December 2015 Strategic Studies Institute report provides the most useful depiction of gray zone conflicts and the intent behind their use. In *Mastering the Gray Zone*, Mazarr performs a comparative analysis of past terminologies to include political, hybrid, and unconventional warfare.²⁸ More importantly, Mazarr injects two additional characteristics for consideration: the revisionist tendencies of the actor (moderate but not radical) and the use of civilian instruments to achieve military objectives.²⁹

Adam Elkus presents another view of gray zone theory in his December 2015 critique.³⁰ He argues that the terminology is incoherent in that it has been expanded to encapsulate too broad a range of activity.³¹ He contends that the gray zone is a new terminology for already existing military strategy and political science: limited wars and compellence, which have all unnecessarily been lumped together.³² He sees gray zone theory as a meaningless effort to identify a problem that has already been solved.³³ Elkus’s take on the nature of the gray zone is highly constructive in that he has recognized the inconsistent nature of the concept in its relative infancy, and that if something means everything, it means nothing. However, Elkus’s critique misconstrues limited war by implying that anything less than total war is within the current confines of the mainline

Figure 2. Elkus's view of the gray zone



Source: Adam Elkus, “Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here: You Cannot Save the Gray Zone Concept,” *War on the Rocks*, 30 December 2015.

gray zone definition. Historically, limited war has meant a state using less than its total resources to achieve victory. The Falklands and Gulf Wars are examples of conflict that fit into this concept—certainly not within the confines of gray zone strategy.

The treatment of the gray zone as defined by the Department of Defense’s (DOD) Strategic Multilayer Assessment forum in 2016 as a “conceptual space” is helpful toward operationalizing the term as a battlespace or environment.³⁴ However, there are two issues present when placed into the Russian context: First, large-scale military conflict is a relative term. Second, not all gray zone strategy threatens solely U.S. interests.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) definition com-

prises many of the common elements put forward to this point but narrows the scope of actor objectives to those of security and therefore does not capture activity that may likely later be categorized within the gray zone.³⁵ Additionally, the CSIS definition has no mention of ambiguity—a paramount characteristic here, referring only to avoidance of direct force. Like the DOD forum's issue, the use of size is relative and may indicate a range of force structures.

In 2020, Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside argued that the adoption of the gray zone and gray zone conflict represent a failure in American thinking.³⁶ They contend outright that the gray zone and its related terms should be eliminated from our current glossary as they serve only to confuse an issue by muddying its parameters.³⁷ To prevent the premature release of new terms, they suggest testing that term against history and existing theory to validate whether it is actually new and worthy of consideration.³⁸ They identify four problems with the concept of the gray zone and hybrid war: first, that they are poorly constructed theories; second, that they distort or ignore history; third, that they feed a tendency to confuse war and peace; and fourth, that they undermine strategic thinking as foundations for new guidance.³⁹

Common Ground and Valid Objections

How then should one proceed in defining gray zone strategy? Is it rightly classified as warfare? Are its myriad critiques justified? Which definition provides the most utility? Recent history has provided no shortage of material for consideration.

Hybrid warfare and hybrid threat are distinguishable from gray zone conflict. While gray zone activities may rely entirely upon unconventional or covert military techniques at all levels, hybrid warfare often contains a congruence with conventional military assets, is limited to only tactical and operational echelons, and is punctuated by explicitly sanctioned violent tactics.⁴⁰ *Operations, Army Doctrinal Publication 3-0*, describes hybrid threat as

the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, terrorist forces, criminal elements, or a combination of these forces and elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects. Hybrid threats combine traditional forces governed by law, military tradition, and custom with unregulated forces that act without constraints on the use of violence.⁴¹

Additionally, as Michael Mazarr argues, hybrid warfare is truly “war” in the Clausewitzian sense, whereas gray zone strategies are less violent and a looser form of conflict.⁴² Moreover, the term *hybrid threat* in this context does not align with military doctrinal understanding and serves only to further confuse since not all gray zone activity contain mixed forces. Finally, the hybrid characterization has limited analytical utility since it indicates a mix of elements and nothing more.⁴³

To reduce confusion on the characterization of the gray zone and distance

discussion from tactical concepts, its “warfare” surname should be dropped in favor of “conflict.” This better aligns with Hoffman’s argument on imprecision, since warfare typically connotes some type of targeted violence, a trait not always consistent within the gray zone. This will also help future proof against any arising redundancies or oxymorons.

The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms defines an operational environment as a “composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander.”⁴⁴ *Operational Environment and Army Learning*, Training Circular (TC) 7-102, further elaborates on complex operational environments and describes the interplay between expectations, perceptions, influences, and ambiguity.⁴⁵ These drivers play directly into gray zone strategy, resulting in its characterization as an operational environment. Additionally, classification as an operational environment, as opposed to forcing it into irregular, hybrid, or unconventional terms will assist military planners in constructing estimates and forecasting effects at the strategic level. In that same vein, “multiple instruments of power” carries a strategic connotation, facilitating longer-range thought and consideration at higher echelons. Descriptors of increased fervency and staying short of the threshold of conventional war are retained as they represent the core attributes of gray zone conflict. Exploitation of ambiguity captures several domains (legal, geographical, intent, and attribution).

A Suggested Definition

The 10 leading definitions can be distilled into the following common elements:

- Uses nontraditional statecraft, unconventional methods, or multiple elements of power
- Remains below the threshold of conventional war
- More fervent than steady-state competition
- Ambiguous in intent or attributability
- Involve some form of coercion or aggression
- Pursues objectives
- Gradual
- Threatens U.S. interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws

Regardless of the current critique of the gray zone as an in-vogue phrase, the term has positioned itself firmly within both the strategic and military lexicon and for the moment looks to be here to stay. The table below illustrates the several shared touchpoints among the varied definitions.

The gray zone should be defined as an operational environment in which actors use multiple instruments of power to pursue political-security objectives through graduated activities that are more fervent than steady-state competition, exploit ambiguity, and fall below the threshold of conventional war.

Which activities adequately fall within the gray zone as contrasted with

Table 1. Gray zone elements and variations

	Hoffman (2014)	Votel (2015)	Barno & Bensahel (2015)	Mazarr (2015)	Kapusta (2015)	Brands (2016)	DOD (2016)	NIC (2016)	CSIS (2017)	Rand (2019)
Nontraditional state-craft/unconventional methods/multiple elements of power	X	X	X	X			X	X		
Below threshold of conventional war	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
More fervent than steady-state competition		X					X	X	X	X
Ambiguous			X		X	X	X			X
Coercion/aggression	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Pursues objectives	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Gradual	X			X		X				
Threatens U.S. interests by undermining international rules							X			

Sources: Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007); Votel, "Statement before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities"; David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the 'Gray Zone,'" *War on the Rocks*, 19 May 2015; Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*; Kapusta, *The Gray Zone*; Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone"; Popp and Canna, *The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone*; "Foreign Approaches to Gray Zone Conflicts," PowerPoint, National Intelligence Council, 2016; Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*; and Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone*.

historic versions of Soviet strategy? The overall aims, tactics, and outcomes of Soviet Cold War practices have arguably not changed significantly during the past 50 years. While subversion, misinformation, and its various other forms remain consistent, albeit enabled exponentially by technology, a few Russian actions stand as outliers when contrasted to the last half century. These anomalies may be better characterized as hybrid warfare rather than as gray zone strategy.

Russian Approaches Over Time

There is a tremendous cultural and historical gap between the USSR and the West. An analyst trying to understand the mentality of the Soviet leaders or their approach to or perception of problems is seriously handicapped without some background in Soviet history.

~ Robert Gates, 1976⁴⁶

Russia's gray zone approach is based fundamentally on Soviet techniques.⁴⁷ The approach used depends largely on the targeted adversary, but all approaches are typically rooted in a full-spectrum methodology.⁴⁸ One of the most commonly applied practices against the United States during the Cold War and today is active measures, which finds its heritage in the Bolshevik October Revolution of 1917.⁴⁹ Lenin's fear of ideological subversion had an enormous impact on the way in which narratives were controlled to stabilize Communism.⁵⁰ Soviet propagandist Ivan Philipovich Ivanov later confirmed that the 1930s variation on active measures was the best enabler for socialism and guaranteed against the restoration of capitalism.⁵¹ Seeing success in shaping internal influence and perceived protections via external projection, the Soviets imparted a holistic view and incorporated active measures into allied and foreign policy as well.⁵² The intelligence services that conduct these practices represent an integral function of Russian legislation and are based on a long tradition.⁵³ Indeed, the *Red Army's Officer's Handbook* expressed concern over a weakening of socialist ideals via external anti-Communist propaganda.⁵⁴ This policy continues today as Russia views itself as constantly beset by U.S. information warfare that threatens its ideology.⁵⁵

Although technologies have evolved and globalization has curtailed the distance between the two countries, Russian meddling in U.S. affairs is not unusual or new.⁵⁶ Russia's talent for propaganda and disinformation have long been recognized and continue to improve, even after the Cold War. Russia regularly employs an integrated and seemingly whole-of-government approach to achieve its national objectives. In his 1948 cable, George Kennan noted that Lenin's synthesis of the teachings of Karl Marx and Carl von Clausewitz have made Russia the most refined purveyor of political warfare in history.⁵⁷

The term *active measures* encompasses a broad range of activities used by Russian intelligence agencies for a multitude of purposes.⁵⁸ In the past, these activities have included disinformation operations, political influence efforts, and the activities of Soviet front groups and foreign Communist parties.⁵⁹ Russia's recent gray zone activities in Europe have consisted primarily of disinformation campaigns intended to undermine political institutions.⁶⁰ They also include deception, espionage, destabilization, and sabotage. The end state of each effort is to bolster the image of the Russian government, tarnish the reputation of a foreign government, or sow discord among the populace of an adversary or between nations. The span of operations can be wide or narrow, solitary, or conducted under friendly pretense with other intelligence organizations.

Owing to its versatility, the definition of "active measures" has proven difficult to pin down; indeed, the term is merely the translation of a phrase borrowed from the Russian intelligence community.⁶¹ World War II psychological operations provide the closest parallel to today's active measures. One former Committee for State Security (KGB) official's description of active measures as the "heart and soul of Soviet intelligence" illustrates both the historic importance of and reliance on the tactic as well as reflecting Russia's permanent

wartime mentality and strategic culture.⁶² Active measure campaigns represent the gray area between military campaigns and white propaganda, key terrain in today's information landscape.⁶³

Disinformation was an essential part of the Kremlin's non-nuclear arsenal against the West during the Cold War, with Soviet operatives spending at least one-quarter of their time employing active measures.⁶⁴ The Soviet-East German Operation Infektion from 1983 to 1989 attempted to pin the origination and spread of HIV on the United States.⁶⁵ Various media outlets tailored stories based on geographical or ethnic characteristics, and although now far-removed from recent memory, these narratives have had a lasting impact.⁶⁶ In a 2013 study, almost 60 percent of African Americans surveyed subscribed to one of several conspiracy beliefs regarding origination of HIV, which included the targeting of Blacks.⁶⁷ How much of that percentage was directly affected by the KGB and Hauptverwaltung für Aufklärung (HVA) may never be known, but as one researcher observed, conspiracy theories circulate geographically with astonishing ease, serving as templates readily adapted to the charged social divisions and power inequalities of their latest homes.⁶⁸

Post-Cold War Evolution?

Various documents, doctrinal adoptions, and new leadership in the 1990s surprisingly provided consistency in Russian strategy rather than change. In 1995, instructors at the Russian General Staff Academy offered their definition of information warfare as

a means of resolving conflict between opposing sides. The goal is for one side to gain and hold information advantage over the other. This is achieved by exerting a specific information/psychological and information/technical influence on a nation's decision-making system, as well as by defeating the enemy's control system and his information resource structures with the help of additional means, such as nuclear assets, weapons, and electronic assets.⁶⁹

After taking power in 2000, Vladimir Putin described the importance of a long-term strategy for development and combatting threats.⁷⁰ This strategy partially coalesced in Russia's 2000 *National Security Concept*, which underlined the importance of information as both a commodity and sphere.⁷¹ The security concept also echoed the Soviet-era informational threat of countries attempting to subvert Russian ideology.⁷² In April 2000, Putin broadened his definition of threats to states that infringed or ignored Russia's interests in "resolving international security problems" or stymied Russian attempts to influence the world order.⁷³ Later iterations have perpetuated this ideation, describing foreign media outlets' inherent bias toward Russia, the use of psychological tools to destabilize internal political and social situations, and erode "traditional spiritual and moral values."⁷⁴ This continued narrative reinforces Russia's worldview of persistent vulnerability and geopolitical insecurity as a driver for their actions.⁷⁵

Events in 2007 marked a Russian attempt to reestablish itself as a regional influencer. In February, President Putin indicated during a speech in Munich that Russia would no longer accept the U.S.-led unipolar model of international relations and that Russia would implement its own independent foreign policy in pursuit of its geopolitical interests.⁷⁶ Shortly after Munich, Putin appointed Anatoly Serdyukov as Russia's minister of defence. Serdyukov, a former tax minister, was tasked with increasing efficiency in the Russian military. Overall forces were downsized, but Russia's foreign intelligence services saw their funding restored to Cold War levels, signaling a shift in Russia's offensive strategy and placing a higher emphasis on information operations.⁷⁷ It also effectively indicated that active measures were being revived as a central component of Russian strategy.⁷⁸

In April 2007, Russia began an information campaign intended to drive a wedge between the ethnic Russian population of former Soviet Bloc states and their governments.⁷⁹ Social media efforts and cyberattacks allowed the Kremlin to leverage Russian-identifying populations and incite unrest.⁸⁰ This campaign showcased a cost-effective method of near abroad influence and disruption, causing varying levels of unease in several Baltic and Slavic states.⁸¹

Russian military weaknesses were highlighted in its 2008 war with Georgia. Although it was able to take control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, obsolete equipment, poor command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and lack of diverse military capability instigated reforms that would take place into the mid-2010s.⁸² Russian military doctrine in 2010 described integrated military and nonmilitary means as a characteristic of modern military conflicts, creating an additional subset within the current understanding of gray zone conflict.⁸³ Defence Minister Serduykov and his First Deputy Minister of Defence Nikolay Makarov were replaced by Sergei Shoigu and Valery Gerasimov, respectively. Gerasimov would later become the poster child of Russia's alleged hybrid war approach.

In 2013, Shoigu opened recruiting to new "military science units" that emphasized cyber operations, electronic warfare, and signals intelligence.⁸⁴ A new breed of hackers flowed into the GRU (formerly the Main Intelligence Directorate, the GRU is the foreign military intelligence agency of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation), and the organization established itself as an aggressive and risk tolerant arm of Russian intelligence.⁸⁵ Cyberattacks provided a new means for asymmetric tactics while updated communication technology offered a new venue for propaganda.⁸⁶

The 2014 annexation of Crimea validated perceptions that Russia was using a new type of hybrid warfare utilizing multiple domains to impose its will. Russia's extensive clandestine disinformation campaign discredited the Ukrainian government and provided a calculated pretense for employment of military forces. Outwardly, the Russian government framed the issue as one of reunification and magnanimous protectionism, garnering the support of many in Crimea. Simultaneously, Russia covertly undermined the government with

disingenuous and inflammatory reporting. Both ultimately softened the blow of any perceived illegal activity in the region. The event also showcased the power of social media in controlling the narrative and a sinister progression from ambiguity to fait accompli. How can the West effectively disrupt these tactics?

Constructing Doctrine

There is no such thing as a former KGB man.

~ Vladimir Putin, 2006⁸⁷

The final report of the organization responsible for countering Soviet disinformation from 1981 to 1992 contained a pertinent admonishment to future analysts and policy makers. Initially established under the State Department and later falling under the United States Information Agency (USIA), the Active Measures Working Group (AMWG) warned that even though the Soviet Union had collapsed, active measures would still be a threat to U.S. interests due to various anti-American groups adopting their previous rival's strategy.⁸⁸ The group also initially identified that Russia had not discarded much of its Soviet gray zone approach, noting that many elements of their active measures apparatus continued to operate, just under new names.⁸⁹

Many Russian leaders today were professionally trained by the Soviet state. President Putin has surrounded himself with like-minded individuals and there are few people at the top levels of Russian government that did not grow up in the Soviet intelligence apparatus.⁹⁰ Contemporary Russian gray zone tactics against the West mix previous Soviet tactics with analysis of adversary strategy, enabling a tailored application of practices.⁹¹ The perception that this brand of conflict is new is a misstep that shows how successful these tactics are.⁹² A second misstep is the perception of activity as ad hoc rather than as part of a long-term strategy, with Russian actions tending to startle the West even after intentions have been made clear.⁹³

Understanding Russian strategy drivers is essential to formulating gray zone policy. Since the early 2000s, Russia has perceived a growing instability in the world order favoring a shift from West to East.⁹⁴ Moscow believes that competition for markets, trade routes and resources, and its reemergence as a world power will depend largely on global perception.⁹⁵ This view, coupled with Russia's fortification against Western ideology and a zero-sum mentality presents a complicated mosaic of motivations leaning toward a defense through offense bent. A blurring between offense and defensive actions will hinder U.S. deterrence as Moscow pursues external interests in the name of national security.⁹⁶

Gray zone conflict also severely challenges America's conventional military and analytical thinking in several ways. It relies on creating a narrative contrary to U.S. interests and demonstrates the ineffectiveness of existing tools by undermining traditional measures of conflict. The Western security construct on warfare is an inadequate framework for understanding Russian strategic thought.⁹⁷ In hybrid warfare situations like Crimea, ideations of war and peace

as mutually exclusive hinder the ability to respond and adapt to a decades-old strategy that uses ambiguity as a shield. Additionally, there are few international institutions that can effectively respond to gray zone conflict or low-intensity hybrid warfare.⁹⁸ Take, for example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), where every alliance member must agree to enact Article V protections in an environment that lends itself quite handily to deniability. There is no gray zone for Russia, since it considers itself in a constant state of conflict with no distinction between war and peace. Russia's strength flows from its ability to integrate various instruments of power and its ability to effectively identify weaknesses in adversaries.

As CSIS observes, the United States is being confronted with the liabilities of its strengths.⁹⁹ The U.S. tendency to see the military as the sole hammer of national power overshadows the potential of other tools, especially when every problem is viewed as a nail. A prime illustration of this mentality is displayed in the U.S. military's doctrine as published in *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, JP 1. Warfare is described as either traditional or irregular, and although the publication admits that it can be a combination of both, irregular warfare includes only those struggles that are "violent."¹⁰⁰ Nathan Freier notes that these actions serve as a "menace to convention" that achieve outcomes typically reserved for war.¹⁰¹

Similarly, *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0, provides a phasing construct that is inadequate for current issues. Of the six phases delineated in Joint planning doctrine, all are placed into stringent sequential categories that shackle planners by creating arbitrary parameters and blinders.¹⁰² Russian gray zone activities operate in a steady state and sometimes occur gradually with no clear delineation or attribution, resulting in a frustration of the planning process and desyncing expectation and response. This also presents a problem within the highest levels of U.S. policy. Steven Metz, professor of national security and strategy at the U.S. Army War College, believes that Washington's tendency to compartmentalize elements of power and apply them in sequence shows our weaknesses toward ambiguity and inclination toward restricting conflict.¹⁰³ Nowhere is this compartmentalization more apparent than in U.S. dependence on the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community as a tool in irregular warfare. Caught between poor delineations of conflict and its historic role in nonpermissive environments, SOF consistently serves as default for any employments considered short of war. This, and other tendencies within U.S. strategic culture, display U.S. organizational and psychological unpreparedness to counter gray zone conflict.¹⁰⁴

In the last few years, the United States has started to understand how gray zone competitors operate.¹⁰⁵ Although the United States possesses near unlimited capability to compete in the gray zone, there is no plan to effectively integrate its capabilities to achieve its objectives.¹⁰⁶ Its challenge will not lie in developing capability, but in developing a national security strategy appropriate to an era of mixed and paradoxical trends.¹⁰⁷ Formulating strategies, options,

and counters to gray zone activities will be crucial as they become more frequent and complex.¹⁰⁸

In the information domain, the impacts of Russian disinformation campaigns on the U.S. intelligence community have been increased scrutiny, organizational and mission adjustments, and a new focus on cyber operations. Increased scrutiny has come as a by-product largely due to perceived Russian influence in the 2016 election and the U.S. intelligence community's inability to prevent or counter the activity. The United States has improved the means of monitoring information but has developed no standard procedures for response. Complicating the situation, social media exists in a purgatory moving between platform and publisher and is not subject to the many regulations that outright media outlets must obey. Even so, popular social media outlets' attempts to self-regulate are met with suspicion.¹⁰⁹

Russian action has obliged organizational and mission adjustments as well as a new concentration on cyber operations in recent years. Russia is outpacing the United States by leveraging the information space to bolster its propaganda, messaging, and disinformation capabilities in support of geopolitical objectives.¹¹⁰ The U.S. intelligence community has had to reexamine potential threat avenues, increase defensive cyber capabilities, and work harder to ensure that the correct version of information is available.

Responses to disinformation necessitate a delicate balancing act. Should the intelligence community address applicable reporting as false and set the record straight—but at the same time risk dignifying a forgery—or do nothing and hope that the populace will critically view the information? Another dilemma in truthful reporting is exemplified by the Robert S. Mueller report and other redacted reports concerning Russian influence operations: confirm or deny involvement at the risk of revealing sources and methods or remain silent and again hope that the truth sorts itself out.¹¹¹ Concerning response to disinformation, Charles Wick, director of the United States Information Agency, observed in 1988 that “the United States has the tremendous advantage that the truth is inherently more powerful than lies . . . [b]ut if the lies go unchallenged, then they can have a damaging effect.”¹¹² While addressing gray zone challenges requires looking forward, it also requires looking back to a period where actions regularly fell under the traditional notion of war.¹¹³ During the final years of the Cold War, exposing acts of disinformation served as an extremely powerful tool in undermining Soviet strategy.¹¹⁴

The rapid and intensive release of U.S. intelligence during Russia's military buildup along the Ukrainian border in late 2021 helped to shape the international narrative and frustrate Russian plans. This “prebunking,” or inoculating the public against disinformation by purposefully spreading intelligence, narrowed any potential avenues for denial on the part of the Russian government, expedited United Nations sanctions, and helped set conditions for a near global rally in Ukraine's favor. Increased intelligence sharing has also worked to stymie false flag actions, most recently Shoigu's November

2022 attempt to establish a pretext for escalation by implicating Ukraine in a dirty bomb scheme.¹¹⁵

Recommendations

The ambiguous nature of gray zone conflict presents the biggest challenge to the U.S. mindset. Hesitancy in attribution prevents any meaningful response, while misinformation runs nearly roughshod throughout social media and other outlets with no repercussion or appreciable cost to its fabricators. Russia watchers fixate on purported military doctrine while overlooking the importance of information in strategy.¹¹⁶ Understanding that the KGB stratagems in active measures still endure in today's gray zone conflict is key in developing responses.¹¹⁷ The West has difficulty in identifying information-based stratagems due to our tendency to oversimplify Russian intentions as aggressive and only short term.¹¹⁸ The United States must reshape its intellectual, organizational, and institutional models to enable better understanding and response options to Russian gray zone activities.¹¹⁹ U.S. strategy must assume that there are no fixed rules in gray zone conflict and that actors will utilize a wide swath of activities to achieve their ends.¹²⁰ Similarly, the United States must, as its Cold War counterparts did, make the expenditure of effort exceed the value of Russian political objectives.¹²¹

Seth G. Jones, director of Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, argues that today's Russia is much weaker than the Soviet state of the 1980s.¹²² He recommends modifying the U.S. Cold War playbook and developing an information campaign that can compete with Moscow.¹²³ Along that same line, the fear of upsetting bilateral relations due to forceful responses should carry less weight today. The balance between cooperation and confrontation does not require the same careful consideration as it did almost half a century ago.

Former secretary of defense Robert M. Gates notes that since the abolition of the USIA, U.S. diplomacy is just a shadow of its Cold War self.¹²⁴ Removal of one of the United States' most effective tools in thwarting Russian gray zone activities is counter to the proposition that other instruments of national power need to take a more active role in enforcing U.S. foreign policy. Because gray zone tactics are not typically geared toward territorial gains and have long-term objectives, civil organizations are better positioned to counter gray zone tactics since these activities comprise many agencies' core competencies.¹²⁵

The U.S. intelligence community needs an apolitical tool along the lines of the AMWG that gives information the treatment it deserves as a critical domain. An organization that understands adversary strategy, narratives, and content and is geared to highlight and halt attempts at subversion would serve as a useful nexus between real and fake news. The establishment of the Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) was a step in the right direction; however, it was not enough. In 2013, the IIP employed a paltry 458 employees (43 percent of which were contractors) and had a budget of \$55 million. The

IIP had significant structural problems and suffered from low morale.¹²⁶ This is a far cry from the USIA, which even in its waning years employed more than 8,000 individuals and had an operating budget exceeding \$1 billion.¹²⁷

Current circumstances in U.S. society present an enhanced opportunity in combatting some gray zone activities. The coverage of the 2016 and 2020 elections has placed Russian interference at the forefront of many American minds. This increased awareness has likely elevated critical thinking about sources of information and offers U.S. agencies a wider and less rocky path in hardening the population against subversion.

The other side of this coin, however, is a highly polarized citizenry that is dismissive of any agency advisory or guidance that might be perceived as partisan. While serving in Congress, Newt Gingrich (R-GA), who had taken an interest in the success of the AMWG, seemingly took pains to ensure it remained firmly neutral.¹²⁸ Gingrich apparently understood the importance of sources and perceived bias in 1985, years before the internet entered the mainstream. Given the speed of information, penchant for flavored commentary, and gravitation toward like-minded opinion, this concern is well-founded. Couching an updated AMWG or USIA within the context of intelligence will help mitigate concerns of politicization and bias since the U.S. intelligence community generally enjoys greater trust than other portions of government.¹²⁹ Consider the recent debacle in creating a Disinformation Governance Board. Falling under the Department of Homeland Security and intended to focus on disinformation surrounding immigration and Russian threats to critical infrastructure, the organization's perception as a political tool led to its swift demise.¹³⁰

In August 2020, Representative Michael McCaul (R-TX) introduced the USIA for Strategic Competition Act, which would reconstitute the AMWG and create an information statecraft strategy for the United States. During five years, the revived AMWG would combat Chinese propaganda and disinformation.¹³¹ Although the resolution died during the legislative session, it serves as affirmation that some leaders in government recognize and are concerned about gray zone conflict. Regardless of what organization is tasked to address Russian influence operations, it must be able to identify and block propaganda, help build the resilience of the issue agnostic population, displace Russian narratives with alternative content, and do a better job at telling the American story.¹³² Above all, personnel must understand the specific motivations behind these actions to better anticipate future efforts.¹³³

For gray zone tactics that rise above ideological subversion, several organizations have offered general strategy recommendations that utilize multiple instruments of power. A majority opinion recognizes the need for organizational and institutional paradigm shifts, especially concerning the Western view of conflict. Findings from most studies have common underlying elements and key in on central themes and approaches.

Although militaries are often essential in imposing a nation's will, they should play a limited role in gray zone conflict. Gray zone conflict is specifically

geared to circumvent traditional U.S. military power, and thrusting uniformed services into the mix risks escalation where none is warranted. Philip Kapusta suggests a benchmark for military intervention—when actions become transnational.¹³⁴ He also suggests proactive deterrence rather than responding after a crisis erupts, since military intervention is often met with international criticism that might sway states toward adversaries.¹³⁵ The military's main strength in gray zone conflict is its ability to improve cyber defenses, enhance intelligence and counterintelligence capabilities, and build partner special forces capacity.¹³⁶

For issues that do not obviate the need for military action, the State Department should be the central instrument of national security policy.¹³⁷ The United States has lost many opportunities in strategic messaging and failed to appeal to the nationalist sentiment of other countries subjected to Russian influence operations.¹³⁸ Statecraft is becoming a lost art that needs to be rediscovered and mastered.¹³⁹

Russia's desire to improve its regional and global image provides leverage and an opportunity for U.S. statecraft.¹⁴⁰ Effectively attributing aggression and subversion to their source serves two purposes: First, increasing awareness among the international community and exposing Russian tactics will push fence-sitting states toward increased cooperation with the United States. Second, attribution exposes the ideological weaknesses inherent in Russian authoritarianism and will increase financial and security expenses while fostering the perception of a threatened legitimacy.

Conclusion

Gray zone conflict and the challenge it presents are here to stay. Novel technologies, ambiguity, and a shifting geopolitical environment present new opportunity for adversaries to exploit. However, these opportunities are not one-sided. By looking to the past, the United States may find effective strategies to counter activities designed to remain below military thresholds while avoiding escalation. U.S. Cold War tactics in combatting Soviet active measures successfully undermined adversary narratives and tipped the balance between cost and benefit against adversaries. These Cold War counters shared four characteristics: they were proactive, unambiguous, rapidly employed, and enjoyed wide dissemination.

Measures of effectiveness in the gray zone center wholly around influence, underscoring the need for effective communication outlets, transparency, and appropriate signaling. In 2016, U.S. Army Special Operations Command conducted Silent Quest 16-1, an exercise designed to test future operating concepts and define "winning" in the gray zone.¹⁴¹ Results emphasized the importance of the human domain and how information-focused campaigns grant leaders more decision space and greater opportunity to change the course of conflict.¹⁴² Maximizing effectiveness in influencing and creating new opportunity and space for the United States while denying adversary positional advantage requires that all instruments of national power are synchronized and firing on all cylinders.

The U.S. ability to move effectively in the gray zone will necessitate a change in temperament concerning war's evolving analog nature. Realizing that activities are part of a long-term strategy and system rather than ad hoc events, and turning to economic, informational, and diplomatic statecraft rather than military means are the first steps toward success. Appreciating the reason adversaries turn to these tactics is close behind and will help the United States identify and capitalize on weaknesses that necessitated a gray zone approach in the first place.

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Plan Z

Reassessing Security-Based Accounts of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Alex Hughes

Abstract: The debate on the origins of the Russia-Ukraine War is at an impasse. Many prominent realist scholars argue that Russia's government chose to invade Ukraine as a last resort to reverse Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration, which it viewed as a major or "existential" national security threat. Critics of this contend that Ukrainian accession did not seriously threaten Russian security, and that Putin launched the invasion in the hope of achieving one or more nonsecurity objectives. This article surveys the current debate, before evaluating one of Moscow's key stated security concerns. It then identifies four empirical issues on which security and nonsecurity accounts make substantially different predictions. It concludes that in each case, the available evidence is difficult to reconcile with a primarily security-seeking interpretation of the Russian government's war aims.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine War, realism, imperialism, diplomacy, preventive war

Introduction

On the night of 24 February 2022, the Russian government initiated the first large-scale conflict on European soil since 1945. It was widely viewed as a watershed moment in modern international affairs, and the start of a new era for Russia.¹ The underlying motive for the invasion, dubbed a "special military operation" by Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, has been the subject of intense and often bitter debates among Western scholars and foreign policy analysts.² A mainstream interpretation was summarized by the conclu-

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sion of a *New York Times* investigation: “Consumed by his legacy, stewing in resentment against the West, Mr. Putin drove his country to war to seal his place in Russian history.”³

However, a significant number of prominent international relations scholars, mostly working in the neorealist tradition, reject such accounts. They argue that Ukraine’s possible accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) posed a severe or “existential” threat to Russia’s security, generating incentives that made war likely and perhaps inevitable. Preventive war accounts proved highly controversial, not least because they partially align with the Russian government’s own public relations effort, which has presented the war, in Dmitry Adamsky’s words, as “an unavoidable preventive strike to neutralize an existential threat and avoid colossal future costs.”⁴ For those who viewed the invocation of a national security imperative as little more than a cynical attempt to mask the war’s true aims, these scholars were engaged in dangerous apologia.⁵

Of these scholars, the University of Chicago’s John J. Mearsheimer is by far the most prominent. His lecture, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis,” has now received 29 million views, making it one of the most-watched political lectures in history.⁶ Joseph Cirincione summarized the views of many in the field when he wrote that “Mearsheimer is brilliant, provocative and deeply insightful. . . . On Ukraine, however, he is dangerously wrong.”⁷ Daniel W. Drezner goes further, concluding that “there is little value in delving any further into his thoughts on the matter.”⁸

However, the history of international relations is littered with wars waged with the aim of preventing a deterioration in the military balance.⁹ Mearsheimer, for his part, is one of the field’s most influential and respected scholars of the last two decades, having pioneered the offensive configuration of realist theory.¹⁰ And he is far from a lone voice; many—perhaps most—American realist scholars share his interpretation of the Russian government’s motives.¹¹ Moreover, the importance of correctly discerning those motives goes far beyond historical accuracy. James Goldgeier, a leading expert on NATO enlargement, views it as the single most important question for European security.¹² And as Mearsheimer notes, “Understanding [the conflict’s] root causes is essential if we are to prevent it from getting worse and, instead, to find a way to bring it to a close.”¹³ If Western policy makers incorrectly believe that Russia’s invasion is driven by a nonsecurity motive, they might underestimate Putin’s determination and risk a much wider and potentially nuclear conflagration. If instead they imagine there to be a non-negotiable security imperative where none is in fact present, they may ultimately push Kyiv into making unnecessarily large political or territorial concessions to a predatory regime, setting a precedent that could destabilize international politics.¹⁴

The debate is now deadlocked—for the most part, proponents of the security and nonsecurity accounts have failed to identify any tractable empirical issues that distinguish their accounts. This article identifies a number of such issues and concludes that the security-seeking account suffers from serious em-

pirical weaknesses. Although the main nonsecurity accounts are analyzed in the next section, the arguments in this article do not distinguish between alternative nonsecurity accounts. However, its conclusions increase their joint explanatory relevance. A broad survey of the existing literature will be useful to frame the discussion that follows.

Mapping the Academic Debate

In his famous 2014 *Foreign Affairs* article, Mearsheimer argued that Putin's seizure of Crimea, and his unacknowledged military operations in support of pro-Russian separatist elements in eastern Ukraine, were "defensive, not offensive" actions, designed to prevent Ukrainian integration into Euro-Atlantic economic and security institutions, particularly NATO.¹⁵ "The trouble over Ukraine actually started," Mearsheimer writes, "at NATO's Bucharest summit in April 2008, when George W. Bush's administration pushed the alliance to announce that Ukraine and Georgia 'will become members.' Russian leaders responded immediately with outrage, characterising this decision as an existential threat to Russia and vowing to thwart it."¹⁶ Mearsheimer argues that—in Putin's mind—such integration would leave Russia vulnerable, in conventional military terms, to a potentially hostile military alliance. Though he acknowledged in his 2001 theoretical treatise that nonsecurity motives "occasionally dominate a state's decision-making process," in 2014 Mearsheimer wrote that "Putin's actions should be easy to comprehend. A huge expanse of flat land that Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, and Nazi Germany all crossed to strike at Russia itself, Ukraine serves as a buffer state of enormous strategic importance to Russia. No Russian leader would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow's mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine."¹⁷

Mearsheimer insisted that his argument was merely "Geopolitics 101," and, indeed, prevention—i.e., choosing to fight sooner rather than later in the face of a deteriorating military balance—is a key rationalist explanation for conflict, described in one canonical account as a "ubiquitous" motive.¹⁸ Most large-scale interstate wars have been framed as preventive in nature by at least some analysts.¹⁹ However, Mearsheimer's argument proved highly controversial among both Russia experts and international relations theorists. Since Russia drastically escalated the conflict in February 2022, Mearsheimer has restated the argument in numerous publications and interviews. "This was a defensive war, it was a war of self-defense," he insists, "I think almost any Russian leader would have done what he did."²⁰

Other high-profile Western observers have also interpreted Russia's invasion primarily as a preventive war. Stephen Walt, another prominent neorealist scholar, writes that the "entire affair was avoidable," and that NATO's post-Cold War enlargement represents "a monumental failure of empathy with profound strategic consequences."²¹ Russia expert Richard Sakwa likewise argues that Russia's actions are driven by perceived insecurity.²² International security scholar Emma Ashford concurs, arguing that the invasion "is the almost inevitable result

of U.S. policy . . . we have pushed all the way up to Russia's borders and acted as if that is not a problem at all."²³ While describing Russia's invasion as "thug-gish, illegitimate and dangerous," Justin Logan and Joshua Shiffrinson recently argued in *Foreign Affairs* that "Moscow views [Ukraine] as uniquely central to its national security."²⁴ The late scholar of Russian studies, Stephen Cohen, also argued that the prospect of Ukrainian accession to NATO would remove an "essential" fixture of Russia's conventional security.²⁵

In a series of papers, Elias Götz analyses the competing interpretations of Russia's "near-abroad assertion," arguing that while a pure security-seeking account is difficult to square with Russia's apparent indifference to growing Chinese power, perceived insecurity was a central factor.²⁶ After Russia's large-scale invasion in 2022, Götz and Jørgen Staun wrote that the Kremlin's security concerns were honestly held—though amplified through the prism of a strategic culture that heavily emphasized the security implication of a NATO-aligned Ukraine—while also arguing that the country's aspiration to regain true great-power status, for nonsecurity reasons, was also central.²⁷ They conclude that "the perceived interests at stake—security and status—are vital for any government in Moscow. . . . This does not mean that any Russian leadership would have launched a large-scale invasion. Putin's personal goals and beliefs (especially regarding the Ukrainians' willingness to resist) most likely played a role here."²⁸ "Granted," they note, "it is impossible to make our case conclusively without better evidence than is currently available. Yet, the circumstantial evidence is solid enough to suggest its plausibility."²⁹

Many leading foreign policy analysts inside Russia have also posited a straightforward security-seeking rationale. Interestingly, however, very few seem to have anticipated the invasion. In late 2021, Dmitri Trenin, the then-director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that "Russia . . . treats Ukraine as a vital national security interest. . . . In his articles and speeches, Putin may emphasize the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, but what he cares most about is preventing NATO expansion in Ukraine."³⁰ However, contrary to Mearsheimer, who insists that NATO's efforts to bring about Ukraine's entry were actively proceeding, Trenin wrote that "for now . . . there is almost no support from the United States and other NATO members for letting Ukraine join the alliance."³¹ As such, Trenin predicted that major military escalation was unlikely.³² Similarly, Sergei Karaganov, an influential commentator and former Putin advisor, wrote shortly before the war that "NATO is not an immediate threat. We observed its fighting capabilities in Afghanistan. But we see it as a dangerous virus spreading bellicosity and thriving on it. Also it is obvious that the closer it comes to our borders the more dangerous it could become."³³ Like Trenin, Karaganov wrote prior to the invasion that Russian forces would not be given the order to invade—doing so would be "simply senseless"—but argued afterward that the war "was inevitable, they were a spearhead of NATO. We made the very hard decision to strike first, before the threat becomes deadlier."³⁴ Fyodor Lukyanov, the Valdai Discussion

Club's influential research director, also points to a primarily security-seeking rationale.³⁵ Asked weeks before the attack whether Russia was "planning to go to war in the near future," however, Lukyanov responded "absolutely not, and if it will [*sic*] happen, I would say it will mean miserable failure of Russian strategy, because no one wants war."³⁶

Several prominent Western journalists have also argued that the invasion was primarily or partly motivated by national security concerns. Tim Marshall writes that "Russian leaders have long attempted at least to control the flatlands to their west. . . . As long as a pro-Russian government held sway in Kyiv, Russia could be confident that its *most important buffer zone would remain intact and guard the European plain* along with Belarus."³⁷ However, Marshall adds that this "is [only] a partial answer to the question 'why' " and concludes that as he "gazes at the map and dreams of Mother Russia as a great power, feared by the world, Putin is prepared to kill tens of thousands of men, women and children to achieve his fascistic dream and Ukraine's nightmare."³⁸ In *Overreach: The Inside Story of Putin's War Against Ukraine*, Owen Matthews concludes that the "invasion of 2022 was, in the minds of the men who planned and pushed it, first and foremost a pre-emptive strike to save Russia from a looming strategic [i.e., military] threat from the West."³⁹

The security-seeking account has been extensively criticized. Some have accused Mearsheimer and others of stripping all actors besides NATO and Russia of agency in their purely dyadic analysis. Gerard Toal argues that Mearsheimer's argument "is a highly reductionist view of the Ukraine crisis that is manifestly at odds with the historical record. In Mearsheimer's world, superpowers are the only ones with real agency, smaller states are subordinate clients, and substate actors are proxies."⁴⁰ Similarly, the European University Institute's Filip Kostelka writes that "[in Mearsheimer's account], Ukrainians appear only as victims of Russia's invasion, deprived of any agency . . . [and] as clueless pawns in a geopolitical game played by the 'great' powers."⁴¹

Many have rejected the security-seeking argument on the basis that NATO is intrinsically defensive. Dismissing arguments that cast Russia's aggression as in any sense defensive, UK defence secretary Ben Wallace wrote in January 2022 that NATO is "to its core . . . a truly defensive alliance."⁴² This would not contradict the logic of Mearsheimer's argument: "It doesn't matter whether you think they're facing an existential threat," he notes, "all that matters is whether they think they're facing an existential threat."⁴³ Mearsheimer assumes that "states can never be certain about other states' intentions."⁴⁴ This assumption is of course correct but trivial. A stronger version, which Mearsheimer also espouses, asserts that intentions cannot be discerned with *sufficient confidence* to allay mutual suspicion, or in other words, rising states or alliances cannot credibly commit not to exploit the future power imbalance, regardless of whether their current intentions are benign.⁴⁵ As a result, offensive realists argue, states default to a generalized worst-case assumption, balancing "against capabilities, not intentions."⁴⁶ Walt is less categorical, maintaining that perceptions of oth-

ers' intentions vary to a behaviorally relevant extent, inserting a wedge between a state's power and the threat it is perceived to pose.⁴⁷ However, he argues that the strategy America pursued after the Cold War led Russia's leadership to see NATO as a major military threat.⁴⁸ Mearsheimer's worst-case assumption, which departs from standard expected utility-based rationality criteria, has been notably defended by Sebastian Rosato and criticized by Charles Glaser and others.⁴⁹

Strategy scholar Lawrence Freedman writes that "NATO enlargement . . . features in many explanations for the origins of the war . . . whether or not we believe that NATO poses an objective threat. . . . Threats to a state are interpreted by those in charge."⁵⁰ He also argues, however, that "the more authoritarian the system, the more the issue becomes one of what makes the supreme leader insecure, which might be anything that threatens their personal position. . . . The desire of dictators to be left alone to do their dictating as they wish is why they cling to the principle of 'non-interference in internal affairs' as a vital principle in international affairs."⁵¹ In Freedman's view, "this illuminates the limitations of 'realism' . . . as an aid to understanding the origins of this conflict. . . . Because realism concentrates on power relations between states, the only aspect of Putin's tergiversations that are considered relevant by realists are those that complain about NATO's enlargement. All the rest are disregarded."⁵² To be sure, as many have noted, most security-seeking accounts are not purely realist; Mearsheimer, for instance, does not argue that the deterioration in NATO-Russia relations can be captured by the spiral model of interacting security-seekers.⁵³ Rather, he frames Russian decision-making as that of a rational, unitary security-seeker, but explains U.S. behavior in terms of naïve, liberal "delusions."⁵⁴

Nonsecurity accounts of the Russian government's motives generally fall into one of two distinct, albeit compatible, categories. The first posits an ambition on the part of Putin and his inner circle to significantly increase Russia's relative power in international affairs, particularly vis-à-vis the United States, for nonsecurity reasons. In this account, the goal of the invasion was to absorb—outright or de facto—much or all of Ukraine into a rejuvenated Russian Empire or Greater Russia. Jeffrey Mankoff argues that Russia's invasion "may be the 21st century's first imperial war."⁵⁵ "Russia's ruling elite grew up during an era," Mankoff notes in his classic textbook on Russian foreign policy, "when Moscow and Washington largely directed the fate of the world."⁵⁶ He argues that rather than Ukraine's aspiration to join NATO or the European Union (EU), Ukraine provoked Russia through "the very temerity it displayed in existing at all," and that in order to understand its invasion, "it helps to think about Russia not as a nation-state with fixed borders demarcating the extent of its territory and its people, but as the heir to a long imperial tradition" with an "intellectual and political elite that has never come to terms with the loss of status accompanying the erosion of Russia's imperial space."⁵⁷

A September 2022 article by Angela Stent and Fiona Hill, both experienced Russia specialists, argued that "Russia's president invaded Ukraine not because he felt threatened by NATO expansion or by Western 'provocations.' He or-

dered his 'special military operation' because he believes that it is Russia's divine right to rule Ukraine, to wipe out the country's national identity, and to integrate its people into a Greater Russia."⁵⁸ Likewise, before the invasion, historian Niall Ferguson wrote that Putin's July 2021 essay "made it perfectly clear that he was contemplating a takeover of the country along the lines of Nazi Germany's 1938 Anschluss of Austria" and that "it is not Stalin's Soviet Union for which Putin hankers. It is the rising Russian Empire of Peter the Great," Putin's favorite historical leader.⁵⁹ Similarly, Mark Galeotti, a noted expert on Russian security affairs, argues that "the use of force, in this context [i.e., against Ukraine in 2022], is a symptom of the degradation of checks and balances on the monarch."⁶⁰

In *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, historian Timothy Snyder emphasizes Putin's valorization of the writings of Ivan Ilyin, a quasi-fascist thinker who was influential in reactionary circles of White émigrés that fled Russia during the civil war, and whom Putin quoted at the end of his 30 September speech announcing the plans to annex the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizha provinces.⁶¹ Owen Matthews has noted Putin's number two Yuri Kovalchuk's own apparent fascination with Ilyin.⁶² Snyder argues that "no thinker of the twentieth century has been rehabilitated in such grand style in the twenty-first, nor enjoyed such influence on world politics."⁶³

A second set of accounts cast the Russian government's actions in Ukraine as driven primarily by the desire to increase or maintain the security of its regime from internal threats. Distinct from the standard "rally-around-the-flag" mechanism posited in diversionary war theory, these accounts posit a view in the presidential administration that its legitimating narrative or "political formula," as the neo-Machiavellian political theorist Gaetano Mosca called it, might be fatally undermined by a successful transition to Western-style liberal democracy in a major Slavic neighbor.⁶⁴ As former U.S. Russia ambassador Michael A. McFaul puts it, Putin fears "democracy on Russia's border practiced by people with a shared culture and history. If Slavs succeeded in consolidating democracy in Ukraine, Putin's theory about the Slavic need for a strong, autocratic ruler with orthodox conservative values would be weakened."⁶⁵ Anne Applebaum makes the same case, writing that Putin "has never won a fair election, and he has never campaigned in a contest that he could lose . . . one day, prodemocracy activists of the kind he saw in Dresden might come for him too . . . [so] he wants Ukrainian democracy to fail."⁶⁶

In the same vein, Stephen Kotkin, an influential historian of modern Russia, argues that while the argument made by Mearsheimer and others "need to be taken seriously," it veers into "self-flagellation . . . in the early part of the Cold War . . . people said, you know, we didn't respect Soviet sensitivities. We didn't respect Stalin [*sic*] psychology, and look what happened. He conquered all his neighbours, because he was disrespected . . . I'm sorry, that argument is bunk."⁶⁷ Kotkin suggests,

The biggest mistake of all is when we conflate Russia with the personalist regime. So Putin feels insecure and NATO threatens him personally,

in his mind. The EU threatens Putin. Democracy threatens him in his personalist regime. Does it threaten Russia? Does it threaten Russian security? . . . Let's be honest, it does not. It never did . . . it's a fictitious threat, and it's a conflation of a country and its security, with an individual and his personalistic, kleptocratic, gangsterist regime.⁶⁸

Freedman concurs: "Ukraine threatened Russia," he writes, in part "because of the potential contagion effect of the 'Orange' revolution of 2004 and the Euromaidan movement of 2014. To understand the sources of conflict these factors cannot be ignored."⁶⁹

Likewise, Samuel Ramani, a Russian security policy expert, argues that Putin's "obsessive focus on NATO expansion over the past decade or so" is a "political construct."⁷⁰ "The real issue for him," Ramani continues, "is that the West, or liberalism, or foreign values, poses a threat."⁷¹ Contrary to Snyder and others, Ramani argues that Russia's leader "is not fundamentally ideological; what he's focused on is the retention of power at all costs. . . . That's what's driving a lot of his actions."⁷² A 2019 Rand report argued that Russia's

top security policy goal is stability . . . [it] seeks stability externally, most of all on its borders, because of a perceived direct link between events there and stability inside Russia. Stability is defined particularly by avoidance of "color revolution" scenarios. . . . Many Russian strategists consider . . . domestic instability to be the number one threat. . . . Popular unrest—spurred from abroad—that could topple the government or undermine state institutions is seen as a very real prospect.⁷³

Some analysts have emphasized Putin's personal role in Russian state behavior. Dissenting from macro-level accounts, Julian Waller argues that the neorealist security-seeking account has difficulty explaining "why the NATO issue spurred on the sudden capture of Crimea in 2014 and then only eight years later led to a renewed round of conflict," while the role of Russian nationalism or imperialism "lacks specific explanatory power to be anything other than a handwave or a background condition."⁷⁴ Similarly, Waller argues, accounts that focus on regime insecurity do not explain the timing of Putin's decision. These accounts each "have difficulty adjudicating why we saw war in 2022, rather than 2021, 2019, 2017, or earlier."⁷⁵ The fact that Russian foreign policy elites were essentially in the dark about the decision to invade, he notes, "is difficult to square . . . with claims that pervading structural logics were the decisive element, if only the Russian president really could see them as such."⁷⁶ Indeed, while Mearsheimer could be said to have been prescient on the difficulties Russian forces would encounter if they attempted to seize large swathes of the country, some have gone as far as to commend him for predicting the invasion.⁷⁷ Tyler Cowen, for example, writes that "I think [Mearsheimer] is quite wrong about NATO as the provocation, but if you are grading him on predictions alone obviously he wins some serious kudos."⁷⁸ In fact, Mearsheimer made no

such prediction. On the eve of the attack, he predicted the opposite, arguing on 15 February that Putin “did not have any intention of invading Ukraine.”⁷⁹

Instead, Waller emphasizes the “leader image,” i.e., the causal role of Putin’s idiosyncratic worldview and psychology. He writes that Putin became “uniquely isolated from wider elite preferences due to strict pandemic isolation protocols, highly-developed presidential centralization, and bureaucratic privileges in information access given to sycophantic subordinates.”⁸⁰

At the same time, Waller notes, Putin has viewed Ukrainian politics primarily through the Federal Security Service’s (FSB) lens—that, by 2022, had “increasingly diverged from generic elite opinion on the state of Russian-Ukrainian relations.”⁸¹ Recent research has documented the pervasive optimism that characterized prewar FSB assessments, particularly surrounding its penetration of the Ukrainian state, and the centrality of these assessments to Moscow’s overall strategic planning.⁸² Serhii Plokhii emphasizes similar leader-level factors in his book-length account of the conflict, noting that Putin appears to have taken a keen interest in Russian imperial history and in how his own legacy was taking shape.⁸³

The classical realist notion that major states tend to pursue power and spheres of influence as ends in themselves is implicit in some nonsecurity accounts, while others emphasize the peculiarities of Putin’s temperament, worldview, regime security concerns and legacy-related goals, or the mediating role of Russia’s strategic culture.⁸⁴ In other words, each portray Russia as “greedy”—i.e., as a state actor with significant nonsecurity goals—but posit different goals and alternative accounts of the sources of those goals.⁸⁵

This article casts regime insecurity as a nonsecurity motive, for several reasons. As a unit-level factor, regime insecurity plays no causal role in neorealist models of conflict and preventive war. Accordingly, proponents of the security-seeking interpretation tend to refer strictly to the national security concerns relevant to unitary actors. While both motives are *defensive* or *preventive* in a narrow sense, the implications of national and regime security accounts differ in two important respects. First, to a large extent, the attribution of “blame” for the conflict’s outbreak turns on this distinction. Mearsheimer is clear that Putin “started the war and is responsible for how it is being waged.”⁸⁶ However, if straightforward national security concerns drove his decision, Western policy makers can be said to share much of the blame, since NATO’s eastward enlargement pushed a fundamentally benign, security-oriented state to the point of desperation, and plausibly would have done so regardless of Putin’s idiosyncrasies or Russia’s regime type. But if concerns around regime security were the motivating factor, primary causal responsibility lies with Putin—specifically, his willingness to lay waste to neighboring countries, not to protect Russia as a nation-state, but to solidify his dictatorial position within it. The enlargement process might still be viewed as reckless or counterproductive, as discussed below, but most of the blame shifts to Moscow. The war becomes an unpredictable consequence of Ukraine’s proximity to a domestically insecure

autocracy—with the architects of NATO enlargement having stepped on a hidden landmine—rather than the predictable or Geopolitics 101 consequence of cornering a great power by threatening its survival and thus forcing it to act. Second, the implications for Western policy, and relatedly, for the underlying bargaining space in potential negotiations, might be markedly different. Future research might investigate the relationship between the Russian leadership's motives for the war and its level of resolve in waging it.

A broader literature has investigated the role of NATO enlargement in the deterioration of Russia's relations with the West and with neighboring states. In her 2021 account *Not One Inch: America, Russia and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*, Mary Sarotte provides a wealth of new archival material on NATO-Russia diplomacy in the 1990s.⁸⁷ She concludes, in part, that alternatives to NATO enlargement, in particular the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which Yeltsin called a “stroke of genius,” could have empowered liberal reformers to resist the powerful antidemocratic forces inside Russia.⁸⁸ Moreover, she argues that—had Russia embarked on an aggressive foreign policy against CEE states despite the United States opting for PfP over outright enlargement—members could have been swiftly brought into NATO.⁸⁹ Kenneth Waltz would almost certainly have rejected the rationality of Moscow's stated security fears—whether honestly held or not—since he argued that a secure nuclear arsenal guarantees a state's core security interests.⁹⁰ However, he shared Sarotte's views on enlargement, writing in 2000 that it “weakens those Russians most inclined toward liberal democracy and a market economy. It strengthens Russians of the opposite inclination.”⁹¹

Conversely, Kimberly Marten, an expert on Russian foreign policy, writes that

those who predicted that nationalists would run with the enlargement issue were correct—but that is a far cry from the argument that nationalists would defeat reformers because of it. Domestic concerns about the economy, public safety and order, and instability and violence in the Russian North Caucasus mattered much more.⁹²

Kotkin goes further:

There's a misunderstanding of democracy in Russia in the nineties . . . Yeltsin was a self-styled democrat, and he appointed President Putin to power. Yeltsin's constitution in 1993 was the constitution used by Putin to make an autocratic regime. Boris Yeltsin brought to power, before Putin, members of the KGB, en masse . . . the recourse to autocracy, the recourse to repression, the recourse to militarism, the suspicion of foreigners. These are not reactions to something that the West does or doesn't do. These are internal processes that had a dynamic of their own. NATO expansion became a pretext or an excuse, post facto.⁹³

Karen Dawisha reaches a similar conclusion in her detailed account of the

development of Putin's regime.⁹⁴ "Instead of seeing Russian politics as an inchoate democratic system being pulled down by history, accidental autocrats, popular inertia, bureaucratic incompetence, or poor Western advice," she writes, "I conclude that from the beginning, Putin and his inner circle sought to create an authoritarian regime ruled by a close-knit cabal with embedded interests, plans and capabilities."⁹⁵

Ultimately, Marten argues, "extreme nationalist ideology, not a security dilemma or preventive war thinking, most likely explains Russian actions toward Ukraine," arguing that "Russia was always very unhappy about NATO enlargement, but the reason that it was unhappy was because of the loss of status and Russia's being excluded from what it saw as this new security architecture in Europe, not because it truly felt any kind of military threat from NATO enlargement."⁹⁶ Evan Kerrane concurs and wrote that "arguably, Moscow's assertive policies against external influence in the near abroad emerge more from national pride and the search for international respect, or fear, than concern over a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) invasion."⁹⁷

Tracey German, an expert on Russian security policy at King's College London, contends that the assumption in Western capitals that Putin was not truly willing to use force to reverse Ukraine's movement toward NATO membership, when combined with the lack of urgency within NATO to fulfill its 2008 promise, made aggression an increasingly attractive option for Moscow, while at the same time leaving Ukraine unprotected.⁹⁸ On this final point, many notable proponents of NATO enlargement, such as James Goldgeier, and prominent critics of Mearsheimer's account, including Niall Ferguson, agree that NATO's 2008 promise was a "huge mistake," creating "the worst of all possible worlds."⁹⁹

The Analytical Impasse

Debates about the origins of the Russia-Ukraine War are often framed in terms of whether Putin and his inner circle strongly objected to Ukraine joining NATO. But as the previous survey shows, *whether* he cares about Ukraine's association with NATO, or the extent to which he cares, is not the main issue—rather, the key question is *why*. Unlike a state's actions, its motives are a latent variable—they cannot be observed directly, and one set of actions can causally follow from very different underlying motives.¹⁰⁰ A purely security-oriented state might strongly oppose its neighbor's ambition to join an alliance such as NATO because it believes this will jeopardize its security. Conversely, a state that does not envision a significant security cost may also oppose its neighbor's move if it intends to coerce, subjugate, or conquer that neighbor in the future, since the most powerful state in the international system formally pledging to defend the neighbor will almost certainly make those future strategies prohibitively costly, and in all likelihood, militarily impossible.

In other words, whatever Putin wants from Ukraine, allowing it to join NATO would drastically curtail his options. As such, all the commonly hypothesized motives—national security concerns, imperial ambition, legacy build-

Table 1. Distinct implications of alternate war motives

Implications for:	Motives			
	National security	Regime security	Ideology (nationalism, imperial nostalgia, Eurasianism, etc.)	Leader image and classical-realist power maximization
The purpose of Russia's pre-war diplomacy	Secure Ukrainian neutrality and large concessions from NATO	Deception campaign	Deception campaign	Deception campaign
Requisite military capability	Sufficient for large coercive leverage	Collapse UAF resolve; defeat UAF if required; conduct large-scale stability operations	Collapse UAF resolve; defeat UAF if required; conduct large-scale stability operations	Collapse UAF resolve; defeat UAF if required; conduct large-scale stability operations
Minimum political aims	Block Ukrainian NATO membership	Regime change	Regime change plus formal annexation or union state relationship	Regime change plus formal annexation or union state relationship
Minimum military aims	Exert sufficient coercive pressure to secure a neutrality agreement	Seize Kyiv; collapse UAF resolve	Seize Kyiv; collapse UAF resolve	Seize Kyiv; collapse UAF resolve

Source: compiled by author.

ing, historical-ideological fervor, and regime security—imply that preventing Ukraine from joining NATO, potentially through military force, would be a key intention. The analytical deadlock therefore stems from the fact that in this key respect, rival accounts of the origins of the war are observationally equivalent.

This article aims to bypass the deadlock. It starts with an evaluation of an influential argument that emphasizes the Russian government's stated concerns about U.S. intermediate-range missiles and Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems—in particular, the compatibility of Aegis systems with nuclear-tipped cruise missiles—as having played a major role in motivating its decision to invade Ukraine. It then evaluates four issue areas on which security-based and nonsecurity accounts make distinct predictions. The first three are summarized in table 1.

The primarily security-seeking account suggests, first, that the diplomatic crisis triggered by Moscow in late 2021 constituted an honest effort to attain concessions aimed at improving or maintaining Russia's perceived security, by

preventing Ukrainian NATO membership. Then, as the invasion began, leading proponents of the security-seeking account suggested that Russia's invasion force was clearly insufficient to achieve the objectives ascribed to Moscow by nonsecurity accounts—in particular, the subjugation and potential annexation of most or all of Ukraine. Third, some proponents—including Mearsheimer—argue that Russia does not appear to have intended to “conquer” or “absorb” most or all of Ukraine, but instead to merely coerce it into reneging its intention to join NATO. Because more extensive military objectives are more consistent with nonsecurity goals, the publicly available evidence on Russia's objectives sheds light on the causal importance of a security-seeking motive. Lastly, the security-seeking account assumes that Moscow views Ukraine as a vital security interest, i.e., a state whose membership in a foreign alliance would result in an unacceptable shift in Russia's perceived defensive military and deterrent capabilities. To a considerable extent, this assumption is based on the claim that senior Russian officials have consistently said that Ukrainian membership is a red line. The final section evaluates that supposed consistency. In each case, the available evidence is more consistent with nonsecurity interpretations of Russian motives, but the security-seeking account becomes especially difficult to defend when these issues are considered in combination.

Russia's Nuclear Vulnerability Rationale

In *How the West Brought War to Ukraine: Understanding How U.S. and NATO Policies Led to Crisis, War and the Risk of Nuclear Catastrophe*, which drew praise from Mearsheimer, Noam Chomsky, and Richard Sakwa, among others, Benjamin Abelow argues that Russia's invasion was motivated by national security concerns.¹⁰¹ Alongside NATO's geographic enlargement, he contends that offensive U.S. missile installations in Europe, both actual and anticipated, also played an important role in Putin's decision. Influential analysts such as Dmitri Trenin have emphasized the same concerns, while Russian officials have repeatedly forwarded them as an implicit rationale for the invasion.¹⁰² Highlighting the installation of Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense systems in Romania in 2016, Abelow writes that “though ostensibly defensive,” Aegis systems can accommodate a variety of missile types, not just ABMs [antiballistic missiles] . . . but also, crucially, nuclear-tipped offensive weapons like the Tomahawk cruise missile. Tomahawks have a range of 1500 miles, can strike Moscow and other targets deep inside Russia, and carry hydrogen bomb warheads with selectable yields up to 150 kilotons, roughly ten times that of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. A similar Aegis site is under construction in Poland . . . [Aegis launchers] can accommodate 24 missiles, creating the potential for 48 Tomahawk cruise missiles to be launched at Russia from relatively close range. Mr Putin has been adamant that the presence of these offensive-capable Aegis launchers near Russia's border poses a direct danger to Russia.¹⁰³

Abelow is correct that Aegis BMD systems do not solely function as hedges to possible Iranian proliferation, and that he greatly overstates their significance for the NATO-Russia military balance.

First, although Aegis-borne Tomahawks could be mated with nuclear warheads and would be capable of deeply penetrating Russian territory, they are dwarfed in both number and yield by America's current land- and submarine-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) forces, which already render all Russian territory vulnerable. Nuclear cruise missiles are more difficult to detect, but hardly a new factor—the United States fields more than 500 air-launched AGM-86Bs.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, unlike their American counterparts, Russian surface vessels and submarines currently field nuclear-capable cruise missiles.¹⁰⁵ If Russia's leaders are rational, the possible deployment of 48 nuclear-tipped cruise missiles in Eastern Europe should not raise real concerns; given the size and reach of existing U.S. and Russian nuclear forces, the marginal value of additional capabilities that do not seriously threaten the opponent's second-strike potential is minimal. Russia's leadership could suspect that the U.S. government somehow erroneously believes it has gained a viable first-strike option, thereby granting the United States a significant *de facto* bargaining advantage.¹⁰⁶ However, additional Russian arming or changes to its nuclear force posture—actual or stated—could dispel the U.S. misconception and, as discussed below, the statements Putin has made on this issue suggest he remains confident that Russia's retaliatory potential is unambiguous.

Second, Abelow misconstrues the strategic significance of Aegis-type systems, suggesting that while Moscow might ignore a single-purpose, defensive BMD installation, Aegis's offensive capability raises rational concerns around first-strike vulnerabilities. However, the logic of nuclear deterrence under mutual vulnerability reverses this picture—missile defense systems are cast as offensive assets because their purpose is to limit the damage an adversary is able to inflict, thereby undermining its ability to defend itself via effective deterrence, while nuclear-tipped cruise missiles can be viewed either as offensive or defensive, depending on whether they threaten force or value targets, respectively.¹⁰⁷ In other words, given Russia's preexisting vulnerability and ample strategic forces, BMD systems should loom larger in any concerns Moscow might harbor around strategic stability. And indeed, although Putin briefly mentioned its cruise missile functionality at the 2015 Valdai conference, he put much more emphasis on the potential threat posed by Aegis Ashore's BMD role.¹⁰⁸

Third, Abelow ignores the Russian government's potential to respond through nuclear arming, and indeed, ignores its actual response. As the influential Russian foreign policy analyst Dmitri Trenin writes, "Washington's withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002 resulted in efforts to build a U.S. missile defense system . . . Russia responded by stepping up work to make sure its strategic offensive weapons could overcome any conceivable U.S. missile defense. So far, Russia has managed to fully protect its deterrence capacity."¹⁰⁹

This was affirmed in a December 2021 *Foreign Policy* article that Abelow cites elsewhere, written by Russia's ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov. "The result of the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty," Antonov writes, "was Russia's forced decision to develop hypersonic weapons that can penetrate any missile defense system, in order to maintain strategic stability."¹¹⁰ Putin made the same claim at the Valdai conference in 2018:

we are improving our attack systems as an answer to the United States building its missile defence system. . . . I am talking about the Avangard [hypersonic boost-glide vehicle] system. Clearly, we have overtaken all our, so to speak, partners and competitors in this sphere, and this fact is acknowledged by the experts. No one [apart from Russia] has a high-precision hypersonic weapon. . . . So, we feel confident in this sense.¹¹¹

Putin's stated confidence is well founded—even prior to Russia's rollout of hypersonic weapon systems, antiballistic missiles (ABMs) launched from the Aegis site in Romania could not intercept Russian land-based ICBMs bound for U.S. territory even under unrealistic conditions, and the ABMs based in northern Poland have only a small chance of blocking outbound ICBMs from a minority of Russian launch sites.¹¹² Later, Abelow argues that in the wake of the Donald J. Trump administration's withdrawal from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty,

Russia had been deeply concerned that new U.S. missiles, placed close to its borders, could increase the chance that, in a crisis, the United States might believe it could carry out a preemptive first strike, decapitating Russian command and control systems and degrading Russia's ability to retaliate . . . [a key factor that likely motivated Putin's decision to launch a large-scale invasion was] concern about possible new intermediate-range missile deployments, exacerbated by a concern that the U.S. might deploy Aegis, offensive-capable ABM launchers in Ukraine regardless [of] whether Ukraine was yet a member of NATO.¹¹³

Abelow's claim—that the Russian leadership honestly feared that the INF Treaty's breakdown could lead to the introduction of intermediate-range missiles that could facilitate a U.S. first strike—is not convincing, for a number of reasons. For several years, Russia had intentionally jeopardized the treaty by violating it; even so, U.S. officials had signaled their willingness to cooperate on mutual force limitations during prewar crisis talks.¹¹⁴ But, as Michael Kofman wrote at the time, "while a discussion on future missile placement, mutual reductions in military activity, and other measures might count as a diplomatic success for Moscow, it is unlikely that this is enough to satisfy Putin. If it were, why has he not pocketed the deal already?"¹¹⁵

More broadly, Russia's government should know that the U.S. military could not successfully carry out a disarming first strike.¹¹⁶ For Putin's stated

concerns to be honestly held, he would have to believe that U.S. leaders were either delusional, or might be willing to tolerate the annihilation of most of America's major cities to gain the meager damage limitation benefits associated with striking first in a hypothetical crisis. And he would have to harbor this fear despite the fact that, in the mid-2000s, the deterioration in Russia's nuclear capabilities—particularly the lack of a viable submarine leg—meant that the United States would probably have been able to carry out a surprise disarming counterforce strike, but showed no interest in exploiting that advantage.¹¹⁷

Moreover, it is far from clear why this concern, if it were honestly held, would lead Putin to initiate a large-scale conventional invasion of Ukraine. Abelow argues that one of Russia's key concerns regarding Ukraine lay in the possibility that U.S. Aegis systems might be deployed on its territory.¹¹⁸ But Abelow rightly notes that intermediate and cruise missiles in Poland and Romania could already reach Moscow and other targets deep inside Russia. The invasion has expended a large proportion of Russia's cruise missile arsenal and blocked resources—especially through the massed conventional use of cruise and ballistic missiles and the sanctioning of high-tech imports vital to missile development—that could have been far more efficiently employed, from a strategic stability standpoint, in upgrading Russia's missile defenses; strengthening its command, control, and communications infrastructure; and mirroring U.S. attack capabilities.¹¹⁹ As Trenin writes, "If, despite assurances to the contrary, Washington decides to bring its intermediate-range forces back to Europe . . . [Putin] intends to take steps that will put U.S. command and control centers at a comparable risk."¹²⁰ But even this posits a qualitative imbalance where none exists; as part of its force modernization efforts, Russian submarines were once again able to operate within nuclear cruise missile range of targets along America's eastern seaboard by 2009 at the latest.¹²¹ As of 2023, Russia boasts a large and survivable submarine fleet, equipped with nuclear-capable cruise missiles far in excess of those that could hypothetically be stationed at U.S. Aegis sites.¹²²

Moscow's Prewar Diplomacy: Desperation or Diversion?

Mearsheimer argues that Moscow's prewar diplomatic behavior points to a security-seeking rationale. In his account, Putin decided to launch the invasion from a position of perceived weakness, even desperation, rather than strength:

I think all the evidence is, running up to when the war started, that Putin did not want to invade Ukraine. He was working mightily to try to avoid that outcome, because I think he understood that it would be very messy. . . . [But] when countries think they're facing an existential threat, and they become desperate, they're willing to roll the dice.¹²³

Elsewhere, Mearsheimer writes that

in all of Putin's public statements during the months leading up to

the war, there is not a scintilla of evidence that he was contemplating conquering Ukraine and making it part of Russia.¹²⁴

Mearsheimer is likely referencing the set of demands that Moscow leveled in mid-December 2021, which called for a removal of multinational NATO forces from Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Balkan states, as well as for NATO to formally ban Ukraine from acceding to the alliance and for the United States to remove the remainder of its nuclear weapons from Europe.¹²⁵ In the final weeks before Russia's invasion, a debate took place as to the underlying purpose of the demands. Alongside Mearsheimer, many prominent observers argued that Moscow was making its demands in good faith, in the sense that they accurately reflected its underlying concerns, and that—if met—Putin intended for them to serve as an alternative to a major military operation. Stephen Van Evera wrote that “Russia’s statements related to its demand that NATO roll back eastern European force levels indicate that Russia is mainly concerned with the threat these forces pose to Russia.”¹²⁶ Likewise, discussing the buildup of forces around Ukraine, Emma Ashford said that Putin was “clearly trying to use this force to negotiate.”¹²⁷

However, other commentators convincingly argued that the extent of Russia's demands—and the way they were conveyed—implied that their actual purpose was to buy time and sow doubt as the invasion force assembled.¹²⁸ As Niall Ferguson presciently wrote, “When one party is bent on war, this kind of diplomatic activity often continues until just hours before hostilities begin. We should not be deluded: Putin is bent on war against Ukraine.”¹²⁹ Michael Kofman noted at the time that “Moscow has not only been asking for things that it knows it cannot attain, but it has been doing so in a manner that will ensure that it cannot attain them . . . By publicizing its demands and refusing to unbundle them in ways that might achieve compromise, Russia has made its diplomatic effort appear more performative than genuine.”¹³⁰ Privately, U.S. officials were also convinced that Russia's diplomatic outreach was a “charade” and that unlike the smaller buildup in spring 2021, the Kremlin was now planning a major combat operation.¹³¹

With the benefit of hindsight, the underlying purpose of the demands appears to have been to deliver a favorable correlation of forces north of Kyiv, so that a strike force could be securely inserted along an airbridge to Antonov airport in Hostomel and then exploit a largely clear path into the capital.¹³² The operational plan relied on maintaining a significant degree of surprise, and alongside the repeated denials by senior Russian officials, convincing Kyiv that the force buildup was more likely to be a coercive diplomatic bluff than a preparation for invasion appears to have been an important part of that deception.¹³³ It proved largely successful; in the weeks and days leading up to 24 February, Ukrainian government officials continued to seriously doubt that a large-scale invasion was being planned, even though senior U.S. officials had described their intelligence in some detail by mid-January, including the Russian plan to

funnel mechanized forces through Antonov airport.¹³⁴ As a result, around half of the Ukrainian Armed Forces' (UAF) maneuverable combat power was kept in the Joint forces operation (JFO) area in the east, which was thought to be the most probable locus of any Russian operation.¹³⁵ UAF high command did not realize that Russia's main effort would consist of an armored thrust toward Kyiv until approximately seven hours before the ground attack began, enabling Russia to attain a 12:1 force ratio advantage north of the capital.¹³⁶

Likewise, Mearsheimer's general claims about the Russian government's reluctance and desperation do not accord with the reports about Putin's overall attitude that have emerged since the invasion began. In interviews with the *New York Times*, several of Putin's associates report that prior to 24 February, he had "spiraled into self-aggrandizement and anti-Western zeal, leading him to make the fateful decision to invade Ukraine in near total isolation, without consulting experts who saw the war as pure folly."¹³⁷ They report that Putin viewed Ukraine as "a centerpiece of Russian identity that must be wrested back from the West and returned to Russia's orbit" and that he sees that as "the biggest unfinished mission of his 22 years in power."¹³⁸ This is consistent with a much earlier account provided by Mikhail Zygar's sources: "In Mr. Putin's view . . . it is the West that's weak. The only Western leader that Mr. Putin took seriously was Germany's previous chancellor, Angela Merkel. Now she is gone and it's time for Russia to avenge the humiliations of the 1990s."¹³⁹ Zygar notes that Putin was isolated for much of the pandemic, and that he and Yuri Kovalchuk, a key media and banking mogul, Orthodox Christian conspiracy theorist, and one of Putin's original group of associates in the Ozero Cooperative, became "inseparable," making Kovalchuk the "de facto second man in Russia."¹⁴⁰ Zygar's sources inside the Russian elite relayed that "the two of them have been making plans to restore Russia's greatness . . . It seems that there is no one around to tell him otherwise. In recent years—and especially since the start of the pandemic—he has cut off most contacts with advisers and friends . . . he is now isolated and distant, even from most of his old entourage."¹⁴¹ Indeed, in the famous televised meeting of Russia's Security Council three days before the invasion, reportedly only three of the officials in attendance knew Putin was planning to launch a full-scale invasion.¹⁴²

The claim that Putin was "working mightily" to avoid a war but felt forced due to perceived insecurity is similarly inconsistent with the publicly available evidence. For example, the then U.S. ambassador to Russia, John Sullivan, has described an encounter four months before the war between Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director, William Burns, and Nikolai Patrushev, Putin's hawkish Security Council secretary and close associate since the 1980s, who occupies a role analogous to a U.S. president's national security advisor. Sullivan quotes Patrushev as declaring that the strength of Russia's armed forces now rivals that of the U.S. military.¹⁴³ A sanguine view of the quality of Russia's forces appears to have been common within the regime. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian military's General Staff, had told British officials that Russia had

achieved parity with the United States.¹⁴⁴ One could dismiss this as the sort of intentional misrepresentation that plagues international affairs.¹⁴⁵ However, Gerasimov is also reported to have assured Russia's war planners of its military capabilities.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, leading Russian foreign policy analysts have expressed similar sentiments. Sergei Karaganov and Dmitri Suslov, for example, wrote in 2018 that "the only area where Russia has undergone profoundly successful modernisation is its military."¹⁴⁷ "[Patrushev] was just looking at Burns," recalled Sullivan, "and saying: 'We can do this. We're back.' The way I would describe it was that this was *already decided*, and they were *supremely confident*."¹⁴⁸ Burns, for his part, is reported to have sensed that the Russians had not yet made an "irreversible" decision to attack, but that there appeared to be "no room for meaningful engagement," and that Putin's mind was "all but made up."¹⁴⁹

Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz, has stated that in negotiations prior to the invasion, he told Putin privately that Ukrainian accession to NATO "won't happen in the next 30 years."¹⁵⁰ Recounting the "completely absurd" response he received, Scholz said that Putin insisted that both Ukraine and Belarus should not be independent states, and also came away with the sense that Putin does not accept the legitimacy of liberal and open societies in Europe.¹⁵¹ Perhaps tellingly, just after the final in-person meeting between senior Russian and U.S. officials prior to the invasion, the U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken pulled Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov into an empty room.¹⁵² "Sergei," he asked, "tell me what it is you're really trying to do?"¹⁵³ Lavrov walked out of the room without saying a word.¹⁵⁴ On 14 February, in a televised meeting with Putin, Lavrov said, regarding the demands sent to NATO, that "I believe that our possibilities are far from exhausted," with Putin replying, "Good."¹⁵⁵ The next day, Russia's Ministry of Defence announced a slight drawdown of forces around Ukraine, clearly trying to generate a sense of détente to minimize Ukrainian readiness.¹⁵⁶

Mearsheimer is likely referring in part to these last-minute signals when he argues that "all the evidence" points to Putin having worked "mightily hard" to avoid an invasion. In fact, credible evidence suggests that a final decision had been made by early December 2021 at the latest. For instance, a slew of particularly expensive and logistically challenging redeployments had been ordered at a meeting of the Russian military's General Staff on 1 December, after months of continuous troop movements from across Russia, and around the same time, infiltration squads had begun receiving fake passports and hit lists.¹⁵⁷ A report by Reuters, which has not been publicly confirmed, cites two sources close to Dmitry Kozak, a longtime member of Putin's circle, claiming that a few days after the start of the invasion, Ukrainian negotiators agreed to guarantee that Ukraine would not seek to join NATO, while a third source claims that Kozak had Kyiv's agreement just prior to the attack.¹⁵⁸ Those sources allege that Putin dismissed the terms out of hand and pressed ahead.¹⁵⁹

Was the Invasion Force Insufficient for Maximalist War Aims?

Mearsheimer argues that the “best indicator” for inferring Russia’s strategic objectives is the size of the force that it amassed along Ukraine’s borders, which comprised more than 80 percent of the Russian military’s permanent readiness ground combat power organized into 136 battalion tactical groups, along with a significant number of mobilized Donetsk and Luhansk separatist units.¹⁶⁰ With this force, Mearsheimer argues, Putin simply did not have the “capability” to conquer the country.¹⁶¹ “The Russians invaded Ukraine with 190,000 men,” he notes, and insists that “there’s no way 190,000 men could conquer a piece of real estate with 40-plus-million people in it.”¹⁶² In November, he said that “it’s very hard to make that argument in the West . . . because the propaganda which says that Russia was intent on conquering all of Ukraine and absorbing it into a Greater Russia is so pervasive. But anybody who knows anything about military operations knows that you couldn’t conquer and absorb Ukraine with 190,000 troops.”¹⁶³ Responding to the same argument shortly before the invasion, Michael Kofman, an influential expert on Russia’s armed forces, noted that

size doesn’t matter, that’s not how military analysis is done in terms of quantity of forces . . . Russia has tremendous quantitative and qualitative force overmatch. The force multipliers that they bring in terms of airpower and the like, that Ukrainians don’t have, are tremendous. So the actual net value in combat effectiveness of the forces, as they are positioned, gives Russia very, very large advantages . . . now, are their assumptions potentially very wrong about [the] occupation of this territory? That may well be the case. . . [but] does Russia have enough forces currently arrayed to defeat the Ukrainian military decisively, and conduct an operation across its territory? Yes they do. They very clearly do.¹⁶⁴

For their part, American intelligence agencies, which had been analyzing Russia’s force posture in extensive detail via satellite surveillance as well as human and signals intelligence, believed that Kyiv would fall to Russian forces during the initial phase of the campaign.¹⁶⁵ Likewise, in early February, U.S. officials estimated that Russia would need around 130,000 troops to achieve the objectives they believed it would pursue, which involved a “takeover of most of the country.”¹⁶⁶ Since the scale of Russia’s underperformance became clear in March 2022, analysts have attempted to determine whether the force was in fact insufficient to achieve its campaign objectives, or if defective operational planning and execution led an otherwise-sufficient force into a series of tactical—and ultimately strategic—blunders.¹⁶⁷ In any case, Mearsheimer’s claim that the force was *clearly* insufficient to conquer and occupy large swathes of Ukraine’s territory and key population centers—thereby rendering the existence of such objectives implausible—is false, given that both Western intelligence agencies

and leading experts on the Russian military were highly confident that the force was at least potentially sufficient.

Moscow's apparent confidence in the sufficiency of its available forces was closely tied to Putin's assumption that Ukrainian government forces would rapidly surrender.¹⁶⁸ Strategically, the operation hinged on the success of a rapid decapitation strike; as such, Russia's conventional forces were not employed as many Western analysts had predicted.¹⁶⁹ As a recent Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) report notes, "One of the foremost causes of inaccuracy in pre-war military assessments of the likely trajectory of the fighting . . . stems from the assumption that the Russian forces would conduct a deliberate military offensive."¹⁷⁰ Rather, the strike force that was supposed to disembark north of Kyiv was tasked with delivering a decisive blow to the government in Kyiv, while the conventional formations were used demonstratively, as a show of force that would precipitate the collapse of UAF resolve, and a top-down surrender from the central government.¹⁷¹

The Kremlin's Theory of Victory

For the purpose of inferring the Russian government's underlying motives, the most important aspect of the invasion was its immediate military-political objectives. Mearsheimer has presented his purely security-driven account of those goals on numerous occasions. For example, in a November interview, he argued that

there is no evidence that Russia was interested in conquering Ukraine . . . [and] they didn't try to . . . they surrounded Kyiv, and they invaded in the east and in the south . . . [what they were trying to do was] to get the Ukrainian government to basically change its policy vis-à-vis the West. They were trying to coerce the Ukrainian government into abandoning its policy of becoming a Western bulwark on their border . . . this was a limited aims strategy. This was not a strategy that was designed to conquer Ukraine.¹⁷²

In a December 2022 debate with Carl Bildt, Mearsheimer claimed that if you look at the operation itself on February 24th, they made no attempt to conquer all of Ukraine. Nothing close to that, because they didn't have the capability . . . there's no question that he went after Kyiv. It doesn't look like he was interested in conquering Kyiv. It looks like he was interested in threatening Kyiv for the purpose of coercing the government to change its policy on membership in NATO.¹⁷³

Mearsheimer's claim, in other words, is that the special military operation amounted to a large-scale border incursion whose goal was to coerce Zelensky's government—by "threatening" Kyiv—into agreeing to become a neutral state, presumably along the lines of Belgium in the 1830s and Austria and Finland during the Cold War.¹⁷⁴ Although broader military objectives are compatible with versions of the security-seeking account—both regime change and

large-scale occupation could have been viewed as necessary to prevent further Ukrainian association with NATO—they are more consistent with nonsecurity accounts. As outlined above, these accounts necessitate maximalist war aims, while such aims are only consistent with a subset of security-based accounts. The reality of Russia's military objectives therefore affects the relative likelihood of security and nonsecurity objectives.

For its part, Mearsheimer's minimalist account is strongly contradicted by publicly available evidence—in particular, the copies of official orders issued to Russian units.¹⁷⁵ These confirm that the initial objective was to liquidate the executive branch of the Ukrainian government, using either the special forces units that infiltrated Kyiv on the first day, or the mechanized units that were supposed to disembark from transport aircraft in Hostomel.¹⁷⁶ “The whole logic of the employment of forces,” a RUSI report notes, “was premised on the success of Russia's unconventional operations. . . . The bulk of Russia's planning focused on what to do after the invasion.”¹⁷⁷ Both attempts proved unsuccessful; the infiltration units attempted to storm the presidential compound twice, but were repulsed each time, and the transport aircraft were unable to land due to determined Ukrainian counterattacks and artillery fire cratering the runway.¹⁷⁸ The intention, however, had been to occupy Kyiv within 72 hours, encircle other major population centers and the UAF's forces in the JFO, capture key nuclear power stations and water supply centers, and—anticipating a general collapse of UAF cohesion—to have Russia's conventional forces largely transition to stability operations within 10 days.¹⁷⁹ As one political operative close to the Kremlin put it on the second day of the invasion,

All groupings of the Ukrainian Armed Forces will be surrounded (mainly from the air) and given an ultimatum. They will have to surrender their arms. If everything proceeds normally, a process of disarmament will begin. Wherever normality does not prevail, those groupings will be destroyed.¹⁸⁰

At this point, a coalition of pro-Russian elements in Ukraine's parliament was supposed to form a government as a “Movement for Peace,” illegalizing resistance to Russian forces and cutting off noncompliant regions from water, power, and payments services from the central bank.¹⁸¹ The plan for the puppet government had been put together by Russia's FSB, which had reportedly been ordered to begin planning the occupation of the country in July 2021.¹⁸² Lists of likely and potential collaborators, as well as those to be suppressed and those to be liquidated, had been prepared.¹⁸³ In addition, many of the individuals known to have taken part in the 2014 Maidan Revolution were to be put on trial and executed.¹⁸⁴

Based on intelligence that is not yet publicly available, a RUSI report states that after this initial high-intensity phase was complete, the Russian government planned to annex Ukraine into the Russian Federation by August 2022.¹⁸⁵ This is consistent with remarks made by senior Russian officials, and with Rus-

sia's formal annexation of all of the provinces in which it maintained a significant military foothold, amounting to 15 percent of Ukraine's territory, in late September.¹⁸⁶ Before the war, Mearsheimer appears to have believed invasion would necessarily mean conquest. Asked why he viewed Putin's buildup as a bluff, Mearsheimer explained that "if he invaded Ukraine, he'd own it. He'd be an occupier, and that would not work out very well."¹⁸⁷

Russian Warnings on NATO Enlargement

The most important evidence that Mearsheimer and others point to as evidence of the Russian government's motivation is the litany of public statements and warnings made by Putin and other senior Russian officials during the post-Cold War period. "There is no question," Mearsheimer writes, "that Ukraine joining NATO remained the 'brightest of red lines' for Moscow. To deal with this growing threat, Putin stationed ever-increasing numbers of Russian troops on Ukraine's border between February 2021 and February 2022 . . . Putin made it clear in 2008 that Russia would wreck Ukraine to prevent it from joining NATO. He is delivering on that promise."¹⁸⁸

As Dmitri Trenin summarized shortly before the invasion, for Putin "Ukraine is the last stand. . . . [He] will never yield on this point."¹⁸⁹ The Russian government was reacting, in Mearsheimer's words, to

an existential threat . . . an existential threat in the sense that they believe that their survival is at stake . . . [from] the West's efforts to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's border . . . [which] included NATO expansion, EU expansion, and turning Ukraine into a pro-Western liberal democracy. . . . The Russians made it unequivocally clear from 2008 forward that this was unacceptable . . . [and] that they would destroy Ukraine as a functioning society before they would let it happen.¹⁹⁰

Indeed, Mearsheimer is adamant that "almost any Russian leader would have done what [Putin] did."¹⁹¹

Russian officials have frequently claimed to see the prospect of NATO enlargement, especially into Ukraine, as an unacceptable threat to national security. Two days prior to the invasion, Putin said that "we are categorically opposed to Ukraine joining NATO because this poses a threat to us, and we have arguments to support this. I have repeatedly spoken about it in this hall."¹⁹² In Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's words, "We reached our boiling point."¹⁹³ These stated concerns might be genuinely held, but could instead serve as a legitimizing pretext and diversion, concealing Putin's underlying nonsecurity goals. The *a priori* credence with which these remarks should to be treated is widely disputed, including among offensive realists. Mearsheimer insists that "leaders do not lie much to each other; they lie more often to their own publics. Regarding Putin, whatever one thinks of him, he does not have a history of lying to other leaders."¹⁹⁴ Sebastian Rosato, Mearsheimer's former graduate student and coauthor on a forthcoming book, argues that

great powers have enormous incentives to deceive others, and by deception I mean to conceal their plans and to misrepresent their plans, [through] secrets and lies. Why do they have that incentive? . . . if you have aggressive intentions, you want to go to enormous lengths to hide that from a potential victim, so that they can't get ready for you. You want to go even further, and pretend that you have benign intentions to throw them off their guard. This is what it means to be a strategic actor . . . this is statecraft 101, you keep your intentions to yourself, and states do it all the time.¹⁹⁵

However, the two accounts are not observationally equivalent. If Putin was concerned about the security implications of NATO enlargement, he could be expected to have been consistently and unambiguously opposed to closer ties between Ukraine and NATO throughout his presidency, given that the strategic-territorial threat purportedly posed by those ties remains roughly constant. Indeed, as stated, the perceived importance of a buffer zone between Russia and NATO might if anything have been greater early in Putin's presidency, when Russia's military capabilities were still severely compromised.¹⁹⁶ Conversely, if Putin's opposition arises primarily from underlying nonsecurity goals—goals that would be permanently foreclosed if NATO extended its security guarantees to Ukraine—which have grown during the course of his presidency, he could be expected to have initially appeared indifferent, or at least not adamantly opposed. He should then have appeared to grow increasingly concerned, as the expanding scope of his ambitions both raises the perceived costs of Ukrainian accession and creates the need for an increasingly dramatic pretext.

The evolution of Putin's public position is more consistent with the latter hypothesis. When asked about the future of Russian, Ukrainian, and NATO relations at a 2002 press conference, for example, he responded that "Russia does not intend to join NATO":

[But] I am absolutely convinced that Ukraine will not shy away from the processes of expanding interaction with NATO and the Western allies as a whole. Ukraine has its own relations with NATO; there is the Ukraine-NATO Council. At the end of the day the decision [on NATO membership] is to be taken by NATO and Ukraine. It is a matter for those two partners.¹⁹⁷

Shortly thereafter, Putin remarked on Ukrainian accession at a press conference with NATO's then secretary general Lord George Robertson, and his words were officially summarized by the Russian government as follows: "On the topic of Ukraine's accession to NATO, the Russian President said that it was entitled to make the decision independently. He does not see it as something that could cloud the relations between Russia and Ukraine."¹⁹⁸ In a 2005 interview—more than five years into his premiership and four months after Ukraine's Orange Revolution—Putin's position had begun to shift, but only

marginally. When directly asked whether it “irritate[s] you that NATO is seeking to expand its influence among your neighbours and partners, in Ukraine and Georgia, for example?,” he replied that “this does not irritate us,” and if NATO wants to expand to take in these countries as members, that, of course, is another question. If you are interested in my view on that question, I am ready to answer . . . I do not really understand exactly how . . . the expansion of NATO to take in our Baltic neighbours, can bring greater security. If other former Soviet republics want to join NATO, our attitude will remain the same. But I want to stress that *we will respect their choice* because it is their sovereign right to decide their own defence policy and *this will not worsen relations between our countries*.¹⁹⁹

This is a far cry from, in Mearsheimer’s words, making “it clear that [Russia] would destroy Ukraine as a functioning society” before allowing it to join.²⁰⁰ On the question of Ukraine’s entry into the EU, the Russian government quoted Putin in 2004 as outright endorsing the prospect, writing that he “considers that if Ukraine were to join the EU this would be a positive factor that, unlike NATO expansion, would help strengthen the system of international relations.”²⁰¹

By the time of his famous Munich Security Conference speech in 2007, Putin’s stance had shifted significantly, castigating eastward enlargement as a “serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?”²⁰² However, as Kimberly Marten notes, Putin had been reducing the quantities of troops and hardware deployed along Russia’s western borders since entering office and would continue to do so for the next seven years.²⁰³ Tellingly, the former NATO secretary general has said that “in all the meetings and conversations I had with [Putin], he never complained about NATO enlargement, not once. . . . We had the 2002 enlargement, seven countries joining NATO, all from the Warsaw Pact, including three from the Soviet Union. But not a single time did he complain.”²⁰⁴ This corroborates former U.S. ambassador McFaul’s claim that Putin did not mention NATO enlargement a single time to President Barack H. Obama during their phone and in-person communications between 2009 and 2014, all but one of which McFaul was present for.²⁰⁵

Rather, Russia supposedly feared the political instability that accession might generate within Ukraine. Needless to say, stated Russian concerns around the possibility of internal Ukrainian instability and “civil war” are suspect, given its actions inside the country during and since 2014.²⁰⁶ And although Burns quotes foreign minister Lavrov’s claims that his government viewed Ukrainian and Georgian accession as a “potential military threat,” Burns concludes that

Russia’s opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia is both emotional and based on perceived strategic concerns about the

impact on Russia's interests in the region. It is also politically popular to paint the U.S. and NATO as Russia's adversaries and to use NATO's outreach to Ukraine and Georgia as a means of generating support from Russian nationalists.²⁰⁷

During the following 15 years, Putin's rhetoric became increasingly alarmist, on threats from NATO as well as on a range of other issues, each of which would eventually be forwarded as justifications for the invasion. These included the specter of Ukrainian neo-Nazis, Satanists, American mercenaries armed with chemical weapons, the presence of U.S. bioweapon laboratories, impending Ukrainian nuclear proliferation, and a campaign of "genocide" by Ukrainian government forces against the Russian-backed separatist regions.²⁰⁸ In his speech announcing the invasion on 24 February, Putin described the prevention of this genocide—which is widely viewed by area experts as a fabrication—as "the purpose of this operation."²⁰⁹

More generally, Putin's emphasis on Ukraine's "historical unity" with Russia dating back to the Kyivan Rus'—which necessitates a focus on threats posed by third parties—became increasingly explicit.²¹⁰ Senior Russian government officials voiced similar views. In 2021, for example, former president Dmitry Medvedev, now deputy chairman of Putin's Security Council, referred to Volodymyr Zelensky's administration as a "vassal" government that could not be negotiated with.²¹¹ The previous year, Vladislav Surkov—a key architect of Putin's personalist-authoritarian political system and the foremost strategist behind its post-2014 hybrid war against the Ukrainian state—told an interviewer that "there is no Ukraine. There is Ukrainianism. That is, a specific mental disorder. . . . Forced coercion into fraternal relations is the only method that has historically proven effective in the Ukrainian direction. I do not think that any other will be invented."²¹²

Conclusion

This article identified several ways to distinguish security-based and nonsecurity interpretations of the Russian government's motives for invading Ukraine. It argued that (1) concerns surrounding the nuclear balance played no plausible role, (2) Russia's prewar diplomatic efforts were likely designed as a conscious and largely successful deception campaign that was central to Russia's operational planning, (3) the conventional force assembled was probably sufficient—in the minds of both Russian leaders and Western analysts—to collapse the Ukrainian government and suppress subsequent resistance, (4) the plan itself almost certainly involved regime change, occupation of most of Ukraine's major population centers, and the long-term political subjugation—and potential annexation—of the country, and (5) arguably the most important evidence underlying the security-seeking account—the Russian government's consistent claim that it viewed Ukrainian NATO membership as an unacceptable security

threat—is much weaker than proponents suggest, and that the trajectory of official Russian messaging is more consistent with nonsecurity and Putin-centric accounts.

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The Russian Bloodletting Strategy in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

From Success to Hubris

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Abstract: The article focuses on the role of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in shaping the balance of power in the Lesser Caucasus as a prelude to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It argues that Russia implemented a “bait and bleed” strategy to discipline Armenia for its pro-Western agenda. In addition, it focuses on Turkey’s role as a supportive apparatus for Azerbaijan’s military efforts against Armenia, evaluating the connection established between Moscow and Ankara. The Nagorno-Karabakh case marked a new manipulative Russian strategy to influence the balance of power in regions with geostrategic significance for the Kremlin.

Keywords: bait and bleed, Caucasus, Russia, Armenia, Turkey, war, Azerbaijan

Introduction

War does not constitute a single-dimensional event in international politics. It produces destruction and grief to humans, yet it endorses collective pride and confidence in the winning side. It leads to the violent end of lives and generates sociopolitical movements and ideologies. It is a multidimensional proceeding, purely political to every extent, associated with the organized use of violence and with different results of any kind, shape, and intensity for those with the ill fate of direct interaction. War is the continuation of politics by other means, as Carl von Clausewitz described it; therefore, its contextual depth is also directly linked to the grand strategy of the states since it

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closely relates to securing survival in the antagonistic and anarchic international domain. Heraclitus from Ephesus, the famous Greek pre-Socratic philosopher, thoroughly described the above equation by attributing the phenomenon an almost metaphysical, grandiose state in his well-known quote: “War is a father of all and king of all. He renders some gods, others men; he makes some slaves, others free.”¹ Therefore, war is usually seen as an active political tool that allows its handler to achieve goals, have the bitter taste of failure, or as a tool that aims to harm the opponent indirectly.

This article will focus on the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the clash between Armenia and Azerbaijan, using John J. Mearsheimer’s approach, known as the “bloodletting strategy” to comprehend its origins and the strategies that were implemented by all the involved parties.² It will be argued that the Russian side had used the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War as punishment toward Armenia for the latter’s efforts to come closer to the West. Second, Russia used it as a method to reinforce its presence in the South Caucasus. Through the implementation of the bloodletting strategy, as it will be shown, Russia succeeded in maintaining its control over Armenia and drastically reduced the Western influence inside the country, especially among the Armenian political elite. It will also be argued that Moscow had used the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War as a diplomatic procedure to further strengthen ties between itself and Ankara. Overall, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War can be seen as the last act of the Russian regime before the attack on Ukraine. It was a process that underlined Russian narcissism and eliminated any doubts that the Kremlin might have regarding the unlimited course of action that it supposedly had to operate to shape the fate of the regions around itself. Thus, for the analyst to fully comprehend the origins behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it is essential to study the methods that Moscow operated in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War too.

As will be discussed, through the bloodletting strategy in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia revealed once again its manipulative diplomatic skills that have no moral, military, or political limits to satisfy its national goals. Under Vladimir Putin and with the direct involvement of Sergey Lavrov, Russia tried many times to project a different international image, more sophisticated and open to international cooperation.³ Nevertheless, all these were just Potemkin villages to conceal the true intentions of the Kremlin. As its involvement in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War showed, and later in Ukraine, Russia continues to be an enthusiastic follower of the Hobbesian etiquette, operating as a predator and using other aggressive states, such as Turkey, to enhance its revisionist agenda. The striking aspect is that the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War occurred some months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Back then, the Western powers seemed either unaware of the Russian methods in the Caucasus region or excessively tolerant toward Moscow’s manipulative practices, including a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member (i.e., Turkey). This kind of behavior by the West toward the developments in the South Caucasus, analo-

gous to the Western naivete fully revealed in Munich in 1938, was an additional factor that encouraged Moscow to exhibit its aggression toward Ukraine.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Origins and Rationale

In the early morning of 27 September 2020, Armenian and Azerbaijani forces clashed on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh, the *de facto* boundary that separated the two sides since the cease-fire of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in May 1994. No one, especially not Moscow, was truly surprised by the deterioration of events because the diplomatic ties between Yerevan and Baku had been problematic since the outbreak of the first phase of the war and were never regularized. Between 1994 and 2016, dozens of troops and civilians on both sides were killed along the dividing line of contact. The control of the region was crucial for both sides, from a geopolitical point of view, and for the notional strengthening of the post-Soviet national identity. As Taline Papazian argued about the importance of the struggle for the Nagorno-Karabakh for the Armenians, “the Karabakh conflict in Armenia was the ‘new political thinking’ of the Armenian National Movement.”⁴ During the late Mikhail Gorbachev era, the Armenians demanded the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia systematically, a process that soon led to the violent clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the small industrial Azerbaijani city of Sumgait that led to the death of 32 Armenians and 26 Azerbaijanis.⁵ At the same time, the first national Azerbaijani organization inside the Soviet framework, the Azerbaijan Popular Front, placed Nagorno-Karabakh at the center of its agenda. This was expressed through the systematic demands toward Moscow for the end of the autonomous status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the passing of the region under Azerbaijani sovereign control.⁶ From an opposing viewpoint, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can also be seen as a typical manifestation of Moscow’s weakness, together with unwillingness, to control the domestic agenda of its periphery during the last days of the Soviet Union.

The First Nagorno-Karabakh War, from 1988 to 1994, over the control of the homonymous region in South Caucasus, ended with a cease-fire that did not resolve the dispute over the fate of the territory between Armenia, which claimed the region due to the large Armenian populations there, and Azerbaijan, who had administrative control of the province since the Soviet era.⁷ The main reason that led the Soviet regime to place the region under the administrative control of Azerbaijan, even though the majority of the Karabakhis considered themselves Armenians, was because the Bolsheviks wanted to dissolve any form of nationalism within the state. Thus, by offering Nagorno-Karabakh to the Azerbaijani administration, Moscow aimed to eradicate the solid psychological connection between the local population and the Armenian identity. Therefore, it can be safely argued that the animosity between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh indirectly resulted from the Soviet methods to establish Marxism-Leninism postmodernism within its vast territory. Nevertheless, as in other cases within the USSR or the Warsaw Pact states, Marxism-

Leninism proved insufficient to effectively meet the challenges posed by the re-appearance of nationalism during the 1980s. Consequently, in 1988, war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the fate of the Nagorno-Karabakh region that lasted until 1994 when a cease-fire was reached between the two sides under Moscow's diplomatic umbrella; however, this did not persuade the two sides to end hostilities. At the end of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia controlled the area. At the same time, populations from the two sides were forced to move away from their ancestral lands, and the war modified their national status. Therefore, it was no surprise that violent challenges between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh continued even during the cease-fire period.⁸

It is far from hyperbole to claim that since 1994 the Nagorno-Karabakh question has been one of the contemporary Gordian knots of modern diplomacy, together with the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus and the Kashmir question. The conundrum becomes even more significant if one considers that Nagorno-Karabakh is not just an issue of national sentimentalism from the sides involved. On the contrary, its geostrategic importance is central since it offers the geostrategic advantages to whomever controls the region over the South Caucasus. At the same time, it also provides an excellent base for monitoring the area around the Caspian Sea.

Therefore, the outbreak of violence in late September 2020 between the Armenian and the Azerbaijani forces over Nagorno-Karabakh came as no surprise, not just to the two states but also to the rest of the international system since violent clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces never ceased to torment the fragile status of Nagorno-Karabakh. This time, though, things were to be considerably different from the past regarding the role of external factors. The second phase of the war lasted less than two months; however, the collapse of the Armenian Army was so emphatic that the outcome of the clash influenced not just the status of Nagorno-Karabakh but also the balance of power in the South Caucasus. The intensity of the clashes throughout the conflict and the sophisticated technological means utilized by the Azerbaijani side led to the conclusion that outside powers were involved in Nagorno-Karabakh. After all, Azerbaijan needed the hard power capacity and the technological infrastructure to conduct such technologically advanced warfare. Some may note that the participation of Turkey by the Azerbaijani side is something that Ankara never hid. The Turkish involvement in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was repeatedly advertised by various high-ranking Turkish officials and experienced analysts. Characteristically, the very next day from the beginning of the war, İlhan Uşgel from Ankara University stated that "Turkey is already supporting Azerbaijan militarily through technical assistance, through arms sales, providing critical military support, especially in terms of armed drones and technical expertise."⁹ Moreover, Mevlut Cavusoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, stated on the first days of the war, "The world must side with the right one in the Nagorno Karabakh tensions, and that right one is Azerbaijan."¹⁰

Nevertheless, a question arises from all these events and concerns Moscow's stance toward escalating the crisis in the South Caucasus region. Since the region is one of Russia's primary zones of geostrategic interest, under which terms did Russia allow Turkey to openly support Azerbaijan with its drones to expose the Armenian artillery above? These questions become even more compelling if one considers the close connection that Ankara has established with Moscow during the last few years, especially since the failed coup d'état against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016. Like the rest of the globe, Ankara was fully aware of Russia's sensitivities to any development in the wider Caucasus region. After all, Moscow never ceased to regard, even during the early post-Soviet days when its profound fragility negatively affected its international status, the Caucasus as closely connected with Russian security.¹¹

The central thesis of this article is that Russia never turned away from the developments in Nagorno-Karabakh and manipulated the tense condition between Armenia and Azerbaijan to promote its objectives in the region further. Moscow used Turkey as the key instrument to operate its bloodletting strategy over Nagorno-Karabakh and achieve its political goals for Armenia and Azerbaijan. As it will be argued in the following paragraphs, Armenia was the victim, Azerbaijan was Turkey's pawn, Ankara the Russian puppet, and Russia the master of puppets in this geostrategic gambit. So, what is the bloodletting strategy, and how was this implemented in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War?

Bloodletting

To analyze the bloodletting strategy, it is vital to define the type of polarity that classifies today's international system. Various analysts claim that a new Cold War is bound to occur between the United States and Russia or between the United States and China.¹² This article argues against these views for the following reasons. First, the original Cold War was drastically influenced by the mutually assured destruction doctrine that transformed the antagonism between the two superpowers into a soft-power competition. The global ideological magnitude of liberal democracy, on the one hand, and Marxism Leninism, on the other, was so predominant that it influenced every major military or political event between 1945 and 1991. These include the Greek Civil War, the establishment of the European Economic Community, and the collapse of Salvador Allende's government in Chile. All these and many more events that deeply affected the direction of the twentieth century, had an exegesis on the soft-power antagonism between the two superpowers and the friction that was produced at an international level. Today, neither China, despite having considerable soft power leverage that mainly refers to the country's imperial past and not to the Communist present, or Russia, can reach large audiences outside their regions. This deficit of both states can be mainly attributed to the fact that they are justifiably considered by a large part of the global public opinion as the two main parts of the international axis of autocracy. While the rest of the Western world still regards the United States as the champion of the democratic world,

it is very difficult for both China and Russia to develop their soft-power stance other than just a raw anti-Americanism that is not as convincing as it used to be during the 1960s or the 1970s due to the Vietnam War and other events that affected the United States' international position. Additionally, twenty-first century China and the United States are not revisionist powers, while Russia lacks the military, political, ideological, or economic capacity to reclaim the role of the Soviet Union as its poor performance in the war in Ukraine exhibits.¹³

Nevertheless, the inability of Russia and China to produce a high level of antagonism toward the United States does not mean that they are incapable of operating cunning strategies, as the case of the Russian bloodletting in Nagorno-Karabakh reveals. As John Mearsheimer argues, great powers frequently implement buck-passing strategies to avoid being directly involved in a military conundrum in multipolar systems. This means they are allying with other state actors willing to accept the military burden to come forward and take the pressure on behalf of the buck-passer.¹⁴ By minimizing the friction through such kinds of strategies as buck-passing, a state maintains a relatively active presence in international politics without the disadvantages that the activity may cause to its own security. The same indirect way may be followed by a great power in case it has decided to punish another state without wanting to be conclusively connected with the whole process, as happened in the Armenian case by Russia.

In international politics, there are various direct or indirect punishment methods for other states. For example, coercion, economic sanctions, or bait-and-bleed strategies are straightforward ways of applying pressure on a country for its behavior.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the bloodletting strategy is an indirect way of punishment in the international arena. The aim of bloodletting is an ongoing warfare to turn into a lengthy and costly clash while the instigator remains out of the actual conflict. Mearsheimer describes the bloodletting strategy: "Here, the aim is to make sure that any war between one's rivals turns into a long and costly conflict that saps their strength . . . the bloodletter is mainly concerned with causing its rivals to bleed each other white, while it stays out of the conflict."¹⁶ An excellent example of this can be found in the U.S. stance during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, with Washington being the pivotal source of support for the mujahideen side fighting against the Red Army. The American side supported the mujahideens with money, weapons, and ammunition under the code Operation Cyclone to lead the Soviets toward intense friction that would have resulted in the loss of considerable power of the Soviets in the Afghan mountains. The Soviets eventually had to withdraw from Afghanistan in 1989, and this lengthy and costly involvement was one of the main reasons for the already obsolete economy to collapse. A few decades after the collapse of the Red Army in Afghanistan, it was time for the newborn Russian state to implement its bloodletting strategy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹⁷

Bloodletting in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

Russia did not start the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War because the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan for this landlocked region in the Lesser Caucasus mountains had never really ended. As discussed above, the clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh since 1994 were on and off, with victims from both sides, just enough to preserve the animosity between the two sides. Therefore, Russia found a fertile ground to implement its bloodletting strategy and an eager agent to intensify it—Turkey.

From the early days since the establishment of the Turkish state in 1923, Ankara established a close affiliation with the South Caucasus since the region was considered a stronghold for Turkic entities, including Azerbaijan. Even during the Cold War era, the cultural links between the two states were strong since Ankara wanted to take advantage of the cultural connection and enhance its political role as the leader of the Turkic world.¹⁸ Thus, immediately after the demise of the Soviet Union, Ankara started a colossal soft power campaign in the region, financing the opening of Turkish schools and private academic institutions or setting the political and legal framework for the establishment of various Turkish cultural societies that were promoting the Turkish soft power agenda.¹⁹ Characteristically, since 1991 and the emergence of Azerbaijan as an independent state, the motto that the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs had used to delineate Turkish-Azerbaijani relations was “one nation, two states.”²⁰ Therefore, no one was surprised when Ankara openly supported Azerbaijan during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War and repeated more systematically during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Turkey provided a large number of unmanned combat aerial vehicles to the Azerbaijani forces, in particular the Baykar Bayraktar TB2, allowing the Azerbaijani side to spot from above and neutralize the Armenian units that were stationed in the mountainous terrain of Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey also provided TRG-300 Tiger multiple launch rocket systems and a large number of military advisors with experience in mountainous warfare. At the same time, many Azerbaijani officers are graduates of Turkish military academies.²¹ Would it be possible for the Azerbaijani Army to win the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War without Turkish support? The question is purely rhetorical due to the chameleonic nature of warfare in general. It is much safer to suggest that without Turkey’s direct and open involvement, the Azerbaijani victory would not have been as extended as it was. After six weeks of fighting, Armenia did not only accept that the war was not a victory as the Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, openly admitted, but also it lost almost all the territories it had won during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.²² In addition, the war fully exposed the weaknesses of the Armenian armed forces at every related level, from logistics to the lack of technologically advanced weapons, as well as the low morale and training.²³

Someone with relatively little knowledge of the region and Russian foreign policy in the twenty-first century would have assumed that South Caucasus is

transformed into the venue of direct antagonism between Moscow and Ankara. Especially since the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, many analysts consider Turkey one of the major powers in the South Caucasus.²⁴ Views like these need to be more aware of the strong connection between Turkey and Russia. A cardinal transition in the Turkish grand strategy occurred in July 2016 and was mainly generated by the failed coup d'état against Erdoğan and his government. For reasons that mainly concern Erdoğan's unsavory personality, he blamed Washington for the failed attempt of a group of army officers to overthrow his government. Since the first moments of the coup, Moscow offered Erdoğan its full support.²⁵ From this point onward, a close connection had been established between Russia and Turkey, leading Turkey to abandon its traditional approach toward the United States since the end of the Second World War.²⁶

This novel connection started to bear fruit within a short period. For example, Turkey's role during the Syrian Civil War favored the Russian strategic objectives in the region since it targeted the pro-American Kurdish forces with an anti-Bashar al-Assad agenda, the Russian protégé.²⁷ At the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, President Bashar al-Assad turned to Iran for military support in an apparent attempt to activate the Shia connection between the two regimes. However, when Turkey entered the Syrian Civil War, allegedly to promote the Western anti-Assad policies, Damascus was convinced that the situation was overall transcending Tehran's true capabilities; thus, it turned toward Russia. Within a short period since 2015, Syria became a Russian bastion in the Eastern Mediterranean, with the naval base in Tartus and the military base in Latakia to offer Moscow the opportunity to reenter the Middle East's geostrategic plateau with a clear advantage.²⁸ However, the Syrian Civil War was not beneficial only for Moscow. Turkey secured the backing of various Sunni Islamist Syrian groups fighting against Assad (e.g., Jabhat al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham), enhancing Ankara's objective to undermine Saudi Arabia's influence over Sunni Islam in the Middle East, a critical development in the broader competition between Ankara and Riyadh over the hearts and minds of the Sunni world globally.²⁹ In 2016, during the Astana meetings between Putin and Erdoğan, it was decided that the latter would allow the al-Assad forces to take control of Aleppo, the most prominent Sunni urban installment in Syria and the main center of the anti-Assad opposition during the first half of the Syrian Civil War, while Russia gave the green light to Ankara to unleash Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria that targeted the Kurdish forces there.³⁰ In other words, while Turkey offered Aleppo to the al-Assad forces, allowing a critical blow to the Syrian Sunnis, Russia allowed the former to implement its preventative anti-Kurdish agenda in areas outside the Turkish frontier. As Guney Yildiz explains,

In December 2016, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan envisaged Astana, Kazakhstan's capital, as a new venue for carrying on the Syria peace talks. In doing so, they also set in motion a game plan through which Moscow and Ankara controlled the warring parties in Syria and took control of the conflict. The Astana Process removed in-

ternational mediation mechanisms set up in Vienna and Geneva from the centre of attention. The Turkish-Russian cooperation also further curbed Iran's influence, since tensions between the Turkey-backed rebels and proxies and the Assad regime had been resolved through bilateral Ankara-Moscow talks rather than in Astana.³¹

Besides supporting Assad in Syria, a pivotal move for the return of Russia to the Eastern Mediterranean, Moscow aimed at other strategic objectives too.³² One of the weightiest was the punishment of the Kurds in Syria, the People's Defense Units (YPG), which had developed close relations with Washington to face Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the al-Assad forces. Moscow's punishment toward the Kurds was implemented by proxy through the Turkish Army. Russia remained silent while Turkey was hammering the Kurds in northern Syria with the unfolding of Operation Euphrates Shield. At the same time, the United States did not take any military or diplomatic actions against Ankara because it did not want to jeopardize the unity of NATO. A pattern was created in 2016 when Operation Euphrates Shield began, with Russia planning and Turkey implementing the plan. This role will be identified again in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.³³

Turkey by the Side of Russia

Is Turkey standing by the side of Russia? First, Turkey's energy structure is heavily influenced by Russia. The TurkStream, a natural gas pipeline running from Russia to Turkey, allows Russia to penetrate the European continent using Turkey instead of Ukraine to stretch a 930 kilometer pipeline network across the Black Sea toward the Balkans with a total throughput capacity of 31.5 billion cubic meters annually.³⁴ Official research analysis by the U.S. Congress mentions the significance of the TurkStream for Russia and the spread of Russian influence over Turkey through this specific project: "[The] TurkStream project may strengthen Russia's foothold in European energy markets, especially in southeastern Europe. It also could cement Turkey's longtime status as a lead recipient of Russian gas."³⁵ Moscow holds the keys to TurkStream and the Turkish gas supply. In addition, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with the Turkish economy finding it hard to meet the rising demands of the public health cost, Russia provided the country with 16.3 billion cubic meters of gas while the U.S. contribution was 3 billion cubic meters.³⁶ If Russia had decided to decrease the gas flow to Turkey, then the Turkish people would have frozen during the winter, with unprecedented sociopolitical consequences in the volatile political scene of the state. In addition, Russia controls the Turkish nuclear energy plans since ROSATOM, the Russian state atomic energy corporation, builds, owns, and will operate the first country's nuclear plant at Akkuyu in the Mersin Province in southern Turkey. This development means that Russia will have a large share of control over the energy proportion of Turkey since the Akkuyu nuclear plant will have a total capacity of 4,800 mega-

watts, able to produce 37 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity annually.³⁷ In addition, while claiming that Russia exclusively controls the Turkish hard power structure would be an exaggeration, Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system in 2017 offers a high-tech alternative to the Turkish air defense apparatus. It also exposes the American hesitancy to fully apply the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act to Turkey.³⁸ Lastly, an archetypal asymmetric interdependence is formed in the economic sector at the Turkish expense. Russia is among Turkey's top three trading partners. It is one of the primary sources of Turkish imports, while Russian touristic income is one of the chief financial sources for the Turkish summer locations in the Mediterranean Sea.³⁹ This asymmetric interdependence is vital for the fragile Turkish economy, allowing Russia to extend its control over Turkey. Characteristically, as one of the top Turkish tourist sales managers stated in an interview with Reuters on May 2021, "if Russian tourists do not come, there will be serious bankruptcies and potential layoffs."⁴⁰

In international relations theory, it is not unusual for the weaker side in an interdependent asymmetrical connection to either embrace initiatives or comply with the will of the more decisive element to obtain its survival. Today, Turkey is one of Russia's closest aides, which was fully revealed in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. During this conflict, Russia allowed Turkey to help Azerbaijan openly. At the same time, it did nothing to support the Armenian Army, which was rapidly deteriorating under the systematic military pressure of the Azerbaijani armed forces. However, what were the main motives that led Russia to implement such a harsh punishment to Armenia?

"Crime" and Punishment a' la Russe

The connection between Russia and Armenia is long and mainly concerns the two enduring tools of Russian diplomacy: religion and land. Both Russia and Armenia are Christian Orthodox entities. Their churches are both autocephalous, meaning that they maintain absolute independence from the high control of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the religious and administrative core of Orthodox Christianity worldwide since the Byzantine era and the Great Schism of 1054 between the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. In addition, for the Armenian Church, the close connection with Moscow meant it had the luxury of a formidable ally against the Persian and Ottoman challenges. Moreover, the lands inhabited by Armenian majorities within the Russian imperial framework, and later the Soviet one, held a high strategic value for Moscow since they were functioning as natural blockades of the eastern access to the Russian mainland for every potential invader. It is helpful to underline here the long-established Russian phobia, something that surprisingly can still be traced in today's national geostrategic way of thinking, that had to do with the unobstructed access to Russia that the steppes were offering to potential invaders. Controlling the pathways toward the Russian mainland was and still is a permanent strategic priority for Moscow. As Jeffrey

Czerewko says regarding this deep sense of insecurity of the Russian side, “Russia exhibits a deep-seated sense of geopolitical insecurity which motivates it to pursue strategic objectives that establish an uncontested sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region.”⁴¹

This tight connection between Russia and Armenia became even firmer in 1922 when the latter became a member of the Soviet structure, and even after the Soviet demise in 1991, Armenia continued to be under Moscow’s influence. For example, in 1992, Armenia became a full member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russian-led military alliance consisting of ex-Soviet states, while in 2013, it entered the Eurasian Customs Union, another Russian initiative to compete with the West.⁴² Armenia decided to preserve its close connection with Moscow during the first post–Cold War era, yet it began to act more independently after 2018. There were various reasons for that turn. Armenian society had enough of the corrupted political elites, inefficient governance, and Moscow’s close control regarding every aspect of the nation’s ontology. The resentment of a large social majority against Russia and the Russian political guard inside Armenia was so strong that a grassroots, peaceful uprising began in April 2018 in the Armenian capital and lasted 11 days.⁴³ The revolt was named the Velvet Revolution due to its nonviolent character. It was led by Nikol Pashinyan, a charismatic yet populist politician who aspired to regulate Russian control over Armenia by bringing the state closer to the West. The Velvet Revolution began as a collective resentment toward the appointment of Serzh Sargsyan as the country’s prime minister by the Armenian National Assembly after serving two terms as president of the state. Sargsyan represented all the things that the Velvet Revolution was protesting against. He was a vital figure of the establishment, involved in many corruption cases controlled by Moscow. Thus, every anti-Sargsyan protest adopted an open anti-Russian stance, too, with thousands of Armenians signing pro-Western slogans and carrying the flags of the European Union and the U.S. flag. The revolt was a genuine collective uprising of the majority of Armenians, who were demanding the signing of a new social contract and the redirection of the nation’s direction in the international order, away from the Russian shadow.⁴⁴ As was widely expected, this was a development that Moscow did not appreciate and never forgot, especially since Serzh Sargsyan was forced to step down and Nikol Pashinyan was appointed the new prime minister. Armenians and many Western analysts thought a new era was beginning for the country; alas, they did not correctly calculate the Russian reaction.

Three events intensified Armenia’s punishment by Russia, as expressed in the Second War of Nagorno-Karabakh. The first came with the two congressional resolutions that passed by both houses of the U.S. Congress, on October 2019 by the House of Representatives and December 2019 by the Senate, recognizing the Armenian Genocide by the Ottoman Empire, a process that was fully concluded in April 2021 when the Armenian Genocide was recognized by the White House, too.⁴⁵ The vindication of millions of murdered Arme-

nians during the last phase of the Ottoman Empire by the American political system was not welcomed by Moscow. The Kremlin feared this was giving the green light to the pro-Western political forces in Armenia to intensify their anti-Russian campaign and bring Armenia under complete Western influence. If such a development had occurred, Russia would be in front of a significant geostrategic gap in the South Caucasus, with a pro-Western element controlling areas highly esteemed by Moscow, such as Nagorno-Karabakh. The outbreak of the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh occurred only a short period after the U.S. Congress recognized the Armenian Genocide, revealing the Russian disturbance. According to Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russia had to move against Azerbaijan as soon as the war began, standing by the side of its ally. However, Russia chose to adopt the role of Pontius Pilate, simply watching in total apathy as the Armenian forces were crushed by the Azerbaijani Army with Turkish logistics support.⁴⁶

The second event was the deadlock inside the Minsk Group during the summer of 2020 when it became clear that Armenia and Azerbaijan had no desire to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Established in 1992, the Minsk Group was a French-Russian-American initiative within the OSCE to find a peaceful settlement over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴⁷ In July 2020, severe clashes between the Armenian and the Azerbaijani forces began in Nagorno-Karabakh. Various analysts began to bombard the Western public opinion that the Minsk Group could not resolve the dispute in the Caucasus and that a new diplomatic initiative, institutionally and politically more potent than the outworn Minsk Group, was needed.⁴⁸ The Kremlin began to get suspicious of a Western plot against the existing diplomatic status quo regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Moscow's way of thinking, a possible collapse of the Minsk Group was opening the door for the arrival of United Nations Peacekeeping in the region, allowing the United States to gain indirect access to the South Caucasus. Moscow did not have any problem burying the Minsk Group initiative; however, it wanted to be the one to put the casket in the ground, while it made clear to all the involved sides that it was not willing to accept the United Nations Blue Helmets in Nagorno-Karabakh. As Maxim Suchkov describes the Kremlin's policy in the wider Caucasus, which reflects highly on the Russian conduct over Nagorno-Karabakh, "Russia is the controlling security stakeholder in the Caucasus and has no interest in 'selling its shares' to anyone else . . . Russia's other interests in the region . . . mean that the Kremlin is unlikely to cede any ground."⁴⁹ A few months after the crisis within the Minsk Group, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War started. As analyzed above, Russia did not start the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Still, it did nothing to control the intensity of the Azerbaijani attack and likewise did not assist Armenia. On the contrary, it implemented its bloodletting strategy to punish the Armenian political attempts to adopt a pro-Western orientation in its foreign policy.

Third, the Russian bloodletting strategy during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War can also be seen as Moscow's continuous efforts to show Azerbaijan that it was in Baku's geostrategic interest to maintain a close connection with the Kremlin. Azerbaijan is one of the leading importers of Russian goods in the region, a trade relationship that does not only focus on commodities or energy but also Russian armaments too.⁵⁰ The usage of Russian military technology by as many states as possible is one of the key strategic goals for the Kremlin since it establishes a network of hard power affiliation with various states (e.g., Azerbaijan and Turkey), contributing to Russian influence and prestige. By not aiding Armenia during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, besides Armenia's punishment for its pro-Western inclination during and after the Velvet Revolution, Moscow wanted also to show Baku that there was only one feasible diplomatic stance in South Caucasus, and that was to rally to Russia's side. Otherwise, the status of the state trying to break free from the Kremlin's influence was to be under reconsideration with dire consequences ahead for every disobedient element, for example, Armenia.

While Turkey was openly by the Azerbaijani side throughout the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia avoided standing by the Armenian side. At the same time, it did not try to minimize Turkish involvement either.⁵¹ Russia just monitored the unfolding of the Armenian defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh while the technologically advanced Azerbaijani army demolished the Armenian Armed Forces with the pivotal assistance of Turkish drones. This defeat of the Armenian side, at least to the extent it materialized, would not have occurred if not for Russia's absence and for Moscow giving the green light to Turkey to support Baku. An analyst must consider here that there is no other case in Russia's Caucasus policy since the imperial era that Moscow tolerated the heavy intervention of a third country in the region. The fact that Turkey was allowed to move with such great ease in the region, which is considered vital for Russian security, enhances the main argument of this article that Moscow used Ankara as the bloodletting booster in Nagorno-Karabakh to support Azerbaijan and thus punish Armenia for its willingness to adopt a pro-Western turn after 2018.

It has to be noted that the Russian-Turkish relation that was first tested in Syria and then in Nagorno-Karabakh is still in full display in the war in Ukraine, where Ankara maintains the closest connection with Moscow even if the former is a member of NATO. As Iliya Kusa says about Russian-Turkish relations,

To improve its geopolitical and geoeconomic position in the region, Turkey needs to maintain its partnership with Russia, squeezing out concessions and counterbalancing Western influence. To this end, Turkey must engage with Russia politically, preserve close trade and economic ties, continue to realize steady Russian tourism revenues, find ways to attract more investment, further expand its regional political clout, and maintain the status quo—where it benefits Turkey—with respect to regional security issues, such as the Syria conflict, the geo-

politics of the Black Sea, or the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in which Turkey sides with Azerbaijan.⁵²

The strong connection between the two states can be easily spotted, and it would be a great mistake for the West to disregard this as a trivial development.

The Aftermath

The conclusion of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War had the following effects on the regional balance of power. First, Armenia was forced to abandon its pro-Western aspirations and adopt the stance that without Russian support it would not be able to survive with Azerbaijan as a neighbor. Most of the Armenian political system hurried to reassure the Kremlin that its pro-Western orientation was just a phase that belonged to the past and that the state's grand strategy remains pro-Russian. For example, immediately after the end of the war and while Armenia was still trying to face the consequences of its defeat, Pashinyan, the ex-pro-Western leader of the Velvet Revolution, made the following public statement: "We will continue developing the strengthening strategic partnership with Russia, which is our number one partner in the security sphere."⁵³ It was apparent that the message was received. Therefore, in the 2021 national elections, Nikol Pashinyan maintained his office as prime minister by publicly showing his allegiance to Moscow through a pro-Russian foreign policy agenda. Characteristically, as Emil Mustafayev, an Azerbaijani analyst, stated to Al Jazeera just a few weeks before the 2021 elections day, "The Kremlin fully controls the situation in Armenia, and premiere Pashinyan is no longer a threat to Moscow the way he was in the first years of his prime-ministerial work." Sergey Strokan, the well-known Russian columnist, wrote in an op-ed about the transformation of the Armenian premier: "The former leader of Armenia's 'color revolution' became an example of . . . a bad boy transformed into a politician who finally understood who is who and how much things are."⁵⁴

In addition, Moscow managed to be the only significant power to monitor the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the end of the clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh, meaning that it succeeded in keeping out both France and the United States from future developments in the region.⁵⁵ Consequently, 2,000 Russian troops, instead of the United Nations peacekeeping forces as it should have been, are stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh, offering the strategic advantage to Moscow to control the area.

In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia reached its peak regarding its potential as a great power with the perfect execution of the bloodletting strategy. On the one hand, the Kremlin punished Armenia by allowing the latter to taste a bitter defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh. The punishment resulted from the opening of Armenia toward the West after the days of the Velvet Revolution. On the other hand, the Kremlin succeeded in safeguarding its control over the South Caucasus by showing the two involved sides that without its leading participation in the future of the region, Nagorno-Karabakh would continue to be

a source of military friction between Armenia and Azerbaijan. By implementing its bloodletting strategy, Moscow underlined its role as the pivotal factor in the region's fate. As Dumitru Minzarari argues, "Moscow's ability to stop the Azeri offensive immediately after the fall of Shushi revealed its control. Russia would only have allowed the status quo change if its expected gains exceeded the related risks and costs. This occurred, while the Kremlin used Baku to pull its chestnuts out of the fire."⁵⁶ How things unfolded in favor of Russia in Nagorno-Karabakh must be seen as the hubris booster that ultimately affected Russia's approach to Ukraine. Moscow felt that Kyiv's attempts to diversify its foreign policy by implementing various openings toward the United States and the European Union had to be punished too. Only this time, the role of the punisher to magnify the disciplining effect was to be filled by Russia. The Russian regime failed to comprehend the profound differences between Ukraine and Armenia. This fallacy fully demonstrates that there are no panaceas or secrets of success in military strategy, mainly when the excessive feeling of superiority influences the decision-making process, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine shows.

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Substitute to War

Questioning the Efficacy of Sanctions on Russia

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Abstract: Western nations enacted harsh sanctions against Russia after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. However, sanctions are rarely successful and policy makers should not expect sanctions to coerce Russia into a withdrawal. This article examines several concepts including the instrumental effectiveness of sanctions, the significance of state identity, the pitfall of mirror imaging, and aspects of prospect theory as they relate to the effectiveness of sanctions. Additionally, the weakness of sanctions used for moral signaling and the notion of sanctions as an act of war are considered. Recommendations are offered should policy makers continue to view economic sanctions as an attractive policy choice.

Keywords: economic sanctions, Russia, Ukraine, Crimea, instrumental effects, expressive sanctions, moral signaling, state identity, prospect theory

Introduction

The Megarian Decree is viewed by many as the first instance of state sanctions recorded in Western history.¹ These decrees—economic sanctions issued circa 432 BCE by Athens against the city of Megara—remain a source of disagreement among historians and political scientists. Some argue that the sanctions were the *cause* of a 27-year long war, while others postulate that the decrees were actually an act *of* war.² Thucydides, in his highly regarded work on the Peloponnesian War, notes the issue only in passing.³ The history and political science literature on economic sanctions in world politics has not been able to conclusively resolve the role and effectiveness of sanctions for more

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than 2,000 years. The ongoing failure of Western sanctions in changing the policies of Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine is another case against the efficacy of sanctions regimes in international politics.

Other modern examples of the failure of economic sanctions include those imposed by the United States and other nations on Japan, Germany, Iraq, Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, and North Korea. The evidence of the effectiveness of economic sanctions within international relations literature is mixed, but it leans toward a conclusion that economic sanctions, particularly sanctions alone, do not work to change target state behavior toward the better relative to the desires of the sanctioning party.⁴ Iraq, despite the dramatic results of the 1991 Gulf War, was determined to absorb 13 years of United Nations sanctions, even as its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita fell by some 98 percent within the first three years.⁵ Some studies have statistically shown that sanctions often precede war, particularly for democracies that impose sanctions, because sanctions signal political weakness or lack of commitment of the sanctioner that further incentivizes aggression by the sanctioned.⁶ Japan before World War II was estimated to be the world's seventh largest economy.⁷ After just 18 months of sanctions, Japanese trade was reduced by 20–25 percent, and most historians agree that the progressive sanctions enacted against Japan ultimately led to it lashing out across the Pacific.⁸ This can certainly be counted as a failure of economic sanctions if the goal were to check Japanese aggression or prevent escalation. Several decades of U.S. sanctions against Cuba, likely kept in place for the purpose of moral signaling, have failed to deliver freedom to the Cuban people and are estimated to have cost Cuba \$130 billion and U.S. companies up to \$1.2 billion per year.⁹ These historical examples are significant, since it also has been observed that despite such ambiguity regarding the effectiveness of sanctions, governments often attempt to use them as a first-choice foreign policy to deter or avert war, or as an alternative to armed conflict.¹⁰

Because economic sanctions have such a spotty historical record of success, Western nations should not expect sanctions on Russia to have immediate positive short-term effects on Russian aggression in Ukraine, or long-term positive influence on Russian behavior. In fact, events since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 indicate that international sanctions have had primarily negative effects in terms of Western strategic influence on Russian foreign policy decisions. Russian targets of Western sanctions wear international economic sanctions as “a badge of honor.”¹¹ Likewise, notable Western leaders take pride in being the target of Russian sanctions.¹²

To properly examine the effects of sanctions on Russian foreign policy behaviors, it is necessary to capture what constitutes success when targeting a state with sanctions and to examine potential barriers to the effectiveness of sanctions. To accomplish these tasks, this article is comprised of five sections. The first section briefly introduces various measurements of the effectiveness of sanctions. The second section discusses the lack of instrumental effectiveness of economic sanctions. In the third section, the weakness of moral signaling

through expressive sanctions is considered. The fourth section notes that economic sanctions may be considered an act of war itself. The fifth and final section provides an analysis and several recommendations concerning the use of sanctions as an alternative to war.

What Constitutes Success of Economic Sanctions?

The sanctions enacted against Russia after its March 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea had significant negative impacts on segments of the Russian economy, including a fall in oil revenues, the devaluation of the ruble, increased capital flight, negative GDP growth, and inflation.¹³ It is estimated that the sanctions subsequent to the annexation cost Russia upward of \$50 billion per year during the first seven years.¹⁴ However, those sanctions had no deterrent effect on Vladimir Putin's future policy choices regarding the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Subsequent to the 24 February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Western nations renewed existing sanctions and enacted a large body of additional sanctions against more than 2,500 Russian assets and actors.¹⁵ Within the first eight months of war, sanctions "immobilized about \$300 billion worth of Russian Central Bank assets," ostensibly negatively impacting the Russian government's ability to fund the ongoing war.¹⁶ The sanctions to date have reportedly taken a significant toll on the Russian economy. Yet, there are some assessments that the total collapse of the Russian economy touted by some officials will not occur and that "it is unlikely Moscow will run out of money to fight the war."¹⁷ There are also potentially fatal gaps in the sanctions regime that will lead to their failure in convincing Russia to exit Ukraine.

The international sanctions enacted after the 2022 invasion are both deep and broad, affecting businesses and individuals. However, Group of Seven (G7) nations determined to set a price cap on Russian oil rather than enact a complete embargo.¹⁸ The U.S. Treasury Department stated that the cap was "designed to achieve two seemingly contradictory goals: restricting Russia's oil revenues while maintaining the supply of Russian oil" to make it more difficult for Russia to wage the war and to "keep energy costs down for consumers and businesses around the world."¹⁹ Thus, this price cap measure may have indicated to Russia weakness in the sanctions regime. Indeed, the price cap has since been breached by Japan (a G7 nation).²⁰ Russia has also been able to shift significant levels of oil trade to China and India, both of which drastically increased imports of Russian oil in the first months of the war, even if at a reduced price.²¹ Further, the European Union (EU) "has not imposed sanctions on Russian gas because it relies on it for about 40% of its gas needs."²² These are all significant detriments to the effectiveness of the sanctions regime given the fact that Russia is one of the top three global oil producers and the world's second largest producer of natural gas.²³ Russian oil and gas make up nearly 40 percent of the Russian government's annual revenue.²⁴

Yet, the effectiveness of sanctions on international relations cannot be captured by economic impacts alone. Some scholars have noted an increase in

the effectiveness of sanctions since the end of the Cold War. While post–Cold War sanctions have been enacted more quickly and have had increased negative impacts on a target’s trade and GDP, linking sanctions to positive changes in a target state’s policy choices is difficult, at best.²⁵ Additionally, these claims are marred by changes in methodology used to capture and analyze data regarding economic sanctions.

The Joseph R. Biden administration has made several claims about the purpose of the sanctions enacted against Russia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. According to administration officials, the sanctions were enacted to express that a large segment of the international community is united against Russian aggression *and* that sanctions also intended to punish bad Russian behaviors, while maintaining that the sanctions enacted prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine were never intended to deter that particular act of aggression.²⁶ Yet, prior to the Russian invasion in 2022, the current U.S. administration did make allusions to the potential deterrent effects of the *threat* of sanctions.²⁷ In January 2022, a month before the Russian invasion, President Biden warned Russian president Putin that any Russian incursion into Ukraine would result in “a severe and coordinated . . . economic response.”²⁸

Deterrence, signaling unity, punishment, and ending the Russian war against Ukraine all reflect the different purposes economic sanctions have been intended to serve throughout history. Of course, each purpose potentially comes with a different associated measure of success. If deterrence is successful, it is difficult, if not impossible, to credit sanctions for something that ultimately did not occur. Moral signaling, or enacting sanctions merely for expressive purposes, is measured in terms of how satisfied the *sanctioning actor* is, not in a change in behavior of the target of sanctions. The success of punishment is measured entirely by whether the target of sanctions views the sanctions as an effective form of punishment and how much punishment the target is willing and capable of absorbing. The clearest measure of success for sanctions is a change in behavior of the target of the sanctions toward the desired policies of the sanctioning body.

It may be that Russia—or at least Putin—simply has “a greater willingness to be harmed” than the West has assumed.²⁹ For Putin, the seizure of some or all of Ukraine may be worth absorbing costs in other realms, particularly if those costs can be partially or entirely borne by others. Subsequent to the Russian invasion, President Biden made several statements regarding the effectiveness of the economic sanctions the West has placed on Russia, apparently measuring effectiveness or success of sanctions in terms of the degradation of the Russian economy.³⁰ The effects of sanctions on the Russian economy are clear. Sanctions have significantly and negatively impacted Russian economic growth, trade, and inflation.³¹ But, sanctions have yet to induce a perceptible change in Russian behavior as measured by its foreign policy choices. If sanctions were to be considered effective, the sanctions placed on Russia after the 2014 annexation

of Crimea would have factored into the Russian decision to invade Ukraine. They did not.

The government of the United States has claimed significant and near-immediate impact of sanctions on Russia, including severe negative impacts on Russia's ability to wage war. This declaration that sanctions against Russia have been successful is misleading. The claim mistakes the means and ways for ends. The West is attempting to change Russian behavior by enacting sanctions against Russia with the intended goal of ending Russian aggression in Ukraine. While there has been significant deleterious impact on Russian economy, the sanctions have not resulted in a change of behavior vis-à-vis ending Russian aggression in Ukraine.

A widely accepted view of the effectiveness of sanctions is that they can be measured by "either full target compliance or at least partial policy change in line with the stated policy objectives of senders."³² However, international relations literature notes how sanctions may be enacted for differing intents, including instrumental and expressive purposes. A brief overview of these instrumental and expressive purposes is necessary to frame an argument for the ineffectiveness of economic sanctions in influencing target behaviors.

The Instrumental Effectiveness of Sanctions: Negative Impact to Target's Economy

A simple but incomplete definition of effectiveness can be measured by the extent of the impact on the economy of the target of sanctions. It is widely agreed that sanctions have had serious impacts on target state economies.³³ Yet, this purely instrumental view of sanctions falls short in terms of articulating how well sanctions actually achieve foreign policy objectives—how sanctions actually change state behaviors. A state may levy significant sanctions on another, with severe consequences for the target's economy, yet still fall short of a positive change of policy of that target state.³⁴

For example, it is clear that sanctions enacted against Russia following its annexation of Crimea in 2014 have not resulted in a positive change in Russia's foreign policy behaviors, despite significant adverse effects on the Russian economy.³⁵ Russia did not withdraw from Crimea and was not deterred from further aggression in Ukraine. At the time, it was thought that one of the best ways to impact the Russian economy was by sanctioning oil sales. Though Europe reduced its imports of Russian oil and the global price of oil plunged subsequent to the 2014 Russian aggression, it was not sufficient cause for a positive change in Russian behavior.³⁶ There were two primary reasons for the ineffectiveness of sanctions enacted after the annexation of Crimea. First, Europe likely did not reduce its purchase of Russian oil enough. Second, Russia was able to make up the reduction through increased oil sales to other parties such as China.³⁷ The weakness of the sanctions regime possibly even encouraged future Russian aggression by signaling that Western nations were not willing to pay the price

required to truly strangle Russia into submission. Russia knows that Europe is likely not willing to suffer what is required to enact crippling sanctions on Russian oil and gas. These facts remain relevant subsequent to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Indeed, sanctions may influence a target state, but in ways undesirable to the sanctioning actor. For example, sanctions may embolden such actors, as discussed in greater detail below. In the case of post-Crimea sanctions, the Russians may simply have calculated that they are not painful enough to cause a shift in aggressive policies against Ukraine. Alternately, Russia may have determined that the economic pain these sanctions might cause would be offset by the perceived gains to be had in invading Ukraine—be they economic, moral, or political. Two key factors that impact the potential of economic sanctions to change target behaviors include state identity and mirror imaging.

State identity is described by constructivist political scientists as a set of “intersubjectively shared meanings, norms, and narratives . . . [that] shape state practices.”³⁸ Because state identity aids in determining state interests, such identity often proves a powerful force in world politics.³⁹ A state’s identity is heavily influenced by its past, including its interactions with other actors on the world stage.⁴⁰ Importantly, state identity takes into account not just interactions between nations vis-à-vis international politics but also domestic politics within states. Both international and domestic issues are part of the calculus for how state identity may shape policy choices, including what is valued and how much it is valued. A state makes policy choices that it deems appropriate based on its role in the world and its internal domestic norms and beliefs—its state identity.⁴¹ State identity, driving the determination of what a state considers appropriate behavior, will often override international norms, or in the case of Russia, Western rationalizations. Thus, state identity likely plays a powerful role in determining a target’s response to economic sanctions.

As expected by constructivist international relations theory, scholars have posited that Putin’s behavior is shaped by Russian national discourses and its history—the state’s identity.⁴² The formation of Russian state identity is beyond the scope of this article; however, some key aspects of that state identity are important for understanding Russian responses to the threat and enactment of economic sanctions as a response to its aggressive foreign policies. One aspect is that Russia “must be a strong and independent great power” that stands against the West.⁴³ Another is that a world exists in which Russia dominates outside of the influence of Western civilization—one that is directly opposed to the liberalism of the United States and Europe.⁴⁴ A third important aspect is Ukraine’s historical subservience to Russia, at least in the Russian view of its identity vis-à-vis Ukraine.⁴⁵ Because Russian leadership likely values Ukraine—in terms of a perception of the appropriateness that accords with its deeply ingrained identity rather than merely economically—it will likely lead to the failure of economic sanctions changing Russian foreign policies toward Ukraine. Simply put, Russia’s understanding of itself as a nation impacts its calculus about the

impact of economic sanctions in foreign policy decisions. In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it appears likely that rational economic calculations are outweighed by those Russia deems to be congruent with its own identity.

The instrumental intent of sanctions has another obvious major weakness—mirror imaging. Mirror imaging may be a result of a failure to understand another state's identity, or from a U.S. or Eurocentric view of world politics. Simply put, mirror imaging occurs when an individual or state assumes that another state or individual will react or perceive the same as they would in similar circumstances. Mirror imaging occurs in this instance when the United States assumes that the calculus it would use to determine *what* is valued and *how much* value is placed on something is the same calculus for the target of sanctions—in this case, Russia.

Whether the result of mirror imaging, poor assessment of a target state's identity, or both, the results are the same. The sanctioning state assumes, likely based on incomplete or inaccurate knowledge, that the targeted state values the same things and also that the target places a similar measure of worth on those things. Therefore, it is assumed that Russia in this instance values its economic interests above other tangible or intangible Russian interests, such as international standing, relative power, and position on the world stage, actions considered appropriate in terms of congruency with its own understanding of state identity, or just a base domestic interest in the economic benefits of controlling Ukrainian territory. Another interest Russia likely has is an unambiguous, if misinformed, interest in national survival and security. However misinformed Russia may be in terms of the intent of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or how poorly Russian leadership's perceptions of NATO reflect reality, their views are genuine to them.⁴⁶ Simply put, if Russia perceived, correctly or not, that NATO threatened Russia's survival and security in what it views as its own sphere of influence, Russia acted in a way that is rational to Russia, but unexpected by the Western calculus of a rational economic cost-benefit analysis regarding economic sanctions. In other words, sanctions enacted by the West for instrumental purposes, without a complete understanding of the value system of the target, are quite likely to fail. Therefore, rather than the more common expected utility model of rational decision-making, prospect theory may offer insights into Russian decision-making in the face of economic sanctions.

Prospect theory suggests that individuals make different choices based on how a problem or situation is framed across a gain-loss spectrum. If an issue is framed for or by an individual as a gain, they are less likely to make high-risk choices. Given a perception that the decision domain falls into the loss category, actors will be more inclined to engage in higher-risk actions.⁴⁷ Western nations likely have framed the Russian invasion of Ukraine in terms of the potential gains for Russia. They view the aggression as a grab for power, territory, economic, or possibly political benefits. This results in Western expectations that Russia will use a rational cost-benefit analysis and conclude that the economic and political losses incurred by aggression are not worth the potential gain of

Ukrainian territory. However, it is likely in this case—given the aforementioned Russian state identity, Russia-Ukraine history, and possibly even Putin’s personal goals for Russia—that the Russians view the Ukraine situation with a *loss* frame. This loss perception has resulted in high-risk Russian behavior that couples with Russia’s willingness to endure even strong economic sanctions to achieve its goals in Ukraine.

In the end, without a full understanding of a target’s value system and whether there is a gain or loss frame in force in a given situation, the effect of sanctions on actual behavioral outcomes are no better than a coin toss. That is, until you begin to calculate costs for the sanctioning actors. If the sanctioning body cannot bear the costs of its own sanctions regime, the cost-benefit calculus may well shift in favor of the sanctioned state. Indeed, one of the criticisms of prospect theory is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern where actors’ perceptions are or will be on the gain-loss spectrum.⁴⁸

Sanctions as Expression: The Weakness of Moral Signaling

An alternative view of the effectiveness of sanctions, rather than instrumentalism, is that sanctions can serve an expressive purpose. That is, sanctions are a manifestation of domestic groups’ disapproval of a foreign country’s policies.⁴⁹ Thus, the success or effectiveness of sanctions, rather than affecting *target* state behavior, is measured in terms of the expressive goals of domestic groups in the sanctioning state.⁵⁰ Effectiveness is determined by the satisfaction the sanctioner perceives.

Evidence suggests that sanctions imposed for such expressive notions are likely to fail to change target state behavior since they are “designed deliberately to be ineffectual” because they are not designed to “impose maximum harm on the target country.”⁵¹ Rather than signaling strength and resolve, targets of such sanctions are often aware that sanctioning states design sanctions to minimize the impact on the sanctioner’s economy. The result is a signal of weakness and lack of commitment.⁵² There are also several potential pitfalls of sanctions being enacted for expressive purposes, which lead to sanctions being less effective in terms of measurable changes in target behavior. A savvy target may know of and exploit these pitfalls. Two such phenomena include the Abilene Paradox and the collective action problem.

The Abilene Paradox: Just Going Along with a Sanctions Regime

The Abilene Paradox is a concept that anyone who has participated in group decision-making may have encountered. This paradox occurs when a decision-making body agrees to a decision or action unanimously because no individual member is willing to speak out against the perceived will of the majority.⁵³ At the suggestion of one member of a group, the group ends up taking an unwanted trip to Abilene, even though nobody wanted to go in the first place.⁵⁴ This

occurs because group members may wish to avoid criticizing another member creating, among other things, an “illusion of unanimity.”⁵⁵ The implication of the paradox in international relations is that “organizations frequently take actions in contradiction to what they really want to do and therefore defeat the very purposes they are trying to achieve.”⁵⁶ The organization focuses myopically on one potential course of action or solution, ignoring other potential solutions, the potential costs of the proposed solution, or the possibility that the proposed solution may fail to produce the desired results.⁵⁷ The result is that when an international body, be it a loose confederation or a long-standing alliance such as NATO, determines to enact sanctions, the Abilene Paradox may lead to several states not being as committed as necessary, for as long as necessary, for sanctions to be effective. Such states merely go along with the sanctions regime because they feel pressured to do so or because they believe others want them to. When costs to the sanctioning body begin to manifest, members’ dedication to the sanctions regime will likely diminish and enforcement will become difficult.

When states enact sanctions as an expression of a domestic interest group’s views on target state behaviors—with the intent to simply express condemnation of the target’s actions—the sanctions will be weaker. First, the state enacting such sanctions may not have the same values as the interest group and may not desire to fully back and empower the enforcement of sanctions. They are sanctions in word only, not fully enforced in deed. Second, interest groups may lose interest over time and sanctions are not known for resulting in quick changes in target state policies. The interest group sees the futility and moves on to another issue.

Another problem with expressive sanctions is similar to that of sanctions enacted for purely instrumental purposes. Expressive sanctions are put in place because the sanctioning actor wishes to condemn a target’s actions as being immoral or contrary to international norms. The efficacy of such sanctions may be measured in terms of the signaling insofar as the sanctioning actor is satisfied with the message sanctions send not only to the target but to the international community. However, this is not likely to change the policies of the target state. First, target states are likely to have a selection effect. Targets simply may not care about international opinion in the first place because they are doing things that provoke sanctions.⁵⁸ Likewise, the target state may not care about the principles of interest groups outside of the target country. The target may also have a different value set in terms of how it views international norms. The threshold for what constitutes an international norm is actually quite low. According to international relations scholars, as few as one-third of countries need to accept a norm for it to be considered international.⁵⁹ That leaves the potential that nearly one-half of the nations of the world do not consider a given behavior to have normative power. What is moral and just in one state or collective may be completely different from what is considered moral and just in another state or collective.

Second, even if a target state accepts a certain international norm as valid,

states are continuously balancing many domestic and international norms and interests at any given time. In a given situation, an international norm may take a back seat to prevailing domestic norms, cultural constraints, or domestic political considerations. As is true with instrumental sanctions, sanctioning states are not likely to have an accurate assessment of the cost-benefit calculus of the target of expressive sanctions.

The Collective Action Problem and the Weakness of Sanctions

It is also possible that some members of a coalition or alliance may not be as committed to sanctions as others in the group. This can occur due to the Abilene Paradox, as previously noted. There are also several other reasons for weaker commitment to a sanctions regime, including different domestic norms, individual state power and position in the global community, or disparate economic impacts across the sanctioning body members. This impacts the cost-benefit analysis of states: “Thus, an actor will choose cooperation over independent action only if the increased value of the benefits—that is, the ‘surplus’ resulting from cooperation exceeds the cost of cooperation.”⁶⁰

Without some enforcement mechanism within the sanctioning coalition itself, there may be individual state interests that override interests of the sanctioning body. Some states may defect and violate the sanctions regime they initially agreed to join. Any individual state may intentionally or unintentionally sabotage the sanctions. A single state may lack the same level of will as other members of the collective. A state may experience disparate economic impacts of its own relative to the collective or other individual members, leading to a subsequent cost-benefit analysis that leads to weak or no enforcement of the sanctions regime, such as the lack of sanctions on Russian gas to Europe, and the Japanese breach of the oil price cap noted above. This could ultimately lead to coalition fracture through the actions of just one member. The target of sanctions, often being an individual state, does not have this problem. The target is not required to hold together a coalition and can base its decisions on an individual—and likely more constant—rationale. Collective action is difficult and grows more difficult as the number of actors in a group increases. Thus, another paradox of sanctions arises. Effective sanctions require a large body of sanctioning states to enact meaningful sanctions; however, the larger the sanctioning body the more difficult it becomes to agree to a sanctions regime and to enforce it.

Additionally, a sanctioning body must be comprehensive. Unless all non-target states are brought into the sanctions regime, there will always be back doors for continued trade. Gaps in international sanctions on Russian oil sales and Russian purchases of critical microchips through “third party vendors”—including NATO member Turkey—are just two examples of such weaknesses.⁶¹ The greater number of states that form the sanctioning coalition, the more difficult the agreement on sanctions and their enforcement become. Additionally,

if the success of sanctions benefits members of the sanctioning organization differently, and as a result any member of the group disavows its commitment to the sanctions regime, it will decrease the effectiveness of sanctions and increase the cost of enacting sanctions on the other members of the group.⁶² Some have argued that the single most significant reason sanctions have historically failed is due to “third-party spoilers.”⁶³ As noted previously, China and India have dramatically increased their purchases of Russian oil and gas since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Third parties do not need to fully replace the trade or economic benefits that have been cut off by a sanctioning body. Third parties merely need to provide a temporary lifeline. Success of sanctions requires consensus of the entire coalition but can potentially be wrecked by the dissent of just one. The single actor does not require consensus and can commit to expressive desires or otherwise make noninstrumental cost-benefit decisions. This is particularly true for a dictatorial regime like Russia.⁶⁴

Sanctions as an Act of War

Sanctions may be used merely to signal “displeasure with a certain behavior” of a target state.⁶⁵ Sanctions may also signal a reluctance to use military force, which in turn can signal that sanctioning state commitment could be in question.⁶⁶ In addition to those purposes and perceptions, sanctions may also be considered as an act of war by both the sanctioner and the sanctioned. Sanctions that are enacted after undesirable target state behavior are typically used for the purpose of exacting punishment. Such sanctions may not result in positive changes in behavior of the target state, but they are intended to exact a measurable cost for foreign policy choices deemed unacceptable in the larger international community. How much punishment a target state is willing to absorb will depend greatly on how much the target values that which sanctions target relative to its goals for taking the actions that resulted in sanctions in the first place. This is really not much different than carrying out the same punishment through military actions. The ways employed are different, but only slightly so. More important, the intended effects are the same. That is, to exact enough punishment by damaging something of value to the target to get them to change their behavior. Therefore, it is not unreasonable for a target of economic sanctions to view sanctions as an act of war.

This is not a new discovery, as noted previously with some scholars’ interpretations of the Megarian Decree. More recently, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) officers included sanctions on the list of potential means that “can have a destructive effect that is equal to that of a military operation.”⁶⁷ Further, these Chinese colonels argue that “financial war is a form of non-military warfare which is just as terribly destructive as a bloody war” and that the “destruction which [sanctions] do are not secondary to pure military wars.”⁶⁸ Russian strategists have also noted the utility and potential destruction wrought by economic warfare. It has long been noted that Russia’s use of hybrid warfare leverages economic and other instruments of power to achieve its objectives, which changes

the very “conceptual approach to war.”⁶⁹ Russian president Vladimir Putin has even gone so far as stating that Western sanctions are “akin to a declaration of war.”⁷⁰ President Biden has also stated that these sanctions on Russia constitute “a new kind of economic statecraft with the power to inflict damage that rivals military might.”⁷¹

If the target of sanctions views sanctions as a literal act of war, it is not difficult to see how sanctions might prove ineffective. As an act of war, sanctions will almost automatically create a defensive reaction in all but the weakest of states. When states are threatened militarily, they most often react defensively. There is no reason to think that states that feel they are being attacked economically will react differently. Even the perception, correct or not, that economic sanctions threaten state survival, will, in the mind of the target, create the need for defensive measures. This is often cited as one of the primary reasons Japan lashed out and sought increased resources at the outset of World War II.

Regarding Russia and its activities in Crimea and Ukraine, it is evident that the sanctions that followed Russian aggression have had significant economic impacts but have continued to fall short in reversing Russian belligerence. That is to say, the sanctions may have significant effects on Russian decisions and behavior, but not in the way intended by sanctioning countries. Any sanctions regime must consider the negative effects that may result from sanctions—that sanctions may actually increase bad behaviors.⁷² Sanctions perceived by the target state as an act of war will likely result in such behaviors.

One reason that sanctions might encourage continued bad behaviors is because sanctions may enrage elites who make foreign policy decisions. Some scholars have posited that “autocratic leaders tend to be more defiant as they often escape the intended costs of the coercion to themselves and their support base.”⁷³ The West, and particularly the United States, has moved to a regime of targeted sanctions for this reason. Rather than blanket sanctions that impact an entire populace, targeted sanctions aim to punish or coerce elite actors who directly or indirectly influence foreign policy decisions. However, “there is no strong evidence that targeted sanctions are more successful than conventional sanctions.”⁷⁴ In addition to low success rates in achieving sanctioning states’ policy goals, even targeted sanctions often have deleterious effects in the targeted country, including increased political repression, increased authoritarianism, corruption, and poor governance.⁷⁵ Additionally, as noted above in the discussion of sanctions intended to have a coercive effect or act as a punishment, the target of sanctions may not have the same value system. Thus, “economic rationality, or at least the pursuit of it, is far from being such a dominant motive for some states, especially with certain forms of absolutist or authoritarian regimes.”⁷⁶

Sanctions may also enrage the population of a target country. Scholars have posited that “sanctions can have the perverse effect of bolstering authoritarian, statist societies. By creating scarcity, they enable governments to better control distribution of goods.”⁷⁷ Sanctions may also lend credence to authoritarian

claims of oppression from abroad: “By combining authoritarian governance and nationalism, local leaders [may manage] to mobilize the population against the sanctioning enemy states.”⁷⁸ It has also been suggested that sanctions may bring additional allies into the sphere of the targeted state, rather than causing it to be isolated.⁷⁹ For example, there is evidence that Western actions intended to thwart Russian aggression have increased ties between Russia and China.⁸⁰

Analysis and Recommendations

Sanctions may be intended to serve various purposes, from deterrence to compellence and from diplomacy to punishment. Sanctions may have a range of goals, including instrumental or expressive aims. They may have positive effects in terms of achieving sanctioning state policy goals for target state behaviors. Sanctions may have a delayed effect—for which many policy makers may be unwilling to wait. More likely, they will have negative effects, particularly on the types of countries against which the United States tends to use sanctions. Yet, just because sanctions have a variety of intended purposes does not mean they automatically result in the desired ends. The means—negative economic impacts—cannot and should not be mistaken for the real ends, which are defined best as the desired change in policy of the target of sanctions. This measure of the success of sanctions and the review of several importance concepts discussed above lead to several policy recommendations regarding the use of sanctions.

First, sanctions should be considered as a tool of foreign policy on par with military intervention, with a similar collateral damage and cost-benefit analysis. Sanctions should be just as cautiously considered as a tool of foreign policy as is military intervention.⁸¹ The United States should not assume that other states view sanctions in exactly the same way in all contexts. That is, as an alternative to war. Perceptions and intentions of the target of sanctions matter greatly. Sanctions may be perceived by a target country as acts of war. This is especially true if the economic effects of sanctions result in the same level of economic, social, and political upheaval—and perhaps significant loss of life—that would result from acts traditionally associated with armed conflict. Even if the impacts of sanctions do not approach the economic, physical, social, or political effects of war, it is logical to assume that sanctioned parties can and will use international sanctions as a rallying call to their cause both domestically and internationally. Whether or not such a rally-around-the-flag message will resonate with the domestic population depends on numerous factors—too numerous for policy makers to predict with any level of accuracy.

Second, sanctions should not be used as an expressive foreign policy tool.⁸² There are two reasons for this. First, domestic groups that have an interest in such expressive foreign policy actions may not have the complete picture of world events and the long-term consequences of sanctions—especially the failure thereof. The expressive measures may be based on emotion, religious or moral conceptions, or other factors that do not translate to the culture or state identity of the target country’s elite policy makers or its population. Quite sim-

ply, there may be vastly differing conceptions of right and wrong, of moral and immoral, between the sanctioning state and the target. Without agreement on those and other factors, determination of how much and how long a state will withstand the effects of sanctions cannot be made.

If such expressive sanctions are, in fact, designed deliberately to be less effective by providing loopholes to circumvent them, it will weaken the entire international sanctions regime. Sanctions as a tool will be generally less effective because the target state will not be able to determine if the goal of a sanctioning state is instrumental or expressive—if they are merely signaling or if they really mean it. Again, the perceptions of all parties involved are central to the effectiveness of sanctions. Add to these perceptions the differing values placed on interests and goals that sanctioning states and targets have but do not necessarily fully comprehend, and any result of sanctions—positive or negative—will be nearly impossible to predict.

Third, sanctioners must avoid mirror imaging. Mirror imaging is certainly one of the easiest pitfalls to identify but also one of the most difficult things to avoid when deciding to enact sanctions. It takes a tremendous amount of time and experience to study any state or alliance and accurately determine what it values and how much. In a specific set of events—such as determining the value of Ukraine to Russia—it becomes even more difficult to do so. Understanding the value Russia places on Ukraine cannot be understood from a purely Western viewpoint because it requires a global one.

Fourth, and likely most difficult, is that sanctioning bodies must also strive to understand the state identity of the target of sanctions. Because state identity can be a driving force behind state interests and resultant policy choices, it is imperative that sanctioning bodies understand the motivations of target states. More than merely avoiding mirror imaging when it comes to enacting sanctions, states need to comprehend as much as possible the origins of the target state's interests. This will not be an easy task. State identity may drive policy decisions based on a leader's intersubjective understanding of state identity vis-à-vis other states; however, international relations rarely involve relatively simple bilateral relationships. States have various identities that may come to play in a given situation. States do not "have a portfolio of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead, they define their interests in the process of defining situations."⁸³ Hence, state identity may provide insight into the reason for state policy choices, but state identity alone will be unable to "specify which particular action will follow in any [specific] situation."⁸⁴ Despite such difficulties, enacting sanctions without a clear understanding of the perceptions of the target will likely result in an ineffective sanctions regime. Attempts to influence a target by appealing to or otherwise leveraging aspects of the target's state identity will have greater purchase.⁸⁵

In sum, this article has advanced the argument that economic sanctions alone have had and will likely continue to have a poor track record in creating positive changes in the policy decisions of target states. The current case of

sanctions against Russia before and after its invasion of Ukraine add empirical evidence to the ineffectiveness of sanctions on changes in a target's foreign policy behaviors. Sanctions enacted for instrumental reasons are often measured in terms of impact to the target's economy rather than desired shifts in foreign policy behaviors. This is an incomplete and inaccurate measurement. Relatedly, there has been a notable lack in instrumental effectiveness of sanctions in terms of changes in target policies, both historically for many countries and currently in the case of Russia. The case of Russia continues to highlight the fact that target states may determine to suffer greatly rather than bend to the will of sanctioning states. There is also an inherent weakness of expressive sanctions regimes based on moral signaling by interest groups. Such sanctions are doomed to fail because they are weak by design. Finally, many actors may view economic sanctions as an act of war. This last observation is especially important, particularly for Western policy makers, who often view economic or other damage inflicted by sanctions differently than that wrought by military force. Other nations that do not view sanctions with such an innocuous lens will likely default to a defensive stance. Thus, this analysis has suggested four recommendations for policy makers when deciding whether and how to enact economic sanctions:

- Sanctions should be considered as a tool of foreign policy on par with military intervention.
- Expressive sanctions should not be considered as a national foreign policy tool.
- Sanctioners must avoid mirror imaging.
- Sanctioners must strive for a deeper understanding of a target state's identity.

The Megarian Decree may or may not have played a significant role in the Peloponnesian War, either as a spark leading to war, or as a significant act of war itself. The Megarian Decree, despite many details regarding their intent and effectiveness being lost to history, are nonetheless instructive. The primary lesson of these ancient decrees is that scholars, political pundits, and policy makers continue to disagree on the purposes and effectiveness of sanctions as a foreign policy tool. Intentions, interpretations, and perceptions all matter considerably for both the sanctioning body and the target of sanctions. This fact makes the use of economic sanctions a gamble at best, and policy making folly at worst. It should be remembered that the Athenian powerhouse—the *sanctioning* state—was ultimately defeated and replaced by the Spartan empire.

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Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front. By Michael A. Hunzeker. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021. Pp. 264. \$39.95 (hardcover); \$25.99 (ebook).

Michael A. Hunzeker's *Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front* only needs to be read by practicing professionals of the art and science of arms who want to learn, adapt, fight, and win faster than our adversaries. This is a well-honed blend of abstract theory and extensive case studies from three of the primary protagonists on the World War I western front: France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Italy, Romanov Russia, and the United States are not omitted lightly; rather, the relative paucity of material due to distance, alliance flopping, or late entry relegates these three powers to a secondary tier of relevance when it comes to assessing the doctrine as written in July 1914, as applied in August 1914, and as adapted from September 1914–November 1918.

Hunzeker bases his analysis on the theory of assessment, command, and training (ACT) that considers these three aspects of extant doctrine and training in balance. Hunzeker wanted to know how the United States adjusted in Iraq after the initial drive to Baghdad, and then expanded the scope of his inquiry: Why do some militaries learn faster than others? While the U.S. Civil War, the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War, and the Russo-Polish War all afford excellent examples of superior command, staggering casualties, and rapid technological change that outpaced the ability to think, write, evaluate, and implement change, Hunzeker notes that the rate of technological change both prior to and during World War I is one factor in his choice of this war for his analysis. He also notes that the great power nature of the First World War, started locally and expanding globally, carries important lessons for contemporary study.

From a case study perspective, the sheer volume of documentation from before the war, during the war, and then studies, memoirs, and other ex post facto studies provide a staggering amount of raw data that may provide a more detailed and aggregated set of information from which to distill exceptional insights. Hunzeker is also able to harness the investigatory curiosity unleashed over the last decade upon the centenary of the Great War. Taken all together, World War I provides a “deep learning” experiential case study

from which to possibly derive insights about how commanders, staffs, planners, and political and industrial leaders alike struggled to reduce casualties, restore maneuver, and replace attrition with penetration and decisive victory missions. Likewise, Hunzeker notes that “few armies have changed how they fight as dramatically as did the British, French, and German armies between 1914 and 1918” (p. 6).

To bring all of this into focus, Hunzeker provides a framework for analysis focusing on three critical nodes of wartime learning and application: delegation of command on the battlefield, availability of doctrinal assessment mechanisms, and the central control of classroom training. He proffers that military organizations that moderately delegate command, possess an effective (“independent, prestigious, and rigorous”) assessment process, and maintain centralized control over training are likely to be faster at learning than their adversaries (p. 7). While many of us who have detailed experience (and frustration) with the prepare to deploy processes and paradigms for Iraq and Afghanistan may disagree, at the macro level, these represent organizations that had prepared to fight Desert Storm 2.0, attempting to rapidly adjust to something that M1 Abram main battle tanks and AGM-114 Hellfire missiles could not solve.

Dying to Learn is capable of standing alone as the case studies are rigorously researched and executed. It will be even more insightful if the reader has more than a passing familiarity with the tactical, technological, operational, and strategic evolution of the annual campaign seasons from the Miracle on the Marne and Race to the Sea to the final *Kaiserschlacht* and the “Hundred Days” that concluded the war from Flanders to Meuse-Argonne. There is one overview chapter of where the three protagonists stood in July 1914 and the practical tactical-operational conundrum that confronted them by November 1914. One must remember that out of the 52 months of World War I, on the western front only 8 of them involved any significant maneuver—the rest were static slogs. One chapter each is dedicated to the evolutionary struggles of the French, Germans, and British. They are compared to their own doctrine, and then to how well they are learning and applying those lessons to the front against dynamically desperate adversaries. Hunzeker concludes with an attempted application of ACT theory to the U.S. Army in Vietnam and Iraq.

There is grist for the mill here from the battalion, squadron, ship, wing, and concentric rings of the Pentagon in *Dying to Learn*. One could easily imagine five successive Friday afternoon Officers’ Club calls at which the theory and start conditions were discussed the first week, each of the British, French, and German case studies in successive weeks, and then a “how do we learn faster, better” self-assessment the last week. Hunzeker balances the abstract with the *in stahlgewittern* of Ernst Jünger’s 1920 observations of his time on the western front. As with any other analytical framework, *Dying to Learn* is not the answer; instead, it provides a sophisticated approach that poses as many insightful questions assessed against the massive laboratory experiment of the western front.

This is a read not only for Service schoolhouses, but on the waterfront, the airfield, and each and every forward operating base far and wide.

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Intelligence in the National Security Enterprise: An Introduction. By Roger Z. George. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020. Pp. 344. \$149.95 (hardcover); \$49.95 (paperback); \$49.95 (ebook).

Intelligence work and its interface with policy makers remains one of the least understood and least well-defined aspects of the intelligence process. The lack of clarity on the issue is reflected in many aspects of our society, politicians and the political class, historians and those who are in general academia, and it is reflected in books whose portrayal of the CIA and the intelligence community is that they form a secret government and are essentially running the United States. All of these false perceptions and innuendos are fully exposed in the book under review.

From the standpoint of political discourse, intelligence and intelligence work is increasingly being used to define political leanings and affiliations. Hyperbolic and emotional language has turned intelligence into an us versus them litmus test. Political dialogue, especially in the last four to six years, has been saturated with terms such as *deep state* and *intelligence industrial complex*, reflecting both a leftist and rightist distrust of those engaged in intelligence or those who may support its work. Reviewing this book, this author was subjected to comments from a colloquial source that he had “joined them.” Thus, the process of intelligence, which already had an amount of politization attached to it, has only gotten more tangled up in the fracturing of political discourse. In early 2000, a book was released entitled *National Insecurity: U.S. Intelligence After the Cold War*, edited by Craig R. Eisendrath. In that book, many of the authors suggested either a massively scaled back intelligence community or the outright abolition of the intelligence community with all focus going back to the Department of State. The book was a laundry list of intelligence failures, scandals, and setbacks and made frequent use of the “intelligence industrial complex” terminology, which references Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “military industrial-complex.” The book was published before the election of George W. Bush and before 11 September 2001 (9/11), after which most of the arguments in the book were outdated by events and the suggestions for reform were judged impractical. America was emerging from an attack that carried significant resonance with Pearl Harbor, the event that had spurred America

into World War II and began the slow creation of the intelligence community that we have at present. The events of 9/11 provided a powerful argument for increases, not decreases, in the national intelligence gathering capabilities and profoundly reshaped foreign policy for that period. In the meantime, there have been other events that have rocked the American political scene and either led to embarrassment or scandal. The 2002 Iraqi weapons of mass destruction intelligence assessment, the Edward Snowden scandal, and others have served to push the American public in different directions on the matter of intelligence, yet mostly without an intelligent grasp on the processes that were involved and how government works.

For those who are engaged in studying or writing about intelligence work from the historical perspective or that of intelligence studies, the process can be equally or more greatly misunderstood as they often comment in frustration on intelligence that was not acted on, understood, or used by policy makers from the various levels of government. One particular book, *Military Intelligence Blunders and Cover-Ups* by Colonel John Hughes-Wilson comes readily to mind. In this book, the author lays out a very clear-cut understanding of the theoretical intelligence cycle and what should take place when such information and process is carried out and made available to not only the military but also higher levels of government. The observations in the book illustrate the flawed understanding of the process that the general public has and that they perceive an intelligence community that can predict the future, that law and policy makers should understand the weight of intelligence reports automatically, or that there is a clear, consistent chain of custody through which intelligence passes.

It is into this political climate and assortment of misconceptions that *Intelligence in the National Security Enterprise* steps, and it is for that reason that this book is not only so informative but also fundamentally necessary. *Intelligence in the National Security Enterprise* proves that a textbook can exceed the concept of a textbook and actually look at an issue from a contributory standpoint. It does so by honestly and fairly addressing both agency successes and failures and how these have had origins in the nexus of intelligence meetings of the various national security agencies and policy making bodies. The overall feel of the book is one that is polemizing *National Insecurity* as well as false perceptions of the integration of intelligence on the national policy level that both the left and right have articulated over the years. The book also dispels the notion that books such as *Military Intelligence Blunders* by John Hughes-Wilson attempt to assert that simply because an intelligence cycle took place, or that information was theoretically available, that it must have been known or that policy makers must have chosen to ignore it.

The book traces the beginning and development of the intelligence community, but the majority of its examples in relation to policy interaction and the successes or failures of that and its interaction with intelligence appear to begin from the Bay of Pigs through the Donald J. Trump administration. The book is broken down by chapters, however, the chapters often contain bleedover from

chapters to come or from previous ones and this enhances the value of the book and elevates it from normal textbook isolation of topics and enhances the organic and interactive aspect of the intelligence and policy making process. Intelligence and policy interactions often have multiple points of contact and significance that cannot be neatly compartmentalized.

Due to the expansive nature of the book and this crossover of topics, it is best to approach this text regarding themes. One major theme is that of an expansive intelligence community dealing with an equally expansive policy making community. The text explains that there are 16 intelligence agencies that the U.S. government operates, and this is exclusive of outside, contractor-based intelligence. It also details the isolated job roles that each individual element accomplishes and how they process intelligence in different manners, passing the raw material onward to further specialists and analysts. This complex web is met with an equally large and complex national security community made up of numerous committees and lawmakers, all of whom have unequal levels of access to intelligence on any specific issue, even if on the same committee. Some of these committees or groups are ad hoc, meeting only for temporary purposes or on specific issues. Some of the policy making committees are largely in name only, or are of a mixed group, or are nonlinear and do not meet every day and certainly do not handle the same information. The president and vice president sometimes receive more or less intelligence than anyone else. This compartmentalization of intelligence ensures that a document or particular range of data could be manipulated or improperly handled to suit specific agendas. The division of labor and expertise as well as the various hands that intelligence passes through has been an essential part of the interaction between the two processes from the beginning; the intelligence and policy communities have always had tenuous connections and the forms of these connections has not remained consistent as failures and changing technological and timeliness issues have forced changes in how and through whom it is transmitted.

A second major theme that is laid out is that the intelligence community is tasked with gathering specific and narrowly defined datasets to clarify policy with respect to various issues; however, intelligence agencies can provide so much information that prediction could take place but that is the exception and not the rule. The basic framework is to provide reference and guidance to the administration and its policy objectives. The intelligence community provides data that might support or spoil these objectives and the lawmakers and administration are free to either continue or accept that policies need to be modified. This theme is probably the one that is very important for specific groups such as historians, researchers, or those interested in the general intelligence process given that the greatest myth of intelligence work is that it is meant to be predictive and all-knowing. This goes back to the aforementioned texts and their quest to understand why policy makers did not make better decisions based on intelligence, because intelligence is a tool in the box and not the box itself. This in addition to the inundation of data being produced by the intelligence

community. The book strongly communicates the policy maker's frustration in dealing with the masses of data and information that must be sifted through to come to a clear understanding. This is why chapter three is the one that will likely grab the attention of the reader more than others.

Chapter 3 spells out the numerous committees—foreign, military, and legislating committees and persons that handle intelligence and how it gets digested on the national level. It is this chapter that provides the clearest example of why this process can be so difficult and why information might be neglected, missed, or considered unimportant. With so many different perspectives and approaches and persons who are specifically hired for their expertise in certain areas there is bound to be a large portion of turfing and upscaling intelligence or downscaling based on one's particular interests or position. European experts are going to look at Middle East intelligence with some level of disregard and vice versa.

Finally, another major theme is that, with so much information, so many people and agencies involved, and so many agendas, failure is bound to happen, but those failures have not been ignored but have been incorporated into the process positively. The book deals with failures and setbacks in an honest manner and does not seek to shift blame, but it does seek to resolve them without recourse as opposed to totally abandoning the national security enterprise, as suggested by the aforementioned *National Insecurity*. The text further demonstrates how the intelligence community is working to overcome and prevent such failures in the future, or at least mitigate those failures. The large national population is unaware of the network of inspectors generals that has been established both within each separate agency but also over the entire intelligence community as a whole. These are essential elements in establishing boundaries and ensuring that the intelligence enterprise does not exceed its mandates and that the potential for fraud and waste is limited to the greatest extent possible.

Since this journal mainly reaches those who are active in government service—policy makers, higher ranking military officials, intelligence, and those in academics—the value of the book may be in being a useful resource for those who are not on the select intelligence committees or those whose responsibilities might only occasionally come into contact with intelligence and/or major issues that need to be understood more by using it. Not all lawmakers enter government service with the same levels of education or education in the same areas, and it is a useful means of becoming familiar with this aspect. The fact that this is designed as a textbook should not act as a barrier to anyone reading as it performs equally well as both textbook and monograph on the topic. It should be read as a book for experienced professionals looking to enhance their range of knowledge. For those who do have responsibility in this area, this may prove to be a useful resource for those whose involvement in politics is more from the contributory perspective. This book can serve as a useful resource to educate those who frequently donate to political causes or are highly active in politics, those who are involved in research or policy making from the entry

level, or those that may be curious as to what is actually taking place. Many congressional leaders and members of both houses know of special donors or those who frequently contact their office and offer advice and “political insight.” In distributing this book to a wider audience, there is an opportunity to alleviate, if not eliminate, the demands of unrealistic or disproportionate expectations that are more often than not shaped by popular moviegoing experiences or conversations rather than from an involvement perspective. The book is relevant in educational contexts that do not specifically address intelligence but would be useful in general government classes that serve to remind and highlight that the intelligence community is an essential part of government in an organic, not tangential respect. Finally, this reviewer would highly recommend this book for history students. To gain a proper perspective of the intelligence community is essential to interpreting many national and international events in the last 70 to 80 years. These types of texts ought to be an essential part of a basic curriculum to ensure that a proper interpretive framework is consistently applied to the historical process. It cannot of course be a single source, but it must complement other studies to understand the intelligence community’s perspective on its role in shaping national policy and events in other countries.

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The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield. By Jason Warner, Ryan O’Farrell, Heni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings. London: Hurst, 2021. Pp. 288. £35 (hardcover).

The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield’s meticulous documentation of the conception and evolution of Islamic State (IS) spinoffs across the African continent will prove itself a foundational reader for students of both the fields of contemporary defense studies and African foreign policy. Having read this book while working across a number of the IS provinces highlighted and cities victimized by IS attacks, the reviewer feels strongly about the value of the work’s contributions to contemporary academic discourse and practitioner operational awareness. Including invaluable and extensive endnotes (that may have been more user-friendly as footnotes to save the reader searching), this work is a worthy and timely contribution to the field.

The Islamic State in Africa’s introduction offers a satisfying framing of the scope and context of the battlefronts it seeks to interrogate. Framed by the chronological progression of the group’s “bayahs” or pledges of allegiance to IS central, the chapters proceed logically with significant value as stand-alone chapters on IS affiliates in Libya, Algeria, Sinai, Tunisia, West Africa and West

Africa (greater Sahara), Somalia, and central Africa including the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique. These bayahs represent a mechanism through which IS Central can exercise control over the group's brand identity, while simultaneously alleviating any administrative or resourcing burdens on Central by allowing the affiliates to operate under a general "commander's intent."

IS's model of promoting "democratized jihad" has rewarded individual or small group initiative and, as the book demonstrates across its case studies, the growing reach of IS affiliates supersedes the traditional state boundaries that the international security community lives by. Most alarmingly to practitioners, the book offers multiple vignettes of knowledge transfer among affiliate groups with IS Central serving as the hub in a hub and spoke model of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) proliferation for malicious purposes, such as the shift from surveillance to weaponized drone use and the use of tunnels to evade advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) observation of IS activities. As the United States has seen during the last two decades, it is very difficult to control intellectual property once imparted to partner forces, whether they remain friend or transform into foe.

The book's narrative concludes with the 2019 death of IS Central leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in an American raid in northern Syria, leaving much room for additional scholarship on events in the intervening years (although it is likely that the editorial process and production schedule of the book simply did not allow for this). Therefore, this book neatly queues up the opportunity for follow-on scholarship specific to each of the individual affiliates and for further investigation of whether the primary value of bayahs is for public relations value or will evolve into significant intellectual property and material support.

Although the book has many strengths such that there is an appreciable geographic and professional diversity of authors, there is a marked lack of gender perspective among the contributors—a notable shortcoming that is somewhat tempered by a worthy call for the voices of stakeholders from the continent to be raised. Relatedly, while each chapter usefully relates the relationship of the province to the center, it would be interesting to see a reversed perspective or "rack and stack" of province importance to the center. Similarly, varying approaches to the use, return, and release of foreign fighters across case studies is immediately relevant to policy formation regarding the handling of foreign terrorist fighters and broader debates about whether programs prioritizing security or socialization might prove more effective in any given context.

The book observes the ways in which the Islamic State is competing across different constructs than the governments of nations it is infiltrating and the security assistance partners supporting them, and the only potentially meaningful or durable competition against them needs to be framed as such so that efforts to stymy IS development are directly mitigating the leaders' ability to gain followers, resources, and credibility. While there are dangers to both over-emphasizing and underselling the ties between regional groups and global ji-

hadi networks, any practitioner of foreign policy in the Africa Command area of operations would be well served to read the book (or, at the very least, the chapter[s] most relevant to their work) as a foundational text to understand the genesis and interwoven history of groups active on the continent.

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Managing Sex in the U.S. Military: Gender, Identity, and Behavior. By Beth Bailey, Alesha E. Doan, Shannon Portillo, and Kara Dixon Vuic. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. Pp. 364. \$99.00 (hardcover); \$30 (paperback); \$30 (ebook).

Managing sex among the ranks has been a challenge for military commanders. One which, according to Beth Bailey and her coauthors, has been compounded by changing definitions about what constituted acceptable sexual behavior for those in uniform, varying regulations governing sexual activity—and their unequal implementation and enforcement—and, perhaps most importantly, the evolution of social ideas about what constituted femininity and masculinity and how many perceived them as an unwelcome threat to long-standing military cultural norms.

Beginning with the end of the nineteenth century, Bailey and company lead the reader through a series of chapters that grapple with vital and compelling subjects like “Reproduction in Combat Boots” (chapter 5), the history of bans on gays, lesbians, and transgender personnel (chapter 6), sexual assault and harassment (chapter 9), and gender integration in combat arms (chapters 11–12). Whether the formation of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in 1941 (chapter 3) to the 2015 announcement that combat arms positions would be open to women (chapter 11), a common thread that runs throughout most of *Managing Sex in the U.S. Military* is the mishandling and mismanagement—both unintentional and willful—on the part of the military to recruit and integrate women into the ranks.

It is immediately apparent the book was meticulously well researched and as a result impressively pulls back the curtain on some lesser discussed yet compelling themes. Especially thought provoking is Susan L. Carruthers’s chapter 2 discussions of the issues with the military’s insistence that male heterosexuality—particularly heterosexual intercourse—and masculinity were somehow irrevocably intertwined coupled with the military’s curious attempt to control sexual relations between those in uniform and their civilian partners.

Perhaps the most poignant line of the book is from Amanda Boczar’s chapter 9: “Bluntly, the military has a sexual assault problem” (p. 219). By this point in the book, it is wretched but hardly surprising to learn that the massive

upsurge in women in uniform that began during WWII led to increases in assault cases among the ranks (and Service academies). Boczar paints a bleak picture comprised of decades of cover-ups, commanders discouraging victims from reporting, rape culture, victim blaming, and recent *increases* in assault cases despite new policy. Given the meager results of the military and the Department of Defense's efforts to address assault, Boczar places the onus on civilian legislators.

For all branches of the U.S. military, 1 January 2016 was the deadline for "‘expeditiously’ integrating women into previously unavailable positions" (p. 308). Although women had already been serving in direct combat since the Global War on Terrorism began, the mandate from then-Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta was met with considerable opposition, especially among Special Operations Forces (SOF). Chapter 12 was particularly notable for this reviewer and not merely because of their status as a former member of SOF. Indeed, chapter 12 coauthors Doan and Portillo expertly capture the challenges, paradoxes, and contradictions with gender integration policy and SOF's *perceived* "hypermasculine workplace culture" (p. 315). This is an interesting conundrum partly because a handful of women *have* been attached to and serving directly with SOF elements—even and specifically Tier 1—for quite some time. For sure, the prospect of full gender integration did signify that social ideas and norms about gender equality had made their way into all corners of the military. Something many of Doan and Portillo's survey respondents claimed was completely incompatible with SOF's unique tasking. Yet, as far as this reviewer can tell, gender integration also worried (and *worries*) generations of Oakley-wearing door kickers because it meant outsiders might come to find success in SOF who may not be entirely dependent on some ethereal combination of physical and mental fortitude found among only the most unique and rare alpha males—a hypermasculine mystique perpetuated by SOF members for decades.

This book is important. It is a scathing indictment of a sordid past that had this reader questioning whether those presently at the military's helm even possess the capacity to address these problems going forward. Given the subject matter, the authors could have easily peppered their own subjective opinions throughout. However, *Managing Sex in the U.S. Military* never seems to read like a personal soapbox. And although there are multiple authors, each chapter builds on the themes discussed in subsequent chapters. Some early chapters do a great job of tapping primary sources, while the rest draw heavily from secondary sources and memos from organizations like Rand. Here again, chapter 12 stands apart. Doan and Portillo collected novel data via focus groups and used these data to develop two surveys that were administered across the Special Operations Command to inform their analysis. For this political scientist, chapter 12's methodology was a welcomed addition (and change) to the chronological narratives that dominates much of the rest of the book. This reader's methodological preference aside, the book is a must read. This reviewer will look to

add *Managing Sex in the U.S. Military* as required reading in some of their own course syllabi.

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Power & Complacency: American Survival in an Age of International Competition. By Phillip T. Lohaus. Lincoln: Potomac Books, an imprint of University of Nebraska Press, 2021. Pp. 400. \$36.95 (hardcover); \$36.95 (ebook).

Phillip Lohaus's *Power & Complacency* is an ambitious work that seeks to investigate the nature of modern conflict between the United States and some of its most prominent competitors: Russia, Iran, and China. The author uses a cross-disciplinary approach of historical analysis and operationalized international theory to evaluate the strategic dispositions of the four nations and their relative preparedness for competition, especially regarding measures short of armed conflict. Lohaus spends the majority of this text cataloging the strategic culture of each nation, before demonstrating how culture prepares the nation for modern competition. The resulting assessment finds that despite historical, social, and methodological differences, the United States' competitors are similarly predisposed to strategies that maximize maneuver in the space between direct conflict and peaceful coexistence. The United States, on the other hand, is hamstrung by a sense of security in its own power and an unwillingness to acknowledge the true nature of modern conflict, and this dichotomy is eroding the relative power advantage of the United States (pp. 27–28). Lohaus posits that this constitutes a serious threat to the United States and the modern international order, but a threat that can be mitigated by an accurate assessment of the current situation coupled with concrete policy decisions. *Power & Complacency* seeks to first clearly illuminate the realities of the modern strategic landscape, then provides recommendations for future action gleaned from this assessment.

The book is laid out in a case-study format; following an introduction where Lohaus clearly lays out the thesis of the work and its objectives, each country in question is allocated an individual chapter. These chapters progress from Russia to Iran to China, before finally reaching the United States. The book then concludes with a summary of its major arguments and a series of policy recommendations that Lohaus suggests will help the United States compete below the level of armed conflict. Each chapter follows a similar formula. They begin with a historical survey of the development of the nation's strategic culture, with a particular emphasis on how the nation in question historically viewed conflict and what tools were available for competition. This historical work is then followed by a contemporary assessment of the nation's preparedness and,

more important, willingness to engage in competition below the threshold of armed conflict. All of the chapters are exhaustively sourced and provide a wealth of resources for deeper reading. While these sources tend to emphasize writing that would be categorized as works of international relations rather than history, Lohaus makes good use of a wide range of academic writing as well as primary sources where applicable. The end result is a book that summarizes centuries of history to streamline its presentation of the author's assessment of strategic environment but is sufficiently sourced to allow the reader to challenge and investigate its findings.

The book's assessments of Russia, Iran, and China emphasize broad degrees of similarity in the different regimes over any conceptual strategic differences. The most prominent linkage is the tendency of all three nations to reject the "peace-war duality" found in Western thought in favor of a more fluid, continuous understanding of conflict (pp. 31, 96, 124). Lohaus attributes this commonality in large part to the long, contiguous history of the three nations, which the author ascribes to Russia by demonstrating linkages in Russian strategic thought from the tsarist era through the Soviet Union into the modern state. This conceptual framework couples with the existence in these nations of governmental systems and resilient entities that lend themselves to long-term strategic planning: Russia's security and intelligence apparatuses, Iran's Revolutionary Guard, and the Chinese Communist Party, respectively (p. 240). Together, the history of these nations and their strategically oriented structures allow all three nations to exploit the West's fixation on a binary understanding of war to achieve policy objectives without direct confrontation. This is not to say that Lohaus describes the three competitors as identical; some of the book's strongest analysis is found in its detailed accounts of how the nations in question impose their will on their population and the outside world through unique means. Lohaus's discussion of Russia's active measures, Iran's "soft war," and China's three warfares are insightful and expertly demonstrate the ways by which these nations use novel approaches to conflict predicated on their own unique circumstance. Instead, the book simply suggests that these capabilities are enabled by a common understanding of conflict that the West does not share.

Lohaus's assessment of the United States starts with the work's most thorough historical analysis. This analysis definitively concludes that the nation's strategic culture is inherently predisposed against long-term planning and generally wary of means of competition outside of direct conflict. He attributes this to a number of factors. The nation's republican values, characterized by frequent general elections, emphasized the value of short-term planning and reflected a suspicion of the kind of entrenched governmental structures required for long-term planning, and the nation's geographic location allowed it to isolate itself from threats it might otherwise have to find varied means of mitigating (pp. 190–91). Furthermore, Lohaus argues that the United States' preferred means of responding to threats overemphasizes military options over more competitive

responses. The subtitle's reference to "American Survival" is more than a case of literary melodrama—rather, it is a specific reference to what Lohaus assesses as an essential element in an effective American grand strategy. In his historiography of the United States' national strategy, Lohaus argues that American policy tends to paint challenges as existential threats that require total annihilation, be it literal or conceptual, in order to preserve American safety. This threat may be a literal threat to the homeland, or, in more modern conflict, to the American way of life, but the nation requires such an assessment to properly orient a whole-of-government approach on its annihilative tendencies.

Lohaus points to the Ronald W. Reagan administration's recharacterization of the Soviet ideology as just such a threat as an effective implementation of this principle that provided the United States with needed focus (pp. 224–27). By using "American Survival" in the subtitle, Lohaus alludes to what conceptual underpinnings he feels are necessary for any future national strategy to be effective. The author suggests in the conclusion that the United States must first recognize the reality of the strategic environment and develop strategies that allow the nation to compete with rivals in the shaping operations that dominate modern conflict. To achieve this, Lohaus suggests that the country implement mechanisms to institutionalize strategic thinking that lasts beyond election cycles and increase interconnectivity of the nation's industrial and economic leaders to the nation's strategic aims (pp. 246–47). He also suggests that a complete overhaul of the United States' strategic culture may not be feasible; rather, future leaders need to follow the example of the Reagan administration and correctly assess the current threat, then appropriately direct the nation's mechanisms of power to meet the challenge. In this way, Lohaus suggests that the United States can effectively compete in the modern arena.

Power & Complacency is not without its challenges. The vast scale it seeks to cover, both historically and topically, creates a tendency to turn the experience of billions of people over hundreds of years into monolithic forces. This makes for an argument that flows together well but may not hold up to strict scrutiny by regional specialists and could lead strategists influenced by this work to dangerously oversimplify the experience and thought process of individuals from the subject countries. Furthermore, the work has a tendency to underplay the United States' agency in the world events; readers of Oscar Jonsson's *The Russian Understanding of War* (2019), for example, might argue that the Kremlin would likely categorize its use of "hybrid" techniques as merely a response to what it feels the United States has already perpetrated against it. Indeed, the book's depiction of Russia's effectiveness and the West's ineffectiveness in shaping political (and battlefield) outcomes through the use of measures below the level of armed conflict may need to be reassessed in light of current events. Finally, the book's suggestions for ways to solve some of the strategic deficiencies it identifies need further specificity to be truly actionable in a way that is consistent with the nation's ideals.

None of these complaints undercut the greater point regarding the United

States' relative inferiority to its adversaries in competition outside the means of armed conflict and the significance of this deficiency in the modern world. Lohaus's work does a masterful job of depicting the ways in which Russia, Iran, and China excel at competing below the means of armed conflict. The book's excellent use of citations and easy to follow format lends itself to readers seeking both an introduction to these topics and a starting point for further research. This work could be particularly effective as a means for organizing discussions around the ways in which specific states seek to compete strategically. Readers should expect to be thoroughly convinced that the United States must honestly assess the nature of its relationship with other nations and understand that military power is an insufficient tool for national survival.

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Russian Practices of Governance in Eurasia: Frontier Power Dynamics, Sixteenth Century to Nineteenth Century. By Gulnar T. Kendirbai. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2022. Pp. 246. \$136 (hardcover); \$42.36 (paperback); \$42.36 (ebook).

This study of economic, social, and political structures among the nomadic Kalmyk and Qazaqs of the Eurasian steppe also reveals a great deal about the Russian governance system and imperial customs. It explores methods and practices of governance across Eurasia, focusing primarily on Inner Asia. Much of this region eventually became part of the Russian Empire. Beginning from the earliest interaction between these nomads and Russia, in the Russian Empire's formative years, the chapters take us up to the first decades of the nineteenth century. Many scholars, Russian and Western (under the influence of Russian scholarship), have argued that the migration of nomadic groups in and across Eurasia was as a result of a need for pasturelands for herds or a result of discord between communities. In other words, there was a push rather than a pull to preserve nomadic life. Kendirbai argues convincingly, rather, that nomadic groups were not nomadic due to circumstances beyond their control—such as environmental concerns or internecine fighting—but were instead making choices about their lifestyles. They were not forced into being nomadic. Moreover, nomadic groups such as the Kalmyks and Qazaqs believed their way of life to be superior to the life of sedentary peoples, such as the Russians or the Chinese. Kendirbai's core thesis runs counter to the conventional wisdom and offers an original contribution to the field of scholarship.

The book details the fluid situation in Inner Asia, noting that frontiers were permeable and there was a great deal of interaction between societies. Sometimes this resulted in conflict but other times collaboration. For example,

Kendirbai discusses the Kalmyks's view that the Volga region was a "strategically convenient location" where they could campaign against the many other peoples living there, but they could also occasionally cooperate with them (p. 75). The peoples of Inner Asia paid loyalty, sometimes in the form of tribute (*yasak*) to Russia, but not only Russia. In Kendirbai's study of the Kalmyk political scene, we learn that after obtaining Russian approval for eighteenth-century leadership change, in accordance with Kalmyk custom, they also sought the approval of the Dalai Lama. Thus, we see the nomadic peoples of Eurasia as caught between greater powers of Russia and the Qing, which established control over Tibet in 1721. When those powers attempted to limit the movements of the nomadic peoples, the nomads reacted with "resistance and discontent," employing their most valuable and prized tactic of movement (p. 94). They engaged great powers when it suited them but chose to flee when they wanted to avoid imperial controls.

Kendirbai employs the necessary secondary literature in English and Russian, placing ideas in the context of the canon. She also undertook archival research, in both Kazakhstan and Russia, which becomes increasingly important to her argument as the book progresses. Her linguistic skills allow her to easily move between these sources and to offer her readers glimpses into the vocabulary by offering original terminology as appropriate. Just a sprinkling of Russian and Turko-Mongol words pique the reader's interest without being a distraction.

Some minor quibbles this reviewer had while reading include the emphasis in the title of the book on "Russian Practices." The book sheds equal, if not more, light on the customs and values of nomadic non-Russian peoples, including a bit on the Ottoman, Crimean, and Chinese perspectives. The manner of spelling the name "Qazaq" was puzzling, since today it is spelled "Kazakh." This became especially distracting when noticing that "Qing" is spelled with a "Q" (pronounced [ch]), yet "Kalmyk" is spelled with a "K" (pronounced [k]). The logic behind this choice should have been offered in a short section on transliteration and spelling. Kendirbai takes the time to explain people, places, and concepts, demonstrating an innate pedagogical nature. She wants the reader to comprehend and learn about this topic. However, there are a few places where definitions come late, such as *yasak* (appearing on p. 4 but not defined until p. 16) or *yarlyk* (appearing on p. 16 but not defined until p. 23). But these really are slight criticisms and do not detract from the overall success of the argumentation or the book as a whole.

Because of the focused nature of the examination and the degree of detail, this book is recommended for graduate students or scholars, those interested in either Russia or Eurasia's nomads. A reader needs to know at least a bit about early modern Inner Asian peoples and terminology to be comfortable with the evidence Kendirbai offers. Familiarity with Chingizid and Turkic history specifically, in addition to Russian, will serve the reader well.

The publisher is to be commended for releasing a paperback version of this

2020 publication. However, a bibliography would have been appropriate for easy reference. Yet, there is an index, which was appreciated.

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The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries. By Anthony King. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp 560. \$141.63 (hardcover and ebook). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199658848.001.0001>.

In a multidisciplinary and compactly written study, Anthony King examines how cohesion has been generated and sustained in the Western infantry platoon from the First World War to recent and present-day operations of Western professional combat forces. Throughout the book, instruction manuals of the American, French, German, Italian, and British armed forces, together with dozens of interviews with Allied soldiers and veterans, are held up against insights from the most influential sociologists, psychologists, and military thinkers of the twentieth century. For illustrative purposes, the author presents his study with dozens of case studies from military operations in both World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

A note on terminology—*cohesion* is defined by the author as not so much the comradeship between brothers-in-arms, but rather as the group motivation and capability of platoons to coordinate their actions together on the battlefield.

Despite the occasional acts of mass heroism displayed on the beaches of Normandy, none of the citizen armies in the World Wars was very effective on the battlefield, neither in France nor anywhere else on the European continent. In reality, soldiers were so overwhelmed by the lethality of mechanized warfare that their combat performance was hampered by a phenomenon termed as battlefield inertia. The first to come to this conclusion was chief historian of the U.S. Army, Samuel Lyman Atwood Marshall, who claimed that in the World Wars, as well as in Korea and Vietnam, only one in four U.S. soldiers had actually fired their weapon.

His findings, not surprisingly, caused much controversy and his research methods were debated. Nevertheless, there was no getting around the empirical evidence put forward by Marshall, who not only served but also conducted hundreds of interviews with U.S. Marines from Vietnam and Korea. The conclusion of his study and henceforth the central theme of this book was that battlefield inertia, also known as the Marshall effect, could only be overcome by adequate training of the troops.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, Western citizen armies tried to animate the *esprit de corps* of their troops. Usually, they did so by resorting to simple but effective tactical maneuvers. The bayonet charge, although seemingly outdated on the industrial battlefield, was in fact useful in aligning the troops. Another tactical maneuver, put forward by army commanders, was to praise the courage of heroic individuals who were put forward to lead by example.

All major combatants of the World Wars glorified the patriotism and masculine honor of their military men, in an effort to strengthen their fighting spirit. By pointing out that to be a true man was to be a patriot, the Western armies pressed their citizen soldiers to engage into combat.

Apart from this rhetoric, citizen armies formulated battle preparation techniques (some of which are still useful today) as early as 1916. But because they were either meant only for elite troops, or in any case were not put into practice on a mass scale, the Western citizen armies continued to perform poorly on the battlefield. During operations in Korea and Vietnam, U.S. infantry units were incapable of keeping cohesion independently and, when in close quarters with the enemy, they found small-group tactics too difficult to execute.

For good measure, it must be noted that already in the 1920s the Soviet marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky formulated his celebrated ideas on “deep battle” (the tactic of penetrating through the enemy’s defense with a combined arms assault, using shock troops), but the military theories of the Red Army are beyond the scope of the author.

What changed the course of events was the professionalization of citizen armies. The ideas of strategist and historian Edward N. Luttwak are put on the table to bring into context how the alternation of warfare caused Western states to reevaluate the concept of mass citizen armies.

No longer did the Western powers need to throw their civilian soldiers into the trenches because they had access to nuclear arsenals (the Cold War, therefore, was fought out by proxy wars). Western armies realized that there was no point in losing men if there was no battlefield on which they could achieve a decisive victory and so they became casualty averse.

The author discusses the pros and cons of resizing the infantry before concluding that the quantitative reduction of military personnel had the desirable effect of concentrating the army’s full capacity and capability. Instead of relying on unwilling conscripts (including those volunteers who enlisted only to preempt obligatory draft), the armed forces were now building up their combat competence by counting on dedicated professionals.

These willing and able troops profited from increased attention on battle preparation, repetitive rehearsal, and battle drills. One of those trainings, the rehearsal of concept drill (RCD), is outlined by the author in length. The RCD, basically a walkthrough of the operation by the commander, is essential for the battle plan. It was not only for practical reasons (troops getting familiar with the terrain and aligning their common objectives) but also because the soldiers

come to terms with their specific tasks in the platoon. Even more important, they identify themselves with the moral objectives and consequences of the mission.

Increased awareness (through rehearsal and battle drills) allows the soldiers to operate independently (or with minimal supervision) on the battlefield. When the troops move into battle, they have repeated their operational tasks so many times that their actions are guided intuitively. They are able to perceive the mission as a large-scale drill itself. By repetitive training, the brains of these soldiers are trained muscle memory, so that they can produce their actions without being affected by emotions or by self-conscious thought, even in stressed and potentially lethal situations.

The key elements of these psychological trainings, called “The Big Four” (goal getting, visualization, self-talk, and breath control) are designed specifically to diminish the fear of dying on the battlefield. When repeatedly drilled, the frontal lobes and cortex in the brain are able to suppress the amygdala and, in so doing, control its instinctive fight or flight responses. The Canadians, already the first to fully professionalize their armed forces in the 1960s, have since then paved the path for the integration of mental preparation in their formal military training.

Because training has the effect of strengthening morale, self-identification with the mission, and controlling emotions of fear, it consequently enforces group identity or cohesion. All platoon members understand the moral implications of their actions on the battlefield in the same way. And correspondingly they are drilled to act and react in the same fashion.

Today, the author concludes, platoon units are trained to conduct complex drills and operate in close coordination with each other on the battlefield. With respect to their citizen predecessors, the cohesion of Western platoon units has drastically enhanced, resulting in a much-improved combat performance.

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The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan. By David Kilcullen and Greg Mills. London: Hurst, 2021. Pp. 368. £14.99 (paperback).

The entire world watched in horror as the Taliban stormed into Kabul in August 2021, instantly undoing 20 years of immeasurable sacrifice and hard work by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Afghan forces. As all the gains and developments from the course of two decades evaporated, the world became faced with a Taliban-run Afghanistan, which is now better manned, armed, and equipped than it was in 2001. *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan* expertly analyzes how conditions were set during the course of

the war that led to this nightmare unfolding. Both authors, David Kilcullen and Greg Mills, have extensive experience in Afghanistan and they leverage this knowledge to detail the history—particularly from the Soviet invasion in December 1979, all the way up to the evacuation in August 2021. The book not only seeks to answer the question, “How could this happen?,” but also provides valuable insight that both military and political leaders would be wise to heed going forward. The templates provided by Vietnam and Afghanistan yield critical lessons that have far-reaching consequences. These consequences dictate course correction lest the United States wishes to see global hegemony erode in favor of other rising powers.

In discussing the “echoes of campaigns past,” the authors describe five common lessons regarding counterinsurgency, which compare the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) era (p. 109):

- 1) Fighting cannot end without a political solution
- 2) If the insurgents are still fighting, they are winning
- 3) It is extremely hard for insurgencies to survive without a regional safe haven
- 4) Government development
- 5) Understanding the nature and distribution of power within society

The first of these lessons is a matter that, throughout the war, was consistently overpowered through the application of military strength. Ironically, the authors describe that peace talks *could have* happened in 2001 when the United States would have been negotiating from a position of absolute strength, as opposed to negotiating against the backdrop of a pending withdrawal (p. 64). Instead of being willing to hear out the prospect of a Taliban surrender, the U.S. government was not interested in legitimizing the Taliban (p. 81). “‘The answer is no,’ Donald Rumsfeld stated flatly in response to [Hamid] Karzai’s proposed peace negotiation” (p. 64).

The second point cuts through all the confusing metrics for success that were set throughout the war. A similar phenomenon happened in Vietnam and is a constant in counterinsurgency. The United States won every major conventional engagement with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, yet still ceded the Republic of Vietnam to the north in 1975. It is impossible to not draw an even more damning conclusion from this conflict.

Third, and this is a point heavily emphasized throughout the book, is that regional safe havens are critical to the survivability of an insurgency. For much of the war, the issue was looked at solely through an Afghan lens without consideration for the rest of the region, in particular, Pakistan, where the Taliban leadership safely operated out of for the duration of the war. The U.S. government understood this, but too little was done (effectively) to coerce the issue for fear of political sensitivities with the Pakistani relationship.

Number four highlights the ineffectiveness of developing a fledgling state

that was capable of surviving without the dependency on foreign aid, which led to rampant corruption and undercut any potential progress. The relationship that was crafted with the Afghan government, from the highest to lowest levels, effectively incentivized corrupt practices, which turned large swaths of the population, particularly in rural Pashtun areas, away from the Afghan government and toward the Taliban. The fifth lesson highlighted an ignorance by planners at all levels to fully grasp and appreciate the social and power dynamics across Afghanistan that could have led to better power brokering.

These common lessons form the basis for the “four failures” that the authors assess (pp. 123–92). These failures are: the failure of politics, the failure of policy on Pakistan, the corruption of recovery, and the failure of economic development. These failures all set the conditions for the slow disintegration that was witnessed starting in 2015. That year specifically was when the NATO effort transitioned from ISAF to the Operation Resolute Support mission, marking a move from combat operations to a “train, advise, assist” model. These failures came in large part from senior military leaders that either misunderstood the proper metrics for success or simply wanted to satiate politically driven decisions. This was exacerbated by the fact that the constant deployment cycle, with the lack of a singular focused campaign plan or strategic clarity, led to a lack of continuity and long-term ownership over the problem. Perhaps worse were the political failures. Chief among them was the establishment of a withdrawal time line. This was first issued by President Barack H. Obama and later continued by presidents Donald J. Trump and Joseph R. Biden. The authors expertly describe how President Obama’s establishment of a time line in conjunction with the surge from 2010 to 2014 gave the Taliban the will and morale to survive. The Taliban knew that all they had to do was withstand the occupation, with leadership safely tucked away in Pakistan, until ISAF was gone. In the meantime, they would continue to apply pressure where they could. If the West had “signaled that it was there for the long haul,” as we have done in Korea, then the prospect of a peaceful political compromise favorable to the United States would have been more likely to be accomplished (p. 301).

All of the aforementioned led to the disastrous events of August 2021. There is plenty of failure to ascribe to both military and political leaders; and it is fair to expect a certain level of accountability. Post-WWII military ventures have largely signaled all the wrong things to both enemies and allies alike. Adversarial actors (both state and otherwise) see a golden opportunity to exploit the callousness of American foreign policy and inability to truly commit to its partners. Conversely, allies may waver on expecting support from the United States if the end result is what they witnessed in August 2021. Pacing threats such as China are not going away, and to be certain they will take advantage of this narrative particularly in emerging economies across Africa. The authors use the book as an opportunity to at least impress on readers these lessons learned

for application in Africa to avoid making the mistakes of Vietnam and Afghanistan once again. This book is critical for those wishing to understand why and how such a catastrophic blow could be struck against the United States. The facts and subsequent analysis are maddening but critical to understanding the magnitude of what occurred in Afghanistan. Ultimately, many will want to know if it was all for nothing (p. 312). Sadly, as the authors point out—it is too early to tell.

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The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy. By Loch K. Johnson. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. 408. \$37.99 (hardcover and e-book).

The question of how the use of covert action, with its emphasis on secrecy and deniability, operate within a democratic framework permeates this book. Loch K. Johnson, Regents Professor Emeritus of International Affairs at the University of Georgia, offers his ideas on how covert action might be a “third option” for American foreign policy. From its opening chapter’s mention of preventing arbitrary exercises of power, to the conclusion’s emphasis on honoring legal procedures for authorizing clandestine intervention, Johnson wants to demonstrate when covert action can be a viable option and how to use it ethically in a democracy. Overall, the book provides an excellent introduction to the subject matter and presents a good overview of some operations, while acknowledging some dilemmas in the process.

A core strength in the book is in how Johnson combines covert action, ethical decision-making, moral implications, and the process of its use in the American system. The book presents a solid account on the tradecraft of covert action as the “clandestine intervention in the affairs of other nations for the purpose of advancing the global interests of the United States” (p. 1). Johnson organizes the possible actions into four categories: propaganda, political, economic, and paramilitary covert operations. In a “Ladder of Clandestine Escalation,” Johnson orders specific operations from benign to reprehensible, depending upon two factors: intrusiveness against sovereignty and moral implications (pp. 41–42). Later chapters introduce the law, accountability, and decision-making process for understanding the authorization of covert action by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the presidency, and Congress. The application of a moral prism to judge the worthiness of covert action—via the rungs of the ladder, legality, foreign policy consistency, American values, public awareness, odds of suc-

cess, and the constitutional expectations—is a welcome effort in systematizing decision-making. These are critical elements to understanding how a democratic government could use secret operations to achieve its national interests.

A further strength of the book lies in its range of the cases and operations that Johnson presents on the use of covert action by American decision-makers. He divides the CIA's history along the lines of the Hughes-Ryan amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1974, with 1947–75 taking two chapters and then examining 1975–2020 in the next two. The four chapters provide a good overview of American clandestine interventions in some areas, such as parts of Eastern Europe, Guatemala, Laos, Chile, Iran (multiple times), Afghanistan (twice), Nicaragua, and more. Unfortunately, the book says less about operations commenced in democracies, with only the efforts in Italy (1947–50) receiving significant attention. The breadth of the types of operations is also impressive, covering propaganda campaigns, using money for influence, plotting for paramilitary invasions, and attempting covert regime change. In the cases discussed, Johnson draws on a wide range of material to weave brief but informative narratives on each president's use of the CIA's operations. Each instance highlights the role of influential American actors, while especially noting the outcome—both short and long-term—for the operations.

In pursuing a wide range of cases and operations from 1947 to 2020, the discussion leans more toward vignettes with brief insights than detailed tracing of the decision-making. That approach, unfortunately, hinders two core aspects of the book. First, Johnson wants to understand how covert action “complements the federal government's more open national security organizations, such as the Department of State and the Department of Defense” (p. xii). That is certainly an interesting question, as many scholars and policy makers would want to understand how the CIA might work with other options for a democratic government. Yet, the attention given to the other powers is brief in most cases and decision-making on integrating any of the three options is slim.

Second, the lack of depth also undermines the application of the moral prism to evaluate the best and worst cases of American covert operations. The brief approach to each case provides little room for making a thorough demonstration of the evidence or addressing debatable aspects of each category. For instance, Johnson identifies Afghanistan (2001–11) and Laos (1962–68) as the “best” operations according to the prism. In Afghanistan, Johnson asserts, the “system of accountability worked” (p. 237). Yet, how did the system work? While some details might remain secret, further evidence would help understand how and why the process functioned. With Laos, Johnson contends that the operation followed American values on “anticommunism and democracy” (p. 239). However, the abandonment of the Hmong in 1968 raises questions about American credibility and reliability in promoting those values. Did those values matter in this instance or were the operations with the Hmong simply convenient to further the war in Vietnam?

The breadth of cases presents an opportunity to see how American presi-

dents use executive discretion in authorizing covert operations. Johnson recognizes that this discretion largely drove decision-making on covert action prior to 1974. His discussions on the subsequent administrations, especially Ronald W. Reagan and Donald J. Trump, demonstrate that this discretion remains present in how a president can evade the law or ignore intelligence when an executive wants to. Johnson forcefully argues that both Congress and the presidency should be equal in powers as set forth in the Constitution. Yet, he recognizes the dilemma that many officials, including presidents themselves, see the executive as supreme in some areas, such as covert action. The book has simply presented the dilemma though as one that persists in the American democratic system. Johnson's work should be understood as calling for a more nuanced treatment in how administrations use executive discretion in pursuing covert action.

In exploring that dilemma, there is a critical role here for understanding how bias shapes and influences decision-making. Johnson wants to align covert action with various democratic values, such as accountability. To do that requires further understanding on what influenced an administration to engage in clandestine interventions. For example, the final chapter ends with a chart outlining the use of covert operations in developed and developing countries. As Johnson suggests, American officials seem more willing to use covert operations, and to escalate them, in developing countries. The question is, why do American decision-makers seem to favor using covert action in these countries? The answers may stem from conflicting business interests and ideological perceptions, but perhaps ideas of superiority and/or racism played a role in that decision-making. That exploration would likely help us understand these occurrences and present us with some insights on how to make the use of covert action align with the values of a democracy.

That raises a final criticism of the book. In terms of addressing the problem of executive discretion, Johnson could do more when offering recommendations on democratic values, ethics, and the U.S. Constitution. The book presents a list in the final chapter but draws out few new lessons or new ideas. For example, the idea of honoring the Constitution, of "inculcating a culture of law and morality" among intelligence officers is important but seems insufficient in responding to the issues surrounding executive discretion (p. 265). Even if career officers do honor the Constitution, they run the real risk of becoming a target of an administration, similar to what President Trump did to one "well-regarded officer" and another "CIA whistleblower" (p. 265). Executive discretion allows individual presidents to determine their relationship with the CIA and, to a certain extent, favor their own interpretations of the Constitution. The question is how to monitor and manage executive discretion. Policy makers and scholars alike should consider how Congress might more effectively insert itself into the decision-making process for the use of covert action.

The question of how to reconcile covert operations with an open government is a critical one that touches upon many of the basic ideas of democratic theory. Johnson wants us to recognize the contentious nature of this relation-

ship and certainly to learn from successes as well as failures. The book provides an opportunity to begin that exploration. It offers a good introduction on how covert action has complemented and challenged those values and institutions given its breadth of cases, recognition of dilemmas, and exploration of legal frameworks. This reviewer would strongly recommend this book as a foundational text for a course, supplementing with materials that offer greater depth on some operations or more controversial takes on the core ideas.

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To Risk It All: Nine Conflicts and the Crucible of Decision. By Admiral James Stavridis, USN (Ret). New York: Penguin Random House, 2022. Pp. 327. \$28.00 (hardcover); \$30 (paperback).

There are times when we must decide really important things *now*, often before all the facts are at our fingertips, acting on a combination of sketchy information, historical analogy, and imperfect measurements of risk versus reward. . . . The hardest are those that must be made quickly in moments of stress and crisis. That certainly happens at sea routinely, often in combat, and even in peacetime under highly stressful but noncombat conditions. Examining that process—truly hard choices made in the crucible of high stress—is the aim of this book.

The above selection is a brief sample of the exemplary writing covering a topic to which many of us dedicate significant contemplation—How can I make effective decisions while under pressure? In *To Risk It All*, Admiral James Stavridis has written an engaging book guiding the reader through the myriad challenges of making timely and effective decisions in the crucible many leaders find themselves in while making tough choices. This book contains combat as well as peacetime examples of leaders making difficult choices while under the gun. There are not just examples in this book of leaders making decisions that turned out well. There are examples of leaders who were dealt a bad hand and still had to make a decision, some of which did not turn out well. This book does not contain only officer actions but also enlisted decisions such as the heroic actions of Cook Third Class Doris Miller, who decided to leap into action during the attack on Pearl harbor, firing a machine gun that, due to the prejudice of the time, he was not trained to fire.

To Risk It All contains nine case studies drawn from U.S. naval history (both distant and more recent) of leaders that had to make decisions given incomplete information and expedited time lines. Each case has a theme that Stavridis provides that each character embodies, which readers will find help-

ful. These cases vary from Captain John Paul Jones to Commodore George Dewey, to Admiral William F. Halsey Jr.—to name a few well-known combat examples. Among the noncombat examples are some less well-known cases that readers will find quite informative such as Lieutenant Commander Lloyd M. Bucher (USS *Pueblo* [AGER 2]) and more recently Captain Brett E. Crozier (USS *Theodore Roosevelt* [CVN 71]).

Combat examples include Captain John Paul Jones and the power of “no,” which illustrates the importance of a leader to be determined and refuse to be defeated. Jones shows leaders how simply refusing to give up can be quite powerful. In some cases, leaders deciding to be just more determined than their opponents can be decisive in battle. In contrast to the determined but perhaps rash John Paul Jones is the determined but methodical Commodore George Dewey at the Battle of Manila Bay (1 May 1898), whom Stavridis refers to as “Cool Hand George.” Dewey’s performance at the Battle of Manila Bay depicts a leader who is facing a considerable amount of uncertainty against a numerically superior force through prudent action, with his forces punching above their weight, defeating the enemy. Readers will find these examples inspiring as these leaders navigate the complexities of the crucible of combat.

Noncombat examples include Lieutenant Commander Lloyd Bucher in chapter 7 entitled “No Way Out,” which depicts a leader in a no-win situation that quickly becomes untenable. Bucher commanded the USS *Pueblo*, an intelligence collection platform that became surrounded by North Korean naval vessels and ultimately captured. Bucher must struggle with how to balance the mission against the lives of his crew. Bucher is a controversial figure about whom many still argue to this day about whether he should have been punished for allowing his vessel could be captured. More recently, Captain Brett Crozier, who commanded the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* in 2020 made headlines as the Navy relieved him for cause because he sent a controversial email that was leaked to the media regarding the COVID-19 outbreak on his vessel. Again, this leader is dealt a bad hand as he must attempt to balance a peacetime mission against the welfare and health of his crew. He makes a difficult and controversial decision that ends his career.

There is a concluding chapter that is an excellent resource that reviews the nine cases, summarizes lessons learned, and builds on the conclusions reached. This concluding chapter could be an excellent resource for leadership classes in military, business, or academic leadership environments. Chapters could be assigned and the corresponding section of the concluding chapter covering those themes could be used to facilitate discussion. This would be an excellent resource for leadership classes in academia or leader development sessions in businesses or in military formations.

In *To Risk It All*, Admiral James Stavridis provides military professionals as well as civilian readers an opportunity to view seminal moments in U.S. naval history illustrating enduring leadership lessons regarding decision-making. Most leaders would hope that they would have plenty of time to gather

intelligence, analyze that intelligence, weigh the pros and cons, consider future outcomes based on which options were chosen, and select the optimal solution. Most experienced leaders realize that this is not always possible. Military leaders might struggle to decide how to deal with a threat or an opportunity given a shortened time line. Business leaders might grapple with deciding if what they are seeing in their environment is an opportunity that is fleeting and must be seized or lost forever or an unwise investment to be avoided given a deadline. *To Risk It All* provides such leaders with examples that can serve as analogies that can be applied to similar situations so that decisions that are feasible might be quickly reached that could work. *To Risk It All* provides such decision-making analogies. By examining how these leaders made decisions, leaders might be prepared to apply similar approaches quickly. A must-read for civilian, military, and academic leaders.

In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, the worst thing you can do is nothing (p. 275).

~ Theodore Roosevelt

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The Trillion Dollar War: The U.S. Effort to Rebuild Afghanistan, 1999–2021. By Abid Amiri. Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2021. Pp. 256. Free (paperback and ebook). <https://doi.org/10.56686/9781737040569>.

It is said that we must never judge a book by its cover, and it is true for a book can contain a man's entire lifetime that the cover will fail to depict. Yet, Abid Amiri's *Trillion Dollar War* is an evoking water image that will zoom in and out on a rollercoaster ride through the history of Afghanistan. A matter of interest and perhaps mockery has been discovered within the pages of this book, the innovations and experiments that the author has played that seem to be obvious. The question then arises, how did the donor countries miss these loopholes?

The United States of America as we know it is a global superpower that holds a powerful force on its allies as well as its enemies. It has been a role model to all developed and developing and democratic and undemocratic countries throughout the decades. One of the biggest feats accomplished by United States in partnership with Europe was the rebuilding of the affected regions in the aftermath of World War II. The \$13 billion spent on the Marshall Plan have resulted in a \$103.21 trillion economy of Europe accompanied by a world trade dominion. The success of this plan if not analyzed deeply can seem completely

dependent on financial aid. It is, however, not the solution to every problem. The countries of Southeast Asia unfortunately did not realize this. The Taliban entered Afghanistan, creating very strict rules and regulations. Under the rule of the Taliban, women were forced to pray five times a day. It was outlawed to play sports. Men had to grow a long beard and women could not come out of the home unless accompanied by a male companion. The 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks came as a surprise to the citizens of the United States. After four commercial planes were hijacked and crashed, nearly killing 3,000 people, the U.S. government demanded the terrorist group al-Qaeda responsible for this attack but was awarded with an unpleasant answer. Conflict and tensions rose between the U.S. and the Afghan governments, who gave a nest to the terrorist groups responsible for the attack to breed in. President George W. Bush demanded the Afghan government hand over the group responsible for the attack. The United States was forced to capture the area where Taliban soldiers had planted the seeds of hatred and insecurity. This was the first time the United States became involved with the Afghanistan government. After forcing the group out of Afghanistan and analyzing the state of Afghanistan under the Taliban, President Bush along with the members of NATO decided to stick around a bit longer. A nation rebuilding plan was outlined by President Bush, and it was decided that the United States along with other donor countries would invest into different sectors prioritizing democracy, militia, education, and infrastructure. It was considered to be the only way to achieve complete peace. The Taliban were expelled from Afghanistan. The United States spent \$22.1 billion in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2008.

The government was elected and although the voting process was said to be successful, the people failed to trust the government. Instead of protecting the people of Afghanistan, the police sided with crime and accepted bribes, increasing fear among the people. This was a huge benefit to drug dealers and, since Afghanistan is one of the most productive suppliers, the profit was huge. During these 20 years, the improvement in certain sectors such as education was very limited. Despite the various conferences and funds from the donor countries, the government of Afghanistan was unable to achieve the goals outlined. Data shows that the United States was most involved economically under the presidency of Barack H. Obama. However, 20 years of financial aid made Afghanistan completely dependent and, after all this time, it is still 50 percent financially dependent on donor countries.

Afghanistan is one of the youngest countries, and the focus should be on educating the future. This motto was bluntly ignored. It is evident that the Afghan government was not successful in accomplishing the goals outlined by the various donors. After a certain period of time and heavy losses in both mechanics and human lives, President Donald J. Trump decided to pull back a number of troops. This was a shock to the Afghan president. Eventually, all American troops returned home under the presidency of Joseph R. Biden, after a negotiation was made with the Taliban. Complete deprivation of American

aid and attacks of the Taliban broke down the country that had been struggling to stay afloat the past 20 years.

The author's analytical overview of the people's suffering conveys the exact message that global superpowers failed to derive from Afghanistan at the time it was needed. The truth that the people of Afghanistan have been locked away and deprived of the various sorts of developments in the twenty-first century is bound together within the pages of this book. It is a treasure map for those readers who wish to know more and find the hidden secrets that protect the cruelty of this world. It is a journey of the struggle in Afghanistan against the Taliban for 20 years, the tolerance of the citizens and the efforts of the United States to rebuild the country and modify its democracy and rights of the citizens. The success of this book lies far beyond the mechanical artistry that extends to the authors aesthete that is born to occupy the minds of its readers. The ink on these pages have been sculpted with extreme beauty to glamorize the honest observations from across the lands of history and to keep the reader's mind captive within the halls of Afghanistan's struggle.

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