



# ***RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE: PAST, PRESENT, AND... IN TRANSITION?***

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## **PROSPECTUS**

Traditional Russian strategic culture – that of Imperial Russia from its emergence as a state in the middle of the last millennium through most of the existence of the Soviet Union into the late 1980s – has been one of the most martial and militarized such cultures in history, rivaling, if not exceeding, those of Prussia, Imperial and Nazi Germany, and Imperial Japan in this respect. Starting sometime in the 1970s, accelerating in the 1980s, dramatically so in the years after the collapse of the USSR, conditions have arisen which open the possibility of changing this nature—significantly “demilitarizing Russian strategic culture—while also leaving open the possibility of a revival or reassertion of traditional, highly militarized, Russian strategic culture.

The purpose of this tutorial essay is to summarize the origins, contents, and implications of traditional Russian strategic culture, and then, in conclusion, to explore the possibilities for change or reassertion arising from post-Soviet conditions.

## **STRATEGIC CULTURE DEFINED FOR THE RUSSIAN CASE**

It is that body of broadly shared, powerfully influential, and especially enduring attitudes, perceptions, dispositions, and reflexes about national security in its broadest sense, both internal and external, that shape behavior and policy. For all its high degree of militarization, Russian strategic culture is not simply coterminous with its military culture, i.e., deep attitudes about how military power should be shaped, maintained, and used. Strategic culture in the Russian case is very much influenced by political culture, how political power is defined, acquired, legitimized, and used; by foreign policy culture, how the outside world is regarded and addressed; and by economic culture—although the latter is, in the Russian case, more a product of the other influences than itself a source of influence. But that may be changing. In other words, strategic culture arises from the intersection of political, foreign policy, military, and economic culture—and influences can flow in both directions.

## **Continuity and Change**

In the Imperial and Soviet eras, Russia experienced changing structure of statehood, imperial expansion, the appearance of firearm weapons, the industrial revolution, a massive political revolution, several hugely destructive wars with foreign enemies, very destructive civil war, and the appearance of nuclear weapons in the tens of thousands. The continuity of Russian strategic culture through all these changes, strategic in their character, is truly striking. Fully explaining this continuity is beyond the scope of this essay. But it certainly arises in the main from a political culture and psychology shaped by geography, by a long history of “tribal” conflicts under the Mongols, in the expansion and rule of a multiethnic empire, and by deep authoritarianism. Any argument for change in strategic culture must keep this remarkable continuity in mind.

### Core Elements of Russian Strategic Culture in the Imperial and Soviet Periods

The Russian state and empire emerged and expanded in conditions of almost constant warfare, initially defensive, then increasingly offensive as the empire expanded. Moscow (Muscovy) became the unifying center of the Russian state because it was most effective in “managing” the Mongol Yoke (overlordship), especially in raising taxes for tribute, and then in assembling military resources for defeating the Mongols and bringing other Russian principalities under Muscovite rule.

Physical and ethnographic geography gave Muscovy and the Russian state no readily established and defensible borders. This condition invited attack. More important, it inspired a combination of fear about vulnerability and an appetite for achieving security and status by expansion. This contributed greatly to the militarization of Russian strategic culture.

As a consequence, by early modern times (1600-1700) military power became the chief institutional foundation of Russian statehood. The monarchy was a kind of royal head on a muscular military body. Historian Richard Pipes cites a telling symbolic illustration of this: When Tsar Nicholas II abdicated the throne in 1917, he sent his letter of abdication, not to the Duma (parliament) which had demanded it, but to the chief of the Russian general staff.

A seemingly contradictory point, however, is very important to understanding the intersection of Russian political and military cultures: Despite the enormous importance of the military as an institutional base and legitimizing symbol of Russian statehood and power, there is

little tradition of direct or active military intervention in Russian politics. That thousands of Soviet military officers went to the camps or to execution at the hands of Stalin's secret police without the serious threat of a military coup is a striking manifestation of this. There have been some exceptions and deviations, but they almost prove the rule. The revolt of the Decembrist officers of 1825 was a significant military intervention in politics; it was not the Russian corporate military in action, however, but a clan of liberal officers. In the 1950s, Marshal Zhukov gave Khrushchev critical but very limited military support against his enemies, first Beria (1953), then the "anti-party group" (1957).

In the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods, this tradition of "non-intervention" by the military has been tested in various ways. In the late 1980s, the Soviet military was involved in suppression of local unrest in Georgia and the Baltics; but they resented this and blamed Gorbachev for sullyng their corporate reputation. In August 1991, some senior military leaders supported the "putsch" intended to preserve the USSR. But those commanders most in the chain of command required for military support to the coup, refused it outright or by evasion, thereby guaranteeing its failure. And some units around the parliament went over to the crowd supporting Yeltsin. The most dramatic military intervention occurred in 1993 when the Russian military went into action against the rebellious Duma on behalf of Yeltsin. But, again, this was on behalf of the superior authority of the state, such as it was then. During the 1990s, individual military leaders, such as Rutskoi, Gromov, and Lebed turned politician, and numerous officers were elected to the Duma. It remains to be seen whether these phenomena will lead to change in this aspect of Russian political and military culture: non-intervention by the military in politics.

Russian strategic and military cultures have from earliest times prized and exploited a resource in which Russia was rich: masses of military manpower. Russian strategy, generalship, and operational art relied heavily on this resource through World War II and the Cold War. Industrial age weapons were regarded as "mass multipliers," not as means of fighting better with fewer numbers. Ability to rely on seemingly limitless manpower encouraged a relative indifference to casualties, vividly displayed in both World Wars. It also encouraged relative indifference to the living conditions of most troops. Exploiting this ability required not only very large standing forces, but maintenance of a huge, conscripted, but only rudimentarily trained mobilization base, and a huge military industrial base to arm it. This prizing of mass has bedeviled Russian efforts to accomplish military reform to this day.

## **Influence of Political Culture**

Russian political culture has been a major contributor to strategic culture, especially to its militarization. Political culture is itself very “martial” or harmonious with military values in that it is grounded on the principle of *kto-kovo* (literally “who-whom), i.e., who dominates over whom by virtue of coercive power or status imparted by higher authority, e.g., by God to the Tsar, the Tsar to the boyars; or by history to the communist leadership and in turn to bureaucrats and political satraps. Political conflicts are resolved by struggle and intrigue, occasionally by force, but not by negotiations, bargaining, voting, or legal adjudication.

Marxism, especially as interpreted and applied by Lenin and his colleagues, fit rather naturally with Russian political culture, despite its materialism in contrast to Russians’ notions about the “spirituality” of their culture. This is because Marxism is as much a martial doctrine, i.e., a summons to combat, as a political and social philosophy.

After the turbulence of the first post-Soviet decade, it is clear that elements of traditional Russian political culture are strongly reasserting themselves under Vladimir Putin. The essence of this reassertion is not just in moves toward more authoritarian rule, which have been relatively mild by Russian and Soviet standards. Rather it is the clear tendency of those who wield or strive for political power in Russia to regard the features of normal democratic life – parties, parliament, a meaningful press, election campaigns – not as the enabling conditions of a legitimate polity, but as instruments to be manipulated, controlled or combated for the benefit of the central authority.

## Foreign Policy Culture

Russian foreign policy culture is a reflection of political culture to a significant degree. Russian leaders have generally been capable of artful and accommodating diplomacy when the situation demanded it, as displayed by the statecraft of Goncharov in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Soviet pursuit of various flavors of *détente* in the 20<sup>th</sup>. But there has always been an underlying attitude that views foreign states or actors as either enemies, or subjects, or transient allies, or useful fools to be manipulated, i.e., the attitude of “*kto-kovo*.”

Russian political and foreign policy cultures have always had some element of messianism, that is, a sense of national and international mission beyond security and prosperity

for the country. In the Imperial period, this messianism—the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome, the heir of a legendary religious and imperial tradition—helped to legitimize national expansion, but also a sense of national and cultural superiority. In the Soviet period, this mission was to spread “world revolution”, an ideological label for Soviet national power, but also a pretense to supra-national, pseudo-religious, values of justice and progress. Military power has long been seen as a means for pursuing messianic goals or as a protective base from which to pursue them by other means, such as diplomacy, political action (overt or covert), and foreign assistance.

In rhetoric and action, Russian foreign policy culture has often expressed a puzzling combination of contradictory attitudes: defensiveness bordering on paranoia, on one hand, combined with assertiveness bordering on pugnacity, on the other. In the Russian mentality, both an inferiority complex and a superiority complex can be simultaneously on display. The traumatic effects of the break up of the USSR and decline of Russia’s role as a great power have intensified these complexes, especially among Russia’s national security elites. And the partial recovery of Russia’s international standing under Putin’s more disciplined and, as the result of energy revenues, better-funded regime, have produced another amplification of these complexes in the pronouncements of leaders and pundits.

Perhaps despite, or perhaps because of the balance among these conflicting complexes, Russian strategic leadership has on the whole been notably risk averse at the level of action and operations. It has not been given to daring high-risk, high-payoff initiatives such as characterized the strategic leadership of Napoleon and Hitler. This was certainly the case throughout the Soviet period. Khrushchev’s deployment of nuclear missiles to Cuba in 1962 may be seen as a dramatic exception. At the same time, the record shows that a) because the United States was accelerating its strategic build up and had recently discovered how the Soviets actually lagged, Khrushchev had good reason to believe bold action was less risky than doing nothing, and b) he saw U.S. actions leading up to his move as indications he would get away with it. It was as much a miscalculation as a daring initiative that failed, despite accusations of “adventurism” Khrushchev subsequently faced. The invasion of Afghanistan was clearly such a miscalculation by a very risk-averse Brezhnev leadership.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS FOR SOVIET AND RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE**

The appearance of nuclear weapons and their deployment by the USSR and its NATO, and then Chinese, adversaries in large numbers presented a paradoxical challenge for strategic and military culture at a very fundamental level of thinking and policy action. On one hand, they vastly amplified the destructive power available to the Soviet military. But, as probable enemies had them in large numbers as well, they called into serious question the very feasibility of mass warfare, a challenge to a core value of the strategic culture, and to the survivability of the Soviet state, a challenge to the core of the ruling ideology.

Stalin and his successors, at least up to Gorbachev, never seemed to have entertained any serious doubts about the necessity to build and maintain vast nuclear forces, although Khrushchev expressed some ambivalence in his memoirs. The problem was how to think about and manage this power in the strategic context, i.e., in relation to the pursuit of offensive and defensive state goals.

Initially, even as he recognized the great destructive power of nuclear weapons (e.g., in comments to Milovan Djilas) and maximized efforts to get them, Stalin sought to minimize their doctrinal impact, or the strategic discontinuity they represented. This found expression in his doctrine of the “permanently operating factors” that brought victory in World War Two and supposedly still obtained despite nuclear weapons: size of forces, industrial base, ideology and morale, etc.

After Stalin’s death, Soviet military and political leaders had to develop a more robust and sophisticated way of thinking, which they did over the course of the 1950s and early 1960s. The implications of this thinking for statecraft and military posture unfolded over the next two decades.

### **Managing the Nuclear Paradox**

The Soviets managed the nuclear paradox by constructing different doctrines and policies for different aspects of it, somewhat in tension, but basically in harmony.

At the level of foreign policy and strategic diplomacy, the Soviets recognized the enormous danger and destructive consequences of nuclear war and embraced doctrines of peaceful coexistence, détente, arms control, and crisis management to contain this danger and avoid its destructive consequences. These doctrines sprang from both moral and practical

appreciations of an apocalyptic predicament. In that sense, they were certainly sincere. At the same time, the Soviets saw the diplomatic, political and other interactions involved as means to continue the “international class struggle”, the “struggle against imperialism”, the “struggle for peace”, in other words, as means to achieve fundamental shifts in the global power balance in their favor. Thus, arms control negotiations and the surrounding politics and propaganda were seen as means to constrain the US and its allies from exploiting their superior technology and economic power to achieve strategic superiority over the USSR. This led them in the mid-1960s to accept the idea of limits on ballistic missile defense, an idea at variance with Russian strategic culture. The combative-competitive elements of strategic culture were by no means laid to rest at this level of doctrine, for all its pacific pretensions.

At the level of military doctrine, especially with respect to building and exercising forces, the combative-competitive element was more vividly displayed. Although embracing deterrence as the first objective of strategy, the Soviets also embraced the notion that there was a plausible theory of victory in nuclear war. Both to make deterrence and the peacetime influence of their military posture as robust as possible and to keep open the possibility of victory, they sought to build comprehensive warfighting forces for all levels of potential conflict. This involved:

- Diverse survivable counterforce capabilities in intercontinental and theater nuclear strike forces.
- Active and passive (civil) defense of the homeland.
- Very massive theater land-combat combined arms forces, especially for the conquest of Europe in nuclear conditions.

Like U.S. strategic planners, Soviet planners considered and made some provisions for limited nuclear conflict which could see the effective use of nuclear weapons while avoiding escalation to all out nuclear exchanges. Also like U.S. planners, the Soviets did not have high confidence that such limits would actually work.

Despite embracing and effecting in their force building a plausible theory of victory in nuclear war, Soviet leaders recognized that large scale use of nuclear weapons could probably sweep away the battlefield for mass warfare and destroy their homeland. This appreciation certainly reinforced their aversion to risk of confrontation.

It is important to note that there was a kind of double think going on here. Despite deep doubts about the workability of their strategic theories of victory and superiority, the Soviets

believed that as strategists, Russians, and Soviet communists, they should strive as much as possible to make them work, that they should not give up on traditional strategic and military thinking because of the destructiveness of nuclear weapons. This doctrinally animated striving had much to do with the hypermilitarization of the Soviet economy and its ultimate failure. It is also important to note that much of the pressure for this came not from the Soviet military, but from the military industrial complex, which had acquired enormous political weight in the years after World War Two. (There was a U.S. counterpart to this strategic double think. Sorting out the similarities and differences, with the benefit of hindsight, would be a really interesting exercise in comparative strategic culture.)

### **THE APOTHEOSIS OF SOVIET STRATEGIC CULTURE...AND THEN DECLINE**

Soviet strategic culture, in its expression in military power and foreign policy behavior, reached a kind of peak or apotheosis in the mid-to-late 1970s. Soviet political and military leaders came to believe that they had achieved or were on the way to achieving a kind of strategic superiority over the West based in robust strategic nuclear forces, theater force superiority both conventional and nuclear, and the beginnings of capabilities to project force beyond the Eurasian continent. Equally important, they came to believe, especially after America's withdrawal from Vietnam, was that "historic trends in the global correlation of forces"—military, political, and ideological—were running in their favor.

This new level of strategic confidence never approached such heights that Soviet political and military leaders believed they could safely initiate or court confrontations with the United States and its allies that might escalate to military conflict. Rather, they viewed their strategic status as a platform from which they could conduct more assertive and ambitious foreign policies in the Third World to win new allies and dependencies, and in Europe to detach traditional allies from the United States. Moreover, they believed that because of its power and "in the interest of peace" Western leaders would have to acquiesce in the expansion of Soviet influence. (An official U.S. intelligence appraisal of the Soviet outlook in this period, since declassified, is listed in the readings.)

Then began what in historical terms was a rather sudden phase of crisis and collapse, running from the late 1970s into the 1990s, important elements of which continue to this day. The institutional, material, and human embodiments of Soviet strategic culture fell apart. The

spiritual, intellectual, and attitudinal contents of that culture came under severe and, potentially, transforming stress.

Soviet military spending began to flatten out in the mid-1970s. It had been growing in absolute terms every year since U.S. intelligence had sought to measure it and had come to represent about 15 percent of GNP, according to U.S. estimates, and perhaps as much as 20 percent according to later Russian assessments. Despite the flush of oil and gas revenues, the military burden was becoming too much for the economy (something it appears Putin-era Russian leaders remember).

The United States and its NATO allies launched new advances in conventional warfighting technology, especially for precision strike, that made Soviet deficiencies in these areas worrisome to senior military officers, such as Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, who voiced their worries to political ears. It then became increasingly apparent to both political and military leaders that the military competition was entering a technology era in which the Soviet Union would be unable to compete. This brought the issue of systemic, especially economic, reform out of the precincts of a few dissident economists into the center of strategic concern.

The United States stepped up its challenge to Soviet power and influence expansion in a number of ways: Supporting Soviet enemies in the unconventional conflicts in Afghanistan, Africa, and Central America; with its NATO allies, countering Soviet deployment of intermediate range nuclear strike systems with similar deployments in NATO; and the Reagan administration displaying an unexpected willingness to confront Moscow rhetorically and ideologically. These developments were not just troubling or threatening, they were “strategically demoralizing” because they negated Moscow’s confidence that “historic trends in the correlation of forces” were running in its favor. This parlous state of affairs was the fundamental reason why Gorbachev came to power. The party leadership sought someone to “get the country moving again.”

From the mid-1980s to the end of the decade, Gorbachev initiated a series of reform moves and processes which rapidly escalated. Initially with military support, Gorbachev cut the military budget and proclaimed a much less demanding defensive military doctrine. He escalated pursuit of détente and arms control with the United States. He began to reduce Soviet forces in East Europe.

A chance incident during this period, the landing of a small foreign plane on Red Square after passing through hundreds of miles of warning and air defenses, was a severe blow to military prestige in the eyes of the political leadership. This prestige had already suffered greatly from failures in Afghanistan, abysmal living conditions for most soldiers, and the debunking of the military's record in World War Two when *glasnost* permitted more objective history.

Then came the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, i.e., Soviet control of East Europe, and then the collapse of the USSR and communist rule, and more than a decade of decay and deep crisis within the Russian military.

The details and chronology of this history, especially its impact on the Soviet military, are adequately related in Odom's *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*. But it is important to try to draw some implications about the meaning of this history of crisis and collapse for Russian strategic culture in the future before turning to the recent past in which a recovery of sorts is in progress.

### Lessons from Recent History

Although crucial developments happened quickly, this era of crisis and collapse has been going on now for nearly thirty years. This is long enough for even deeply ingrained attitudes and beliefs to possibly be changed by protracted discrediting.

Despite its enormous size and power, the Soviet military could not or would not save the Soviet bloc, the USSR, or communist rule. This was in part owing to Gorbachev's distaste for bloodshed. But the military had no taste for quelling domestic disorders either. The bottom line for culture, however, is that in the midst of revolutionary developments concerning the locus, extent, and nature of state power, in a state where military power has long been the foundation of the state, military power was simply irrelevant. In the Russian-Soviet strategic culture tradition, this was quite different from the record of 1916-1922 when the Russian military, while failing to save the Tsar, was transformed into the Red Army which saved the Bolshevik regime in its infancy.

This period of strategic irrelevance has also been a period of institutional rot in that corruption, mismanagement, high rates of crime, accident, suicide, have beset the Russian military. This has hurt its internal morale and external respect.

Over hundreds of years, the Russian-Soviet strategic cultural tradition said that military power was useful, successful, and greatly deserving of respect. The legacy of the past quarter century has been one of enormous and destructive burden on the state, strategic irrelevance, and rot. One needs to ask what the impact of that legacy will be on Russian strategic culture.

### **STRATEGIC CULTURE IN RECOVERY...OR TRANSFORMATION?**

The early Yeltsin years, 1992-96, saw the attitudinal and certainly the behavioral elements of traditional strategic culture go into a deep – but not comatose – hibernation. Most of the Russian public and most of the elites signed up to propositions quite antithetical to traditional strategic culture:

- Russia must become a “normal” country, i.e., a law-governed democracy with a genuine market economy.
- Russia must integrate with the West.
- The West, especially the United States, is not a threat, but a source of help.
- The Russian military is largely not needed to deal with the surrounding world, but may be needed to keep Russia from disintegrating.

Russian defense spending plunged further from already unprecedented low levels of Gorbachev’s last years (see accompanying table at end of text). The most pressing problem was to find housing for troops pulled out of East Europe and the former Soviet republics. The U.S. government pitched in with billions of dollars in aid to safeguard Russian nuclear and other dangerous materials.

The events of these years and their impacts are well described in Odom, Blank, and Golts. Their titles capture the essence of developments.

At the attitudinal level, however, elements of the old strategic culture remained alive, if terribly unwell, among the military and security services and the nationalists in the political elites. They harbored:

- Deep resentment about the break-up of the USSR and loss of international standing for Russia, and toward the leaders held responsible for this.
- Still strong perceptions of threat from the West and also from China and the Islamic world.

- Strong desire to reestablish Russian international standing, and some semblance of Muscovite influence in the former empire.
- A belief that military power had to be a significant part of this recovery.

At the same time, there emerged a fairly broad consensus, at least in principle, on the need for fundamental military reform and modernization. This meant raising the human, material, and operational quality of the Russian military on the basis of smaller but better forces and a smaller but better military industrial complex. It meant shifting from conscription to a largely volunteer (contracted) force.

As described by Odom, Blank and Golts, however, agreement in principle did not in any way mean progress in practice. Little agreement emerged on how to reform and modernize. More important, reform and modernization take money and the Russian state was broke because of economic collapse and “bandit capitalism’s” appropriation of state assets.

#### Resurgence of Traditional Strategic Culture

Toward the end of Yeltsin’s presidency, 1996-99, attitudinal elements of the old strategic culture began a strong recovery among elites and publics, especially hostility to and perceptions of threat from the West, and resentment about loss of Russian status. This occurred in part because of specific U.S. and NATO actions: NATO enlargement, and intervention against Russia’s historic friend in the Balkans, Serbia. More broadly, it was stimulated by a fantasy-based disappointment that the United States and the West had not rescued Russia, especially from its economic crisis; and also by a reality-based perception that Western leaders, advisors, and greedy businesses were significantly responsible for the “bandit privatization and capitalism” that impoverished most Russians and created a hated class of wealthy, politically powerful “oligarchs.”

Under Putin the political and foreign policy elements of strategic culture—combativeness and competitiveness, perceptions of foreign threat (especially from the United States and the West), and political assertiveness bordering on pugnacity—have been increasingly prominent, so much so that "Russia's return" as a demanding and pushy power in the world was a dominant theme of commentary among pundits and politicians prior to the July 2006 summit of the G8, chaired by Putin in Russia.

The "ideology" on which this reassertion is riding is essentially nationalism, replacing at least to a modest degree the role of communist ideology in Soviet times. This nationalism, centered on Russia's interests, security, and influence as an international actor, is accompanied by assertions of a supra-national Russian mission, to advance a multi-polar world that contains U.S. power, to establish a Eurasian geo-political identity distinct from the West, and to combat perceived threats from Western culture.

This new assertiveness is definitely fueled by the dramatic economic recovery of recent years that oil and gas revenues have stimulated. The Putin regime declares its intent to use Russia's energy resources, and the tight supply situation prevailing in the global energy market, to make Russia a "great energy power," even an energy superpower. A complete strategy for doing this has yet to be publicly articulated. But it clearly involves 1) state domination of extraction; 2) state monopoly of transport (pipelines); and 3) efforts to push Russian business (ever more dominated by the state) downstream into the processing, distribution, and marketing environments of consumer markets. Alarming to many is a clear readiness on the part of the Kremlin to use its energy clout on behalf of political-strategic interests, on display when Russia cut gas supplies to Ukraine, and hence to Europe, in a pricing dispute in early 2006. This was perceived not merely as a commercial dispute, but an effort to punish Ukraine for the pro-Western turn of its internal politics.

### The Russian Military

At the same time, energy revenues have fueled a significant increase of resources to the Russian military, whose budgets, purchase of new equipment, and exercise activity are up by significant percentages compared to levels of the past decade. Moreover, Putin personally as well as the regime more generally has been paying more laudatory public attention to the military in the form of visits to facilities and rhetorical promotion of military modernization. Pride of place on this front has clearly gone to the goal of sustaining and modernizing Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent against the United States (and also but much less explicitly against China), mainly through deployments of the Topol-M intercontinental ballistic missile and the Bulava submarine-launched ballistic missile. Also highlighted, by Putin personally, is a hypersonic maneuvering reentry vehicle that can defeat any ballistic missile defense. The United

States is clearly the potential “main enemy” in this posturing, partly for reasons of deterrence, partly for political show.

Military reform and modernization objectives debated for over a decade are now asserted, at least rhetorically, more consistently. Russia must have, according to its current leaders, a modernized military that can wage "global war" (by this seems in context to be meant strategic nuclear retaliation for deterrence but not a massive global war on the scale of World War Two or what World War Three might have looked like); several large scale regional conflicts; and local conflicts against insurgents, terrorists, and the like.

Nuclear weapons play, if anything, a more prominent role in current Russian strategy than they did in Soviet times, at least in a qualitative sense. This is avowedly to make up for deficiencies in Russian general purpose land combat forces. This force multiplying role of nuclear weapons was widely discussed in Soviet military writings during the 1990s. Then this discussion went silent, suggesting that something serious was going on. From past public discussion and more recent comment by informed defense experts, the aim is not only to preserve a robust strategic nuclear deterrent, but to develop highly accurate long-range nuclear strike options for selective, strategic operations; and to develop new tactical or battlefield nuclear options suitable (presumably because of low yield) near Russian forces and even on Russian territory. This seems to include options for very limited, non-damaging demonstration firings aimed at stopping and "deescalating" a conflict. Possible conflict with NATO and the US (implicitly also China) is the contemplated setting for these capabilities.

### **IS TRADITIONAL RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE COMING BACK?**

This question cannot be convincingly answered at present because the story is still unfolding. It leads to further questions pertinent to tracking that process.

Is the Russian military coming back, finally? The rhetoric and budget increases would suggest so. But it remains unclear. Although large in percentage terms, budget increases still leave Russian military spending relatively modest, certainly by historical (Soviet) standards. Russia spends now about 2.7 percent of its GDP on defense, akin to that of advanced European countries, as its leaders point out. Military leaders protest that this is far too little to accomplish professed goals, while civilian leaders, including the Minister of Defense, proclaim that Russia is not going to "militarize" its federal budget or economy as in Soviet times. The priority goal of

sustaining the strategic nuclear deterrent can be accomplished relatively cheaply, compared to reforming and modernizing the general purpose forces.

For all the rhetoric and increased defense spending, it would appear that, at least for now, Russia's political leaders either care less about military power than their predecessors over decades and centuries, or they have a plan for gradually reforming and modernizing the military according to professed goals with the benefit of energy wealth coming in over many years.

Why might they care less about military power today than in the past? Despite articulated threat perceptions and professed goals, Russian leaders actually perceive an historically mild threat environment. The United States and NATO present no real military threat to Russia for the foreseeable future. Russo-Chinese relations are the best in decades; underlying political and strategic interests bode for them to remain so for the foreseeable future. The prospect of a real military threat from the Islamic south, perhaps from some new Caliphate, is distant at best. In short, military power—except for the strategic nuclear deterrent, the remaining military basis for Russia's claims to be a great power—is not terribly relevant to Russia's current environment. This condition could bode for either: 1) The enduring subsidence of the military element of Russian strategic culture; or 2) its gradual, carefully planned return as resources permit and threat environments encourage or demand.

What about Russia as an energy power? An old aphorism held that Russia had only two reliable allies, its army and navy. Today pundits rephrase this to proclaim that oil and gas are now Russia's reliable allies. Does this mean that Russia's leaders view energy resources as promising to the kind of power to coerce, intimidate, and control for which they once relied on military power? Their rhetoric and actions like that against Ukraine suggest that they do. Might the enduring tightness of the energy supply regime in the global market actually permit fulfillment of such ambitions? This is not at all clear. Energy is, after all, a form of economic power and leverage. But that leverage, ultimately, must be exercised in a marketplace of competing, but also cooperating, political and economic interests, where the actors must respect each others' interests and well-being. Acting only on competitive or combative instincts risks breaking down the market and loss of both the wealth and influence that economic leverage promises. This suggests the possibility that, over time, the quest to make Russia an energy power could exercise an educational, dare one say, “civilizing” influence on Russian strategic culture, especially as new generations come into the elite. Were this the effect, the result could

be a less combative-competitive political element in strategic culture, and its more lasting demilitarization.

But we must remember, as noted earlier: The combative and militaristic qualities of Russian strategic culture have survived revolutionary change before. They may do so again...but not inevitably.

## CONCLUSION

### **Concluding Note 1: The Bearers of Russian Strategic Culture**

In Imperial times, the bearers of Russia's strategic culture—perhaps steward would be a better term—were the military leadership, the monarchy, and the nobility. In Soviet times, they were the party leadership, especially in its strong symbiosis with the leaders of the Soviet military industrial complex, and the military leadership.

In post-Soviet times, the picture is more confused. The military leadership is clearly the embattled bearer of the traditional culture of mass forces based on conscription and mobilization. The political combative element is sustained by a host of actors and influences, from the Putin regime and its allies in the security services to a range of experts, journalists, academics, and ideologues of nationalist persuasion. Broad publics and elites clearly believe in a strong Russia, and that military power has to be a part of that strength. But there is also broad consensus that the military excesses of the Soviet period should not be repeated.

### **Concluding Note 2: The Role of WMD**

During Soviet times, nuclear weapons became central to strategy and posture, but certainly did not displace general purpose forces. The Soviets also invested lavishly in biological and chemical weapons, the noxious legacy of which lingers today.

Post-Soviet Russia seeks nuclear weapons, not merely as very important, but as a god-send to protect Russia during a time of internal weakness against foreign intrusion or attack such as Russia suffered during similar times in the past. It sees nuclear proliferation as a danger for Russia, but a more serious challenge to the United States in the near to middle term.

There are some indications that Russia continues a biological weapons program of some scale, probably as a hedge against what others might do in an era of revolutionary developments

in bio-technology. The main concern with respect to chemical weapons is probably to eliminate the huge stocks that remain, while maintaining some research on exotic new possibilities.

## Selected Readings<sup>1</sup>

- Blank, Stephen J., *Potemkin's Treadmill: Russian Military Modernization* (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2005)
- Fuller, William C., *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600-1914* (Free Press)
- Golts, Aleksandr, *Eleven Lost Years* (Moscow: I. V. Zakharov Publishing, 2004) [ In Russian; the only English translation of this book known to the compiler of this syllabus is from the US Government's Open Source Center, formerly FBIS].
- Herspring, Dale, *The Kremlin and the High Command* (forthcoming)
- National Intelligence Estimate, 11-4, *Soviet Power in the Global Arena* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974) [available in CIA declassified archives]
- Odom, William E., *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998)
- Putin, Vladimir, State of Nation Addresses, 2001-2006 [available in English from OSC/FBIS, or at [www.Kremlin.ru](http://www.Kremlin.ru)]
- Sokolovskiy, Marshal V. D., *Military Strategy: Soviet Doctrine and Concepts* (Frederick A. Praeger, 1963)
- Szamuely, Tibor, *The Russian Tradition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974)
- Wren, Melvin C., *The Course of Russian History* (New York: MacMillan, 1958)
- "Pundits Discern Putin's National Strategy Based on Excerpts From Speeches", Moskovskiy Novosti, June 14, 2006, Article compiled by Dmitriy Andreyev and Yekaterina Zabrodina [in Russian; English translation available from archives of Johnsons Russia List or from OSC/FBIS]

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<sup>1</sup> Compiler's Note: This selection aims to give the reader untutored in Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet history, from sources familiar to the compiler, as comprehensive but quickly accessible as possible a body of readings for developing a feel and sense of sweep of the subject. Most readings are rich in treatment of political, foreign policy, and economic, as well as military themes; they also for the most part contain references to an enormous number of additional sources. The period 1914-45 is not represented here because it is richly summarized and sourced in Sokolovskiy

## Russian Defense Spending In Real Terms 1991 - 2006

Table 5 Trend of Russian military spending in real terms: 'National Defence' plus military pensions (m.r.)

	GDP	%	GDP Deflator	ND+P (actual)	ND+P %GDP	Real %	92= 100	91= 100
2006B	24,380,000	105.8	107.5	744 508	3.05	106.3	63	41
2005F	21,430,000	106.4	118.4	651 362	3.04	111.2	59	39
2004	17 008 400	107.2	119.8	494 820	2.91	99.3	53	35
2003	13 243 200	107.3	114.0	415 940	3.14	107.7	53	35
2002	10 830 500	104.7	115.7	337 584	3.12	105.2	49	33
2001	8,943,600	105.1	116.5	277 464	3.19	111.2	47	31
2000	7,305,600	110.0	137.7	214,118	2.93	115.7	42	28
1999	4,823,200	106.4	172.4	134,412	2.79	103.4	36	24
1998	2,629,600	94.7	118.5	75,000	2.85	77.8	35	23
1997	2,342,500	101.4	115.1	81,400	3.47	110.7	45	29
1996	2,007,800	96.4	145.8	63,891	3.18	88.3	41	26
1995	1,428,500	95.9	263.0	49,565	3.47	66.1	46	30
1994	610,700	87.3	407.9	28,500	4.67	82.8	70	46
1993	171,500	91.3	988.4	7,213	4.20	85.4	85	56
1992	19,000	85.5	1,590.1	855	4.50	65.6	100	66
1991	1,400	95.0		82	5.86			100

Note: 2005 forecast - ND as Table 4, plus pensions, as original 2005 f.b. The latter may understate actual spending.

Sources: 1992-2006 budget, Rosstat/Goskomstat and Minfin data (can be supplied); 2005 as Table 4; 1991: Institute of Economy in Transition, *Russian Economy*,

January-September 1998. *Trends and Prospects*, Moscow, 1998, p.15 (c) Julian Cooper

Source: Warfare.ru

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Figure 1: Russian Military Spending

Here's how to read that table: Column 1 is the year. 2 is GDP in current, not constant, rubles. 3 is annual change in constant rubles, established by using the deflator in column 4. 5 is annual defense budget plus military pensions in current rubles. 6 is defense in constant rubles as a percent of GDP in constant rubles. 7 is annual change of defense in constant rubles. 8 and 9 show annual defense in constant rubles as a percent of two baseline years. I have not checked the current ruble data against contemporary reporting (though the table cites official sources), nor checked the correctness of the deflators and the arithmetic. The general picture of collapse in the 90s, then slow, modest recovery is consistent with common knowledge. But this detailed picture is dramatic. Flush with cash and draped with the rhetorical mantle of national security and strength, Putin's regime is spending just less than twice what Yeltsin's did at the nadir on military power. I know there are some funny money aspects to this, like subsidies from exports,

funds for defense in other accounts, money to the MVD and FSB, big institutional parts of the strategic culture. But the evidence at hand suggests something significant may be happening.