Moscow's Strategic Culture
Russian Militarism in an Era of Great Power Competition

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Abstract: Shifting balances in power realities increase uncertainty and tensions among states. During those times of rising powers and changing alliances, it is imperative to understand how states determine adversaries and how they choose to engage threats. However, biases in decision making at the state level obscure a conceptualization of state action and intent. This article argues that the study of strategic culture helps bridge the gap between state-level biases and actions at the structural level. Furthermore, the understanding of militarism as Russia's strategic culture helps contextualize certain Kremlin policy choices that seem to fall outside conventional international relations frameworks. A better understanding of Russia's strategic lens brings insights into Moscow's actions, particularly within the near abroad.
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Introduction

A multifaceted approach is necessary to understand state policy choice as state-level beliefs influence how states perceive the world. Kenneth N. Waltz describes three images of international relations: (1) human nature, (2) the structures of the state, and (3) the international system.[1] However, these images are not necessarily mutually exclusive to understanding international conflict. Instead, structures found within the state influence how the state interacts within the international system. The structural realist approaches of international relations theory, which focus on power as the central feature of international relations, treat state-level variables as inconsequential differences.

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The prominent realist scholar John J. Mearsheimer argues that for realists there are no "good or bad" states, but "in essence, great powers are like billiard balls that vary only in size."[2] While this conceptualization of the state services the grand generalities of structural theorists, many nuances of state action remain unanswered. Absent from a closed understanding of the state are issues of biases and beliefs of regimes that influence how they perceive international events. Biases and beliefs of the state become particularly important when analyzing the security dilemma phenomena, as state fear drives a self-defeating increase in security measures. Although state survival is the paramount concern in the system, how states delineate allies from adversaries and perceive the actions of others often come down to state-level variables.

At the state decision-making level, these biases and beliefs manifest into a strategic culture, or how the regime perceives and engages threats to state security. Realist theories rely on the assumption of the state as rational actors but struggles to define rationalism. Returning to Mearsheimer, he writes of the rational state actor, "They are aware of their external environment and they think strategically about how to survive in it." He continues, "In particular, they consider the preferences of other states and how their own behavior is likely to affect the behavior of those other states, and how the behavior of those other states is likely to affect their own strategy for survival."[3] Unfortunately for realism, this complex notion of state rationalism necessitates an understanding of how states determine these perceptions of the other and establish their own preferences.

Strategic culture enables understanding state response to international events by allowing scholars to engage in a dialogue on state biases and beliefs. Jack L. Snyder's seminal piece on *strategic culture* defines the term as "the sum total of ideas, conditioned 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."[4] More recent works define strategic culture as "a product of a country's geography, history, and shared narratives that shape the prevailing worldview of its national security establishment, which in turn guides its responses to challenges and threats."[5] Strategic culture offers a view into the second image and, importantly, insight into the biases of state decision makers. Although Professor John Glenn argues that neorealism and strategic culture are "competing approaches," strategic culture should be viewed as complementary to the understanding of state perception.[6] However, Glenn writes that an "epiphenomenal" approach to strategic culture considers the concept as an intervening variable and offers a potential point of collaboration and overlap.[7] Within this vein, strategic culture becomes a mechanism that influences how states perceive threats and respond to external events.

For the purposes of this study, the concept of strategic culture is presented, not as an organizational structure, but in the Snyder construct of ideas, emotional responses, and patterns of behavior. In totality, this concept is the outwardly expressed bias of the state that drives decision making. This construct

is within Elizabeth Kier's understanding of strategic culture that "screens out some parts of reality while magnifying others" and that we understand it as a way to make sense of the choices of the state.[8] This conceptualization remains within a realist understanding of the world. Despite Kenneth Waltz's attempts to distance the theory from foreign policy choice, many realist scholars argue this is inconsistent with realism.[9] In Russia's case, the theories of militarism, or the glorification of force in state decision making, foster an understanding of how the Kremlin perceives the world and determines a state response. This article argues that Russian militarism formulates a specific characteristic of Russian strategic culture, which helps bridge the gap between structural theories on the balance of power and states' biases and beliefs in determining threats. In short, Russian militarism shapes the strategic lens through which the Kremlin perceives the world.

A purely structural theory approach falls short of understanding Russian actions in the near abroad. Moscow is particularly sensitive to external influence within its self-declared sphere of influence, and the Kremlin responds aggressively when challenged. While realists argue states pay close attention to an adversary's relative gains, it fails to explain how states first determine an adversary. 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. Militarism, or the "glorification of war as a good in itself, rather than simply as a means to an end," plays a crucial role in Russian strategic culture by serving as the source of state biases and beliefs.[10] This contextualization is not to imply Russia is not a rational actor; it certainly is. Instead, Moscow's rationality, and that of any state, filters through state biases and sets of belief about the international system.

Graham Allison's Rational Actor Model (RAM) is beneficial on this point. For RAM, states seek value-maximizing choices but are limited in bounded rationality or simply by the information available. Additionally, this understanding of the world and subsequent value-maximizing decisions stem from state beliefs. For Allison and Philip Zelikow, "Rather than labeling actors who misperceive a situation as 'irrational,' the model accepts the values, beliefs, and stereotypes of the decision-maker, irrespective of the accuracy of his views."[11] Therefore, the RAM allows for incorporating bias and belief into state understanding while maintaining state decision-making rationality within bounded rationality.

A new era of global competition brings changes to existing relationships, which may seem unpredictable. Failing to account for the strategic culture of others leads to a fundamental misunderstanding in state action. This failure is evident in the Intelligence and Security Committee of the United Kingdom's Parliament's 2020 report calling Moscow "fundamentally nihilistic."[12] Perceiving an adversary as irrational or, in the British case, destructive for the sake of being destructive, is a failure in understanding what "rational" is for the Krem-

lin. Take, for instance, the seeming surprise at Russian interference during the 2013–14 Ukraine crisis. For the West, how could an economic agreement between Ukraine and the European Union (EU) result in the type of clandestine efforts by Moscow to provoke a Ukrainian uprising? Namely, Moscow's fabrication of a secessionist movement in Crimea and ultimately placing Russians on the battlefield in Donetsk and Luhansk.

The questions posed by this article are: (1) in what ways does a multilayered approach improve the understanding of state action, and (2) how does militarism, as the Russian strategic culture, explain Russian actions and perceptions in a way that structural realism does not? The author argues that it is necessary to incorporate a second and third image approach to understand the role of strategic culture. Particularly in Russia's case, militarism plays a significant role in how Moscow understands the world and engages perceived adversaries. Understanding the Kremlin and influence of the *siloviki*, or former members of the security services, throughout Russia's state decision-making institutions is paramount to understanding the European security environment. The following sections break down into two parts. The first part explores the literature of militarism and how it can be understood as a strategic culture. The second part of the article addresses Russian militarism as the source of Russian strategic culture, providing the lens through which Moscow perceives the global environment. This section concludes by exploring how this lens perceives a changing global structure.

Militarism as Strategic Culture

The Ukraine crisis of 2014 became the defining moment of the post-Soviet Russo-Western relationship to date. Western governments, particularly the European Union, were taken aback by Moscow's seemingly unprovoked act of aggression. The West could not understand how a potential economic agreement with Ukraine could result in Russian force. The pending EU Association Agreement, opposed by the Kremlin, brought no NATO tanks to the Russian border, nor did the eventual collapse of the pro-Russian government in Kyiv bring NATO security forces into Ukraine. Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky write that Russian actions in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea "were a shock to the politics and security of Europe as a whole."[13] However, the authors argue, "when examined in the context of Russia strategic culture, they should not have come as a surprise."[14]

Elias Götz argues for a complex approach to understanding Russia, writing "decision-maker influences, domestic political conditions, ideas, and geopolitical imperatives all matter, to some extent, but they play different roles and carry different weight in the various approaches."[15] For Moscow, the interplay between structural balance of power struggles and the perception of adversaries is best understood through the lens of militarism and the militarization of Russian foreign policy within the near abroad. While many Russian scholars place great weight on the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, these writers tend to ad-

dress the head of state in isolation from the greater Russian society.[16] However, this runs counter to the "large residual degree of continuity" strategic culture provides.[17] Instead, the Kremlin is better understood as a symptom of Russian strategic culture than simply acting at the behest of a charismatic leader. In this sense, Putin is more a product of Russia than Russia is a product of Putin.

Additionally, the structural origins of realist international relations theory fail to address the nuances of Russian policy within the near abroad. Was the 2008 Russo-Georgian War the result of an existential threat to Russian security? Was Georgia really on the brink of NATO accession? If John Mearsheimer's offensive realism accurately describes Moscow's actions, always pursuing regional hegemony and an edge over rivals, why did the Kremlin withdraw from Georgia?[18] After such a sound defeat over Tbilisi, notwithstanding several identified equipment failures, why settle for merely the autonomous zones of Abkhazia and South Ossetia? Was the West, fully committed to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, actually prepared to challenge Moscow from turning Tbilisi into a puppet state? The answers to these questions are not found in either understanding of a personality-driven Kremlin by Putin scholars or structural balance of power theories.[19] Instead, the understanding of the Kremlin's lens is found within Russian militarism. The argument here is not that balance of power realities or Putin's choice between policies "A" or "B" is somehow not an essential means of understanding Russian policy. Instead, as Götz contends, they all play a role in the ultimate outcome. However, militarism helps place these choices into the context of a specific Russian strategic culture. Militarism serves as the guiding mechanism for how Russian strategic culture, in the writing of Elizabeth Kier, "screens out some parts of reality while magnifying others."[20] It is the understanding of how Russia perceives the world and looks to engage specific threats. Importantly, this construct helps in the understanding of what is essential to Russia in terms of national security interests.

Structural realism focuses on the interaction between states and the powers that influence state action. However, state perception is left to an understanding of the rational actor, operating within bounded rationalism. This concept, of course, begs the question of what is rational to the actor? Perception of one state may appear irrational to the other, a common theme of Western and Russian policy makers. This concept is evident within the defensive realist notion of a security dilemma, generally understood as a misperception by one state about the intent of another, which leads to military buildups and an increased potential for war. Of this phenomena, Barry R. Posen writes of states, "The nature of their situation compels them to take the steps they do."[21] But the situation "compelling" a state to act is not entirely accurate. As previously discussed, perception is, in part, a function of state bias and belief systems. There is no certainty of action based on an external phenomenon. Instead, the action or policy choice results from how the state perceives the event.

Militarism, as a bias manifested from strategic culture, serves as a bridge between the third and the second image and offers insight into state biases and

beliefs that influence how states perceive the world. While the essence of a security dilemma forms from a fundamental misunderstanding of an adversary's intentions, defensive realism offers little in how these beliefs manifest. Instead, Robert Jervis' "spiral model" of the security dilemma depicts status quo powers in fear of each other.[22] Within this model there is a tragic escalation of tensions as states perceive others as revisionist powers, but in actuality they are absent any nefarious intent. As each state takes measures to increase their security, their actions decrease the security of the other state, locking each into a cycle of self-defeating self-protection. The condition, it seems, is a by-product of the system, and therefore the state is practically powerless to prevent it. However, perception is far from universal across states as strategic cultures influence how states perceive events.

In general terms, Anna Stavrianakis and Jan Selby define militarism as "the social and international relations of the preparation for, and conduct of, organized political violence" and "is an abiding and defining characteristic of world politics."[23] While scholars engage militarism through several lenses, militarism is understood as an institutionalization of war and conflict for this article's purposes. For Moscow, it is conceptualized as the development of a strategic culture within the Kremlin, which creates a bias toward the offense, particularly toward the near abroad. Nick Megoran writes militarism is "the glorification of war as a good in itself, rather than simply as a means to an end."[24] It is vital for the purposes of this study on Russian militarism not to hold the term *war* in the literal sense. Instead, in the Russian context, war is understood as both military force and political dominance. This conceptualization is particularly crucial in discussions of Moscow's so-called hybrid warfare within the near abroad as an instrument of regional fear and respect. As discussed in further detail in the next section, the Kremlin's desire to dominate the near abroad drives Russian policy more than any singular strategic objective. In this sense, war becomes an end unto itself and not simply a means of achieving strategic goals.

Institutional militarism is the study of the "relations between military and political institutions, and particularly on situations where the former are deemed to exert excessive influence over the latter."[25] Recent events in Myanmar, with the military junta's return, represent the extreme case where the military also serves as the political regime. However, in many instances, the civil-military relationship and the power of military or security elites are more nuanced. Stavrianakis and Selby explain that in nonliberal democracies, particularly in authoritarian systems, "there may be no clear distinction between civilian and military elites, and where the norm of an apolitical military may not apply."[26] Furthermore, many post-Communist states failed to transition away from these influences, and the close relationships between security and political elites remain. Moscow faced a similar occurrence when the chaos of the 1990s ended under Vladimir Putin's rise to power and subsequent turn away from democratization in favor of a regime more reminiscent of the Soviet past.

The question remains: How does militarism influence state decision mak-

ing? In other words, how does this phenomenon at the second image affect state actions at the third? To address this question, the institutionalization of militarism and military buildups, or militarization, are perhaps the most quantifiable components of militarism. For the latter, possessing superior military capabilities over those you wish to impose power leads states to rely more heavily on strength than diplomacy. An overpowering force reduces the risk of conflict to the stronger state, thereby removing the use of force from a means of last resort and elevating it to a primary diplomatic tool. Institutional militarism becomes evident when states emplace security elites at the top echelons of state decision making. These individuals' suspicious mindset influences the collective perception of the state on the international system and threats to state security. In this perception, the world is filled with revisionist powers seeking to gain an advantage within a zero-sum game. As a result of the institutionalized role of militarism in the system and the glorification of the security apparatus, the state relies heavily on the use of force.

David Kinsella writes, "The term 'militarism' is commonly used to describe a disposition or proclivity to behave in a particular way, namely, to employ military over non-military means of conflict resolution."[27] Militarism induces a bias toward military engagement, or coercive threats, over diplomatic means of conflict resolution. This phenomenon occurs by cultivating a suspicious mindset into state decision making and a proclivity toward the use of force in responding to international disputes. To these states, war, or the use of force, is a first option rather than means of last resort. Importantly, this returns this discussion to the third image, or state action, as militarism results in a bias toward the offense.

Militarism's role in the state's perception leads decision makers to rely on force as the primary means of diplomacy. From a realist paradigm, this perception of state capabilities alters the construct of the offense-defense balance. Stephen van Evera's concept of offense-defense theory possesses two variants: the true capabilities of the state and the perceived capabilities.[28] When states possess or perceive an offensive advantage, they are less likely to negotiate terms to avoid conflict, resulting in an increase in the potential for war.[29] Here, militarism's influence as a source of bias in state decision making directly influences how states engage the international system. In this case, perception of the other is no longer entirely abstract or based on state subconscious or a collective belief of threats. Instead, militarism emerges as a strategic culture of power glorification through the institutionalization of security elites into state decisions. In Putin's Russia, the *siloviki*'s influence acts as both a symptom and a cause of this phenomenon.

This section explored how militarism offers a mechanism for the study of bias and belief in how these forces influence a state's global perception. Furthermore, militarism can be understood as a form of strategic culture, operating as a set of beliefs that drive state decision making at the highest levels. The institutionalization of militarism, through the standing of security elites, coupled

with a cultural glorification of power, creates a bias toward the use of force. In Russia, this emerges as a desire to dominate the near abroad and post-Soviet space. The following section explores how Russian militarism helps explain why the Kremlin is quick to use force and coercion in the region. Moscow's strategic culture promotes the narrative of a nation surrounded by hostile powers seeking to destroy the state. This concept is best articulated in John Mearsheimer's 2014 *Foreign Affairs* article describing a Russia under siege by the West.[30] However, this third image interpretation of Russia falls short in explaining why the Kremlin perceives itself encircled by hostile powers. Moscow's development of hybrid warfare, clandestine political operations, coercive diplomacy, and the use of economic pressures all point to the influence of militarism as Russian strategic culture.

Russian Strategic Culture

Following the Ukraine crisis in 2014, Russian academic Fyodor Lukyanov, the chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy and research director at the Kremlin-supported Valdai Discussion Club, gave testimony before the United Kingdom's House of Lords. He stated "that there is a deep belief in Russian political culture that Russia can achieve anything geopolitically only through military means—through being very offensive."[31] Lukyanov's statement reflects the tenets of militarism, a bias toward the offense and a preference for military conflict over diplomatic alternatives. This section aims to establish an understanding of the Russian strategic culture through three primary questions. First, how did Russian militarism emerge within the context of the Putin regime, and how does this conceptualization influence Moscow's perception of the international environment? Second, in what ways has Russian militarism influenced how the Kremlin perceives an adversary's action? Once the article addresses these questions, the author can then focus on how this strategic culture perceives the changing global environment and, importantly, its role in a multipolar world.

In addressing the first question defining Russian militarism, three aspects of the current regime emerge. First, the regime that developed under Putin's leadership, while genially tied to the charismatic Russian leader, reflects more a return to normalcy than a stark shift in Russian governance. Instead, attempts at democratization following the collapse of the Soviet Union were an anomaly. Second, Putin's regime brought forth a rise in the *siloviki*, or former members of Russian and Soviet security forces, into the Kremlin's political decision making. A former KGB officer, Putin looked to fill positions with those loyal to him and, in doing so, stoked the suspicious perceptions and biases of the security elites. Third, the emergence of a strong centralized state with significant influences from the security forces led to a greater militaristic mindset, which fosters deep skepticism of rival powers.

Russian Militarism

From the chaotic post-Soviet Russian era came Vladimir Putin and the return of stability. Karen Dawisha writes, "His inaugural ceremony as the second president of the Russian Federation was designed to underscore his main theme: the centrality for Russian history of a strong state located inside the Kremlin."[32] The robust and centralized regime Putin established reflects the type of Russian governments dating back to the czars. So instead of seeing Putin as a maverick, he is in actuality simply a traditional Russian leader. This traditional approach is supported throughout the country, but Putin is not an all-powerful dictator. Some scholars argue Putin's "policy outputs have in theory tended to be closer to the majority public preferences than to a regime that relies primarily on blanket repression."[33] His style of leadership and cultivated hypermasculine public image is popular within Russia. Furthermore, the president's rejection of the West as a matter of national pride would arguably exist without Putin.[34] Putin's popularity as a "traditional" powerful Russian leader shows him to be a product of Russian societal preferences.

Putin's consolidation of power within the Kremlin operates through rings of influence around the president. Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy describe the Kremlin in terms of Putin as a "CEO," balancing the powerful oligarchs and the power of the state.[35] In their conceptualization of the regime, the Russian bureaucracy operates outside of Putin's "inner circle," limiting its influence on decision making.[36] Russia's powerful oligarchs may hold the majority of the nation's wealth, but they do so at the expense of political power. Ian Bremmer writes of a "bargain" between Putin and the powerful oligarchs in which they retain their wealth for political loyalty.[37] Breaking this bargain comes with severe consequences, as Bremmer points to the high-profile downfall of both Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky. In this type of closed system, it is crucial to understand those influencing Kremlin decision making.

Putin began an effort to surround himself with friends and former colleagues. As an effort to solidify control of Moscow, Putin brought in those from his time in St. Petersburg and began the "KGB-ization of the government."[38] This effort to insulate Putin from the bureaucracy and centralize power around the office of the president further institutionalized Russian militarism. According to Julie Anderson, these "chekists," or *siloviki*, began leading Russia's political-economic offices, bringing about closer ties with organized crime and actively working against democratic reforms.[39] The Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor of the Soviet-era KGB, was used to secure the Public Prosecutor's office and effetely remake the State Duma into a single-party institution.[40] In a relatively short time, Putin successfully returned Russia to a strong, centralized power and reduced the impact of Western efforts to democratize the nation.

With the rise of the *siloviki* came a greater commitment to restore Russia's international power and a cultural preference for the offense. Since the Soviet-

Afghan War (1979–89), the Soviet and subsequent Russian military lost their formerly vaunted status. After returning from Afghanistan, Soviet leaders used force to suppress domestic disturbances in 1988, and for Russian society, the force "no longer represented the ideals of honor, duty, and socialist equality."[41] Instead of being a source of national pride, the institution became a symbol of how far the former superpower fell. These issues were on display during NATO's 1999 Kosovo mission. According to former U.S. defense attaché Robert Bannon, "The situation in the Balkans was a particular flashpoint because it accentuated Russia's weakness and inability to defend its interests in the region."[42] In addition to NATO's mission expanding, the enlargement of the organization into the post-Soviet space created a resentment that seemed to catch Western powers off guard. Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer write of this resentment: "Putin would later tap and mobilize to develop his brand of red-blooded nationalism, was discounted, even dismissed, by Western proponents of expansion, who at best seemed puzzled by Russian anxieties."[43] This movement helped reignite the Russian mindset, as Kosovo harbingered a new era of Kremlin aggression. Lost to the Western perspective was an understanding of Moscow's loss from a strategic culture perspective. For the Kremlin, the West possessed revisionist objectives that aimed to destroy Russia.

The West became free to operate throughout the former Soviet space with little resistance from Moscow. Following the disastrous *Kursk* submarine tragedy in 2000, which further exposed the Russian military's decline and a striking lack of honesty within the Kremlin, Putin began an overhaul of Russian forces.[44] This reconstruction of the Russian military began in 2001 with the appointment of Sergei Ivanov, Putin's friend and former KGB colleague.[45] Ivanov began the task of modernizing the Russian military from the Soviet rot. A critical component of the institutionalized Russian militarism is the idea that force is an end unto itself. For Moscow, this end comes through a respected military force capable of instilling fear within a perceived Russian sphere of influence. Keir Giles of Chatham House writes, "Russia equates respect with fear, and expression of respect by other nations with ensuring that Russia is consulted—and deferred to—on all major aspects of international affairs."[46] Since Moscow cannot replicate Western alliances, such as NATO or the European Union, the Kremlin must resort to fear across the near abroad to generate compliance. The fear Moscow cultivates throughout the near abroad emerges as a primary objective of the state, or in other words, strength becomes a good unto itself.

In the 1990s, Russia's military was unable to produce the fear, and therefore respect, across Eurasia in the way of the old Soviet military. Restoring the Russian military to greatness became a driving policy choice under Putin. The Kremlin embarked on a military modernization program titled the "New Look." It is at this point where militarism becomes solidified within Putin's Russia. This and subsequent programs aimed to transition the Russian military from the old Soviet era of peer-to-peer conflict to a streamlined service, more agile and responsive to current Russian threats. These kinds of changes to military doc-

trine and spending may lead states to pursue military over nonmilitary means of conflict resolution.[47] Additionally, a perception of an offensive advantage increases the probability of war.[48] In the Russian case, the changes to doctrine and the force aimed to reimpose respect within the near abroad.

Moscow's strategic documents point to NATO buildups along the Russian border as the Kremlin's top security concern.[49] Arguably, the ability of NATO and the EU to attract new members among the former Soviet Union is unmatched by Moscow. The Eurasian Economic Union failed to attract the larger economies of Eurasia, falling short in its goal as a counterweight to the EU. When NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit ended with a pathway for Ukrainian and Georgian membership, it became a reminder of this lack of fear. The Kremlin perceives the near abroad not as allies but as potential Western pawns. The sentiment is evident years later in Russian minister of foreign affairs Sergey Lavrov's comments, "In my opinion, this played a significant role in Mr. [Mikheil] Saakashvili 'flipping his lid' and deciding that he could do anything he liked."[50] In Lavrov's comments, it is apparent that Western influence over the Georgian government "forced" Moscow's hand.

The five-day war successfully deterred Georgia's pro-Western government from joining NATO, but it also served to reassert Moscow as the predominant power in the post-Soviet space. Unlike the West, Moscow was forced to resort to military means within the near abroad to achieve a diplomatic objective. Although former U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, laments the lack of Western response to the incursion, and some analysts refer to the war as a watershed moment for Russian aggression, there remains a pervasive question.[51] Why, after little Western resistance, did Moscow remove its military from Georgia? If the goal were to end Georgia's Western dreams, why not go further and forcibly remove President Saakashvili? Instead, for Russian militarism, the goal was to reassert the fear in Russian capabilities and dominance, while the strategic goal of stopping Georgia's NATO membership was almost secondary. Arguably, Moscow achieved this by taking a poorly equipped army, virtually unimpeded, to Tbilisi. The incident showed the Kremlin that conflict was easy and is a further indication that Moscow is quick to use force within the near abroad.

Moscow's "New Look" program reduced the officer corps and sought to modernize military equipment through a 1.1 trillion ruble, 10-year spending plan.[52] Modernizing the Russian military included changes to the way Moscow perceived war and conflict and led directly to the introduction in the near abroad to so-called hybrid warfare. Dmitry Adamsky describes the concept as without formal declaration, but as an " 'informational-psychological struggle'," that attacks an adversary's decision making through "moral-psychological-cognitive-information suppression."[53] At its foundation, hybrid war confuses an adversary as to what is occurring while enabling Moscow's plausible deniability. Arguably this tactic serves to strike fear, not necessarily in other great powers, but within the near abroad. Moscow's implementation

of hybrid warfare reveals it to be a method of diplomatic intimidation and shows the Kremlin's preference for force over diplomacy. This change to Russian warfare was evident in the lead-up to the 2014 Ukraine crisis. Russian "snap-exercises" near the Ukraine border were dismissed by Russia's representative to NATO, Alexander Grushko, as simply maintaining readiness.[54] In reality, these "exercises" masked Russian intelligence and material support to Ukrainian separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

The military modernization program brought about a foundational shift in the Russian perspective. A 2015 study by the Moscow-based Levada Center "recorded a phenomenon never seen before in Russia: her citizens dreaming of war, believing it will solve all existing problems. An overwhelming majority believes that Russia is surrounded by enemies and that their patriotic military will heroically defend them."[55] A belief that Russia is under constant threat of war is nothing new. Throughout Russian history, rulers perpetuated an ideology "on the idea of the country as a military camp, a fortress under siege."[56] This belief helped to solidify the understanding of the near abroad as comprised merely of pawns in a global game between Moscow and the great global powers.

Russia's perception of the world as a system filled with enemies emerges from a deep-seated historical belief in Russian greatness. Early in Putin's term, he echoed this understanding by arguing Russia is a great power. In a 2005 speech, Putin declared, "Above all else Russia was, is, and will, of course, be a major European power."[57] The source of Russia's claim to be a great power stems from its continued control over the near abroad, or *derzhavnost*. Alexandra Roberts of the Aspen Security Forum defines *derzhavnost* as "great-powerness" or an "unquestionable sphere of influence."[58] This belief is an understanding that its influence over others through a sphere of influence grants the nation its "right" to be among the great world powers. Arguably, the West's support of Kosovo's independence from Serbia over Russia's objectives were seen as a violation of the sphere of influence.[59] Stephen Kotkin argues, "The real challenge today boils down to Moscow's desire for Western recognition of a Russian sphere of influence in the former Soviet space (with the exception of the Baltic states)."[60] This deep-seated belief in Russian greatness resulting from the dominance of the near abroad is foundational to Russian strategic culture and institutionalized within the Putin regime.

The Kremlin's Perception

After establishing how militarism manifests within the Kremlin, it is necessary to turn attention to Russian militarism's influence on state threat perceptions. In other words, in what ways does Russian strategic culture, as militarism, influence how the Kremlin perceives an adversary? What emerges from Moscow's strategic culture is a deep suspicion of external influences within its self-declared sphere of influence. Rumer and Sokolsky argue that Russian strategic culture was the cause of Moscow's "blunders in Ukraine."[61] As stated previously, this article argues that it is this bias toward the offense that drives the Kremlin

to become overly aggressive, to the detriment of Russia's strategic objectives. Moscow perceives its primary great power threat coming from the West. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov told Sputnik in 2015, "I see no threat from China. In general I see no threats from the east except one, US global missile defence, which is being created on US territory."[62] For structural realism and the balance of power, a hypersensitivity toward changes to Russian influence in Eurasia emerges. To the Kremlin, the near abroad is a zero-sum game and at stake is Russia's "right" to be a great power.

According to Mitchell Orenstein, Moscow perceives the European Union "as a competitor for influence in its" near abroad, as no Central and Eastern European nation has "joined the EU without joining NATO first."[63] This concern is twofold: while NATO is a straightforward military alliance, the EU promotes democracy and economic integration by adhering to political and economic norms. Moscow views the Western efforts of democratization within the post-Soviet space as undermining Russian power and influence. Attempts by states to Westernize fuels the Kremlin's fundamental belief that these actions are anti-Russian and part of a Western conspiracy. Ukraine's 2004 election provides an example of this paranoia. Former Kremlin official Gleb Pavlovsky stated that Putin assumed Western influence in support of Viktor Yushchenko over the Kremlin-backed candidate, Viktor Yanukovych.[64] This belief is largely due to Moscow's efforts to sway the election in the Kremlin's favor. Putin sent political operatives to Kyiv to stoke Eastern Ukraine and Western Ukraine divisions, even sending people with Nazi flags to a Yushchenko rally to give the appearance of extremist support.[65] This effort was ultimately a disaster for Moscow, as Yanukovych's contested victory brought about a "seismic shift Westward" by igniting the Orange Revolution.[66]

Moscow's perception of Ukraine stems from the institutionalized belief in *derzhavnost*, and the Kremlin's militaristic strategic culture. Ukraine, in particular, is not seen by the Kremlin as an independent nation, only a pawn in efforts by foreign powers to harm Russia. Putin has stated he does "not believe that Ukraine is really a separate state," which is a legacy understanding that emerges from the ancient Kievan Rus civilization (862–1242 CE).[67] The perception of being a foreign pawn dates back well before the current regime to the belief in conspiracies of the Swedish in 1709, Austrians during World War I, Nazi Germany, Israeli intelligence during the Cold War, and more recently, the European Union and NATO.[68] The Western conspiracies returned to prominence for the Kremlin during the 2014 Ukraine crisis. Victoria Nuland, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, became a symbol of the Russian belief in Western meddling in the near abroad. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs even published a report entitled *White Book on Violations of Human Rights and the Rule of Law in Ukraine* to justify its actions in Ukraine. Regarding Nuland, it states, "Whenever she came, she edified opposition leaders, exercising public gestures like the distribution of cookies among the activists, which was intended to show that Washington was supporting the lawlessness

that reigned in Ukraine."[69] While perhaps almost comical to point to cookie distribution's nefarious intent, the message is clear: the West is interfering in Moscow's rightful sphere of influence.

As events unfolded in Kyiv throughout the fall of 2013, Russia's militaristic strategic culture began to take shape. The *siloviki* and "patriotic businessmen" began plotting ways to regain control of Crimea should events in the capital continue to decline.[70] These musings were eventually operationalized by Russia's changing military tactics and doctrine. In February 2014, former deputy prime minister Vladislav Surkov, Putin's "grey cardinal," arrived as a special emissary to Crimea.[71] Surkov, a prominent *siloviki*, championed "sovereign democracy," or the notion that Russia requires a "unique" form of democracy as it is forever besieged by external enemies.[72] The idea of "sovereign democracy" from such a high-ranking *siloviki* reveals the extent of Russian militarism's institutionalization within the Kremlin. Surkov's arrival in Crimea foreshadowed the Kremlin's hard-line policy to come. Shortly after his appearance, Moscow rapidly increased military special forces and clandestine agents from both the GRU (*Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie*, or Chief Intelligence Office) and FSB in Crimea.[73] Within days, demonstrations in Crimea grew more violent as Russia's hybrid war had already begun. For the Kremlin, Ukraine is an internal Russian affair. A critical secondary state to Russia within the near abroad, for Russian militarism, the potential loss of Kyiv to the West is a significant blow to *derzhavnost*, its very claim to be a great power.

Paranoia is not limited to the international sphere, as unrest within Russia is routinely blamed on external influences. More recently, the Kremlin points to Western support of opposition leader Alexei Navalny as another example of external meddling in Russian affairs. Putin claims, "Our opponents or our potential opponents . . . have always relied on—and used—ambitious, power-hungry people."[74] During the same interview with Russian media, Putin returned to the idea of Russia under siege by arguing, "The stronger we become, the stronger this containment policy."[75] The Kremlin dismisses any opposition to the central government as only possible with help from external influences. In this sense, securing Russia internally and externally begins with challenging the international powers.

Russian Militarism and Great Power Competition

This article's final question asks: How does Russian militarism perceive a changing global power structure? First and foremost, the Kremlin sees the changing international structure as an opportunity to increase its global influence. The 2015 *Russian National Security Strategy* argues, "The role of force as a factor in international relations is not declining" and that "militarization and arms-race processes are developing in regions adjacent to Russia."[76] These statements reveal how the Kremlin interprets the international system as surrounding and challenging Russian power. The document touts the rise of a multipolar world where Russia plays a central role. According to the document, "The process of

shaping a new polycentric model of the world order is being accompanied by an increase in global and regional instability."[77] The security strategy also names Russia's long-term strategic interest as "consolidating the Russian Federation's status as a leading world power, whose actions are aimed at maintaining strategic stability and mutually beneficial partnerships in a polycentric world."[78] Whether this view reflects a revisionist intent of the Kremlin falls outside this article's scope; however, the statement is telling of a power displeased with its current global position and that feels it is under assault.

China's rise may also become a source of angst for the Kremlin, especially as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expands Beijing's influence throughout the post-Soviet space. Although the Kremlin enjoys touting its importance to the BRI, in actuality, Moscow plays a secondary role in Chinese objectives.[79] For now, the West remains the most urgent threat to Russian militarism's desire for respect through fear. As Lavrov's 2015 remarks to Sputnik reflect, the West poses the greatest threat to Moscow, despite Beijing's growing influence in Central Asia as a result of the BRI. Former U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, argues of Putin, "In his view, he is at war with the United States, its allies, and the multilateral institutions that Washington created and currently anchors. Putin no longer desires cooperation with the West or even a respected place within the liberal international order."[80] Instead, the West serves as the great and pending threat prevalent within Russian strategic culture. Unlike other threats, the one from the West challenges Russia's *derzhavnost*. This challenge to Russian influence in the near abroad impacts the source of Russian power. For the Kremlin's strategic culture, Russian power is dependent upon fear and respect in the region.

This section addressed three questions: How did militarism emerge in Russia, how does Russia militarism perceive adversaries, and finally, how does militarism influence Moscow's perception of great power competition? While Putin alone is not the source of Russian militarism, the return of a centralized state fostered an environment in which a bias toward the use of force could flourish. The rise of the *siloviki* into the regime further institutionalized the militarization of Russian foreign policy. A staunch belief in an "unquestionable sphere of influence," *derzhavnost* drives the Kremlin's policies within the near abroad.[81] As the region becomes the source of Russia's claim to greatness, actions by foreign powers that could jeopardize this asymmetric relationship are perceived as a direct threat to Russian security. In this vein of understanding, the threat is less about state survival and more about preserving a structural relationship where Moscow dominates the post-Soviet space. Fear of Moscow becomes the goal, as fear equates respect of Russian power. As the West remains the largest challenger to this Russian relationship, through the EU and democratization efforts, China is still perceived as a secondary concern. However, as Beijing's influence grows in Eurasia, Russia may see China as a threat to its influence and domination of the region and, therefore, a threat to its source of power.

Conclusion

This article posed two questions: (1) in what ways does a multilayered approach improve the understanding of state action, and (2) how does militarism, as the Russian strategic culture, explain Russian actions and perceptions in a way that structural realism does not? The study of strategic culture as a construct that bridges the gap between Waltz's second (state level) and third (systemic level) image offers greater depth to the study of state action. While acknowledging the influence of state bias and belief, structural realism offers little insight into why a state perceives certain threats to its security. As the RAM shows, states acting within bounded rationality still act rationally, just in accordance with how they perceive the world. Militarism, or the institutionalized glorification of force and power, offers insight into the development of Russian strategic culture during the Putin regime. The resulting bias toward the offense helps explain actions that seem to fall outside structural realism. When seen through this lens, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and subsequent withdrawal of troops illustrates how the Kremlin uses armed conflict as a means to instill fear and compliance. Russian doctrinal changes to hybrid warfare reveal its sensitivity to foreign influence within the near abroad and its "right" to a sphere of influence. Understanding Russian strategic culture through the institutionalization of militarism is necessary to contextualize Russian action.

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