

J P W S

JOURNAL OF PEACE AND WAR STUDIES

4th Edition, October 2022



NORWICH
UNIVERSITY®

John and Mary Frances Patton Peace and War Center
Norwich University, USA

The Journal of Peace and War Studies (JPWS) aims to promote and disseminate high quality research on peace and war throughout the international academic community. It also aims to provide policy makers in the United States and many other countries with in-depth analyses of contemporary issues and policy alternatives. JPWS encompasses a wide range of research topics covering peacekeeping/peacebuilding, interstate reconciliation, transitional justice, international security, human security, cyber security, weapons of mass destruction developments, terrorism, civil wars, religious/ethnic conflicts, and historical/territorial disputes around the world. JPWS is an annual peer-reviewed journal published by the John and Mary Frances Patton Peace and War Center (PAWC) at Norwich University—America’s first private military college and birthplace of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC).

Editor Yangmo Ku

Associate Editors Steven Sodergren
Ali Askarov
Miri Kim
Michael Thunberg

Assistant Editor Vina Hutchinson

Editorial Board Kenki Adachi, Ritsumeikan University, Japan
Felix Berenskoetter, University of London, England
Scott Crichlow, West Virginia University, USA
Clarissa Estep, West Virginia University, USA
Lily Gardner Feldman, Johns Hopkins University, USA
Lyle Goldstein, Defense Priorities, USA
Linus Hagström, Swedish Defense University, Sweden
Youngjun Kim, Korea National Defense University, South Korea
Travis Morris, Norwich University, USA
André Simonyi, Royal Military College Saint-Jean, Canada
Kristina Soukupova, Czech Technical University, Czech Republic
Lon Strauss, Marine Corps University, USA
Lasha Tchantouridzé, Norwich University, USA
Alexis Vahlas, University of Strasbourg, France
Jindong Yuan, University of Sydney, Australia

The opinions expressed in this journal are those of the contributors and should not be construed as representing those of the John and Mary Frances Patton Peace and War Center, Norwich University or the editors of the *Journal of Peace and War Studies*.

Copyright © 2022 by the John and Mary Frances Patton Peace and War Center, Norwich University, Printed by Norwich University Press.

ISSN 2641-841X(Print) • ISSN 2641-8428 (Online)

JOURNAL OF PEACE AND WAR STUDIES

4th Edition, October 2022



John and Mary Frances Patton Peace and War Center
Norwich University, USA

JOURNAL OF PEACE AND WAR STUDIES

4th Edition, October 2022

CONTENTS

Deciphering the Russian Riddle: National Interests and Geopolitical Competitions

Russia's Grand Strategy toward the West

Thomas Graham.....1

The Domestic Foundations of Russian Foreign Policy

Peter Rutland.....16

Lessons From Syria: What We Can Learn About the Russian Way of War

Nikolas K. Gvosdev.....32

'Terrorist Recruiters' Versus 'Terrorist Slayers': Weaponizing Syria
in Russian Information Warfare

Eszter Szenes and Mark W. Perry.....47

The Aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Appeasement of Russia
and the War in Ukraine

Lasha Tchantouridzé.....77

The Russo-Chinese 'Strategic Partnership' Enters a New and
Dynamic Phase

Lyle Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev.....95

JOURNAL OF PEACE AND WAR STUDIES

4th Edition, October 2022

Not Your Father's Disinformation: Emerging Technology, Social Media Advances, and the Growth of Smart Disinformation	
Mary Manjikian.....	130
Bosnia and Russia: The Implications for European Security and US Interests	
Nadina Ronc.	148
Russian Information Operations: The Kremlin's Competitive Narratives and Arctic Influence Objectives	
P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Troy Bouffard, and Adam Lajeunesse.....	161
Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Vision of Ukrainian Nationhood	
Jessica Pisano.....	187
Borderland No More? Shifting Security Dynamics in Ukraine	
Angela Kachuyevski.....	199
STUDENT RESEARCH	
The Yugoslavia Civil War and the Allies in World War II	
Caleb M. Reilly.....	211
Evaluating the Value of US Diplomacy Through Strategic Ambiguity	
Ethan Owens.....	225

Russia's Grand Strategy toward the West

Thomas Graham

Abstract: Russia's grand strategy toward the West is grounded in its historical experience of the past 300 years. Russian President Vladimir Putin has translated the traditional pillars of that strategy—strategic depth, restriction on Western ideas, and disruption of hostile alliances—into five concrete tasks intended to fortify Russia against Western efforts to hold it down: Clamp down on Western influences inside Russia to prevent the regime from being undermined from within; create a buffer zone against the West in the former Soviet space; impede the consolidation of the European Union as a strategic rival; compel the United States to abandon its hegemonic designs and operate like a normal great power; and work with China to contain the West's strategic advance. How successful Russia will be is an open question, but its economic weakness raises doubts it can smoothly execute such an ambitious strategy.

Keywords: Russia; grand strategy; geopolitics; US-Russian relations; former Soviet space; China.

Introduction

Russia is a revisionist power. The prevailing Kremlin narrative is that the post-Cold War settlement in Europe was imposed upon Russia when it was strategically weak. Over Moscow's objections, the US and its allies pushed Euro-Atlantic institutions, notably NATO, whose original purpose was to contain Russia, and the European Union, which Russia could never aspire to join, eastward toward Russia's borders. Western ideas penetrated into Russia, threatening traditional Russian values and the regime itself. Washington supported ostensibly democratic but fundamentally anti-Russian color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005 with the goal of expanding its geopolitical reach in the former Soviet space at Russia's expense—or so Moscow would have the world believe.

As Russia regained its strength under President Vladimir Putin in the 2000s, it began to push back against the Western advance. Putin's passionate speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 made clear his intention to reassert Russia's position on the global stage. After castigating Washington for its alleged ambitions to create a unipolar world and refusal to respect Russia's interests, he declared: "Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy. We are not going to change this tradition today."¹

A year and a half later, Putin fought a short war against Georgia, at least in part to prevent its further progress toward NATO membership. For an analogous purpose, he annexed Crimea and sparked a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014. He ordered a military incursion into Syria in 2015 to bolster the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, and

counter what he saw as an American effort to use a popular uprising to oust him. And in February 2022 he launched a massive invasion of Ukraine to halt the country's westward drift and pull it firmly back into Russia's orbit, with the hope that his action would also erode the unity of the Western alliance and split the US from its European partners. His is a monumental effort to avenge the loss and humiliation of the 1990s and reassert Russia's standing as a great power in Europe.

Russia and the West: Historical Background

Putin's aggression has been vehemently criticized in the West. He has been demonized as a malevolent leader determined to upset the European security order established at the end of the Cold War by recreating the Soviet Union or Russian Empire and plunging the continent once again into the maelstrom of great-power competition and spheres of influence that marked Europe in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.

His methods are indeed brutal in the extreme, but the basic thrust of his policy falls well within the Russian strategic framework that has evolved since Russia entered the European balance of power system in the eighteenth century. Contrary to much Western commentary, that framework was not some emanation of Russia's authoritarian domestic politics or the manifestation of some musty messianic vision. Rather it was shaped by an unsentimental, calculated quest for the security of the state, that is, unabashed Realpolitik.²

Since the founding of the Muscovite state in the thirteenth century, Russia has sought security on the vast, nearly featureless Eurasian plain in the creation of strategic depth, the relentless pushing of the borders outward from the country's heartland. The process proceeded with great vigor during the eighteenth century, as the tsars focused on gaining access to warm water ports and expanding into Europe at the expense of a waning Sweden, Poland, and Ottoman Empire. Catherine the Great oversaw the greatest extension of Russian territory and control into Europe until Stalin, annexing much of what is Ukraine today, including Crimea, and collaborating with Austria and Prussia to partition Poland among themselves.³

But the tsars also had a sense of limits. Like the rulers of other great powers that composed the balance of power system—Britain, France, Austria, and Prussia—Russia subscribed to the system's essential principles. While Russia's rulers actively competed for power, influence, and land, they avoided actions that could unduly upset the balance—Catherine never sought to absorb Poland outright; rather, she carved it up with Austria and Prussia to preserve the equilibrium in Eastern Europe. If one state threatened to upset the balance through territorial expansion, the others had the right to resist or to demand compensation to restore the balance.⁴ That is why Russia became the great enemy of Napoleonic France, and why Alexander I worked diligently at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815 to rehabilitate France as an essential pillar of the balance of power and to carefully divide up the territory of Poland and Saxony to ensure a stable equilibrium among the great powers.⁵ The Congress also marked the Russian Empire's last significant territorial gain in Europe until it collapsed in 1917.

The Congress also represented an historical divide in the relationship between Europe and Russia. During the century before the Congress, Europeans generally accepted Russia as European, even if they were aware of the barbaric quality of life in the empire. What was important for them was that the basic structure of the Russian regime, exemplified by the Court in St. Petersburg, resembled the *anciens regimes* elsewhere in Europe. Visiting aristocrats could easily mix at the Court; the Court language was French. Non-Russians occupied senior positions in the diplomatic corps and the military. Catherine the Great herself was by birth a minor German princess.

This European view of Russia as one of their own changed dramatically after the Napoleonic Wars. Liberal democratic values that had emerged initially in Britain and France slowly moved eastward across the continent, undermining autocratic regimes along the way. They penetrated into Russia but never took root. Russia remained in essence an absolutist autocracy, reviled as the gendarmes of Europe until the Crimean War, after which a crushing defeat vastly reduced Russian power on the continent. Russia might be geographically in Europe and an essential element of the power balance, but, henceforth, it was increasingly not seen as part of Europe, spiritually, philosophically, or politically.⁶

This suited the tsarist regime well enough, even if there was a significant part of the elite that espoused European values, considered themselves to be Europeans, and wanted to modernize Russia along European lines. Moreover, the regime found itself on occasion compelled to adopt certain European political ideas and institutions to modernize the economy and advance technologically so that it could generate the power it needed to compete successfully with the more liberal great powers to the West. The Great Reforms of Alexander II, which emancipated the serfs, introduced local representative government, and liberalized the judicial and educational systems, among other things, are a case in point. But the regime's goal was always to borrow as little from the Europe as it could so as to preserve as best it could the fundamental, and essentially anti-European, characteristics of its autocracy. Censorship waxed and waned in direct proportion to the tsars' assessment of the threat Western ideas posed to their regime.⁷ And so another element of Russia's grand strategy toward the West became apparent: politically expedient restrictions on the flow of Western ideas into Russia.

A third element of the grand strategy grew in prominence after the debacle of the Crimean War. Suddenly made aware of its serious vulnerabilities, Russia launched a determined effort to disrupt any hostile coalition of powers along its borders. The Foreign Minister for a generation after the end of the war, Alexander Gorchakov, had as his first mission the dismantling of the old Crimean coalition.⁸ His successors actively maneuvered among the other European great powers, shifting alliances as necessary to ensure that Russia was not alone.

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century the broad outline of a Russian grand strategy toward the West was visible, resting on three objectives: strategic depth, restrictions

on Western ideas, and disruption of hostile coalitions. The Soviets pursued them, only with greater vigor and ruthlessness until the mid-1980s, when General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev launched a reform effort aimed at reinvigorating the Soviet system so that it could maintain its status as a great power well into the twenty-first century. He allowed the Soviet Union's buffer zone in Europe to collapse, opened the country to Western ideas, and sought partnership with the US. Instead of reviving his country, however, he precipitated its collapse. Nevertheless, the first postSoviet Russian leader, Boris Yeltsin, pursued a similar course, in part because he hoped the West would help Russia overcome a deep political and socio-economic crisis. Indeed, he sought to integrate his country into the Euro-Atlantic community. He failed, and it fell to his successor, Vladimir Putin, to draw the conclusion that Russia needed to restore its traditional framework for relations with West.

The Current Challenge

Putin has long harbored resentment against the West. His effort to forge a partnership with the US during his first years as president was driven not so much by a desire to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic region as by an effort to harness American power to the revival of Russia as a great power. After the horrific terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, he sought to build an anti-terrorist alliance with the US, which would have made Russia, at least symbolically, an equal of the US.⁹

Putin abandoned that approach as Russia engineered an economic recovery that enabled Russia to liberate itself from Western financial support and he came to see US policy as fundamentally inimical to Russian interests. The turning point came in 2004, bracketed by two events. The terrorist seizure of an elementary school in Beslan in September ended with the deaths of nearly 385 people, 186 of them children. Putin saw an American hand in the Chechen rebellion against Moscow, if not in the Beslan attack itself.¹⁰ The conclusion was clear: American talk of counterterrorism cooperation was little more than a smokescreen for US geopolitical advance in the former Soviet space at Russia's expense. In November, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine led to the Putin-backed presidential candidate being denied victory in favor of a pro-Western figure. That led Putin to conclude that US democracy promotion was just another smokescreen for American advance at Russia's expense.¹¹

The resentment built in the following years and culminated in Putin's remarks at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007.¹² That marked Putin's effective abandonment of any effort to forge a partnership with the West. His successor, Dmitriy Medvedev, might have still been interested in a partnership and welcomed US President Barack Obama's decision to reset relations, but once Putin announced his decision to return to the Kremlin in 2011, the deterioration in Russia-West relations restarted and accelerated, leading to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the most severe crisis in Russia-West relations since the darkest days of the Cold War. In Putin's eyes, American behavior was just the present-day manifestation of a centuries-old Western effort to contain and undermine Russia.¹³

Russia's Grand Strategy: The Goals

In confronting the West, Putin has retooled the traditional Russian approach to current circumstances. The traditional pillars—the quest for strategic depth, restriction on Western ideas, and disruption of hostile alliances—have been translated into five concrete tasks, all in the name of fortifying Russia as a great power against Western efforts to hold it down:

- Clamp down on Western influences inside Russia to prevent the regime from being undermined from within.
- Create a sphere of influence, or buffer zone, in the former Soviet space against encroachments by the West.
- Impede the consolidation of a European entity that would dwarf Russia in population, wealth, and power potential much as the US does today.
- Compel the US to operate like a normal great power, that is, a country that has no universalist ambitions and has to respect the interests of other great powers to advance its own.
- Build a strategic partnership with China to counterbalance Europe economically and the US strategically, that is, to contain the West's strategic advance.

During his twenty-plus years in power, Putin has elaborated a set of interlocking policies to advance these goals. At the same time, he has fashioned the necessary arrangements that have enabled him to mobilize the country's resources for his agenda, and built up the instruments of coercion, especially the military, which are essential to executing his policies. Although his approach may not have been articulated in full in any single document, his speeches over the years and various national security documents have laid out a discernible strategy toward the West. Moreover, it is a strategy that in broad outlines is likely to outlive him. It enjoys widespread support within the elements and resonates with the people. Putin's grand strategy toward the West is in fact Russia's grand strategy, well-grounded in Russian strategic thinking, tradition, and historical experience.

... And the Policies

Domestic Consolidation. Putin inherited from Yeltsin a Russia that was in disarray. Regional barons ruled their provinces with little regard for the Kremlin's preferences, and oligarchs privatized parts of the central government apparatus for their own parochial purposes. Foreign governments, particularly the US, had inserted themselves into government offices, playing a large role in the formulation of economic and budgetary policy.¹⁴

Putin saw as his first task restoring the Kremlin's writ across the country. He quickly tamed the regional barons and oligarchs. He divided the country into seven federal districts and placed his personal representatives in charge to ensure that the governors complied with Kremlin policies. He also stripped them of their ex officio seats in the Federation

Council, the upper house of the national legislature, thus depriving them of direct input into federal laws and legislation, as well as the immunity from criminal prosecution, which all federal legislators enjoyed. As for the oligarchs, he threatened to seize the commercial empires they had accumulated through corrupt means in the 1990s unless they desisted from interference in Kremlin politics. He drove into exile or imprisoned the very few who refused that offer. The others got the message.¹⁵

The second task was to restore Russia's sovereignty, that is, to create conditions in which Russia could govern itself free of outside interference. For that reason, he used the windfall from rising oil prices to pay off Russia's debt to the International Monetary Fund in 2005 and to the Paris Club of creditor nations in 2006, thus freeing Russia from Western financial tutelage.

While restoring Russia's financial independence, the Kremlin also turned to restricting foreign influence on domestic politics. In large part, this was a reaction to the color revolutions in the former Soviet space from 2003 through 2005. The Kremlin was convinced that the West used non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to foster regime change, and it was determined to fortify itself against such agents.¹⁶ In 2006, it passed legislation that limited the operations of foreign NGOs in Russia.¹⁷ At the same time, it sought to limit the activities of religious organizations, especially the Jehovah Witnesses and Pentecostals, that were not among Russia's traditional religions (Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism).

The effort to reduce foreign influence, and push back against Western values, was accelerated with Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012. In the midst of an economic slowdown, he decided to shift the basis of the regime's legitimacy from rising living standards to patriotic pride.¹⁸ The Kremlin had school history texts rewritten to present a more positive view of Russia's development. It reintroduced patriotic education into the school system. As an addition to the large May 9 military parade on Red Square marking the victory over Nazi Germany, a celebration Putin had revived in his first presidential term, the Kremlin endorsed a civilian procession, the Immortal Regiment, to underscore the links of ordinary Russians to the generation that won the war.

To bolster this patriotic pride, Putin increasingly espoused traditional Russian, Orthodox family values, which he contrasted with the values of a decadent West. And he introduced policies to circumscribe the spread of Western values in Russia, beginning with the Foreign Agents law of 2012, which required any NGO receiving foreign funding to register as a "foreign agent," a term associated in the Russian mind with spying, espionage, and treachery.¹⁹ More recently, the law has been extended to apply to individuals, especially bloggers, who might receive foreign sources of income.

In the past two years, the Kremlin has made a concerted effort to crack down on all political dissidence that has Western overtones. The fate of Russia's leading opposition figure, Aleksey Navalny, provides the most graphic example.²⁰ A failed assassination attempt

with a deadly poison, Novichok, in August 2020 was followed by his arrest in January 2021, when he returned to Russia after recovering abroad from the effects of the poison, and then imprisonment on trumped-up charges. His countrywide political organization was quickly suppressed, as its leading organizers were either arrested or fled into exile. More recently, with the war in Ukraine raging, the Kremlin has cracked down on all independent media outlets—especially those espousing liberal, Western values, such as the popular radio station Echo of Moscow and the TV channel Rain.

In a little more than twenty years, Putin has thus reshaped domestic politics to increase the country's resilience against Western ideas and attitudes. This has provided him with a foundation, upon which he believes he can be more assertive in pursuing Russia's national interests abroad in the face of what he sees as a concerted Western effort to undermine Russia.

Post-Soviet Sphere of Influence. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia has explored various institutional arrangements to retain its influence and presence in the former Soviet states, starting with the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991. A subset of those states signed the Collective Security Treaty in 1992 to coordinate military and security matters. But all these efforts languished as Russia suffered from a profound socio-economic and political crisis in the 1990s.²¹

Although the Collective Security Treaty was given an organizational framework in 2002 to enhance security cooperation and Russia's influence, Putin initially was not focused on building an exclusive Russian sphere of influence in the former Soviet space. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, over the objections of his security officials, Putin approved the temporary establishment of US military bases in Central Asia to fight the war in Afghanistan.²² He also did nothing to discourage US military and security cooperation with Georgia, which included assistance in Tbilisi's regaining control over the Pankisi Gorge, which had been a safe haven for Chechen rebels fighting against Moscow in Chechnya.

But Putin's views changed rapidly after the color revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. The latter precipitated a government-wide reassessment of US goals in the former Soviet space and a decision that Moscow needed to resist US encroachments on Russia's sphere of influence with much greater vigor. The first notable success was Uzbekistan's demand in 2005, with Moscow's active encouragement, that the US vacate its military base at Karshi-Khanabad amid strains in bilateral relations growing out of Washington's condemnation of the methods Tashkent had used to suppress anti-government protests in the Fergana Valley.²³ At the same time, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, issued a statement demanding that the US set a deadline by which it would close its military bases in Central Asia—something Washington refused to do.²⁴ (The last US base at Manas, Kyrgyzstan, was not vacated until 2014.)²⁵

Putin also gradually came to the view that Russia needed to enhance its economic cooperation with the former Soviet states to protect itself against Western encroachment. In

2011, when he was still prime minister (but had already made clear his intention to reclaim the presidency from Medvedev), Putin endorsed the creation of a Eurasian Economic Union, an idea the Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev had first raised shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union.²⁶ Soon thereafter, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus agreed to establish such a union by 2015. More recently, Putin has exploited the travails of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, growing out of a massive popular protest against a rigged presidential election in 2020, to compel him to cede ever more of his country's sovereignty in economic matters to Russia in the framework of the Belarus-Russia Union State, which was created in 1999.²⁷

In the Kremlin's view, none of these arrangements is complete politically, economically, or militarily without the participation of Ukraine, the post-Soviet state with the greatest power potential after Russia. Ukraine occupies strategically valuable territory on the north shore of the Black Sea, providing Russia a gateway into Europe and a buffer zone against invasion from the West. Moreover, Crimea, the Ukrainian peninsula that dominates the Black Sea, is home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet—Moscow had insisted on retaining the lion's share of the Soviet fleet when the Soviet Union broke up for strategic reasons.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, however, has been at odds with the Kremlin, determined to assert its own independence and sovereignty. It refused to become a full member of the Commonwealth of Independent States or join the Collective Security Treaty. It relinquished its Soviet-era nuclear arsenal only after receiving (as it turned out worthless) security guarantees from Russia, the US, and the United Kingdom in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. It bargained hard over Moscow's access to the Black Sea Fleet's facilities in Crimea, while holding open the possibility of allowing NATO ships to use Crimean ports. Since the middle of the 2000s a large segment of the Ukrainian elite has worked to integrate Ukraine fully into the Euro-Atlantic community through membership in both NATO and the European Union. In 2019, Ukraine enshrined in the constitution its strategic course toward membership in those two organizations.²⁸

Moscow finds Ukraine's westward aspirations an unacceptable threat to its security and prosperity. It has tried various ways to keep Ukraine in its orbit—alternating between economic blandishments (heavily subsidized prices for natural gas up to 2006, for example) and economic pressure (sharp increases in the price for natural gas and temporary cutoffs in supply for non-payment of Ukraine's substantial debt).²⁹ More recently, Moscow has resorted to force. Its annexation of Crimea and fomenting of rebellion in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 came in response to events in Kyiv that forced a pro-Russian president to flee the country and put in place a government intent on rapidly moving westward politically and economically. These moves did not have the desired effect. Ukraine signed an Association Agreement with the European Union in 2015, and in 2020, NATO granted the country the status of a "Enhanced Opportunity Partner." Those developments lay behind Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022, in an effort to end conclusively any Ukrainian aspirations to join NATO and fully escape the Russian orbit.

Disruption of Europe. With a population of 450 million, a GDP of \$15.2 trillion (in nominal terms), and a world-class scientific-technological base, a fully consolidated European Union would dwarf Russia (144 million people, \$1.5 trillion economy) in power potential much as the US does today. By contrast, Russia compares favorably in power potential with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, Europe's major powers. The calculus is thus simple for Moscow: it needs to do whatever it can to retard, if not reverse, the consolidation of the European Union. In this regard, although it had little influence over the U.K.'s exit from the EU, that development was most decidedly viewed with great favor in Moscow.

Moscow has resorted to various tools to drive wedges between EU and NATO member states, and between the US and Europe, and to exacerbate tensions within individual countries. It has, for example, used differentiated energy policies to nourish tensions between Germany on the one hand and Poland and the Baltic states on the other.³⁰ The dispute over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline—a Russian-German joint venture that Poland and the Baltic states adamantly oppose— is a case in point. Moscow has financially supported both right- and leftwing populist and nationalist movements, overtly and covertly, to fuel opposition to Brussels and to put pressure on the governments of individual states. It has developed warm ties with the Hungarian leader, Victor Orban, whose authoritarian tendencies have caused friction with the EU. It has used cybertools and disinformation campaigns to disrupt electoral processes across the continent. And it has put pressure on the vulnerable Baltic states to raise concerns as to whether NATO would indeed honor its guarantee of collective defense in the event of a Russian attack and anxieties among other NATO members that they might in fact be called upon to honor that guarantee.

In addition, Moscow is actively stoking instability in the Balkans.³¹ It stood behind an abortive coup in Montenegro in 2016 to derail that country's path to NATO membership. It has maintained close ties with its traditional ally Serbia and supported Belgrade's continuing efforts to undermine Kosovo's independence. It has backed Bosnian-Serb leader Milorad Dodik's separatist aspirations and disruptive policies inside Bosnia-Herzegovina. More broadly, it has used disinformation campaigns to stoke tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim populations in the region. All these steps have complicated EU and NATO efforts to pacify the region and to integrate the individual countries into the Euro-Atlantic community.

Finally, Putin has exploited Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's disaffection with the reaction of the US and other NATO countries to the failed coup attempt in 2016, and the close cooperation by the US with Kurdish forces in Syria, which Ankara claims have links to terrorist groups inside Turkey—to drive a wedge between Turkey and NATO.³² Erdoğan's decision to purchase Russia's advanced S-400 air defense system—against Washington's strenuous objections—has further strained relations already under stress because of his authoritarian tendencies.

Containment of the US. Putin's goal with regard to the US, simply put, is to transform that country into a normal great power, that is, one without universalist ambitions that has to respect the interests of the other great powers to advance its own. He has, however, evolved in his approach to this task. When he first assumed power, Putin hoped that he could build a partnership with the US that would give him influence over Washington, much as Britain's vaunted "special relationship" with Washington reputedly did. That was one reason for Putin's quick offer of support to President George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, despite opposition from his security chiefs. This effort culminated in the Moscow Summit in June 2002, when the two presidents issued a joint declaration that laid out a framework for strategic partnership.

But Putin was quickly disabused of any thought that this arrangement gave him significant influence in Washington. Bush withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, despite Moscow's objections, shortly after the Moscow Summit (he had indicated his intention to do so six months earlier). He proceeded with a major expansion of NATO, including membership for the Baltic states, even though this raised grave concerns in Moscow. He invaded Iraq, despite Putin's protest. And he failed to offer much assistance to Putin in his effort to suppress the Chechen rebels, who were terrorists in Moscow's view but who, in Washington's eyes, had legitimate grievances against Moscow. Beslan and the Orange Revolution finally persuaded Putin that partnership with the US would not limit its ambitions or the challenges it posed to Russia's position in Eurasia and aspirations to play a larger role on the world stage.

Consequently, Putin turned to other means of containing what he saw as Washington's hegemonic designs.³³ He began to pay more attention to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a counterweight to US actions in Central Asia. He launched the BRICS process, which brought Brazil, Russia, India, and China, and later South Africa, together, to give them more weight in the global economy by setting up alternatives to the power of the Western-dominated international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.³⁴ And he stressed the importance of such institutions as the United Nations Security Council and, to a lesser degree, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as platforms for discussion of major security issues because Russia had an effective veto over US actions in them.

At the same time, Putin began to challenge the US more frontally, in both word and deed. His remarks at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 marked the beginning of a series of addresses that castigated the US for its alleged ambitions to build a unipolar world and impose its values, as well as its general disrespect for countries that pursued independent foreign policies, such as Russia. He used force for the first time in Georgia in 2008 to thwart what he saw as a US effort to bring that country into NATO and tear it out of Russia's sphere of influence. He used force again in Ukraine in 2014 for a similar purpose, and in Syria in 2015 to undermine US policy in the Middle East. And he invaded Ukraine in 2022 to stop NATO's eastward expansion.

Strategic alignment with China. Russia began to improve relations with China in the late Soviet period. Relations continued to advance under Yeltsin and then Putin, with a major acceleration coming in the wake of the Ukraine crisis in 2014. The goal throughout has been to use relations with China to expand Russia's room for maneuver on the global stage, particularly vis-à-vis the US.

The rapid rise of China as both an economic and military power has given it added weight in Russia's strategic calculations. It can serve as an alternative to the European Union in trade, enabling Moscow to reduce its excessive reliance on Europe, which accounts for about half of Russia's bilateral trade and roughly three-quarters of foreign direct investment in Russia (at least until the outbreak of the war in Ukraine). It provides an alternative market for Russian oil and gas, which are exported primarily to Europe (until Russia began to produce liquified natural gas, virtually all of Russian gas exports went by pipeline to Europe). To this end, Russia has built an oil and a gas pipeline into China. At the same time, China can also serve as a strategic counterbalance to the US.

Closer alignment with Russia has also served China's purposes by providing it ready access to natural resources to fuel its robust economic growth and stability along a long border that allows China to devote greater attention and resources to the challenge it faces from the US in East Asia and the Western Pacific. As a result, strategic alignment has progressed rapidly in recent years. Bilateral trade approaches \$150 billion annually, making China Russia's top trading partner. Long wary of Chinese investments in Siberia and the Far East, Russia now welcomes them. At the same time, defense cooperation has grown dramatically. Joint military exercises are routine and increasing in complexity and ambition. Joint naval exercises have taken place in the South China Sea, in the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, and near the Persian Gulf. Russia is selling China some of its most sophisticated military hardware, including an advanced jet fighter (Sukhoi SU-35) and the sophisticated S-400 air defense system. It is now helping China build a ballistic-missile early warning system, which, when complete, will make China one of only three countries to have such a system, the other two being Russia and the US. Meanwhile, the two countries have stepped up their coordination of positions at international fora in opposition to what both see as US hegemonic ambitions, while advocating for a multipolar world.

"Not always for but never against" is the way Russians describe relations with China, an attribute that is on display in voting patterns at the UN Security Council, most recently in a vote condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Russia vetoed the resolution; China abstained). While Sino-Russian relations fall short of a full-fledged alliance, they are moving in that direction.³⁵ In a February 4, 2022, joint statement, Putin and Xi Jinping declared that there are "no limits" to their strategic partnership and, for the first time, Beijing officially announced its opposition to NATO's expansion.³⁶

Conclusion

Although Russia under President Putin has never articulated a grand strategy toward the West in a single document, it has developed a grand strategic framework that guides its actions on the global stage and enables it to opportunistically advance its interests against the West in a rapidly changing geopolitical context. It undergirds a sense of purpose and political will that have enabled Russia to become one of the three most consequential geopolitical actors in the world today, along with China and the US, even though by most measures—population, GDP, and investment in research and development, for example—it lags far behind the other two.

Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether this grand strategy will serve Russian purposes over the long run. Even now it is clear that Russia's ambitions outrun its accomplishments. Russia has been more active in the former Soviet space in recent years, but its hold on the region is not necessarily any firmer—as recent unrest in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and the South Caucasus underscores. Political disarray in Europe is much more a consequence of domestic circumstances than Russian action. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates, its actions can be counterproductive, galvanizing Europe's resistance to Russia—Finland and Sweden, two traditionally neutral countries, are on a fast track to NATO membership, and Europe is now working hard to wean itself off of dependence on Russian energy resources. The same goes for Russian efforts to constrain the US—Russia's invasion of Ukraine has energized Washington to play a more active role on the global stage in opposition to Russia. Even the strategic alignment with China is fraught with long-term complications—given the great disparity in growth rates and the breakdown in relations with the West, Russia is well on its way to becoming China's junior party, in danger of losing its much-prized strategic autonomy.

Finally, there remains the profound question of Moscow's ability to generate over the long run the resources and power it needs to pursue an ambitious grand strategy toward the West. The West is now levying crushing sanctions against Russia because of its actions in Ukraine for the express purpose of eroding Moscow's power-generating capabilities. And those sanctions come after a decade during which the Russian economy has stagnated. As John LaDonne noted, the Soviet Union collapsed, as did the Russian Empire before it, because it could not reconcile military and political ambition with economic backwardness.³⁷ Russia today might not be headed for collapse, but its continuing economic problems raise doubts about how successful it will be in containing the West.

Thomas Graham, a distinguished fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, was the senior director for Russia on the National Security Council staff during the George W. Bush administration. During his Foreign Service career, he served two tours of duty in the political section of the US Embassy in Moscow and, as acting political counselor from 1996 to 1997, oversaw all embassy political reporting to Washington.

Endnotes

1. Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," transcript of speech delivered at Munich Security Conference, Munich, Germany, February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.
2. William C. Fuller Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600-1914* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 132-139.
3. "Expansion of Russia 1689-1796," Mapping Globalization, Princeton University, 2004, <https://commons.princeton.edu/mg/expansion-of-russia-1689-1796/>.
4. Martin Malia, *Russian under Western Eyes* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1999), 21-23.
5. Mark Jarrett, *The Congress of Vienna and Its Legacy: War and Great Power Diplomacy after Napoleon* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 152-153.
6. Malia, *Russian under Western Eyes*, 27-39.
7. Marianna Tax Choldin, *A Fence around the Empire: Russian Censorship of Western Ideas under the Tsars* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 1-2, 18-19.
8. Fuller, *Strategy and Power*, 270-271.
9. Angela Stent, "The Impact of September 11 on US-Russian Relations," Brookings Institute, September 8, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/08/the-impact-of-september-11-on-us-russian-relations/>.
10. Vladimir Putin, "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina (Address of the President of Russia Vladimir Putin)," September 4, 2004, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22589>.
11. Vladimir Putin, "Speech at a Conference in the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Foundation," transcript of speech delivered in New Delhi, India, December 3, 2004, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22720>.
12. Daniel Fried and Kurt Volker, "Opinion: The Speech in Which Putin Told Us Who He Was," *Politico*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918>.
13. Vladimir Putin, "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina (Address of the President of Russia Vladimir Putin)," March 18, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22589>.
14. James Lloyd, "The Russian Devolution," *The New York Times*, August 15, 1999, 269, 276, 279, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 484.
15. Richard Sakwa, "Putin and the Oligarchs," *New Political Economy* 13, no. 2 (May 12, 2008): 186-187, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460802018513>; Thomas E. Graham Jr., *Russia's Decline and Uncertain Recovery* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002), 47-49.
16. Nick Paton Walsh, "Russia Says 'Spies' Work in Foreign NGOs," *The Guardian*, May 13, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/may/13/russia.nickpatonwalsh>.

17. C.J. Chivers, "Kremlin Puts Foreign NGOs on Notice," *The New York Times*, October 20, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/20/world/europe/20russia.html>.
18. Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield, "Putin's Nationalism Problem," in *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, ed. Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa, E-International Relations Publishing, 2016, 157, <https://www.e-ir.info/publication/ukraine-and-russia-people-politics-propaganda-and-perspectives/>.
19. "Russia's NGO Laws," Freedom House, 2013, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet_0.pdf.
20. Adam Taylor et al., "Who Is Alexei Navalny, the Kremlin Critic Serving Time in a Russian Penal Colony?," *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/08/20/who-is-alexei-navalny-kremlin-critic-coma-after-suspected-poisoning/>.
21. Rouben Azizian, "Russia's Crisis: What Went Wrong?," *New Zealand International Review* 24, no. 1 (1999): 2-5.
22. John O'Loughlin, Gearóid O'Tuathail, and Vladimir Kolossov, "A 'Risky Westward Turn'? Putin's 9-11 Script and Ordinary Russians," *Europe-Asia Studies* 56, no. 1 (January 2004): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966813032000161428>.
23. "US Asked to Leave Uzbek Air Base," BBC News, July 30, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4731411.stm>.
24. N. Nazarbaev et al., "Declaration of Heads of Member-States of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 9, no. 3 (2005): 140-146.
25. Olga Dzyubenko, "U.S. Vacates Base in Central Asia as Russia's Clout Rises," *Reuters*, June 3, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-usa-manas/u-s-vacates-base-in-central-asia-as-russias-clout-rises-idUSKBN0EE1LH20140603>.
26. Vladimir Putin, "Novyi Integratsionnyi Proekt Dlia Evrazii – Budushchee, Kotoroe Rozhdaetsia Cevodnia (A New Integration Project for Eurasia—The Future that is Being Born Today)," *Izvestiia*, October 3, 2011.
27. David R. Cameron, "As Russia & Belarus Develop Their Union State & Hold Huge Military Exercise, Russia Goes to the Polls," Yale MacMillan Center, September 15, 2021, <https://macmillan.yale.edu/news/russia-belarus-develop-their-union-state-hold-huge-military-exercise-russia-goes-polls>.
28. See <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-president-signs-constitutional-amendment-on-nato-eu-membership/29779430.html>.
29. Jeffrey Mankoff, interview by Bernard Gwertzman, *The Business and Politics Behind the Russia-Ukraine Gas Dispute*, Council on Foreign Relations, January 8, 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/business-and-politics-behind-russia-ukraine-gas-dispute>. See also Vladimir Putin, "Strategicheskoe planirovanie vosproizvodstva mineral'no-syr'yevoi bazy regiona v usloviakh formirovaniia rynochnykh otnoshenii ([Strategic Planning for the Reproduction of the Mineral Base of a Region as a Market System is Being Formed]Dissertation)," dissertation, 1997, opl.

30. Filippos Proedrou, "Russian Energy Policy and Structural Power in Europe," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 1 (February 2018): 75-89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1419169>.
31. Ritsa Panagiotou, "The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union: Perceptions, Reality, and Impact on Enlargement," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 29, no. 2 (July 29, 2020): 219-233, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1798218>.
32. Rahim Rahimov, "Putin-Erdogan Relations Grow into a Russian-Turkish Partnership," Wilson Center, April 24, 2015, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/putin-erdogan-relations-grow-russian-turkish-partnership>.
33. Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky, "Multipolarity in Practice: Understanding Russia's Engagement with Regional Institutions," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 8, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/01/08/multipolarity-in-practice-understanding-russia-s-engagement-with-regional-institutions-pub-80717>.
34. The BRICS (minus South Africa) was initially a Goldman Sachs emerging market concept, which Putin co-opted to advance his global ambitions. The group's first ministerial meeting was held in 2006 and its first summit, in Russia, in 2009, while Putin was serving as prime minister.
35. Ken Moritsugu, "Russia, China Push Back against US in Pre-Olympics Summit," Associated Press, February 4, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-putin-xi-meet-0e9127176250c0cab19b36e75800052e>.
36. "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," February 4, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.
37. John P. LeDonne, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire: 1650-1831* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 233.

The Domestic Foundations of Russian Foreign Policy

Peter Rutland

Abstract: This paper explores some of the structural features of Russia's political system post-1991 that lay behind the decision to launch the disastrous war in Ukraine. The creeping authoritarianism since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000 prepared the ground for the aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the invasion in 2022. The checks and balances on presidential power were neutralized, and the bloc of security officials became increasingly influential. A campaign of state patriotism, promoting the restoration of Russia as a great power, served to prepare Russian society for war. Yet while the political system was becoming more authoritarian and more stridently anti-Western, Russia's prosperity was still dependent on trade with the West. Putin gambled that the Ukrainian war would be short, and that the West would be divided and indecisive in response. Ordinary Russians and the business elite in particular stand to lose massively from Western efforts to isolate the Russian economy in retaliation for the invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords: Russia; Ukraine; war; foreign policy; militarization.

Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the shifts in Russia's domestic political and economic institutions which made possible the disastrous invasion of Ukraine in 2022. At the beginning of the Putin era there was widespread optimism that Russia was on a path to a capitalist economy, integrated with the West, and that it had adopted the institutions of electoral democracy. These developments, if true, would have made it increasingly unlikely—if not impossible—for Russia to launch a genocidal war on Ukraine. The paper re-examines our understanding of the politics of Putinism to show that behind the creeping authoritarianism was something more than Putin's desire to secure his grip on power and enrich himself: Russian society was being prepared for war.

The Ukrainian war is explained by Russia's geopolitical rivalry with the West and Putin's desire to prevent further NATO encroachment on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Clearly, these external drivers were key in shaping Putin's decision to go to war. But leaving aside the geopolitical context, this paper seeks to explore the structural features of Russia's domestic political system post-1991 that made possible the disastrous war in Ukraine: the *Innenpolitik* (domestic politics) that lies beneath the *Aussenpolitik* (foreign policy). The German terms seem appropriate since Vladimir Putin is living in Bismarck's nineteenth-century world of imperial expansion, where war is a habitual tool for the promotion of national interests.

On Putin's watch, Russia intervened with military force in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), and Syria (2015), along with indirect involvement through mercenaries in Libya, Chad, and Mali from 2018 on.¹ Clearly, the authoritarian regime that Putin has engineered was accompanied by a reversion to Russia's traditional historical pattern of reliance on

the military as the backbone of the state. The increasing concentration of power in Putin's hands removed the checks and balances of a democratic system which could have blocked the path to all-out war with Ukraine. The growing censorship of the media and civil society reduced the scope for debate and the chance for alternative channels of information to percolate up to the decision makers. Increased spending on the security forces and their veneration in state ideology made it more like that military solutions would be sought to the challenges facing Russia.² The question of Russian political identity, and the way that Soviet and Tsarist history is brought into play in defining Russia's relations with the outside world, are also highly relevant to understanding Russia's war on Ukraine. Putin's historical revisionism is beyond the scope of this paper but is well covered in other sources.³

Post-Soviet Russia emerged as a shaky electoral democracy that, according to Freedom House, achieved its maximal level of democracy in 1992. The 1990s were dogged by corruption, a breakdown of the rule of law, and a brutal war to suppress the independence of Chechnya.⁴ Vladimir Putin was chosen as Boris Yeltsin's successor at the end of 1999 and elected president in 2000—the first transition of power in Russia's 1,000-year history that followed some sort of constitutional due process. Under Putin, however, the level of political freedom steadily eroded, while Putin adopted a more confrontational policy toward the West, as signaled by his 2007 speech to the Munich Security Forum.⁵

Since the Soviet collapse, Russia's leaders have mostly pursued integration into global economy, which involved adoption—and adaptation—of Western economic institutions.⁶ Trade (imports and exports combined) as a share of GDP grew from 10-15 percent at the end of the 1980s to close to 50 percent by the 2000s.⁷ At the same time, in the broader Russia society, tropes of hostility toward global integration were still prevalent. After the political crisis caused by Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin began to disengage Russia from the West, politically and economically.⁸ But despite Putin's rhetorical commitment to economic independence from the West, actual implementation of importsubstitution projects was slow, leaving Russia vulnerable to the sanctions that were imposed after the 2022 invasion.

Putin's first two decades in power left a contradictory legacy. Russia's growing authoritarianism and hostility toward the West sat uneasily with the fact that its economic prosperity depended heavily on integration with the very Western economies whose values and influence Putin increasingly openly resented. These contradictions came to a head with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Putin's Authoritarian Regime

The Russian political system is weakly institutionalized compared to other advanced industrial societies. Formally, there is a constitution and institutions of democratic rule, but in practice the Kremlin violates those norms when it chooses to do so and has been at pains to strip the electoral system of genuine competition. The legal system is in place, but for politically connected people it can be short-circuited.⁹

Over his 22 years as president (including four years as prime minister, 2008-2012), Putin has consolidated power in his own hands to an extraordinary degree, and at the same time he restored the capacity of the Russian state both at home and abroad. Analysts disagree over the extent to which Putin is a personal dictator, capable of getting what he wants over each and every issue; or more of a broker, balancing competing factions in and around the Kremlin.¹⁰ The two key groups that form the backbone of the Russian elite are the people running the security agencies (the *siloviki*) and the new capitalist class, the oligarchs.¹¹ These two groups stand atop of a large state bureaucracy composed of millions of loyal officials that administer and monitor Russian society. After his accession to the presidency, Putin used the *siloviki* to rein in the autonomy of the leaders of Russia's 89 regions and to push the oligarchs out from political power. At the same time, in addition to the institutional bureaucracies of the *siloviki*, Putin relied heavily on an inner circle of trusted aides, who have personal connections to him going back to the 1990s, when Putin was working in the St. Petersburg mayor's office.¹² From 2004 on, once the Putin regime had been consolidated, the *siloviki* and the inner circle were able to expand their own personal control over economic assets, expropriating or buying out existing owners.

How is it that this small group of men can rule with an iron hand a large, diverse country of 145 million people spread over 11 time zones? In order to understand the current configuration of power, it is important to look back at the collapse of the Soviet state in the 1990s and its recuperation in the 2000s.

After becoming president in 2000, Putin moved quickly to restore what came to be known as the "power vertical."¹³ In the Soviet Union, the Communist Party had provided a tightly controlled bureaucratic chain of command which reached down into every school, factory, and military unit in the country. The Communist Party vertical operated in parallel to the multiple ministerial bureaucracies that ran Soviet industry, agriculture, and government agencies. The Communist Party tried to coordinate the workings of the state Leviathan, to ensure that the Kremlin's current priorities were being addressed, and kept an eye on the mass population to ensure its political quiescence.

After the failed August 1991 coup, the Soviet Communist Party was banned. When it was reconstituted as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation in 1993, it no longer had a privileged position inside state institutions: it was just another opposition political party. This meant that post-Soviet Russia lacked the central control bureaucracy that the Communist Party had provided. Instead, those coordination functions were the responsibility of the presidential administration at national level, and to the regional leaders in Russia's then 89 provinces. After 1995 the regional governors were directly elected, and thus had a source of political legitimacy independent of the Kremlin. The new Russian state was more ethnically homogeneous than the old Soviet Union, since Russians made up 80 percent of the population as opposed to just 53 percent in the former USSR. But 32 of the provinces were ethnically designated republics, whose leaders were called presidents. In the 1990s most of the ethnic republics jealously guarded their newly won autonomy, finding

ways to avoid paying federal taxes and passing laws which violated federal legislation. Many of the non-ethnic regional governors followed suit.¹⁴

Yeltsin found his economic reforms blocked by the Congress of People's Deputies. In October 1993 he used the army to disband the Congress and then held a referendum in December 1993 to introduce a new constitution and a State Duma with limited powers vis-à-vis the presidency. However, pro-Yeltsin parties fared poorly in elections to the State Duma in 1993, 1995, and 1999, and the Kremlin was stalemated by the opposition-controlled Duma throughout Yeltsin's time in office. Between 1995 and 2000, for example, not a single federal budget was approved by the Duma in advance.

Yeltsin is typically portrayed as the founding father of Russian democracy. However, Archie Brown points out that nearly all the key features of liberal democracy were introduced by Gorbachev, not Yeltsin: free media, competitive elections, freedom to travel, private property, etc.¹⁵ (Yeltsin's one innovation was the introduction of direct election of regional governors.) It is also overlooked that the army played a key role in Yeltsin's rise to power—refusing to support the coup in August 1991, and then obeying Yeltsin's order to shell the congress in October 1993. That meant Yeltsin had little choice but to agree to the army's plan to invade Chechnya in December 1994—so the military foundation of the post-Soviet political system did not start with Putin.

On December 31, 1999, Yeltsin nominated Putin as his successor, and he won election in March 2000. Putin moved quickly to restore the “power vertical,” aiming to create a single pyramid of patrimonial power in place of the multiple competing power centers of the 1990s.¹⁶ He forced out the major owners of the two leading independent television stations, Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, and arranged for them to be taken over by Kremlin-loyal corporations. He created seven new federal districts (*okrugy*) to monitor the regions, ensuring that they paid their taxes, brought their laws into compliance with federal legislation, and delivered votes for Putin and his party, United Russia, in elections.¹⁷ Each *okrug* had a head answering directly to Putin, and there was a presidential representative in each region reporting directly to them. Geographically, the *okrugy* were based on the federal military districts, and most of the presidential representatives were former military or KGB officials. This new vertical chain of command was effectively a replacement for the old Communist Party network. It led to a rapid improvement in tax collection and—to a lesser extent—the capacity of the federal government to implement its policies. The new tax code introduced in 2003 sharply increased the proportion of taxes collected by the federal center.¹⁸ In 2004, Putin used the excuse of the terrorist attack on the Beslan school in North Ossetia to abolish the direct election of regional governors: one of the few remaining elements of electoral competition in the Russian political system. At that point Freedom House downgraded Russia from “partly free” to “unfree.”

Russia is a hybrid regime combining formal democratic institutions (a constitution, regular elections) with the informal exercise of power by a ruling elite. Autocrats can use

their control over the media to win elections and manage society without the need for crude repression.¹⁹ In authoritarian regimes of the Russian type, elections are regularly held to maintain the appearance of democratic accountability, and the regime has to adjust its tactics to accommodate changing social moods and needs.²⁰ Election management tools include spoiler candidates, workplace mobilization, the cooptation of opposition leaders, and the falsification of results. Most of these techniques were already deployed in the 1990s and were carried over into the Putin era.²¹ A key strategy to ensure the desired outcome is to fragment the opposition: encouraging weak opposition parties to run (and lose) creates an image of competition while posing no real threat of a transfer of power. At the same time, a powerful personality cult was built up around Putin as a national leader, floating above the messy business of party politics, and aided by populist performances such as his annual “direct line” television show in which he fields calls from citizens around the country.²² In 2020 Putin consolidated his grip on power by rewriting the constitution to enable him to serve for two more terms after 2024: in effect, president for life.²³

At the same time, Putin took steps to rebuild Russian national identity, focused on patriotism and pride in Russia’s return to the world stage as a great power. In the 1990s, Russia was torn by competing interpretations of national identity and the appropriate ideological foundation for the new/old Russian state. The very proximity of Russian and Soviet identities made it difficult for Russians to define themselves in opposition to their Soviet past, as was a common strategy of nation-building elites in most of the other post-Soviet states. Russia inherited from the Soviet Union a multi-ethnic federal structure and global power worldview which made it difficult for Russian elites to adopt the strategy of a “nationalizing” state built around the ethno-nationalism of the majority population.

There were at least four competing visions of the appropriate identity narrative for the Russian Federation: a multi-national state; an ethnic state (“Russia for the Russians”); a civic state (neutral as to ethnicity); and an imperial state (ruling over other peoples and territories). The multi-ethnic and civic views were dominant in the Russian government’s thinking in the 1990s—though these two approaches contradicted each other in crucial respects, such as the special status of the ethnically-designated republics within the Federation. Under Putin, the emphasis shifted toward an imperial state—stressing the legacy of the Tsarist and to a lesser extent Soviet past. Radical nationalists promoted a more ethno-national approach, but the Kremlin cracked down on the extreme Russian nationalist groups.²⁴

Under Putin, the state invested heavily in patriotic education and the promotion of new symbols, while pushing rival visions of Russia’s national narrative to the margins of the political system. After Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, he put a new emphasis on the ethnic component in Russian identity, including a prominent role for the Orthodox Church. This trend accelerated after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Putin stresses continuity with the “1,000 year history” of the Russian state, while elevating the Soviet victory of 1945 into a virtual state religion. Moscow increased the pressure on non-Russian ethnic

groups to assimilate to that core culture—tightening restrictions on the teaching in native languages in the ethnic republics in 2018, for example. (Chechnya is a notable exception to this homogenizing trend.) This narrative was pushed out through the educational system; through museums and public rituals, and through television and cinema—with an endless supply of patriotic blockbusters.²⁵ In addition, a network of government-led voluntary organizations was created to engage the community in patriotic action, especially young people—such as Nashi (Ours) and the Youth Army.²⁶ These groups were founded in the wake of the “color revolutions” that swept incumbent autocrats from power in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2003–2005, a development that greatly alarmed Putin, and which he attributed to Western interference. In retrospect, we can see that the steady and systematic militarization of Russian society (or at least the efforts in that direction), in response to a perceived Western threat, laid the groundwork for the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of 2022. Some experts did see the importance of this development before the crisis of 2022.²⁷

At the same time as Putin was building this state patriotism narrative, Putin was, as Oxana Shevel notes, “purposefully ambiguous” about where the borders of the Russian state should lie, and which ethnic groups belonged within it.²⁸ After 2007, Putin promoted the concept of the “Russian world” (*Russkii mir*), claiming affinity with ethnic Russians and Russian language speakers living beyond the boundaries of the Russian Federation.²⁹ This view resonated across the political spectrum in Russia—especially with regards to Crimea. Back in 1997 Russia and Belarus announced their intention to form a “union state,” a project that has proceeded in fits and starts, with the creation of a customs union in 2010. Further integration—such as Belarus introducing the Russian ruble as its currency—has been delayed due to President Alexander Lukashenko’s unwillingness to lose his independence, and his prickly personal relationship with Putin. But the union with Belarus is one indicator of Putin’s likely long-run intentions for Ukraine.

In 2008 Putin stepped down from the presidency, in line with the constitution’s two-term limit. However, he moved sideways to the post of prime minister while his loyal aide Dmitry Medvedev became president. Rather than let Medvedev serve two terms as president, in September 2011 Putin announced that he would be returning to the presidency the next year. In part this was because of the Arab Spring that erupted in early 2011, which was an unwelcome reminder for Putin of the capacity of pro-democracy crowds to topple dictators. The Arab Spring culminated in NATO’s intervention in Libya—something which Putin resented. He opposed Western actions to promote regime change, fearing that Russia could be next. Also, the action in Libya replicated NATO’s bombing of Serbia in 1999 in support of Kosovo independence: a critical turning point in the deterioration of US-Russia relations.

Putin’s announcement that he was returning to the presidency helped fuel mass protests in Moscow and other cities challenging the results of the December 2011 State Duma elections. After he was elected president in May 2012, Putin cracked down hard on the protesters, and moved further to the right. He encouraged a series of legislative measures appealing to “traditional” Russian values in opposition to degenerate Western

values (including a ban on foreign adoptions and LGBT propaganda) and cracked down on civil society groups receiving foreign money. The authoritarian shift after 2012 broke the “live and let live” modus vivendi that had previously prevailed between the oligarchs and the *siloviki*.³⁰ The business community was seen as too close to West, and likely to sympathize with the pro-democracy protestors.³¹ The policy shift led to growing tension between the competing economic and political logics driving the Kremlin’s policy.

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and Russian support for the separatist insurrection in Donbas was the culmination of the deterioration of relations with the West over the previous decade.³² Putin saw the overthrow of the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 as a Western-inspired plot to pry Ukraine out of the Russian sphere of influence. Sevastopol, Crimea, was the home port of the Russian Black Sea fleet, and thus a vital strategic asset for Russia. The fact that Crimea was majority ethnic Russian, and had only been transferred to Ukraine from the Russian Federation in 1954, gave Putin the opportunity to combine his geopolitical interests with the theme of defending ethnic Russians. Putin’s approval rating leapt from 69 percent to 81 percent in the month after the annexation of Crimea, and to 88 percent by October 2014. The sanctions played into the anti-Western, conservative nationalist narrative which the Kremlin had been promoting, especially since 2012. Previously, Putin’s approval rating had tracked the ups and downs of Russia’s GDP growth rate: after 2014, this ceased to be the case.³³ Putting Russian society on a war footing, facing off against the alleged threat from the West, provided Putin with a framework to justify cracking down on political opposition and thus consolidate his grip on power.

What Economic Strategy for Russia?

The leaders of post-Soviet Russia faced a triple challenge in trying to modernize their country’s economy. First, as the world’s largest producer of oil and gas it is burdened by the “oil curse”—a well-documented combination of pathologies that hinder the development of countries heavily dependent on oil exports: an overvalued currency, volatile exchange rates, corruption, concentration of wealth and power, etc.³⁴

Second, it suffers from the “Russian curse”: a centuries-old tradition of a strong centralized state, deemed necessary to preserve internal stability and external security of what became the largest country in the world, trying to hold a vast stretch of territory from Europe to North America.³⁵

Third, it suffers from the “Soviet curse”: 70 years of socialist central planning that reinforced the statist tradition of Tsarist Russia and adding new distortions such as a bloated military industry complex, disdain for entrepreneurship, dependency on state handouts, and informal networks of trusted partners that inhibit open competition and public accountability.

Russia’s attempt to build a competitive market economy and liberal democracy in the 1990s was, by and large, a failure.³⁶ The wrenching transition that followed the collapse

of the centrally planned economy saw a 40 percent drop in GDP, rampant inflation, and a concomitant plunge in living standards. The “wild 1990s” discredited free market capitalism in the eyes of ordinary Russians—and also undermined their faith in democracy, which had accompanied the arrival of capitalism.³⁷ The 1998 financial crisis, which saw Russia default on its debts and caused another 75 percent devaluation of the ruble, only reinforced that message.

When Putin was nominated acting president in 1999, he was fully aware that Russia was falling further behind the economies of the developed West. In his pre-election manifesto in 1999 he warned that “It will take us about 15 years and an annual growth of our gross domestic product by 8 percent a year to reach the per capita GDP level of present-day Portugal or Spain, which are not among the world’s industrial leaders.”³⁸ (Russia did manage to reach Portugal’s 2000 GDP per capita in 2012, although its GDP still lagged 22 percent behind the 2012 Portugal level.)

In his first address to the Federal Assembly in July 2000 Putin was harshly critical of the policies of the 1990s, which led to a situation where “the growing gap between the leading countries and Russia is pushing us toward the Third World.”³⁹ He argued, “We have had to choose: operate on alien aid, advice, and credits or rely on our own resources.” In practice, however, Putin recognized the advantages that could be gained from participation in the international division of labor—access to cheap capital, superior management skills, and the latest technology. He did not turn Russia away from global integration: he kept the ruble a convertible currency, lifting the remaining capital controls; and continued to pursue World Trade Organization (WTO) membership, which Russia finally achieved in 2012.⁴⁰

Putin moved quickly to centralize decision making, and gradually tightened the screws on political opposition. The “wild 1990s” had seen control over Russian industry fall into the hands of a few dozen buccaneer entrepreneurs, the “oligarchs.” Putin made it clear to them that they could keep their businesses, but would have to stay out of politics, and would follow Putin’s instructions when their help was needed. Putin also introduced measures to strengthen state influence over the economy. His first step was to restore state control over the oil and gas sector: the source of 75 percent of export earnings and around half of the federal budget revenues. In 2003 Roman Abramovich agreed to sell Sibneft to the state-controlled Gazprom for \$13 billion. But Mikhail Khodorkovsky, owner of the largest oil company, Yukos, and Russia’s richest man, refused to cooperate. In 2003 he was arrested and sentenced to 10 years in jail, and his company was seized and merged with state-owned Rosneft. The Yukos expropriation was a turning point: it gave a green light to state officials at all levels to extort or expropriate local entrepreneurs, to have their own “mini Yukos.”⁴¹

Apart from the oil and gas industry, state-controlled corporations also dominated certain other sectors, such as the defense industry and railways. Meanwhile, a small inner circle of Putin cronies became very rich thanks to their stake in a circle of key private companies and state corporations.⁴² By 2020 Russia had over one hundred dollar

billionaires;⁴³ and the top 1 percent earn 20 percent of the national income and own 40 percent of the nation's wealth—the highest level of concentration of wealth in any of the countries in the World Inequality Survey.⁴⁴

But Putin's overall economic strategy was somewhat ambiguous. Part of his team consisted of modernizers who insisted that the only way to restore Russia's prosperity and standing in the world was to embrace Western market institutions and integrate with the global economy. They were impressed by the experience of China and other East Asian "tigers," who had prospered following opening to foreign trade and investment and integration into global production chains. Although the number of pro-market liberals shrank over the course of the Putin administration, they still hold some influential positions, including Finance Minister Anton Siluanov and Central Bank head Elvira Nabiullina.⁴⁵ Mikhail Mishustin, prime minister since January 2020, is the primary example of an ideologically neutral technocrat: he was the former head of the Federal Tax Service.⁴⁶

On the other side were economic nationalists who believed that integration into the global economy has reduced the Russian economy to a "raw materials appendage" of Europe and China and undermined the political institutions and cultural norms that are central to Russian identity.⁴⁷ The "nationalists" are also a diverse group, ranging from ideological Eurasianists who prioritize reintegrating the former Soviet economies, to lobbyists for Russia's manufacturing and defense industries. They argue that erecting barriers to Western economic influence and creating an alternate trading bloc is necessary to prevent the exploitation of the Russian economy and even the possible destruction of the Russian state.⁴⁸

The global financial crisis of 2008-2009 hit Russia hard, with Russia experiencing an 8 percent drop in GDP in 2009 (and 14 percent from September 2008 to August 2009), the deepest of any of the G20 countries.⁴⁹ Having learned the lesson from the 1998 crisis, the government had paid down Russia's foreign debt and set aside a significant part of the oil revenues during the boom years, providing the state with a cushion to ride through the crisis. They managed to prevent a precipitous decline in the value of the ruble, and consequently maintained the previous level of real wages. The paying down of foreign debt and creation of a war chest to ride out financial crises was one of the signal economic achievements of the Putin regime. However, in 2022, Western sanctions included the freezing the Russian Central Bank assets held in foreign bank accounts, some 30-40 percent of the total. That along with the other measures (exclusion from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) inter-bank transfer system, a bar on many categories of exports to Russia) severely constrained Russia's capacity to import goods.

In 2012 Sergei Glaz'ev was appointed economic advisor to Putin, replacing the liberal Arkady Dvorkovich (who was promoted to deputy prime minister in charge of economic policy). Glaz'ev is a critic of globalization, arguing that it leads to the deindustrialization of mature economies, while the deepening financialization of the international economy

exposes countries to speculative bubbles while strengthening the power of the US. He believes that recycling the petro-wealth through a state-led investment campaign in infrastructure and manufacturing, behind protectionist barriers, can best preserve Russia's industrial base. He argued for the need to create a separate international payments system with the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries to insulate themselves against Western sanctions; more investment in research and development (R&D) to prevent bans on technology transfer from disrupting key industries; and the introduction of capital controls to stop capital flight. One important strategy that gathered pace after 2012 was an effort to "nationalize the elite" by imposing limits on the assets that government officials could hold abroad, and by encouraging oligarchs to repatriate their wealth to Russia through tax amnesties. Ironically, the post-Crimea sanctions served to strengthen the dependency of Russian oligarchs on the Russian state.

In contrast, the liberals believed that it should be private business and not the state that invests in modernizing Russian industry, and that the state should focus its efforts on creating a favorable investment climate—low inflation, secure property rights, lower corruption and bureaucratic barriers, and a welcome mat for foreign investors with their know-how and technology. (Foreign owners had an equity stake in roughly one in four Russian manufacturing firms.) The main standard bearer for the liberals, such as they were, was Aleksei Kudrin, a friend of Putin who served as finance minister from 2000 until 2011. Kudrin warned in 2013 that "There are forces in the country who have long wanted... isolation, maybe a certain self-sufficiency. Today this has all fallen on fertile ground."⁵⁰ In 2016, Kudrin was charged with drawing up a new economic reform plan at the Center for Strategic Research—the fourth such liberal reform plan since Putin came to power.⁵¹

So, in the first decade of his presidency Putin was pursuing a middle path, combining continued trade openness with measures to ensure Russia's long-term development. However, the stagnation which the Russian economy has experienced since the 2008 financial crisis suggests that Putin's hybrid model was not working—even before the 2014 Crimea crisis.⁵²

Another plank in Putin's economic strategy was the creation of a regional trading bloc that would be under Russia's control and would be to a degree insulated from the global economic institutions dominated by the US and its allies. The Eurasian Economic Community was created in 2000, and that evolved into the Eurasian Customs Union in 2010, consisting of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. They went on to create a Eurasian Economic Space (EES) in 2012: a single market with common tariffs and free movement of labor.⁵³ Ukraine declined to join these Eurasian entities—even under the pro-Russian Yanukovich, who was elected president in 2010. However, the overthrow of Yanukovich in February 2014 following the Euromaidan protest signaled that Ukraine was pulling away from economic integration with Russia. The EES was renamed the Eurasian Economic Union in May 2014, and Armenia and Kyrgyzstan were arm-twisted into joining. But without Ukraine, and its population of 44 million, the Eurasian Economic Union was of limited economic utility for

Russia. The subsequent military confrontation and Western sanctions have pushed Russia even further in the direction of autarchy.

The Impact of the Crimea Sanctions

The imposition of sanctions on Russia in response to the 2014 annexation of Crimea changed once again the dynamic between the state and business in that country. The US relies heavily on sanctions as a tool of foreign policy, and in recent years that tool has been unleashed on Russia. Sanctions are a blunt instrument, one that only succeeds one third to one half of the time.⁵⁴ They can also have unfortunate side effects, such as damaging US commercial interests or turning a foreign population against the US. Cognizant of these issues, the US turned to “smart” sanctions that impact individual persons and corporate entities in the target country. The first smart sanctions on Russia were introduced by the 2012 Magnitsky Act, aimed at bringing to justice the persecutors of Sergei Magnitsky, an accountant who uncovered fraud in the tax audit of William Browder’s Hermitage Capital, and who subsequently died in jail.⁵⁵

Days after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the US and the European Union imposed asset freezes and travel bans on 21 individuals deemed to be directly involved in the occupation. Over the next few months as the fighting erupted in Donbas the list of sanctioned individuals and corporate entities gradually increased. The sanctions focused on the banking sector, oil and gas technology suppliers, and defense industry firms. At first the EU was reluctant to join the US sectoral sanctions: they only signed on after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) was shot down on July 14, 2014, killing all 298 on board. Later that month Putin responded by imposing counter-sanctions, banning the import of foodstuffs from countries that joined the sanctions regime. In subsequent years the US widened the sanctions in response to Russian actions in Syria and interference in the US 2016 election.

The US rationale for imposing “smart” sanctions was that they would increase the costs for members of the Russian elite, without harming the well-being of ordinary Russians. That did not work. Putin’s countersanctions on food imports brought an immediate and visible impact on store shelves across Russia, and most Russians blamed the West for the shortages. (They may not even have been aware that it was the Russian government that banned the imports.) Also, the US policy seems to have been based on the premise that Russia was an oligarchy in which Putin’s rich friends would pressure him to step back when they saw that their own economic interests were being harmed. That did not happen: Putin did not seem to care that the wealth of some of Russia’s richest men, even those in his inner circle, was being curtailed.

The 2014 sanctions, cumulatively affecting over 200 individuals and corporate entities, had a serious impact on the Russian economy, shutting down some joint ventures in the energy sector and increasing the cost of borrowing for all Russian firms.⁵⁶ The Central Bank spent \$12 billion defending the ruble but it eventually relented and the ruble lost 40

percent of its value by the end of 2014. Inflation surged to 15 percent, and GDP fell 3.7 percent in 2015. The sanctions coincided with a slump in the global oil price, so it is hard to disaggregate the impact of the former from the latter.⁵⁷ Evsei Gurvich and Il'ia Prilepskii estimate the impact of the sanctions as a cumulative loss of 2.8 percent of GDP over three years 2014-2017, or \$170 billion—against a loss of \$400 billion due to the slump in oil prices.

However, these economic costs were not sufficient to alter Putin's position over the annexation of Crimea or the support for separatists in Donbas. Moreover, Sam Greene convincingly argued that “sanctions very usefully bind the Russian economic elite to the Kremlin, forcing them to run their financing requirements through the Finance Ministry and/or the Central Bank, giving Putin more leverage over the titans of industry than he has ever enjoyed.”⁵⁸ Overall, it is clear that the 2014 Ukraine crisis saw a strengthening of the nationalist wing of the Putin administration.

Putin seems to have concluded that the relatively modest economic cost of the 2014 sanctions was a price worth paying for the acquisition of Crimea and the assertion of Russia's political will on the international stage. From the US point of view, the sanctions did not succeed, if the measure of success is getting Russia to withdraw from Crimea and the Donbas. Some analysts credited the sanctions with pressuring Russia not to escalate the conflict, and to enter peace talks.⁵⁹ But that claim is impossible to prove or disprove. What is clear is that the experience of 2014 and threat of wider Western sanctions did not deter Putin from launching the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Conclusion

One might have imagined that Putin had learnt some lessons from the Soviet collapse, and from China's rise—that modest economic reform is good, and that political reform is risky. But such hopes were dashed once and for all by the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Putin's harsh authoritarianism and foreign policy adventurism is strangling economic development—a formula that looks a lot like Leonid Brezhnev's Soviet Union.

It is impossible to imagine any significant improvement in relations with the West, or any substantial changes in Russia's political system, while Putin is still president.⁶⁰ It is equally difficult to envision that he will be removed through a coup, still less a popular revolution. The constitutional reform of 2020 enables him to stay in power until 2036, assuming his health holds up. (He is 69 years old.) The big unknown is who will replace Putin, and whether that person will be able to dismantle the dictatorial, militarized, and anti-Western regime that Putin has forged.

Peter Rutland is professor of government and the Colin and Nancy Campbell Chair for Global Issues and Democratic Thought at Wesleyan University (Middletown, Connecticut). He has studied Russia and the former Soviet Union for over three decades. Recent articles cover topics such as Russian “soft power,” the structure of the Russian political and economic elite, and US-Russia relations in the run-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He is associate editor of *Russian Review* and vice president of the Association for Study of Nationalities.

Endnotes

1. Samuel Charap et al., *Russia's Military Interventions. Patterns, Drivers and Signposts* (Washington, DC: Rand Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA444-3.html.
2. Daniel Treisman, "Putin Unbound. How Repression at Home Presaged Belligerence Abroad," *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 3 (May-June 2022): 40-53.
3. Sergei Medvedev, *The Return of the Russian Leviathan* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).
4. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
5. Vladimir Putin, "Speech at the Munich conference on security policy," February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.
6. Pekka Sutela, *The Political Economy of Putin's Russia* (London: Routledge, 2012).
7. Peter Rutland, "Globalization, Neoliberalism and the Transition to Capitalism in Russia," in *The Great Dispersion: The Many Fates of Post-socialist Society*, ed. Manabu Sengoku (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2018), 61-77.
8. Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
9. Vladimir Gelman, *Authoritarian Russia. Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).
10. Brian D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
11. Andrei Soldatov and Michael Rochlitz, "The Siloviki in Russian Politics," in *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia*, ed. Daniel Treisman (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 83-108.
12. Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2014).
13. Gelman, *Authoritarian Russia*.
14. Ibid.
15. Archie Brown, "The real Yeltsin legacy," *The Guardian*, April 26, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/apr/26/comment.russia>.
16. Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
17. Peter Reddaway and Robert Ortung, eds., *The Dynamics of Russian Politics: Putin's Federal Reforms* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).
18. Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, "Federalism in Russia," in *Russia After the Global Economic Crisis*, eds. Anders Aslund, Sergei Guriev and Andrew Kutchins (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2010): 59-77.

19. Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).
20. Regina Smyth, *Elections, Protest and Authoritarian Regime Stability: Russia 2008-2020* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 217.
21. Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).
22. Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
23. William E. Pomeranz, "Putin's 2020 Constitutional Amendments: What Changed? What Remained the Same?" *Russian Politics* 6, no. 1 (2021): 6-26.
24. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, eds., *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity, Authoritarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Helge Blakkisrud, "Russkii as the New Rossiiskii? Nation-building in Russia after 1991," *Nationalities Papers*, forthcoming 2022.
25. Valerie Sperling, "Making the public patriotic: Militarism and anti-militarism in Russia," in *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (New York, Routledge, 2009), 238-291.
26. Anna Sanina, *Patriotic Education in Contemporary Russia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
27. Ray Finch, "The Mobilization of Russian Society," in *The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Stephen Blank (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2019), 249-263.
28. Oxana Shevel, "Russian Nation-building from Yel'tsin to Medvedev: Ethnic, Civic or Purposefully Ambiguous?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 2 (2011): 179-202.
29. Mikhail Suslov, "'Russian World' Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the logic of 'Spheres of Influence,'" *Geopolitics* 23 no. 2 (2018): 330-353.
30. Andrei Yavoklev, "Pochemu pravyashchie elity ne ostanavlinvayut voynu?" [Why the ruling elites are not stopping the war?], *Meduza*, May 28, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/28/pochemu-pravyashchie-elity-ne-ostanavlivayut-voynu-a-krupnyy-biznes-kak-v-elite-stali-dominirovat-siloviki-pochemu-v-1990-h-ne-proizoshlo-perezagruzki-vlasti>.
31. Kirill Rogov, "Eta voyna nuzhna ne tol'ko Putinu" [Not only Putin needs this war], *Meduza*, May 28, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/28/eta-voyna-nuzhna-ne-tolko-putinu>.
32. D'Anieri, *Ukraine*; Charles E. Ziegler, "Russia as a nationalizing state: Rejecting the western liberal order," *International Politics* 53, no. 5 (2016): 555-573.
33. Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter, "Is Putin's popularity real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2017): 1-15.
34. Michael Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

35. Stefan Hedlund, *Russia's Path Dependence: A People with a Troubled History* (London: Routledge, 2012).
36. Peter Rutland, "Neoliberalism in Russia," *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no. 2 (April 2013): 332-362.
37. Sharaftudinova, *Red Mirror*.
38. Vladimir Putin, "Rossiia na rubezhe tysyacheletii" [Russia at the turn of the millennium], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, December 1999, translated in *First Person* (New York: Public Affairs), 209-229, <https://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm>.
39. Vladimir Putin, "Annual address to the Federal Assembly," July 8, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21480>.
40. Sutela, *Political Economy*.
41. Yavoklev, "Pochemu."
42. Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2020).
43. Giacomo Tognini and John Hyatt, "The Forbes Ultimate Guide to Russian Oligarchs," *Forbes*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/giacomotognini/2022/04/07/the-forbes-ultimate-guide-to-russian-oligarchs/?sh=1866c4a8276d>.
44. Thomas Piketty, Filip Novokmet, and Gabriel Zucman, "From Soviets to Oligarchs: Inequality and Property in Russia 1905-2016," *The Journal of Economic Inequality* 16, no. 2 (2018): 189-223.
45. Minchenko Consulting, "Politburo 2.0: Demontazh ili perezagruzka?" [Politburo 2.0: Dismantling or Reset?], Minchenko Consulting, November 7, 2016, http://www.minchenko.ru/analitika/analitika_61.html.
46. Max Seddon and Henry Foy, "Putin's new prime minister steps from tax office into limelight," *Financial Times*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/6e5050b6-3857-11ea-a6d3-9a26f8c3cba4>.
47. Peter Rutland, "The place of economics in Russia national identity debates," in *The New Russian Nationalism*, eds. Pal Kolsto and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 336-161.
48. Sergei Glaz'ev, "O strategii modernizatsii i razvitiia ekonomiki Rossii v usloviakh global'noi depressii" [On the strategy for modernizing and developing Russia during the global depression], May 17, 2011, http://www.glazev.ru/econom_polit/269/; Mikhail Deliagin, "Rossii nuzhna politika razvitiia" [Russia needs a development policy], January 21, 2015, <http://delyagin.ru/articles/84134-rossii-nuzhna-politika-razvitiya.html>.
49. Neil Robinson, "Russia's Response to Crisis: The Paradox of Success," *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no. 3 (2013): 450-472.
50. Aleksei Kudrin, "Vliianiye dokhodov ot eksporta neftegazovykh resursov no denezhno-kreditnuiu politiku Rossii" [The influence of oil and gas export revenues on Russia's monetary policy], *Voprosy ekonomiki* (March 2013): 4-19.

51. Kirill Rogov, "Putin's Economist," *Moscow Times*, April 20, 2016; *Strategiia-2020: Novaia Model' Rosta – Novaia Sotsial'naia Politika* [Strategy 2020: A new growth model, a new social policy], 2012, Moscow: Russian Federation Government; March 13; available at www.kommersant.ru/content/pics/doc/doc1753934.pdf.
52. Vladimir Mau, "Between crises and sanctions: economic policy of the Russian Federation," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2016): 350-377.
53. Sean P. Roberts and Arkady Moshes, "The Eurasian Economic Union: a case of reproductive integration?," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 6 (2016): 542-565.
54. Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).
55. Emma Gilligan, "Smart Sanctions against Russia: Human Rights, Magnitsky and the Ukrainian crisis," *Demokratizatsiya* 24, no. 2 (2016): 257-277.
56. Anders Aslund and Maria Snegovaya, "The impact of Western sanctions on Russia," Atlantic Council, May 3, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-impact-of-western-sanctions-on-russia/>.
57. Evsei Gurvich and Il'ia Prilepskii, "The Impact of Financial Sanctions on the Russian Economy," *Russian Journal of Economics* 1, no. 4 (December 2015): 359-385, table 10, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405473916000039>; Sergey Aleksashenko, "Evaluating Western Sanctions on Russia," Atlantic Council, December 6, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/evaluating-western-sanctions-on-russia>.
58. Sam Greene, "What Is To Be Done?" PONARS memorandum, August 22, 2018, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/what-is-to-be-done/>.
59. Sabine Fischer, *A Permanent State of Sanctions? Proposal for a More Flexible EU Sanctions Policy toward Russia* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2017), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/eu-russia-a-permanent-state-of-sanctions>.
60. Timothy Frye, "Why Regime Change in Russia Might Not Be a Good Idea," Politico, April 12, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/04/12/regime-change-russia-putin-00023953>.

Lessons From Syria: What We Can Learn About the Russian Way of War

Nikolas K. Gvosdev

Abstract: The 2015 Russian intervention in Syria allowed the military establishment to test practical applications of a “strategy of limited action” based on the concept of “reasonable sufficiency” as a way to achieve Russia’s political objectives of preventing the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime while avoiding overstretch and a possible quagmire. To avoid having to sustain a wide-ranging occupation of the country, the Russian effort has concentrated on controlling key vantage points, creating a patchwork of de-escalation and reconciliation zones to deprive the opposition of territory, and turning to the private military sector to minimize the risks to its ground forces.

Keywords: Russia; Syria; intervention; strategy of limited action; reasonable sufficiency; mercenaries.

Introduction

In 2014, United States Sen. Lindsay Graham lamented that a country like Russia—with “an economy the size of Italy”—was nevertheless able to play a major role in world affairs, comparing it to “playing a poker game with a pair of 2s and winning.”¹ The implication was that, given its economic base, Russia should not be able to wield the military capabilities it possessed and to project power around the world. The lessons of the Syria operation, however, show how Russia can take its limited assets and constrained budgets and utilize them to great effectiveness. This, in turn, gives Russia a resiliency to conduct military operations while limiting the costs and stresses on its economy and political system. It also reinforced the conclusion that Russia’s ability to project disruptive military power continues to give it relevance on the global stage, even if it lacks the economic wherewithal of other major powers such as the US or China.

Indeed, learning lessons from the Russian experience is critical because the US expectation, when the Russians intervened in 2015, was that Moscow would fail to achieve its objectives and repeat the Soviet failures in Afghanistan. President Barack Obama warned, “An attempt by Russia... to prop up [Bashar al-] Assad and try to pacify the population is just going to get them stuck in a quagmire and it won’t work.”² The president’s comments reflected a tendency within the American strategic studies community to situate Russian actions “within the West’s own theoretical framework” rather than to examine the emergence of a new Russian approach to intervention and conflict management.³

However, as a number of Russian officials have stated, they studied closely the record of American failures and setbacks in both Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴ Indeed, the Russian national security establishment (along with China’s), has, as former Undersecretary of Defense Michelle Flournoy noted in the 2019 Drell Lecture, devoted a great deal of attention to

learning from US experiences—both successes and failures—over the last thirty years.⁵ In addition, the Russian national security community processed the lessons of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, so that “by avoiding the mistakes of the past Russia has sidestepped a quagmire in Syria, and perhaps framed a working doctrine to avoid becoming ensnared in future asymmetric wars.”⁶ That has guided their efforts in formulating a post-Soviet Russian way of intervention and conflict resolution.

Sometimes described under the rubric of “new generation warfare” (NGW), this way of warfare subordinates the use of kinetic power to enmeshing the unleashing of fire-power within a larger framework of influence operations. As Nicholas Fedyk describes it, it elevates “the psychological and popular aspects of conflict” by using, whenever possible, non-military measures as a first resort, so as to avoid, whenever possible, boiling over “into full-scale armed conflict.” The delivery of military force must fit within a larger strategy designed to convince an enemy to cease fighting, or, at minimum, withdraw from the desired objective.⁷

Syria is where many of these lessons were tested, and the Syria operation itself, as Dima Adamsky has concluded, “has enabled Russian practitioners to further refine a notion of new generation warfare (NGW)—a set of ideas about the changing character of war that had been circulating in the Russian strategic community (under the current chief of the general staff [ed. Valery Gerasimov]) for several years prior to the start of the operation.”⁸ In addition, Syria also served “as a laboratory for testing a range of concepts and weapons of various services, as part of the profound reform of the armed forces which has been going on since 2008.”⁹

The lessons of Syria, in turn, need to be examined because of the perceived success of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to intervene in achieving a number of key Russian strategic objectives. The Russians assess that their action blunted efforts by the US to forge a coherent anti-Assad coalition capable of driving Assad from power; it forged a new balance of power within Syria itself as well as the broader Middle East, returning Russia to the table as a major external player; and it cemented Russia’s ability to forward deploy power outside of the Eurasian region and to expand its zone of influence and denial from the Black Sea across the entire Eastern Mediterranean. Not only was the Assad regime, assessed in 2015 to be on its last legs, saved, but a blow delivered to US prestige and to Obama who himself had proclaimed “Assad must go.”¹⁰ Even if the Russian contribution, in absolute military terms, was relatively minor, and the Assad government might have survived without direct Russian military action, the dividends the intervention paid, in terms of enhancing Russian influence in the region, increased Russian leverage as an external player throughout the greater Middle East. As a 2020 Al-Jazeera report concluded, “Russia’s perceived success in Syria also encouraged other countries in the Middle East to seek improved relations with Moscow.”¹¹ In other words, even limited and constrained action can have major impacts.

Mason Clark concludes, “The Kremlin identifies Syria as a highly successful—and replicable—operation and conceives of expeditionary deployments as a new addition to the

Kremlin's policy toolkit."¹²By showcasing Russia's ability to deploy limited forces in circumscribed engagements, Moscow demonstrated that it, too, could cast a vote in regional and global issues. Rather than viewing Syria as a sui generis case, in which a host of factors specific to Syria contributed to Russian success, Moscow concluded the lessons of Syria might in fact be applicable elsewhere.¹³

The Lessons

I. Limit Goals and Scope of the Operation

In going into Syria, the Russians, having observed the overreach and overstretch of the US efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, decided to eschew what they viewed as the American expenditure of personnel and funds for massive reconstruction efforts and to reshape political and economic life.¹⁴ Indeed, as Adamsky has noted, "The Kremlin realized that overall intervention might become a deadly self-inflicted blow."¹⁵ In defining the scope of the intervention, the Russians ruled out "nation-building reconstruction or political transformation" as goals of the operation.¹⁶ Instead, as Dara Massicot pointed out, Russian action was explicitly guided by the strategy of limited action (стратегия ограниченных действий).¹⁷ As Massicot notes, the 2017 edition of Dmitry Rogozin's *Voyna i Mir*, a dictionary of national security and military terms, defines the term as follows:

The way of conducting war and operations with limited goals, with the deliberate spread of military actions on strictly defined territories, using only a part of military potential and only certain groups of armed forces, selectively striking a certain number of selected objects, targets and groups of troops (forces) of the enemy. It is used in conditions when there is no need to use the entire military power of the state to achieve the goals set, or if one side or the other seeks to avoid the enemy's dangerous large-scale actions. At the same time, military actions are of a limited nature; they are carried out on a smaller scale, mainly by launching fire strikes and conducting joint air, anti-air, front-line, army and divisional operations.¹⁸

Rather than envisioning the occupation of an entire country and a complete restructuring of its political and economic institutions, the strategy of limited action envisions a focus on taking possession of what might be seen as the commanding heights, control of which is necessary to be able to shape and manage the politico-security environment. In assessing how the Russians carried out the campaign in Syria, Jānis Bērziņš identified some of these critical items that the Russians focused on, such as strong points, dominant heights, lines of communications, road junctions, transport hubs, water sources, and key settlements.¹⁹ Significantly, this did not require positive control of the entire country, simply that negative outcomes from other areas of the country could be prevented or minimized. However, if guaranteeing those negative outcomes could not come as a result of negotiation, the Russian approach would be to use "scorched earth" tactics.²⁰

The success of a limited strategy in Syria was defined, as Robert Hamilton noted, as a

regime just stable enough to achieve its ends, which Anna Borshchevskaya further refined as a modicum of stability across most of the country and an end to large-scale fighting. As she also notes, political reconciliation and reconstruction was not the objective of the mission.²¹ Charles Sullivan agrees, seeing a Russian definition of success as “reinforcing a weakened state, restoring its control over a tract of geography, and ‘freezing’ the war through a combination of diplomacy and deterrence.”²² Adamsky defines this end state as “controlled tensions.”²³

The subsequent reoccupation of much of Syria’s territory by Assad’s military was a byproduct of the massive, damaging and debilitating military strikes enduring by the opposition, rather than the initial purpose of the Russian intervention, which was to stave off Assad’s collapse. Indeed, as Ralph Shield concluded, “Russia’s objectives in Syria are relatively limited. Putin has dispatched Russian military force to preserve the Assad regime but remains uncommitted to the more formidable task of re-establishing Damascus’s sovereignty over the antebellum Syrian state.”²⁴ Vadim Volovoj concurs: what matters most to the Kremlin is the process, not the result, since involvement in the Syrian civil war has ensured Russia remains a player in Middle East politics and is able to extend its influence against the US without having to have solved the Syrian crisis.²⁵

II. Destroy Capabilities Rather than Occupy Territory

Throughout the course of the Syrian civil war, think tanks like the Institute for the Study of War would produce ongoing maps showing what parts of Syria were under the nominal control of the government and opposition groups. When the Russians began their intervention, their initial military campaigns focused primarily on destroying capabilities and fighting formations of the anti-Assad opposition, rather than on occupying territory.²⁶ [Here, “occupation” is used to mean exercising effective and direct military and political control over a defined area, in terms of establishing a civil or military administration and supervising all aspects of life.] The Kremlin made the decision to become directly involved in the Syria conflict when, in the late summer and early fall of 2015, the opposition forces had acquired sufficient capabilities and momentum to push on Damascus and attempt to dislodge Assad. By focusing on airpower, as well as missile strikes and use of unmanned systems, the Russian task force concentrated on breaking up and degrading opposition military formations and, just as critically, disrupting and destroying their supply routes.²⁷

The Syria campaign validated the stress placed on developing capabilities to direct accurate firepower for “blocking routes for delivery of material assets, weapons, ammunition, and replenishment of the enemy” and finding, fixing, and destroying opposition weapons emplacements, especially strongholds in villages and urban areas.²⁸ Thus, an overview of what platforms the Russians preferred to use in the Syria operation—Su-24 and Su-34 fighter bombers, Su-25 ground attack aircraft, Mi-24 attack helicopters and reconnaissance drones—suggests that “their main application would seem to be guaranteeing the operational freedom of action and freedom of maneuver of Syrian or other troops on the ground, supporting counter-offensives and destroying, disrupting and degrading the ene-

my's ground forces, even the enemy's depth position in the area of operations."²⁹ Indeed, the targets of air strikes, drone attacks and even naval gunfire (such as the October 2015 launch of Kalibr cruise missiles from the Caspian Flotilla) were designed to strike headquarters, weapons depots, and convoys as part of this strategy of degrading and disrupting opposition forces.³⁰

Adamsky sees this approach as having two stages: halting the advance of opposition forces (and so demonstrate the resilience of the Assad regime) and then to fragment the opposition to "localize, isolate, and dismantle pockets of resistance."³¹ This follows from the Russian strategic precept of "harassment and interdiction" to disorient and demoralize opposition forces and the civilians who support them.³² The end goal would be to achieve уничтожение (annihilation) of a center of resistance.³³ In addition, the calculated brutality of these harassment and interdiction tactics has been designed to show those who continue to resist that there will be no outside intervention, and, as one on the ground observer commented, "clarifying in terms of how far international 'friends' would be prepared to go for other areas."³⁴

However, while liquidation through the application of military force was the traditional approach, General Aleksandr Lapin, who served in Syria, acknowledged that, in a departure from traditional Russian strategy, the military also embraced the use of negotiations to encourage opposition forces to leave neighborhoods or enclaves. Of course, it should be noted that often such negotiations take place in the context of what has been described as "siege and starve" tactics—including the use of indiscriminate firing into areas, without care to avoid civilian casualties or destruction of non-military infrastructure—to create evacuation as the only remaining option.³⁵ Evacuation would also serve the goal of neutralizing capabilities because agreements for allowing besieged fighters to leave meant abandoning not only fixed positions and bases but also heavier equipment which could not be moved. But the end result of such agreements was to avoid tying down limited Russian military contingents with having to exert positive control over territory and populations; evacuated areas were designed to deny territorial control to the opposition, rather than intended, at least initially, to establish Syrian government control.

III. Ending Resistance as the Objective

Shrinking opposition control over territory, preventing the establishment of more permanent control over specific territories and regions and using those as a base for military and political action against the Syrian regime, factors into the third lesson from Syria—that the Russians chose not to focus on political reform or taking on the responsibilities of governance as part of their mission or using this as a metric for defining success. As Charles Sullivan concluded, "From Russia's perspective, an intervening power should avoid assuming control over a local war effort and becoming involved in the rebuilding of state institutions. Hence, an intervening power should refrain from meddling in local elite politics."³⁶ Indeed, in a number of cases the Russians brokered a series of cease-fires and "recon-

ciliation deals” (*itifaqat al-musalaha*) that left local leaders and notables in control of their immediate territory in return for accepting overall government control, or, at a minimum, ceasing efforts against the regime or aiding the opposition. In other words, the Russian goal was to deny these areas to the opposition, rather than try to force reintegration with the Syrian state. These arrangements “facilitated the authority and control of many of these groups over certain geographical areas (mostly in the de-escalation areas) and meant the Syrian government has been unable to exercise hegemonic domination at the local level.”³⁷ To the extent that the Russian military has defined specific areas of control in Syria, they are focused on a few pieces of critically strategic real estate. This flows directly from the concept of a strategy of limited action, where “fortified areas and large points of enemy resistance” are bypassed but where lines of communication are secured.³⁸ Indeed, as Marika Sosnowksi’s research has shown, control of roads and other transport infrastructure has allowed the Russians “to facilitate the flow of goods into de-escalation areas which also endeared them with local armed groups and populations. A member of the Russian military operating out of Hmeimen airbase in Latakia said that Russia “has good relations with nonstate armed groups” as a result of those activities.³⁹

At the same time, force, and especially indiscriminate force, is employed alongside tactical negotiations in an effort to jury-rig cease-fires and “understandings” with different actors. Even if such arrangements do not last, they, as Samer Abboud has pointed out, “reduce political and military space for the opposition” and hold out to different groups the possibility of extended truce, freeing up Russian forces to focus their attacks on others.⁴⁰ This openness to negotiation and to offer truce on easy terms (e.g., to cease attacks on the Syrian government and to cut off support and aid for those groups that continued their anti-Assad campaign) in turn allowed the Russians to build ties and connections to all parties.⁴¹

While the Russians have hosted political meetings (especially through the Astana process), their intervention has not insisted on developing a new constitutional framework or constructing political institutions. Instead, Lakshmi Priya concludes that the Russian mediation efforts have focused on “a relatively less ambitious process focused on attaining a cessation of hostilities, rather than the forging of a political solution.”⁴² Therefore, the emphasis has been on identifying power centers and leaders and either brokering arrangements between them and the central government or negotiating for neutrality. The Russians have not insisted, as part of this process, that an area accept the exclusive control of the Syrian central government, and the Russian approach is not to have to deploy personnel in large enough numbers to force that compliance. The end result of having a patchwork of “cease-fires” and “de-escalation zones” all around Syria allowed the Russians to build leverage and to be able to focus their resources on targeting the most recalcitrant or more capable anti-Assad opposition groups, allowing for concentration of firepower and assets on those groups that refuse truce or reconciliation.⁴³

Of particular importance is the use of the tactics of the temporary truce, permitting (or compelling) the evacuation of the civilian population, using air and artillery strikes to

inflict considerable damage, and offering final evacuation of resistance fighters to designated enclaves as a way to reduce the size of the territory under opposition control but without having to commit to a lengthy or prolonged occupation. “Temporary truces” of this type have a long provenance in Middle Eastern history, and it appears that Russian commanders, drawing on this situational knowledge, took these historical precedents and, working alongside their Syrian partners, crafted truce arrangements that would be acceptable to local notables and elites. In particular, the use of evacuation corridors, with the proviso that those who remain are then declared combatants, allows the Russians to both diminish the size of the population in the enclaves but also to then engage in indiscriminate firing and strikes without concern for minimizing damage to civilians, since, in the Russians’ view, there are no civilians left in the area.

General Aleksandr Dvornikov saw these tactics as a way to liberate “entire neighborhoods without a fight” and compared the impact of these tactics “to the results of a large-scale operation involving troops and forces.”⁴⁴ At the same time, many of the evacuees, if they do not wish to agree to a reconciliation agreement with the Syrian government under Russian auspices, are transported to Idlib province, where, in a zone controlled and monitored by the Turkish military, an effective “‘dumping ground’ for opposition fighters from the other three zones unwilling to be reconciled with the Syrian government” has been created.⁴⁵

IV. Maintaining a Light Footprint

Even as the tempo of the intervention picked up, the Kremlin always kept a careful eye on the number of forces allotted for the Syrian operation, and never let the mission expand. The Russians have maintained a relatively light “official” on-the-ground footprint in Syria, guided by the principle of *разумная достаточность* (reasonable sufficiency). As Adamsky concludes, “Applied to the Syrian context, the principle means limiting the scale of military intervention to the minimum possible that would still allow Russia to project influence and promote regional goals.”⁴⁶ It has also meant carefully recruiting ground forces and military police who can work most effectively on the ground in Syria. For instance, as the Russians moved into areas of Syria dominated by Sunni Muslims, the Russians deployed military police drawn from the largely Sunni Muslim regions of the North Caucasus, especially Ingushetia and Chechnya. As a result, as Marika Sosnowski’s research showed, “Members of the Syrian armed opposition were reportedly surprised at seeing Sunni prayer rites being performed by the Russian Military Police on the road. These very visual displays of religious solidarity proved successful in establishing a level of trust with opposition groups as the police were perceived by many armed groups as non-sectarian and therefore not as risky to deal with as the Syrian government or Iran.”⁴⁷

Greater focus on air power and offshore maritime strikes, utilizing new technologies, and better integration with local ground units (the Syrian government, other Syrian militias, Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah fighters) allowed the Kremlin to

maximize the impact of Russian combat power while minimizing the number of ground forces.⁴⁸ As part of the emphasis on “reasonable sufficiency,” the Syrian campaign enabled the Russian military to become better acquainted with “modern technological warfare” and how to better deliver stand-off strikes that would minimize the exposure of its ground forces.⁴⁹ Michael Kofman describes the Russian approach as a “lean strategy” designed to avoid creating large sunk costs (in terms of bases, facilities, and commitments) and allowing for flexibility and changes in tactics and approach.⁵⁰ As Kofman and Matthew Rojansky put it, “Russia pursued an ‘emergent’ or ‘lean’ strategy, based on a flexible approach, a willingness to learn and adapt depending on which tactics works and which did not, an approach characterized by the ‘fail fast, fail cheap’ ethos of startup business, with iterative adjustments to the operation.”⁵¹ Indeed, Russian commanders in Syria pursued simultaneous courses of action, adopting and resourcing successful approaches and discarded those not showing results without a concurrent worry about “sunk costs.”⁵²

One way to handle costs has been the practice of using Syria as an ongoing training and exercise operation, rotating personnel in order to hone combat skills while deducting operational costs from the training budget.⁵³ By 2018, some 48,000 personnel had rotated through Syria, including all the commanders of the military districts, and more than 50 percent of the regimental commanders.⁵⁴

Shifting to a light footprint also was a way not to stress the logistical capabilities of the Russian military and to prevent too many forces from going to Syria, diverting them away from other challenges and possible contingency plans.⁵⁵ A respect for the principle of reasonable sufficiency allowed the Kremlin to modulate its force structure in Syria so as to prevent overstretch. A light footprint was also important for political purposes. As Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Valery Dzutsati pointed out: “Prolonged direct engagement in the Syrian civil war was not without its risks, though, and Putin must have understood this. First, the Russians soon came to comprehend that deploying some ground forces in Syria was inevitable, to provide security to the Russian military facilities for one thing. Second, they increased Russian tactical military capacity making it more mobile ...”⁵⁶ Of particular concern was that Russian ground forces not become involved in large-scale urban combat or house-to-house fighting in dense neighborhoods.

The first way that the Russians coped with this problem was to have the Russian task force focus on redeveloping the combat capabilities of the Syrian army. As Ruslan Pukhov has concluded: “Russia has managed to foster a very productive symbiosis between its expeditionary forces and Syrian government troops. The revitalized Syrian units were often bolstered by a small but highly capable contingent of Russian support personnel and elite Spetsnaz troops.”⁵⁷ In addition, not only were Russian soldiers embedded within Syrian units, but high-ranking Russian officers also eschewed a purely advisory role to take part in operations, including, in some cases, commanding Syrian units. This has meant that despite the relatively low number of Russian forces deployed to Syria, the intervention allowed a number of senior-level figures—including colonels and generals—to gain valuable combat experience.

Yet the Russians also found that relying on Syrian, Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and Hezbollah fighters to provide the bulk of the “boots on the ground” had limitations. Therefore, whenever additional or specialized ground forces were needed, the Russians turned to private military companies or other proxies (such as the forces assembled by Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov, the so-called Кадыровцы (*Kadyrovtsy*)), limiting as far as possible the exposure of uniformed members of the Russian armed forces. As in the US, Russian public opinion seems to draw a very clear distinction between “soldiers” dying for the Motherland versus contractors who signed up and took the risks. Indeed, recruiting fighters for Syria allowed the Russian government to encourage people who might otherwise cause trouble in Russia to come to Syria instead.⁵⁸ In turn, losses sustained by private military companies (PMCs) in Syria created no discernable reaction in Russian public opinion, and thus, given the low number of “official” service casualties, the Putin administration was able to mitigate any possible negative domestic repercussions arising from a long-term deployment in Syria.⁵⁹ Use of private military contractors helped to minimize uniformed Russian casualties and also helped to reduce the financial burden of the overall expedition.⁶⁰

Mercenary use in Syria—with some estimates that at least 2,000 contractors were hired for operations in Syria—was not an exigency forced on the Russian military by low manpower levels (as the use of PMCs by the US to supplement auxiliary personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan).⁶¹ Instead, as Bērziņš concluded, these contractors could be successfully “delinked” from the Russian armed forces and to give the Russian government plausible deniability. As he pointed out, “These mercenaries can act as if they were locals, part of the enemy’s armed forces, police, or whatever necessary. They will often engage in sabotage, blackmailing, subversive activities, terrorism, kidnapping, or any other activity that is not considered regular warfare.”⁶²

Private military companies fill gaps in Russia’s deployable expeditionary force and also help to give the Kremlin some distance between these operators and the government should complications occur.⁶³ As Pukhov noted:

Russia has managed to obviate the need for deploying large numbers of troops on the ground by bringing in private military companies. These companies consist of well-paid mercenaries, most of whom are retired Russian servicemen. The difference from the similar practice in the United States is that the Russian private military companies are not relegated to supporting roles. They are used as highly capable assault forces, and their personnel are often embedded with Syrian units to augment those units’ fighting ability. This approach has proved very useful both militarily and politically, as it minimizes the political cost of direct military intervention.⁶⁴

The Syria operation allowed the Russian military and security services to test and refine the use of mercenaries and other private contractors as part of its overall strategy. As Molly Dunigan and Ben Connable have noted, this has given the Kremlin more options to engage in limited operations around the world. Functioning as the “tip of the Russian

foreign policy sphere,” Russian PMCs have been deployed not only in Syria but also in Libya, the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sudan, Yemen and Burundi—as well as in Ukraine. Thus, “This symbiosis represents the Russian government’s tacit acknowledgment of its ground-power weaknesses, and its own strategic decisions to overcome such weakness with a smaller number of special operations units and state-controlled mercenaries working in tandem.”⁶⁵

Concluding Thoughts

So, in contrast to the predictions that Syria would be “Putin’s Afghanistan,” where a large land-based Russian force would be ground down by insurgent attacks, and that Putin would risk popular unrest at home as casualties mounted, the Russians focused on delivering strikes to disrupt and degrade Assad’s opponents and used their lessons to great effect. As Pukhov concluded: “It is safe to say that Syria has not become a repeat of the Soviet Union’s failed campaign in Afghanistan. The Russian intervention has all but achieved all of its key goals.” Pukhov went on to predict: “The availability of these experienced commanders, a record of a successful and victorious military campaign, and the lessons learned from using air power, modern technology, and special operations forces will provide a major boost to the Russian military machine for years to come.”⁶⁶ Kofman concurred with this assessment, noting that “by 2019, the Russian military appeared to be institutionalizing the lessons of Syria and developing a strategy of “limited actions” for defending its interests abroad in an expeditionary context.”⁶⁷ It seemed that Russia was refining a strategy for overseas intervention, based on the four lessons of Syria, that would allow for the projection of Russian power without risking fiscal or military overstretch.

However, the conduct of the 2022 Russian military invasion of Ukraine calls into question how many of the lessons of Syria were internalized in the Russian military—or whether the lessons of Syria could be scaled up to a much larger ground operation fighting against a middle power. Russia did not engage in the type of campaign in Ukraine that the lessons of Syria would have predicted.⁶⁸ Moreover, unlike with a much smaller force in Syria, where the Russians had air superiority and a reasonably effective supply and logistics chain, the operation in Ukraine has revealed continuing, persistent gaps and problems. Finally, it appears that the political and intelligence calculations on which the 2022 Ukraine operation were based—a quick campaign, minimal resistance, even that significant portions of the population might even welcome Russian forces—were fatally flawed.⁶⁹ After the first weeks of the Ukraine invasion, it did appear that the Kremlin began to shift tactics, taking into account some of the lessons of Syria. Overall command of the Russian forces in Ukraine was unified under a single figure, first entrusted to the aforementioned General Dvornikov, and now, apparently, to Dvornikov’s successor, also a veteran of the Syrian intervention, General Gennady Zhidko. There has been an attempt, as a result, to try and replicate “many of the policies it adopted in Syria.”⁷⁰

The Syria campaign enhanced the reputation of the Russian military, especially when contrasted with the seeming inability of tactical successes by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan to lead to strategic outcomes. That reputation is now called into question by much greater signs of failure in Ukraine. So, whether the lessons of Syria represent the future evolution of the Russian military, or whether it was a one-off with no real impacts on how the Russian armed forces plan to wage war and pacification campaigns, is now an open question. In comparing the lessons of Syria with the performance of the Russian military in Ukraine, analysts will have to make a judgment as to whether the successes in Syria can compensate for the clearly inherent weaknesses displayed by the Russian military operation in Ukraine. This is, as Jeffrey Edmonds concludes, the “beginning of understanding and properly preparing for Russian military power—or the lack thereof.”⁷¹

Nikolas K. Gvosdev is professor of national security affairs at the US Naval War College and a senior fellow in the Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, as well as editor of the journal *Orbis*. The views expressed here reflect his own personal perspective.

Endnotes

1. Comments made on CNN’s “State of the Union,” July 27, 2014.
2. Alistair Bell and Tom Perry, “Obama Warns Russia’s Putin of Quagmire in Syria,” *Reuters*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-airstrikes/obama-warns-russias-putin-of-quagmire-in-syria-idUSKCN0RW0W220151003>.
3. Jānis Bērziņš, “The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 33, no. 3 (2020): 356.
4. Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Does Russia’s Syria Intervention Reveal Its Ukraine Strategy?,” *National Interest*, February 12, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/does-russia%E2%80%99s-syria-intervention-reveal-its-ukraine-strategy-200527>. This is based on a number of direct observations by senior Russian officials at a series of Track II dialogues.
5. Michele Flournoy, “US National Security in an Era of Great Power Competition and Technological Disruption,” Hoover Institution, Stanford University, October 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8a307Sttjc>.
6. Charles J. Sullivan, “Sidestepping a Quagmire: Russia, Syria and the Lessons of the Soviet-Afghan War,” *Asian Affairs* 49, no.1 (2018): 49.
7. Nicholas Fedyk, “Russian New Generation Warfare: Theory, Practice and Lessons for U.S. Strategists,” *Small Wars Journal*, May 4, 2017, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnal/art/russian-%E2%80%9Cnew-generation%E2%80%9D-warfare-theory-practice-and-lessons-for-us-strategists>.
8. Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, “Russian Lessons from the Syria Operation and the Culture of Military Innovation,” *Security Insights* 47 (February 2020), <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/russian-lessons-syrian-operation-and-culture-military-innovation>.

9. Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, “The Impact of the Russian Operation in Syria on Hezbollah’s Operational Art: A Hypothesis,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 5 (2020): 414. See also the discussion in greater detail on this question in Ralph Shield, “Russian Airpower’s Success in Syria: Assessing Evolution in Kinetic Counterinsurgency,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, no. 2 (2018): 214-239.
10. Adam Lammon, “Assad is Here to Stay,” *National Interest* 177 (January/February 2022): 28-29. See also Anna Borshchevskaya, “The Russian Way of War in Syria: Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism,” *Russia’s War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, eds. Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller, and Aaron Stein (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), 21; and Robert E. Hamilton, “Implications for the West,” *Russia’s War in Syria*, 159.
11. Mariya Petkova, “What Has Russia Gained From Five Years of Fighting in Syria?” *Al-Jazeera*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/1/what-has-russia-gained-from-five-years-of-fighting-in-syria>.
12. Mason Clark, “The Bounded Utility of Russian Learning in Syria,” *The Russian Military’s Lessons Learned in Syria: Military Learning and the Future of War Series* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2021), 36.
13. Megan A. Stewart, “What Can the Syrian Civil War Tells Us About the War in Ukraine?,” Middle East Institute, April 12, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-can-syrian-civil-war-tell-us-about-war-ukraine>.
14. The extent to which the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan attempted wholesale reconstruction and reorganization of the target societies as facsimiles of US templates, down to the creation of stock exchanges and use of PowerPoint, is discussed in great detail in a number of works, including Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
15. Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, “Moscow’s Syria Campaign: Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy,” *Notes de L’Ifri* 109 (July 2018), 7.
16. Michael Kofman, “Syria and the Russian Armed Forces: An Evaluation of Moscow’s Strategy and Operational Performance,” *Russia’s War in Syria*, 41.
17. Dara Massicot, “Anticipating A New Russian Military Doctrine in 2020,” *War on the Rocks*, September 9, 2019, at <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/anticipating-a-new-russian-military-doctrine-in-2020-what-it-might-contain-and-why-it-matters/>.
18. Quoted in Massicot, op. cit.
19. Bērziņš, “New Generation Warfare,” 376.
20. Borshchevskaya, *Russian Way of War*, 25.
21. Hamilton, “Implications for the West,” 159; Borshchevskaya, *Russian Way of War*, 31.
22. Sullivan, “Sidestepping a Quagmire,” 53.

23. Adamsky, “Moscow’s Syria Campaign,” 7.
24. Shield, “Russian Airpower’s Success,” 233.
25. Vadim Volovoj, “Political and Military Lessons of the Russian Campaign in Syria,” *Ante Portas – Studia nad Bezpieczeństwem* 1, no. 12 (2019), 170.
26. Adamsky, “Moscow’s Syria Campaign,” 11.
27. Samer N. Abboud, *Syria* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 198.
28. Bērziņš, “New Generation Warfare,” 376.
29. Markus Kaim and Oliver Tamminga, “Russia’s military intervention in Syria: its operation plan, objectives, and consequences for the West’s policies,” *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Comment* 48/2015 (2015): 1-2, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-455698>.
30. Pavel Nečas, Martina Vackova, and Peter Lošon, “Air Power as a Security Factor: Case study Syria,” *INCAS Bulletin* 11, no. 1 (2019): 224.
31. Adamsky, “Moscow’s Syria Campaign,” 11.
32. Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Valery Dzutsati, “Russia’s Syria War: A Strategic Trap?,” *Middle East Policy* XXV, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 45.
33. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics and the Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces* (Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), 240.
34. Marika Sosnowski, “Negotiating statehood through ceasefires: Syria’s de-escalation zones,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31, no. 7-8 (2020): 1403.
35. Clark, “Bounded Utility of Russian Learning,” 35.
36. Sullivan, “Sidestepping a Quagmire,” 53.
37. Sosnowski, “Negotiating statehood,” 1401.
38. Bērziņš, “New Generation Warfare,” 376.
39. Sosnowski, “Negotiating statehood,” 1401.
40. Abboud, *Syria*, 198.
41. Borshchevskaya, *Russian Way of War*, 27.
42. Lakshmi Priya, “Astana Talks: A Prelude to Peace in Syria,” MP-IDSA Backgrounder, November 27, 2017, https://www.idsa.in/backgrounder/astana-talks-a-prelude-to-peace-in-syria_lpriya_271117.
43. Borshchevskaya, *Russian Way of War*, 28, 30.
44. Clark, “Bounded Utility of Russian Learning,” 36.

45. Sosnowski, "Negotiating statehood," 1406.
46. Adamsky, "Moscow's Syrian Campaign," 7.
47. Sosnowski, "Negotiating statehood," 1401.
48. Adamsky, "Moscow's Syria Campaign," 16.
49. Volovoj, "Lessons of the Russian Campaign," 167.
50. Kofman, "Syria and the Russian Armed Forces," 41.
51. Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" *Military Review* (March-April 2018): 12.
52. Kofman and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory," 12.
53. Kofman, "Syria and the Russian Armed Forces," 59-60.
54. Adamsky, "Moscow's War in Syria," 15.
55. Azmi Bishara, *Russian Intervention in Syria: Geostrategy is Paramount* (Doha, Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015), 13.
56. Souleimanov and Dzutsati, "Russia's Syria War," 45.
57. Ruslan Pukhov, "Russia's Unexpected Military Victory in Syria," *Defense News*, December 10, 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/outlook/2017/12/11/moscow-based-think-tank-director-russias-unexpected-military-victory-in-syria/>.
58. Borshchevskaya, *Russian Way of War*, 19, 25.
59. Pukhov, op. cit.
60. Kofman, "Syria and the Russian Armed Forces," 42-43.
61. Kofman, 50.
62. Bērziņš, "New Generation Warfare," 378.
63. See, for instance, this reporting on government attempts to disassociate captured Wagner personnel from the Russian state. Oliver Carroll, "Kremlin distances itself from captured 'Russian soldiers' shown in Isis propaganda video: Dmitry Peskov says Russia would be 'concerned' if the men 'turn out to be Russian citizens,'" *The Independent*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/isis-russia-video-soldiers-syria-kremlin-mercenaries-roman-zabolotny-grigory-tsurkanu-a7983316.html>.
64. Pukhov, op. cit.
65. Molly Dunigan and Ben Connable, "Russian Mercenaries in Great-Power Competition: Strategic Supermen or Weak Link?," *The RAND Blog*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/03/russian-mercenaries-in-great-power-competition-strategic.html>.
66. Pukhov, op. cit.

67. Kofman, “Syria and the Russian Armed Forces,” 60.

68. See, for instance, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Does Russia’s Syria Intervention Reveal its Ukraine Strategy?,” *National Interest*, February 12, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/does-russia%E2%80%99s-syria-intervention-reveal-its-ukraine-strategy-200527>.

69. All of this is discussed in greater detail in an interview given by Ruslan Pukhov. In particular, he notes the lack of clear air supremacy, Ukraine’s own military capabilities, and the political choice in the early weeks of the war to prioritize efforts to secure a change of government as complicating the Russian approach. See Petr Skorobogaty, “Ukraina: Gladiatorskie Boi,” PRISP, August 4, 2022, <http://www.prisp.ru/analytics/11005-skorobogaty-ukraina-gladiatorskie-boi-0408>.

70. Emma Beals, “How the Lessons of the Syria War May Safeguard Lives in Ukraine,” Carnegie Middle East Center, April 27, 2022, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2022/04/27/how-lessons-of-syria-war-may-safeguard-lives-in-ukraine-pub-87005>.

71. Jeffrey Edmonds, “Start with the Political: Explaining Russia’s Bungled Invasion of Ukraine,” *War on the Rocks*, April 28, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/start-with-the-political-explaining-russias-bungled-invasion-of-ukraine/?msclkid=40d1bc82d08e11ecb333e9b2d5123009>.

‘Terrorist Recruiters’ Versus ‘Terrorist Slayers’: Weaponizing Syria in Russian Information Warfare

Eszter Szenes and Mark W. Perry

Abstract: This article focuses on Russian information warfare in the context of the Syrian civil war. From the beginning of its military intervention, Russia justified its presence in Syria by claiming to fight “international terrorism.” This article draws on corpus linguistic analyses to examine this claim by analyzing the linguistic anatomy of Russian information warfare on Twitter. Findings reveal how recurring linguistic patterns construct information tactics that condemn the United States as a “terrorist recruiter” and “civilian killer” and praise Russia as a “terrorist slayer” and a “humanitarian.” We compare these findings to open-source conflict data to discuss how these information tactics were related to kinetic maneuvers on the ground.

Keywords: Disinformation; information warfare; strategic communication; corpus linguistics; Russia; terrorism.

Introduction

Four years into the Syrian civil war, by the summer of 2014, the Islamic State (ISIS), a violent Salafist terrorist group, conquered large areas of northern and eastern Syria and Iraq, declaring an Islamic caliphate in the region. ISIS’ rise was rapid and unexpected, and the Syrian government’s violent and lethal crackdown on the opposition spiraled out of control. After Syrian President Bashar al-Assad allegedly made a formal request for Russian military assistance, Russia entered the Syrian civil war on September 30, 2015, as a major player and supporter of the Assad regime and its allies.¹ These allies included Hezbollah, Iranian Quds and Revolutionary Guard Forces, allied-foreign Shi’a militias, and local Syrian forces operating in rebel-held territory. In parallel to the Russian military intervention, a Russian state-sponsored disinformation campaign was spreading on Twitter, calling on the US and other Western governments to join the Russian-Syrian “anti-terrorist front” against ISIS. Despite international outcry and condemnation of the human rights abuses Syrians suffered at the hands of their government, Russia continued to defend the Assad regime by arguing that compared to ISIS, Assad was a lesser of two evils.² It portrayed Assad’s campaign as a legitimate war on jihadi terrorism, which served to justify Russia’s military intervention.³

To divert attention from the Assad regime’s human rights violations and war crimes, Russian state media also portrayed the 2011 Arab Spring as a US/Western scheme against Russia: a geopolitical operation “to plant puppet regimes in the attacked countries,” which “ended in failure.”⁴ In order to better understand their information warfare (hereafter IW), it is essential that our analytical framework rests upon a firm understanding of the ways in which Russia operationalizes language to achieve strategic objectives. Drawing on a corpus linguistic methodology, this article will examine claims made by Russian Twitter

accounts that the aim of Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war was mainly to fight "international terrorism." Specifically, this article will analyze the linguistic anatomy of Russian IW, focusing particularly on unpacking the narrative signature with which Russia seeks to influence perceptions and advance strategic objectives.

This article is organized as follows. The article begins by introducing key concepts and provides an overview of research on Russian disinformation campaigns. It then introduces the methodological framework and describes the data. The analysis section illustrates in detail how Russian information tactics are built up through recurring linguistic patterns that condemn the US as a "terrorist recruiter" and "civilian killer" and praise Russia as a "terrorist slayer" and a "humanitarian." The following section discusses the implications of how such analyses can improve our ability to identify information tactics within Russian IW and interpret their strategic intentions. The paper concludes by discussing how the information tactics identified in Russia's disinformation campaign were related to kinetic maneuvers, i.e., actual events on the ground.

Literature Review: Russian Information Warfare

Key Terminology and Definitions

Before reviewing existing research on Russian disinformation campaigns, it is important to first introduce some key concepts relevant to the study of IW. The internet and social media have contributed significantly to the weaponization of information by the fast-paced dissemination of misinformation and disinformation, propaganda and conspiracy theories.⁵ Even though digital media helps amplify the spread of disinformation, it is worth pointing out that "it is only where the underlying institutional and political-cultural fabric is frayed that technology can exacerbate existing problems and dynamics to the point of crisis."⁶ Given the sheer volume, volatility and velocity of information in the global information environment aided by technology, machine learning, and algorithms, the study of IW is fundamentally a pursuit in social cybersecurity, as its targets are not IT systems, but "humans and the society that binds them."⁷

The terms *propaganda*, *information warfare*, and *disinformation* are especially relevant for this paper as they are related to the idea of manipulative use of information. Propaganda has been defined as a type of communicative tactic whose purpose is to intentionally provoke an emotional response from a target audience rather than to merely disseminate information.⁸ Propaganda research has shown that controlling a narrative that dominates public discussion has the power to manipulate the attitudes and beliefs of target audiences.⁹ An important distinction between propaganda and IW is that propaganda typically targets the local population while IW is aimed at foreign adversaries with the purpose of sowing confusion, fear, and distrust among the population of "enemy" states.¹⁰ While there are several working definitions of IW developed for a range of political, academic, government, and military contexts, overall, it is understood as the use of "information as a weapon" and the dissemination of propaganda in order to gain an information advantage

over an adversary.¹¹ Most recently, IW has also been defined as “a strategy for the use and management of information to pursue a competitive advantage, including both offensive and defensive operations.”¹²

Propaganda and IW operations characteristically involve the coordinated dissemination of disinformation. Disinformation is distinguished from misinformation on the basis of intent: misinformation can be defined as the unintentional spread of incorrect, misleading, and false information; in contrast, disinformation is spread intentionally and systematically in order to deceive and manipulate the opinions and behavior of target audiences, from the general public to foreign governments.¹³ This paper draws on the 2018 definition of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation of the European Commission: “Disinformation [...] includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit.”¹⁴ This definition is useful because it highlights the intentionally deceptive and manipulative nature of disinformation. Another relevant concept, *strategic narrative*, is defined as “a compelling story,” whose aim is to create shared meanings that “shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.”¹⁵ This master “story” contains smaller stories that all become embedded in a larger *master narrative*.¹⁶ For example, a *master narrative* portraying Russia as a more ethical and capable global partner than the US may encompass a diversity of embedded *strategic narratives* emphasizing Russia’s military might and humanitarian motives.

Russian Disinformation Campaigns

Disinformation campaigns are not new phenomena: the term itself can be traced back to the Russian word дезинформация (*dezinformatsiya*) coined during the Cold War.¹⁷ In its more recent 2011 *Draft Convention on International Information Security*, Russia describes disinformation as “manipulation of the flow of information in the information space of other governments, disinformation or the concealment of information with the goal of adversely affecting the psychological or spiritual state of society, or eroding traditional cultural, moral, ethical, and aesthetic values.”¹⁸ Indeed, Russia’s weaponization of information makes full use of the social diffusion of information, treating it as both the medium and the subject of conflict in IW.¹⁹

While the study of propaganda has long interested researchers, scholarly interest in information warfare has increased significantly since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, and it surged after Russia’s interference in the 2016 US elections.²⁰ The US intelligence community has since concluded that Russian intentions were to undermine liberal democracy by sowing distrust in the democratic process—an objective requiring the dissemination of numerous conflicting narratives to resonate with mutually exclusive political ideologies.²¹ It has been well established that this objective was carried out by a Russian state-sponsored “troll factory,” the Internet Research Agency (IRA), which operated thousands of troll accounts on social media in order to influence the 2016 US

elections.²² During the 2016 US elections, these troll accounts experimented with *trading up the chain*, i.e., planting a story, hoax, or conspiracy theory on a blog or news outlet with low reporting standards, which is then picked up and circulated by mainstream outlets, and amplified by automated social media accounts.²³ In this manner, disinformation can reach a mass audience several degrees removed from its source, making its message appear more organic and rendering attribution back to Russian intelligence all the more difficult. During the 2020 US elections, security officials were primarily concerned with so-called “perception hacks,” or the coordinated attempt to create the perception that voting processes were compromised, while inflicting little to no real damage to election infrastructure.²⁴ In this type of campaign, the intention is not to manipulate the physical voting systems and processes (i.e., altering votes and tallies), but rather to manipulate the psychology of the American voter and their faith in free and fair elections to the point of crisis.

To realize an information environment where objective reality cannot exist, and where any single narrative is as valid as the next, Russian IW employs what Keir Giles calls an “elastic targeting of different audiences with different implausible and mutually contradictory narratives.”²⁵ This carnival mirror’s representation of world events enables Russia to physically fight the realities they create, such as intervening to “protect” allegedly oppressed Russian speakers in Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, the separatists republics of Lugansk and Donetsk in 2022, and fighting against international terrorism in Syria beginning in 2015.²⁶ The multifaceted nature of this “digital blitzkrieg” muddles and delays analysis and response-time such that Russian objectives can be secured before international consensus can be reached as to what actually occurred and what should be done about it.²⁷

Russia operates in a perpetual state of information war.²⁸ While tactics may differ between operations targeting Russia’s “near abroad” in the former Soviet Union and those in its global “far abroad,” Kremlin IW generally seeks to advance three overarching objectives: re-establishing the Russian sphere of influence, damaging the influence of the West, and projecting Russia’s position as a global superpower.²⁹ The delivery of information under the Russian IW masthead has been described as a “firehose:” high-volume and multichannel; rapid, continuous, and repetitive; and, perhaps above all else, lacking commitment to objective reality and consistency.³⁰ Giles observes that “even if disinformation is not successfully inserted into the policy-making chain, and only spreads in mass and social media, the effect can be to create a permissive public opinion environment where Russian narratives are presented as factual.”³¹ Further, the Atlantic Council identified four major moves in Russian disinformation: *dismissing* the critic, *distorting* the facts, *distracting* from the main issue, and/or *dismaying* the audience, which became widely known as the 4D framework.³² While the 4D framework introduces mostly negative information tactics, this article will show that Russian IW does not exclusively rely on negative rhetoric to manipulate the narrative. Since disinformation campaigns are thought to provoke an emotional response in their target audience, this article will analyze the linguistic anatomy of Russian IW on the microblogging site Twitter in the context of the Syrian civil war, focusing specifically on claims about fighting “international terrorism.”

Research Method: Corpus Linguistic Analyses

The overall research questions guiding this study are the following: 1) how did Russia frame its own involvement in the Syrian civil war, and 2) how did Russia portray the international coalition's involvement, led by the US, in Syria? To answer these questions, this article draws on two sets of data. The first comprises a corpus of publicly available English-language Russian Twitter accounts between 2016 and 2020. The second dataset draws on open-source conflict data of Russian military activity in the Syrian civil war. To examine disinformation tactics, we draw on the methodology of corpus linguistics, which enables both automated quantitative and qualitative analyses of recurring linguistic patterns in their context.³³ Since Russia has claimed that its involvement in the Syrian civil war was mainly to fight “international terrorism,” we will use the results of analyses from both sets of data to discuss how kinetic maneuvers, i.e., actual events on the ground, were related to the information tactics identified in Russia's disinformation campaign.

The tweets analyzed in this paper are part of a large dataset included in Twitter's Information Operations Archive.³⁴ As this article focuses specifically on Russian information warfare, we have narrowed down the dataset analyzed for this article to include English-language tweets only. The finalized dataset was collected from 100 Twitter accounts, which have since been identified as state-linked accounts and deleted by Twitter. In contrast with tweets sourced from overt, publicly attributed Kremlin sources (e.g., @KremlinRussia), the accounts we analyze can be considered part of a covert operation, because they are unattributed to the Russian state, pretending instead to be local citizens and journalists, among other false identities. The dataset comprises a total of 51,594 tweets, 2,473 of which are retweets, and 1,841,553 words including hashtags (Table 1); it was pre-processed and cleaned using the Tidyverse package in RStudio, an open-source software for data science.³⁵ After preparing the data for processing and analysis, it was loaded into the corpus linguistic program, Sketch Engine, which was used to store and analyze the dataset.³⁶

The open-source conflict data was recorded between 2017 and 2020. It was accessed from the data export tool of the Armed Conflict Event and Location Data Project, a non-profit organization receiving funding from international government agencies including the US Department of State, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the German Federal Foreign Office.³⁷ The data consists of actors involved in a conflict event (perpetrators as well as those affected), the location of that event, the number of fatalities, the type of event (e.g., battles, violence against civilians, explosions/remote violence, riots, protests, and strategic developments), and the date the event occurred.

Table 1. Breakdown of data by number of tweets, sentences, words

TOTAL # TWEETS	51,594
Total # sentences	56,130
#Word Types	79605
#Word Tokens (cleaned; stop list)	680,600
Total # words	1,841,553

Our methodology comprised three analytical steps: we performed word frequency, keyword, and concordance analyses. Specifically, corpus linguistic quantitative analyses focused on word frequency and keyword analyses, while the concordancer function of Sketch Engine allowed closer qualitative analysis of wild card searches based on frequency and keyness. For example, as exemplified by Table 2, the wild card search for *kill**, indicated by the asterisk, has returned 1,526 hits including word forms such as *kill*, *killing*, and *killer*. To perform qualitative text analyses, analysts can then click on the search term, also termed as Key Word in Context (KWIC), in each concordance line in order to examine their usage in their textual context. Sketch Engine allows displaying KWICs in two formats: as one line of text with the KWIC in the middle of the concordance line, or as a complete sentence, with longer sentences displayed as multiple lines. While a one-line concordance line is visually more elegant, in this paper we chose to illustrate some examples as full sentences in order to display complete tweets and thus better understand their full context.

Table 2. Five randomly selected concordance lines for *kill**

#	Left context	Keyword in context	Right context
1	air strikes, 5 civilians were	Killed	#Syria #US
2	More than 50 terrorists	Killed	, more than 20 captured
3	in the western city of #Aleppo,	Killing	one person and injuring four
4	#MSU fighters and civilians were	Killed	and more than #400 people
5	the shelling of pro-Turkish	Killers	from the SNA(TFSA)

Key Themes Related to the Syrian Civil War

The starting point for corpus linguistic analyses is typically running a word frequency analysis.³⁸ Word frequency analyses are concerned with the number of occurrences (i.e., hits) of words or word forms ordered from the most to the least frequent item. The results in Table 3 show the top ten most frequent content words found across the entire dataset, after loading a list of stop words into Sketch Engine (i.e., after excluding highly frequent grammatical words such as articles and prepositions, e.g., *the*, *of*, etc.). The middle column of the table shows *absolute* frequency, that is, words actually occurring in the corpus. The third column shows *relative* frequency, that is, the occurrence of a particular word per

million words.³⁹ The most frequent word across the entire dataset is the modal verb *will* with 3,990 hits, which occurs ~1,051 times in every one million words. The other words can be broadly grouped into semantic categories of geopolitical entities (e.g., *US, Syria, Russia*) and non-specific groups of people (e.g., *people, militants, terrorists, civilians*).

Table 3. Top 10 words in the corpus

Word	Frequency	Freq. per Million
1. will	3,990	1,051.43
2. people	3,911	1,030.61
3. US	3,659	964.21
4. militants	2,163	569.99
5. Syrian	1,717	452.46
6. Russian	1,541	406.08
7. Syria	1,531	403.44
8. terrorists	1,435	378.15
9. Russia	1,214	319.91
10. civilians	879	231.63

Keyword analyses are concerned with words and expressions that are characteristic of a kind of discourse.⁴⁰ Keywords typically occur with *unusual frequency*; in other words, they are statistically significantly *overused* in the focus corpus (i.e., the data set compiled for this study) by comparison with a reference corpus (emphasis added).⁴¹ The reference corpus used in this study was the English Web 2020 (enTenTen20), available by default in Sketch Engine. It consists of 38 billion words excluding poor quality content and spam.⁴² When keywords are grouped semantically, they can reveal overall recurring patterns of usage.⁴³ Table 4 shows the top 50 words identified as keywords in the corpus. Based on their keyness, the following semantic categories of interest can be identified: lexical items related to the Syrian civil war, specifically its locations (e.g., *Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Raqqa*) and the language of war (e.g., *destroy, attack, kill, airstrikes, shelling, etc.*) (cf. Lukin); US-allied forces (e.g., *NATO, UN, CIA*); terrorists and terrorist organizations (e.g., *militant, terrorist, ISIS*); the Russian military (e.g., *forces, military, liberation*); those impacted by the civil war (e.g., *civilians, refugees*); and Russian humanitarian action (e.g., *humanitarian, aid, convoy*).⁴⁴

Table 4. Top 50 keywords in the corpus (Reference corpus: English Web 2020 (enTenTen20))

1. idlib	11. sdf	21. raqqa	31. military	41. arms
2. tahrir	12. turkish	22. armed	32. liberation	42. cia
3. militant	13. humanitarian	23. turkey	33. un	43. destroy
4. syrian	14. civilian	24. refugee	34. threats	44. radical
5. saa	15. isis	25. russian	35. terrorism	45. attack
6. aleppo	16. convoy	26. russia	36. airstrikes	46. kill
7. erdogan	17. ceasefire	27. nato	37. russians	47. army
8. syria	18. putin	28. shelling	38. explosion	48. fighting
9. terrorist	19. checkpoint	29. forces	39. bomb	49. war
10. hama	20. daesh	30. missile	40. crisis	50. terror

After identifying semantic categories of interest based on keyword analyses, we have manually examined the word frequency list in order to identify further synonyms and names of and references to semantic categories specifically that construe the collectivized entities *The USA* and *Russia* (inclusive of some instances of human collectives; cf. Halliday and Matthiessen) as well as the human collectives *terrorists* and *civilians*.⁴⁵ The synonyms indicative of these four main collectives identified across the dataset are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Collectivized entities and human collectives: USA, Russia, terrorists, civilians

Collectivized entities	
USA	Russia
The United States	Russia
The #UnitedStates	#Russia
the US in Syria	The #Russian Federation
The #US	#Russian air defense systems
the US Air Force	The Russian military
The international coalition led by the #United-States	#Russian military
the western coalition led by the United States	#RussianNavy
The US-led coalition	Russian Air Force
#UnitedStates	Russian #AirForce
#USA	Russian Aerospace Forces
#AmeriKKKa	
#FourthReich	
Human collectives	
The #Americans	The #Russians
US military instructors	#Russian #military_men
#American instructors	Russian military medics
#US intelligence agencies	Russian nurses
	#Russian experts
	#Russian soldiers

Human collectives	
Terrorists	Civilians
militants	the Syrian population
terrorists	Syrian civilians
#militants	Syrian citizens
#terrorists	Syrians
#jihadists	civilians
Insurgents	refugees
terrorist gangs	people
#terrorist groups	#Muslims
#militants of various armed formations	Arabs
pro-US insurgents groups	women
#USAterrorists	children
NATO backed jihadis	displaced persons
illegal armed groups	local residents
Jabhat al-Nusra	families
ISIS	inhabitants
#ISIL	
Daesh	
ISIS terrorists	
#ISIS #terrorists	
#ISIS_snipers	
#ISIS' "sleeper cell"	
#AlNusra militants	
Dzhebbat al-Nusra radicals	
HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) militants	
Jabhat Tahrir Surya militants	
soldiers of Tahrir al-Sham	
Feylaq al-Rahman snipers	
Jaish al-Islam fighters	
New Syrian Army militants	
the terrorist organisation Tahrir al-Sham	
the terrorist alliance Tahrir al-Sham	
enemies	

For follow-up qualitative analyses tweet sampling was based on the results of the corpus linguistic keyness and word frequency analyses. We treated the four collectives introduced above as *node* words, i.e., pre-selected vocabulary items (see Hunston for a detailed introduction), to generate concordance lines.⁴⁶ As an illustrative example, Table 6 shows a random selection of five concordance lines for the word *militants*.

Table 6. Five randomly selected concordance lines for militants

#	Left context	Keyword in context	Right context
1	The #Americans continue training	militants	of illegal armed groups.
2	US military instructors continue training	militants	on the territory of the military base in El #Tanf
3	The #UnitedStates has regained its title as the main recruiter of	militants	for Syria's southeastern factions.
4	the #Americans recruit the ranks of the	#militants	under their control in the #AtTanf zone
5	#US intelligence agencies continue to train	#militants	in the Al-Tanf camp

Given their high frequency and keyness, we processed the entire dataset focusing more closely on five node words included within the human collectives: *militants*, *terrorists*, *people*, *civilians* and *refugees*. We ran wildcard searches for each of these words (e.g., **militant**): the asterisk signals a wildcard for one or more characters, so these searches retrieved all instances that include hashtags as well as singular and plural forms of these nouns. A preliminary reading of the resulting concordance lines revealed that the *United States* and *Russia*, which also appear in the list of the most frequent words, are often mentioned in tweets containing these wildcard searches.

In order to narrow down the search to a specific context, concordance lines can be selected by using the filter option in Sketch Engine, also known as “advanced context word function.”⁴⁷ As we show in Table 4, there are several synonyms of and references to both the US and Russia across the dataset. For example, mentions of the US include *The USA*, *America*, *#Americans*, or *the international coalition led by the United States*. Similarly, synonyms and references to Russia include, for example, *the Russian Federation*, *Russians*, or *#Russian*. For each node word search, we uploaded a list of all mentions of the US and Russia identified in the randomized sample, to keep lines containing only the node word **militant** in the context of Russia, for example. The advanced context word function allows searching not only for one word or expression but also a list of lexical variations or synonyms of the search term. The results presented below account for such lexical variation.

The human collectives *militants* and *terrorists* appear as the fourth and eighth most frequent words (Table 3) and their singular forms appear in the list of 50 keywords (Table 4). A wild card search for **militant** and **terrorist** returned 3,330 and 3,626 hits respectively. The asterisk stands for extra characters: it allows us to retrieve search terms preceded by hashtags as well as different word forms, i.e., singular and plural forms of these nouns. We then filtered the context of the tweets containing **militant** by searching for references to the *United States*, which retrieved 1,049 hits, and in the context of **terrorist**, 1,143 hits. Filtering the context by searching for references to *Russia* returned 1,301 and 1,253 hits respectively.

We then ran the same search on the other statistically significant human collectives *people*, *civilians*, and *refugees*. With 3,911 hits, Table 3 above lists *people* as the second most frequent word in the entire dataset. A wild card search for **people* returned a total of 4,298 concordance lines; filtering its context by searching for both the *United States* and *Russia* returned 969 and 1,005 concordance lines respectively. With 879 hits, Table 3 above shows *civilians* as the tenth most frequent word. A wild card search for **civilian** retrieved a total of 1,286 concordance lines; filtering its context by searching for the *United States* and *Russia* returned 388 and 421 hits respectively. Since the keyword *refugee* is ranked 24th, we included it in our analyses: a wild card search for **refugee** returned a total of 1,173 concordance lines; filtering its context by searching for the *United States* and *Russia* retrieved 485 and 536 hits respectively. Performing these searches using the advanced context word function retrieved 4,034 concordance lines for the *United States* and 4,516 for *Russia*, a combined total of 8,550 concordance lines (Table 7a). Table 7b presents illustrative examples of each of the collectives filtered for context.

Table 7a. Concordance lines of key human collectives filtered for context

Keyword	Hits	Freq per M	Filter US	Freq per M	Filter Russia	Freq per M
*people	4,298	1,132.59	969	255.35	1,005	264.83
terrorist	3,626	955.51	1,143	301.2	1,253	330.19
militant	3,330	877.51	1,049	290.66	1,301	342.84
civilian	1,286	338.88	388	102.24	421	110.94
refugee	1,173	309.1	485	127.81	536	141.24
Total #	13,713		4,034		4,516	
Total combined # of concordance lines in sub-corpus: 8,550						

Table 7b. Illustrative examples of key human collectives filtered for context

Keyword	Filter: US	Filter: Russia
militant	The #ISIS militants , with the support of the United States and the Kurds, freely cross the Euphrates River, heading for the south-western regions of the Syrian province of #DeirezZor.	The militants reportedly want to launch an offensive in the coming days, using tanks and heavy equipment. #Syria #HTS Only Russia can de-escalate.
terrorist	The United States is not able to fight terrorists , and there is no particular desire.	In the event of the start of a military operation against terrorists in Idlib, Russia will be ready to greatly increase the number of military aircraft in Syria for the quickest possible destruction of terrorists.
*people	The United States is behind the terrorist attack in Ahwaz. On Saturday, September 22, a terrorist attack took place in Ahwaz, Iran, where 25-29 people were killed.	Russia does not tire of helping the friendly people of Syria.
civilian	The United States launched a series of air strikes on the homes of Syrian citizens in Hadjin, which resulted in regular civilian casualties.	Russia and Syria do not violate provisions of international humanitarian law as there are no actions targeting civilians or civilian infrastructure.
refugee	the # UnitedStates is not interested in solving the problems of Syrian refugees .	The # Russian # military escorted a convoy of 800 refugees returning to the liberated En-Naim.

After identifying the key semantic categories that construe the collectivized entities and the human collectives presented above, we aimed to unpack the online “chatter” surrounding the topics of militants/terrorists and people/civilians/refugees: What did the Russian Twitter accounts say about these human collectives when related to the US and Russia? In the following concordance analyses we present how the US is portrayed in an exclusively negative light as an immoral actor and Russia in an entirely positive light as both a capable and moral actor representing military might and a moral high ground in the fight against international terrorism.

Concordance Analyses: Key Information Tactics in Russian Information Warfare

In this section we analyze what kinds of messages accumulate in Russia’s disinformation campaign, specifically about fighting international terrorism in Syria to understand how they cluster into information tactics that praise Russia’s involvement in Syria and condemn that of the US. Following Tilakaratna and Szenes, and Szenes, we use the term *cluster* to mean recurring patterns of the same type of linguistic resources.⁴⁸ As shown in Table 7a, by filtering the context of key node words, we created a sub-corpus made up of a total of 8,550 concordance lines. We then used the random sampler function of the concordancer to create a representative sample of 200 tweets, which formed the basis for our qualitative analyses. For reasons of space, we will limit our presentation to five randomly selected tweets per cluster.

Information Tactic 1: America the Terrorist Recruiter

For the concordance analysis we first searched for the keywords **militant** and **terrorist** in order to examine how these human collectives are positioned within the sub-corpus and what key messages about them emerge. First, we focus on the concordance lines containing **militant** and **terrorist** filtered for the context of the *United States*. As highlighted in Table 8, we found that they occur together with different forms of the verbs *train* or *recruit* in each of the tweets analyzed. It is important to note here that these verbs do not convey any positive or negative valence on their own. However, together with the verb *continue* they function to invoke and thus amplify Russia’s condemnation of the US for the training and recruiting of terrorists as they portray the action of terrorist training as ongoing and long-lasting. We have named this cluster “*America the terrorist recruiter*” and it constructs the first information tactic identified in Russian IW against US involvement in the Syrian civil war.

Table 8. Cluster 1: “the US + RECRUITS / TRAINS + militants / terrorists”

#	Left context	Keyword in context	Right context
1	The #UnitedStates has regained its title as the main recruiter of	#militants	for Syria’s southeastern factions.
2	the #Americans recruit the ranks of the	militants	under their control in the #AtTanf zone
3	The United States continues to train	terrorists	at its military base in the #AlTanf
4	#American instructors train	#terrorist	groups from the #NewSyrianArmy
5	#US intelligence agencies continue to train	militants	i# n the Al-Tanf camp

Information Tactic 2: America the Civilian Killer

When filtering the concordance lines containing **civilian** for the context of the *United States*, we found that the verb *kill* occurs most frequently in the concordance lines retrieved across the data. Coupled with quantifying the civilians killed by the US (e.g., *dozens of thousands of, more than 300, more than 10000*) as well as specifying locations (e.g., *in #Syria, in #Raqqa city*), piling up such tweets functions to amplify Russia’s condemnation of the US relative to both number of casualties and also spread (cf. Hood).⁴⁹ As in the first information tactic, where Russia accuses the US of training and recruiting terrorists in Syria, it also blames the US and the international coalition for killing civilians. Illustrated by Table 9, we named this cluster realizing the second information tactic identified in Russian IW “*America the civilian killer.*”

Table 9. Cluster 2: “the US + KILLED + x number of + civilians”

#	Left context	Keyword in context	Right context
1	The #US killed dozens of thousands of	civilians	in #Syria
2	The US-led coalition killed hundreds [sic]	civilians	at eastern #Euphrates
3	The US Air Force killed 30	civilians	, the majority of the dead - women and children
4	The US in Syria killed more than 10000	civilians	in the city of Raqqah
5	The international coalition led by the #UnitedStates killed only	civilians	#Syria #BreakingNews

In both information tactics presented above the same type of linguistic resources are repeated: the *United States continues training/recruiting* terrorists and *killed* civilians. The linguistic resource of repetition has an intensifying effect in discourse (cf. Hood); thus, posting (and retweeting) tweets that repeat the same message help 1) reinforce Russia’s accusations against and 2) amplify Russia’s condemnation of the US.⁵⁰ We will now show how Russia shifts its negative information tactics portraying the US as “terrorist recruiter” and “civilian killer” to positive information tactics that praise Russia’s involvement in Syria.

Information Tactic 3: Russia the Terrorist Slayer

Here we focus on the randomized selection of concordance lines that contain the node words **militant** and **terrorist** filtered for the context of *Russia*. The verbs *destroy* and *kill* were identified as frequently occurring in these tweets. As opposed to the negative information tactic that portrays the US as terrorist recruiters, the positive information tactic in Table 10 below represents Russian military might and its defense capabilities, amplified

by references to amount, space, and intensification (e.g., *dozens of militants, in the Jarjanaz area, successfully destroyed*). As mentioned above, quantification and repetition both serve to amplify Russia’s condemnation of the US as part of the Russian IW toolbox. Another strategy for amplification is “infused intensification,” i.e., upscaling the degree of intensity of the meaning of lexical items: through the choice of the verb *destroy*, compared to *kill*, Russia steps up the amplification of Russian military capability and exaggerates its image as a successful geopolitical power in eliminating terrorists and fighting against international terrorism.⁵¹ We will name this pattern “*Russia the terrorist slayer*,” the third information tactic identified in Russian IW.

Table 10. Cluster 3: “Russia + DESTROYED / KILLED + militants / terrorists”

#	Left context	Keyword in context	Right context
1	Russian #AirForce destroyed Military Police #ISIL headquarters in Uqayrbat city. About 20	militants	were killed and 1 vehicle was de-destroyed .
2	Russian aviation destroyed the last two tanks of the #HTS	terrorists	in the Jarjanaz area. #Syria
3	#Russian_Air_Force destroyed a convoy with ammunition and food for #ISIL	#terrorists	
4	Russian and Syrian aviation destroyed 3 pickups with a large-caliber machine gun and one bus as well as more than 50	militants	were killed
5	#Russian air defense systems in Syria shot down two	#terrorist’s	#drones

Information Tactic 4: Russia the Humanitarian

Finally, we examine the concordance lines containing **people,* *civilian,** and **refugee** filtered for the context of *Russia*. We found that the word *humanitarian*, ranked 13th on the list of keywords, occurs in the tweets analyzed in Table 11. A further search for *humanitarian* has revealed that it collocates, i.e., occurs most typically, with the words *aid* (n=131), *action* (n=65), *corridor* (n=53), *convoy* (n=46), and *situation* (n=46). The verbs used most typically to describe Russia’s humanitarian action are *provided* and *delivered*, construed as factual statements. Place names (e.g., *Um al-Izam in #Homs, in #Aleppo province*) included in each tweet signal how far Russian assistance spreads. The co-patterning of these resources forms the fourth information tactic identified in IW. We named this information tactic that serves to highlight Russia’s claim of moral superiority “*Russia the humanitarian*.”

Table 11. Cluster 4: “Russia + PROVIDES + humanitarian aid + to civilians / refugees”

#	Left context	Keyword in context	Right context
1	The Russian military provided humanitarian aid to the	people	of Um al-Izam in #Homs. #Syria
2	#Russian soldiers gave humanitarian aid to	civilians	in #Aleppo province
3	The #Russian Federation has fully fulfilled its obligations to organize the delivery of #UN humanitarian aid to the #Rukban	#refugee	camp
4	#Russia delivered humanitarian aid to the Syrian	people	in the city of Ira in the province of Essaouida
5	#Russia organized humanitarian corridors for 13 thousand of Syrian	#refugees	to leave the fighting zone in #EasternG-houta

The four information tactics presented above are summarized in Table 12. Russia’s negative portrayal of the US as *terrorist recruiter* and *civilian killer* foreground the condemnation and moral inferiority of the US for terrorist recruitment and its alleged human rights abuses, portraying it as a destabilizing power in Syria. In contrast, Russia’s positive portrayal of its own involvement and actions as *terrorist slayer* and *humanitarian* functions to foreground both admiration of Russian military strength and capability and praise of its moral superiority for its humanitarian interventions, portraying Russia as a stabilizing power in Syria.

Table 12. Key information tactics and their linguistic features in Russian information warfare

Information tactic		Recurring linguistic pattern
US	terrorist recruiter	The US + RECRUITS / TRAINS + militants / terrorists
	civilian killer	the US + KILLED + x number of + civilians
Russia	terrorist slayer	Russia + DESTROYS / KILLS + militants / terrorists
	humanitarian	Russia + PROVIDES + humanitarian aid + civilians / refugees

Comparing information tactics to kinetic operations

To gain a fuller perspective on the deployment of information tactics in relation to Russia’s use of force, we compare the results of the concordance analyses to the open-source conflict data on Russian military operations.⁵² Several patterns emerge. Figure 1 visualizes temporal variation across Russian military actions targeting civilians, groups widely designated as terrorists and other armed rebel and opposition groups.⁵³ While kinetic operations against civilian and rebel targets ramped up between mid-2017 and mid-2018, as illustrated in Figure 1, Russian information warfare emphasized information tactics 1 and 2 (Figure 2) to manufacture alternate versions of events in which Russian operations were prolifically killing terrorists and supplying humanitarian aid. The spike in the latter tactic lags behind the former and appears to respond to the spike in increased civilian targeting in Figure 1—a *reactive* tactic reminiscent of what the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence refers to as Russia’s “fog of falsehood.”⁵⁴ During a lull in Russian kinetic activity encompassing the period between Russia’s Idlib demilitarization deal with Turkey in September 2018, and the agreement’s ultimate collapse in May 2019 (Figure 1), information tactics shifted strongly to those framing the US-led coalition as *recruiting terrorists* while simultaneously *killing civilians* (Figure 3).⁵⁵ As Russian military operations began to build up in early 2019, we again see a marked increase of the information tactics *Russia the terrorist slayer* and *Russia the humanitarian*, followed by a dramatic spike in *America the terrorist recruiter* and *America the civilian killer* as the campaign progressed. Finally, as kinetic operations wound down in the latter half of 2020, so too did the corresponding information campaign.

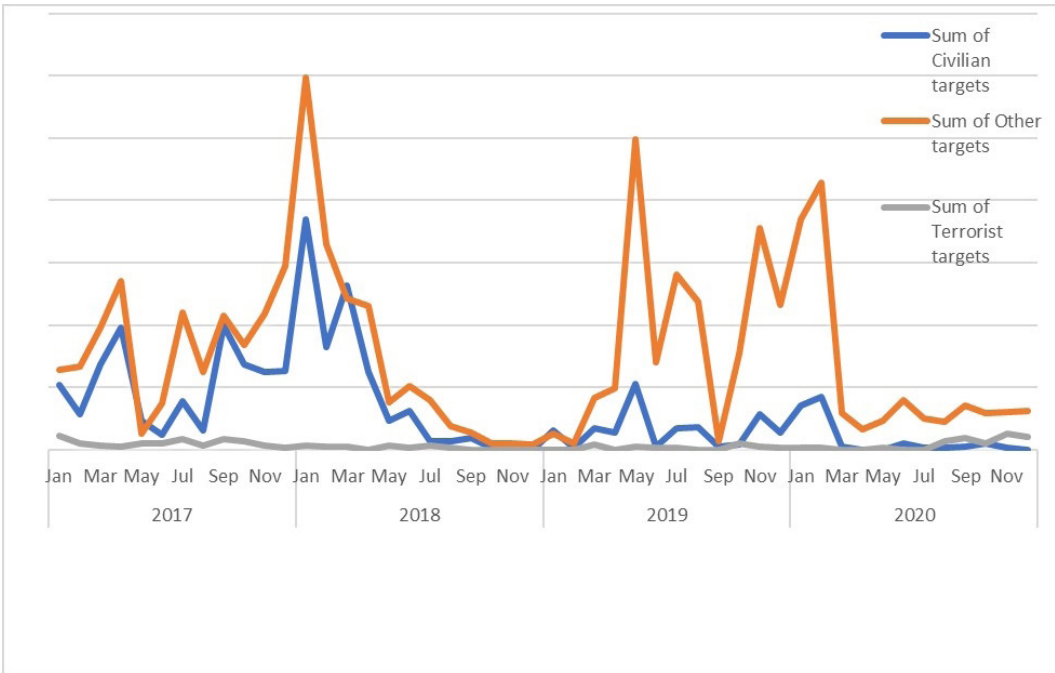
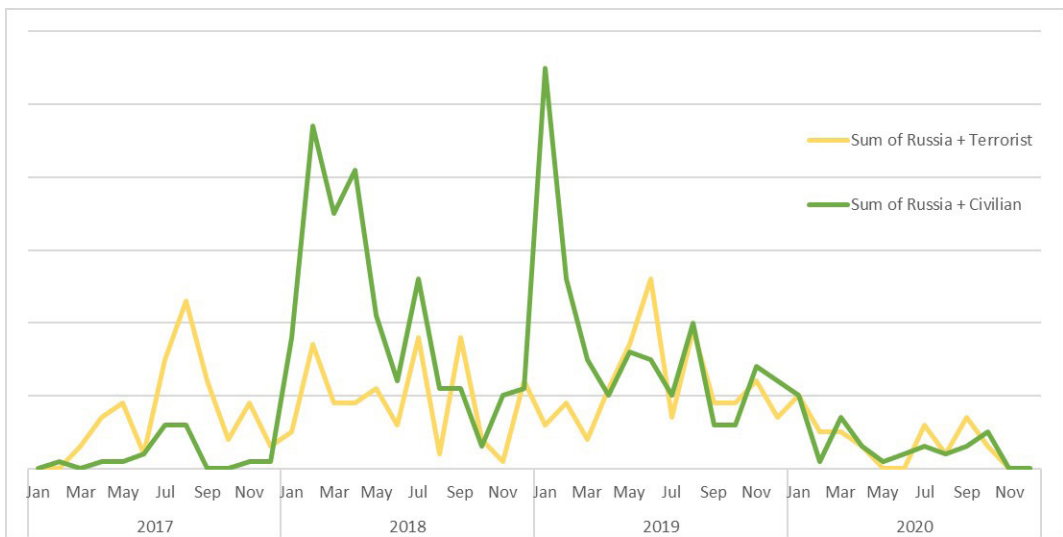


Figure 1. Variation in Russian military targets between 2017 and 2020



**Figure 2. Russian information tactics 1 and 2 over time:
*Russia the terrorist slayer and Russia the humanitarian***

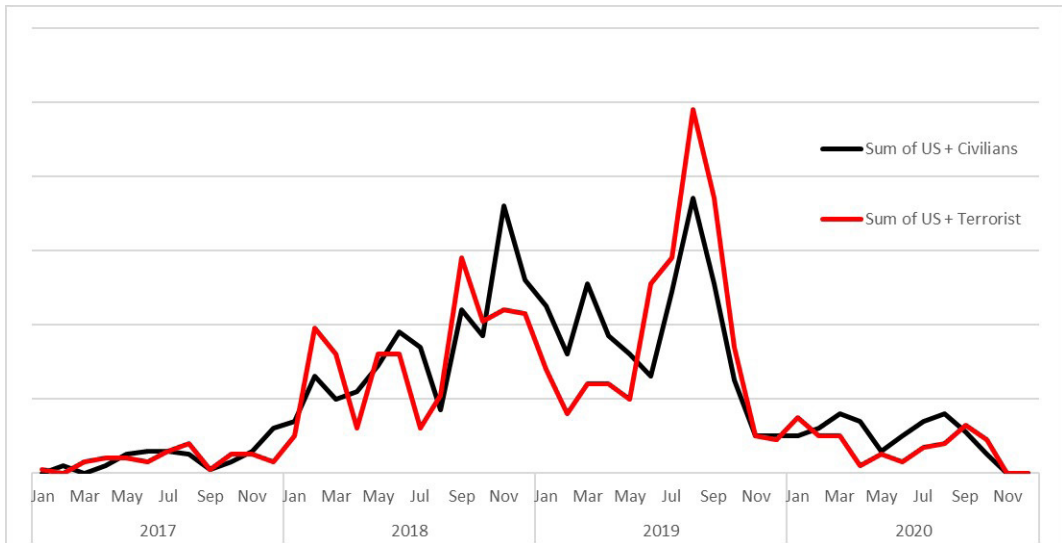


Figure 3. Russian information tactics 3 and 4 over time:
America the terrorist recruiter and America the civilian killer

Discussion

This article set out to examine how Russia framed its own involvement and actions in the Syrian civil war in comparison to those of the international coalition, led by the US. Since Russian state and social media claimed that Russia’s mission in Syria was to fight “international terrorism,” we sought to unpack Russia’s covert Twitter campaign surrounding the Syrian civil war between 2016 and 2020. The detailed corpus linguistic analyses presented above helped reveal the Russian information tactics used to discredit the US and its allies while lauding Russia’s efforts in the Syrian civil war. Comparing the weaponization of information with on-the-ground conflict data, we found that the versions of reality communicated by these four information tactics formed a more permissive environment for Russia to accomplish military objectives that were actually in direct contrast with its framing of events. At the same time, Russia’s disinformation campaign in Syria continued to advance its larger geopolitical objectives in the information space, such as undermining the influence of the West and projecting itself as a global superpower. The information tactics most closely tied to Russian military objectives are *terrorist slayer* and *humanitarian*, each contributing to the strategic narrative that Russia was in Syria to fight international terrorism. Thus, tweets associated with such information tactics serve to justify Russian involvement, creating the perception that their offensives focus exclusively, and very successfully, on vanquishing ISIS and caring for displaced and injured civilians.

Despite overt strategic communication portraying intervention as a fight against international terrorism, Russian military activity directly targeting ISIS and other terrorist groups remained minimal throughout the period of analysis. In fact, Russian overt

communication (e.g., by Putin or the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense) continually reported air strikes against terrorist targets despite a pattern of discrepancies between claimed target locations and the locations confirmed by independent, open-source analysis, the majority of which had no known connection to ISIS or international terrorism.⁵⁶ Indeed, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Lab concludes that Russian bombing had very little effect on ISIS or the al-Nusra Front and instead served mostly to weaken US-backed opposition and rebel groups, directly enabling ISIS to gain ground and the Assad regime to reclaim territory in Syria.⁵⁷

To summarize, the covert Twitter network appears to favor the *terrorist slayer* and *humanitarian* tactics during initial phases of a kinetic campaign, before rather overwhelmingly turning to *terrorist recruiter* and *civilian killer*. This is significant for the study of IW because Russian information tactics did not simply *prepare* the terrain for their military operations; it *created* the terrain—seeding the information space with justifications enabling physical intervention, while proceeding to undermine any information advantage of the international coalition. In its geopolitical power play and struggle to reclaim its position as a significant military and diplomatic force, Russia's strategic disinformation centers around information tactics that are delivered as factual assertions beyond debate, as real events on the ground. As Lev Topor and Alexander Tabachnik argue, Russian information operations are offensive rather than defensive.⁵⁸ Indeed, our findings underscore the notion that Russian offensives in the physical world are part and parcel to those in the information space.

While the Kremlin consistently denied the allegations of human rights abuses, Russian offensives repeatedly used illegal cluster munitions and targeted civilian objects, including hospitals and aid facilities, civilian homes, mosques, and schools.⁵⁹ These airstrikes and cluster bomb attacks resulted in an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 civilian deaths in Syria between 2015 and 2020 and likely constitute war crimes.⁶⁰ Contrary to Kremlin narratives of “helping civilians,” Russian and Assad forces’ military tactics resulted in the displacement of people in areas held by opposition forces, creating an international refugee crisis.⁶¹

Syria is not the first place the Kremlin has used virtually manufactured realities to justify the use of physical force, nor is it insignificant that a humanitarian theme runs through its framing of military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria.⁶² While the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine (2014) may be where Russia developed and tested its hybrid warfare for use in its “near abroad,” Syria presents a different case. One Russia expert, Troy Bouffard, referred in a recent keynote to Syria as a “combat training exercise center” for updating its military capabilities debuted in Ukraine.⁶³ Our analysis suggests this characterization may also include Russia's IW capabilities, which, this time were deployed alongside military operations in the Russian “far abroad” and in direct confrontation with an American-led operation.

Concluding Remarks

Our objective in conducting this analysis was to provide actionable insight into

how Russian information warfare framed Russian and American coalition involvement in the Syrian civil war, with an emphasis on how this framing aligned with strategic objectives and events on the ground. At the time of writing this article, the *New York Times* broke the news in a series of articles that the Bakhuz airstrike by the US killed dozens of civilians, including women and children.⁶⁴ Independent reporting also estimates that American coalition offensives resulted in 8,000 to 13,000 civilian deaths across Syria and Iraq.⁶⁵ The purpose of this article is not to absolve the US and its allies of responsibility for its humanitarian record in Syria, nor is it to portray Russia as the sole cause of civilian death. Any alleged infringement upon the rule of distinction between civilians and combatants is to be considered first a human tragedy and second a possible violation of customary international humanitarian law, irrespective of the perpetrator.⁶⁶ What we found in our analysis was a strategic disinformation campaign realized by discrete information tactics presenting alternative versions of events as indisputable facts. These virtual realities justified military operations claiming to target terrorism and to provide aid, while mostly ignoring ISIS and instead targeting Assad's opponents, including civilians and civilian objects. Meanwhile, these information tactics ascribed blame for civilian casualties entirely to the US and its allies. It is therefore appropriate to accurately cite Russia's humanitarian impact in this article not only because their disinformation campaign directly supported physical operations resulting in civilian death and displacement, but also because the topic of civilian death and displacement was itself weaponized to manipulate international perceptions of events on the ground.

In addition to shaping the Syrian operational environment, information warfare continued to advance overarching geopolitical objectives emblematic of Russian IW strategy—namely undermining the influence of the West and positioning itself as a global superpower.⁶⁷ We consider framing the US as a *terrorist recruiter* and *civilian killer* as belonging to a *declining West* strategic narrative family, while Russia's portrayal as the *terrorist slayer* and *humanitarian* advances the strategic narrative that Russia is a powerful and ethical alternative to Western influence. This conclusion aligns with the German Marshall Fund's observation that Russian information warfare is not so much guided by any single event, as by overarching narratives associated with long-term objectives.⁶⁸ In other words, covert information tactics in Syria serve not only to justify the use of force against Assad's perceived opponents and undermine America's position in the Syrian information space, but also to advance Russia's image as a superpower while damaging the global influence of the West. Further emphasizing the strategic import of these contrasting covert information tactics, a recent report from NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence found that overt communication by state-backed media (e.g., *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*) also framed Russian involvement in Syria by contrasting Russia's provision of humanitarian aid with America's collusion with terrorists, significantly amplifying the reach of these covertly seeded narratives.⁶⁹

Just as the *defending Russian diaspora* narrative outlived its deployment in Georgia and has since been observed in disinformation campaigns in Ukraine and across the former

Soviet “near abroad,” variations of the information tactics we identify in the Syrian “combat training exercise center” may well appear and indicate future physical intervention in other international contexts. The analytical framework we demonstrate enables us to identify the ways in which the language of individual messages clusters into narrative lines of effort based upon the repeated framing of collectivized and human entities (e.g., *America + trains + terrorists*), signaling the potential for future research efforts to recognize and detect known tactics as they are used in different operational environments. This process can in turn help researchers to identify broader strategic narratives (e.g., *declining West*) and information objectives (e.g., undermining American influence) in an ecosystem intentionally polluted by diverse and mutually contradicting articles of information.

Shortly before this article was finalized and submitted, Russia commenced an invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Much as Russian military intervention in Syria was ushered in with the tactical use of *humanitarian* and *terrorist slayer* narratives to justify the use of force, Russian strategic communication characterized its invasion of Ukraine as a “special military operation” whose objective was the “demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine” and to “defend people who for eight years are suffering persecution and genocide by the Kyiv regime.”⁷⁰ This justification was seeded by weeks of false flag narratives, information tactics framing the US, NATO, and the Ukrainian government as aggressors bent on encircling Russia and committing atrocities, including terrorist attacks and genocide against Russian-speaking populations in Ukraine.⁷¹ Since the invasion began, we continue to witness an unyielding barrage of Russian disinformation framing Ukraine and NATO as aggressive, morally corrupt actors. This disinformation includes claims that Ukrainian leadership is infested with neo-Nazis and drug addicts, that Ukrainian and American governments have collaborated to develop biological weapons for use against Russia, and that the Russian military is targeting radicals and Nazis while actually attacking civilian objects such as maternity hospitals.⁷² The discrepancy between claimed extremist targets and real, often civilian targets is, of course, tragically familiar.

A detailed analysis of Russian disinformation during its invasion of Ukraine is needed to fully break down the anatomy of information tactics in the Ukrainian theatre, however observing the developments in real-time is enough to suggest several similarities between their campaigns in Syria and Ukraine. While returning to *defending Russian diaspora* narratives, the Russian information offensive against Ukraine continues to hinge upon the diametrically opposed symbols of innocent civilians and violent extremists, be they terrorists or neo-Nazis. On one side of this hinge, Russia protects civilians and destroys extremists, while on the other, its adversaries commit unspeakable atrocities and collude with extremists. The *declining West* and *Russian superpower* strategic narratives are once again being leveraged in the Ukrainian conflict. The ebbs, flows, and narrative adaptations of this latest Russian information war will doubtlessly inform and be informed by as yet unknown developments on the ground. The present Ukrainian conflict is the latest and most powerful reminder of just how interconnected Russian IW and their kinetic operations really are.

In sum, strategic disinformation positioned Russia as the most significant actor in the fight against international terrorism, a stabilizing presence in the region with the most powerful military. Information objectives in this context are not concerned with accuracy, credibility, trust, or even persuasion but are focused instead on creating “an exaggerated view of Russia’s economic and military power.”⁷³ This resonates with findings of previous research on public perceptions of Russia in its “far abroad,” especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where Russia has been successful in “inflating” its authoritarian superpower image.⁷⁴ Disinformation analysis should therefore accordingly orient its methodological frameworks to address how IW targets liberal democratic society above all else. In keeping with this, our analysis treats weaponized information tactics as 1) possessing a *narrative*, because they seek to resonate with ideologies, theories, and beliefs, and “points the way to future actions,” and 2) *strategic*, because they seek advantage by targeting an audience’s cognitive vulnerabilities with premises they are predisposed to accept.⁷⁵ Future research thus needs to study from a social cybersecurity perspective the reach, distribution, and impact of disinformation campaigns on targeted audiences, and the extent to which they act as a threat multiplier in polarizing societies.

Eszter Szenes is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions research fellow at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central European University, Vienna, Austria, and a senior fellow at the Center for Global Resilience and Security, Norwich University. She holds a PhD in systemic functional linguistics from the University of Sydney. Her research interests include violent extremism, information warfare, critical thinking, and disciplinary literacies. Her most recent work investigates the links between climate change and violent extremism, ecofascism, and disinformation campaigns.

Mark W. Perry is a research associate at the John and Mary Frances Patton Peace and War Center at Norwich University. He has an MA in international policy and development from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, Monterey, California. His research interests include information warfare, international migration, and comparative politics.

This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (Grant Agreement No 845643), as well as the Department of Defense Cyber Institutes Grant administered by the Norwich University Applied Research Institutes.

The authors also would would also like to thank Associate Professor William Travis Morris and Assistant Professor Robert VandenBerg for providing invaluable feedback on the first draft of this article.

Endnotes

1. Atilla Mesterházy, “The International Military campaigns Against Daesh,” Defense and Security Committee, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2016, <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2016-daesh-mesterhazy-163-dsctc-16-e>.
2. Aron Lund, *From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations* (The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019), <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-paper-no.-7-2019.pdf>.
3. Lund, *From Cold War to Civil War*; Roy Allison, “Russia and Syria: Explaining alignment with a regime in crisis,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 795-823; Phillip Casula, “The Syrian conflict through Russian eyes revisited,” *Russian Analytical Digest* 175 (2015): 6-10.
4. Sivkov Konstantin, “Мистики-нолики,” *Military-Industrial Courier (VPK)* 34, no. 649 (September 7, 2016), <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/32156>.
5. Jessikka Aro, “The cyberspace war: Propaganda and trolling as warfare tools,” *European View* 15, no. 1 (2016): 121-132; Marco Bastos and Johan Farkas, “‘Donald Trump Is My President!’: The Internet Research Agency Propaganda Machine,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 3 (2019): 1-13; and Naja Bentzen, *Online disinformation and the EU’s response* (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019), accessed December 13, 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/620230/EPRS_ATA\(2018\)620230_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/620230/EPRS_ATA(2018)620230_EN.pdf); Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, “Disinformation as Political Communication,” *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (2020): 145-156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755>; and Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 7th ed. (Sage Publications, Inc., 2019).
6. Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 23.
7. Benkler et al., *Network Propaganda*, 118.
8. Bentzen, *Online disinformation*; Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*; and Travis Morris, *Dark Ideas: How Neo-Nazi and Violent Jihadi Ideologies Shaped Modern Terrorism* (Lexington Books, 2016).
9. Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*; Morris, *Dark Ideas*; and Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015).
10. Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*.
11. YuLin Whitehead, “Information as a Weapon: Reality Versus Promises” (PhD diss., Air University Maxwell Air Force Base, School of Advanced Airpower Studies, 1999), 3; and Miriam Matthews, Alyssa Demus, Elina Treyger, Marek Posard, Hilary Reinger, and Christopher Paul, *Understanding and Defending Against Russia’s Malign and Subversive Information Efforts in Europe* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3160.html.
12. Catherine Theohary, *Defense Primer: Information Operations* (Congressional Research Service, 2021), 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10771>.
13. Bentzen, *Online disinformation*; and Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*.

14. European Commission High Level Expert Group on Fake News, *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent high level group on fake news and online disinformation* (Luxembourg: European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology, Publications Office of the European Union, March 12, 2018), 3, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>.
15. Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (Routledge, 2006), 22; and Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, "Introduction" in *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, eds. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 6.
16. Matthew Levinger, "Master Narratives of Disinformation Campaigns," *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1.5 (2018): 125-134.
17. Dean Jackson, *Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and "Fake News"* (National Endowment for Democracy, October 17, 2017), <https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-distinguishing-disinformation-from-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news/>.
18. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Convention on International Information Security* (Moscow: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011), 3, accessed December 11, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/RUSSIAN-DRAFT-CONVENTION-ON-INTERNATIONAL-INFORMATION-SECURITY.pdf>.
19. Keir Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2016), 4.
20. Janne Hakala and Jazlyn Melnychuk, *Russia's Strategy in Cyberspace* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2021); Bentzen, *Online disinformation*; and Freelon and Wells, "Disinformation as political communication."
21. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections* (Washington, D.C: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 6, 2017), ii.
22. Josephine Lukito, Jiyoun Suk, Yini Zhang, Larissa Doroshenko, Sang Jung Kim, Min-Hsin Su, Yiping Xia, Deen Freelon, and Chris Wells, "The Wolves in Sheep's clothing: How Russia's Internet Research Agency Tweets Appeared in U.S. News as Vox Populi," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 25, no. 2 (2020): 196-216, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219895215>.
23. Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online* (New York: Data and Society Research Institute, 2017); and Lukito et al., "The Wolves in Sheep's Clothing."
24. David Sanger and Nicole Perlroth, "'Perception Hacks' and Other Potential Threats to the Election," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/28/us/politics/2020-election-hacking.html>.
25. Keir Giles, *The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016), 8.

26. Timothy Thomas, "Russia's 21st Century Information War: Working to Undermine and Destabilize Populations," *Defence Strategic Communications* 1, no.1 (2015): 22; Tony Selhorst, "Russia's Perception Warfare: The development of Gerasimov's doctrine in Estonia and Georgia and its application in Ukraine," *Militaire Spectator* 185, no. 4 (2016): 156-159; and Maks Czuperski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Frederic Hof, and Ben Nimmo, *Distract, Deceive, Destroy: Putin at War in Syria* (Washington D.C.: The Atlantic Council of the United States, 2016), 19.
27. William Merrin, "From television to the internet: from the reality of terror to reality terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14, no. 4 (September 21, 2021): 451; and Keir Giles, James Sherr, and Anthony Seaboyer, *Russian Reflexive Control* (Kingston, Ontario: Royal Military College of Canada, 2018), 26.
28. *The Weaponization of Information: The Need for Cognitive Security, Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Cybersecurity*, 115th Cong. 4 (April 27, 2017) (Testimony of Rand Waltzman, Senior Information Scientist, Rand Corporation).
29. Todd Helmus, Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, Joshua Mendelsohn, William Marcellino, Andriy Bega, and Zev Winkelman, *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2018), 14-17; and Conor Cunningham, *A Russian Federation Information Warfare Primer* (Seattle: University of Washington, Jackson School of International Studies, 2020).
30. Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2016), 2.
31. Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*, 22.
32. Edward Lucas and Ben Nimmo, CEPA Info War Paper, No. 1 *Information Warfare: What Is It and How to Win It?* (Washington D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, November 2015), https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=1896.
33. Monica Bednarek and Georgia Carr, "Computer-assisted digital text analysis for journalism and communications research: Introducing corpus linguistic techniques that do not require programming," *Media International Australia*, 181, no. 1 (2021): 131-151.
34. "Russia GRU (February 2021)" and "Russia IRA (February 2021)", Information Operations Archive, Twitter Transparency Center, <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/reports/information-operations.html>.
35. Cleaning included removing special characters, URL fragments, and standardizing capitalization to lower case. Stop words were subsequently removed in Sketch Engine; H. Wickham and M.H. Wickham, "Easily Install and Load the 'Tidyverse,' Version 1.3.1.9000" (2017), <http://ftp.gr.xemacs.org/pub/CRAN/web/packages/tidyverse/tidyverse.pdf>; Hadley Wickham, Mara Averick, Jennifer Bryan, Winston Chang, Lucy D'Agostino McGowan, Romain François, Garrett Grolmund, Alex Hayes, Lionel Henry, Jim Hester, Max Kuhn, Thomas Lin Pedersen, Evan Miller, Stephan Milton Bache, Kirill Müller, Jeroen Ooms, David Robinson, Dana Paige Seidel, Vitalie Spinu, Kohske Takahashi, Davis Vaughan, Claus Wilke, Kara Woo, and Hiroaki Yutani, "Welcome to the Tidyverse," *Journal of Open Source Software* 4, no. 43 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.01686>; and R Core Team, *R: A language and environment for statistical computing, Version 1.2.5033* (Vienna: R Foundation for Statistical Computing, 2021), <https://www.R-project.org/>.

36. Adam Kilgarriff, Pavel Rychlý, Pavel Smrž, and David Tugwell, *The Sketch Engine, Itri-04-08* (Brighton, UK: Information Technology Research Institute, 2004), <http://www.sketchengine.eu>; and Adam Kilgarriff, Vit Baisa, Jan Bušta, Miloš Jakubiček, Vojtěch Kovář, Jan Michelfeit, Pavel Rychlý, and Vit Suchomel, “The Sketch Engine: Ten years on,” *Lexicography* 1 (2014): 7-36.
37. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, *Data Export Tool*, accessed August 31, 2021, <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>.
38. Bednarek and Carr, “Computer-assisted digital text analysis.”
39. Anatol Stefanowitsch, *Corpus linguistics: A guide to the methodology* (Berlin: Language Science Press, 2020).
40. Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (London: Continuum, 2006); and Stefanowitsch, *Corpus linguistics*.
41. Mike Scott, “PC analysis of key words – And key key words,” *System* 25, no. 2 (1997): 233–245.
42. Miloš Jakubiček, Adam Kilgarriff, Vojtěch Kovář, Pavel Rychlý, and Vit Suchomel, “The TenTen Corpus Family,” in *7th International Corpus Linguistics Conference CL, 2013*, 125-127.
43. Bednarek and Carr, “Computer-assisted digital text analysis.”
44. Annabelle Lukin, *War and Its Ideologies: A Social-Semiotic Theory and Description* (Berlin: Springer, 2019).
45. M.A.K. Halliday and Christian Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar, 3rd edition* (London: Hodder Education, 2004).
46. Susan Hunston, *Corpora in Applied Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
47. Bednarek and Carr, “Computer-assisted digital text analysis.”
48. Namala Tilakaratna and Eszter Szenes, “(Un)critical reflection: Uncovering disciplinary values in Social Work and Business reflective writing assignments,” in *Building Knowledge in Higher Education: Enhancing Teaching and Learning with Legitimation Code Theory*, eds. Christine Winberg, Sioux McKenna, and Kirstin Wilmot (Routledge, 2021), 105-125; and Eszter Szenes, “Neo-Nazi environmentalism: The linguistic construction of ecofascism in a Nordic Resistance Movement manifesto,” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 27 (Summer 2021), 147-192.
49. Susan Hood, *Appraising Research: Evaluation in Academic Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
50. Hood, *Appraising Research*.
51. James Martin and Peter White, *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
52. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, *Data Export Tool*.
53. These include the Islamic State, Hyat Tahrir al Sham, Ajnad al Kavkaz, Fatemiyoun Brigade, the Nour al Din al Zinki Movement, Hurras al Deen, Liwa al-Haqq, and the Turkistan Islamic Party.

54. Jan Daniel and Dominik Presl, *Russian Civilian Outreach and Information Operations in Syria* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2021), 18.
55. Ruth Sherlock and Lama Al-Arian, "Russia and Turkey agree on a demilitarized zone in Syria's last rebel stronghold," National Public Radio, September 17, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/17/648849808/russia-and-turkey-agree-on-a-demilitarized-zone-in-syrias-last-rebel-stronghold>; and Reuters Staff, "Explainer: Why the war in Syria's Idlib escalated again," Reuters, May 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-northwest-explainer/explainer-why-the-war-in-syrias-idlib-escalated-again-idUSKCN1SF0P7>.
56. Czuperski et al., *Distract, Deceive, Destroy*, 17.
57. Czuperski et al., 19.
58. Lev Topor and Alexander Tabachnik, "Russian Cyber Information Warfare: International Distribution and Domestic Control," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021), 112-127.
59. Amnesty International, '*Civilian Objects Were Undamaged*': *Russia's Statements on its Attacks in Syria Unmasked* (London: Amnesty International, 2015), 23, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/3113/2015/en/>; and Czuperski et al., *Distract, Deceive, Destroy*, 1.
60. "Russian Military in Syria," AirWars, accessed November 16, 2021, <https://airwars.org/conflict/russian-military-in-syria/>.
61. Mona Alami, "Russia's disinformation campaign has changed how we see Syria," Syria Source (blog), September 4, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/russia-s-disinformation-campaign-has-changed-how-we-see-syria/>.
62. Thomas, "Russia's 21st Century Information War," 22; Selhorst, "Russia's Perception Warfare," 155; and Selhorst, 159.
63. Troy Bouffard, "The Role of the Arctic for Russian National Security and Defense," PowerPoint presentation, Norwich University Military Writers' Symposium, Norwich University, Northfield, VT, November 3-4, 2021.
64. Dave Phillips and Eric Schmitt, "How the U.S. Hid an Airstrike That Killed Dozens of Civilians in Syria," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/13/us/us-airstrikes-civilian-deaths.html>; and Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon Chief Orders Briefing on 2019 Syria Airstrike That Killed Dozens," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/15/us/politics/pentagon-syria-airstrike.html?smid=wa-share>.
65. "US-led Coalition in Iraq and Syria," AirWars, accessed November 16, 2021, <https://airwars.org/conflict/coalition-in-iraq-and-syria/>.
66. International Committee of the Red Cross, "1. Rules," in *Customary International Humanitarian Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1>.
67. Cunningham, *Russian Federation Information Warfare Primer*.
68. Bret Schafer, *A View from the Digital Trenches: Lessons from Year One of Hamilton 68* (Washington, D.C.: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Alliance for Securing Democracy, 2018), 17.

69. Daniel and Presl, *Russian Civilian Outreach*.

70. Anton Troianovski, “Putin announces a ‘military operation’ in Ukraine as the U.N. Security Council pleads with him to pull back,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/putin-announces-a-military-operation-in-ukraine-as-the-un-security-council-pleads-with-him-to-pull-back.html>.

71. Gigi Gigitashvili and Roman Osadchuk, “How ten false flag narratives were promoted by pro-Kremlin media,” Digital Forensics Research Lab (blog), February 18, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-ten-false-flag-narratives-were-promoted-by-pro-kremlin-media-c67e786c6085>; and EUvsDisinfo, “The Kremlin’s playbook: fabricating pretext to invade Ukraine - more myths,” News and analysis (blog), February 19, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlins-playbook-fabricating-pretext-to-invade-ukraine-more-myths/>.

72. Associated Press, “Putin references neo-Nazis and drug addicts in bizarre speech to Russian security council – video,” *The Guardian*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2022/feb/25/putin-references-neo-nazis-and-drug-addicts-in-bizarre-speech-to-russian-security-council-video>; EUvsDisinfo, “Weapons of mass delusion,” *Disinfo Review* (blog), March 10, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/weapons-of-mass-delusion/>; and EUvsDisinfo, “‘No, we did not bomb the hospital, and it was a nest of Nazis anyway,’” News and analysis (blog), March 15, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/no-we-did-not-bomb-the-hospital-and-it-was-a-nest-of-nazis-anyway/>.

73. Péter Krekó, “How Authoritarians Inflate Their Image,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2021): 111.

74. Krekó, “Authoritarians.”

75. Mark Laity, *NATO and the Power of Narrative, Beyond Propaganda Series* (London: Legatum Institute, 2015), 24; and Testimony of Rand Waltzman, *Weaponization of Information*, 3.

The Aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Appeasement of Russia and the War in Ukraine

Lasha Tchantouridzé

Abstract: The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is a direct result of appeasement policies pursued by the West toward Russia. The appeasement of Russia started soon after Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008 and captured parts of that country. Initiated by the United States in early 2009 and labeled “reset,” appeasement policies encouraged wrong perceptions of the world in the Kremlin. As part of the appeasement policies, the West refused to sell arms to Georgia, pressured Georgia to remove the valid objections to Russia joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), and quickly abandoned what few sanctions were imposed on Russia following the August 2008 war. The West somewhat toughened its response to Russian aggression after Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2014, annexed Crimea, and created renegade provinces in the Donbas region. Still, the West’s reaction was largely symbolic. This apparently convinced the Kremlin that the West was largely impotent, and the same response was to be expected after launching a full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022. However, that has proved to be a colossal miscalculation.

Keywords: Russo-Georgian war; war in Ukraine; appeasement of Russia; Russian foreign policy.

Introduction

On February 21, 2022, Russian television channels released a video account of the country’s National Security Council meeting chaired by President Vladimir Putin. One by one, the council members stood at a podium and delivered their version of justifications why the Russian Federation should recognize Ukraine’s Donbas’s breakaway provinces as independent states and launch a military invasion against Ukraine. One of the most extensive speeches was delivered by the council’s deputy chair, Dmitry Medvedev, who served as president of Russia from 2008 to 2012 and as prime minister from 2012 to 2020. In his speech, Medvedev addressed potential sanctions that the Russian government expected the West to impose on the country and their potential severity. He assured his audience that the sanctions would be insignificant as they were when he was the president of Russia. Back in August 2008, Russia attacked Georgia and declared Georgia’s breakaway provinces to be independent and sovereign states. “These 14 years [since the Russo-Georgia war] have been beneficial for us,” he said. “When they [the West] got tired, they came to us and offered to remove the sanctions ... they know that Russia is much more important than Georgia or Ukraine.”¹ Medvedev concluded that he expected the same reaction by the West after Russia’s anticipated quick victory over Ukraine.

The August 2008 Russo-Georgian war was a dress rehearsal for what started in Ukraine in 2014 and culminated in the 2022 Russo-Ukraine war. Moscow began to set the stage for an invasion of Georgia in the spring of 2008 by organizing large-scale military

maneuvers at the border with Georgia in July 2008 and commenced the invasion on August 7, 2008. The official reason: to stop the “genocide” in South Ossetia allegedly carried out by Georgian authorities. In preparation for war, South Ossetian authorities evacuated civilians to Russia, but they left armed fighters to face the Georgian army that had to move north to intercept the invading Russian mechanized infantry columns. A large group of Russian journalists were invited for the occasion as well. The war ended in five days: Georgia sued for peace as its armed forces were encircled by the Russian army that crossed the land border with Georgia from the north and northwest, and later conducted amphibious landing from the west. As the ceasefire agreement entered into force, Moscow recognized the independence of the two breakaway provinces of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and established “diplomatic relations” with both. Soon after that, Russia deployed sizable troop contingents to both Abkhazia and South Ossetia announcing new military alliances with these “sovereign states.”

On March 6, 2009, at their bilateral meeting in Geneva, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented a symbolic “reset” button to Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s minister of foreign affairs. Conceived to “reset” Russo-American relations to a more positive starting point for the new US presidential administration of Barack Obama, the symbolic plastic button had erroneously inscribed the Russian word for “overload” instead of “reset.” True to its symbolic promise, relations between the two major powers went into overload for the next 13 years, reaching their climax with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Although the US made several unilateral concessions to the Russian Federation, Moscow never stopped its aggressive foreign policies toward its smaller neighbors. The argument put forward in this paper is that the initially minor concessions initiated by the Obama administration expanded into the appeasement of Russia. Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine is a direct result of that appeasement policy. The cost of this appeasement has been paid by states like Georgia and Ukraine, especially by the latter.

In contemporary discourse the policies of appeasement are not necessarily seen in a negative light in the US or elsewhere—there is no preordained reason why appeasement policies by a great power toward other powers cannot yield positive results for both. However, in the context of the US, circa 2008-2022, the policy of appeasing Russia has had a couple of important implications for the international balance of power. Before the war in Ukraine, the US had conceded Russia’s dominant position and status in most, if not all, former Soviet space. In addition, Russia had established itself as a major player in the Middle East following the Syrian civil war and started to assert its military superiority in the Mediterranean. Since early 2009, the US made several unilateral concessions to the Russian Federation, but the latter did not cease but expanded aggressive foreign policies toward its smaller neighbors. The inability or unwillingness of the US under both presidents Obama and Donald Trump to do anything about a resurgent Russia, and disagreements among members of the transatlantic alliance on a series of important issues dealing with Moscow’s foreign policy ambitions, did not pass unnoticed by the Kremlin. Further, decision-makers in Washington and European capitals did not distinguish between appeasement policies

toward more minor powers, e.g., North Korea or Iran, and great powers like Russia. To some extent, appeasement worked when dealing with Pyongyang or Tehran because both North Korea and Iran have had limited objectives centered on the survival of the ruling regimes. In comparison, Russia is a great power with unlimited objectives aimed at conquering or destroying neighboring states.

The distorted understanding of Russian foreign policy objectives in Western capitals stemmed from the erroneous conception of Russia as a minor power following the end of the Cold War. From the early 1990s on, the diminished status of the Russian Federation in international affairs played a decisive role in creating misleading perceptions in the West that gave rise to the deeply misguided and theoretically illogical unipolar world doctrine. The Russian Federation was seen as the political successor of the Soviet Union, but not its geopolitical equivalent. According to the doctrine of unipolarity, Russia was unwisely relegated to an insignificant place in world affairs such that it essentially challenged Moscow to do something drastic about the new world order. A series of policies by the US and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies in Eastern Europe touched the areas that were very sensitive for Moscow. Serious disagreements between Moscow and the West started in the 1990s with NATO enlargement and reached a critical point in 1999 with the NATO-Yugoslavia war. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Russia voiced loud objections to the West's several long-reaching policy initiatives. These included further NATO enlargement, the US invasion of Iraq, Western involvement in Ukraine and Georgia, the recognition of Kosovo sovereignty, the decision to place missile defense system in Eastern Europe, Western policies in Syria and Libya, and endless but fruitless discussion about whether Georgia and Ukraine should join NATO or not.

Short but decisive, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war quickly erased an image of the world that saw Russia being relegated to the status of an insignificant player, and the Obama administration affirmed the new reality by making a number of key concessions to the Russians, symbolized by Clinton's plastic "reset"/"overload" button. America's concessions gradually turned into Moscow's reassertion of dominance in the former Soviet space of influence and this allowed Russia to introduce nineteenth century-style great power politics in dealing with its European neighbors. Moscow's attacks on Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 did not initially appear to threaten the vital interests of the US or its European allies. With these small regional wars, Putin had achieved his main goal before starting an all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022: Moscow was no longer ignored as an irrelevant international player; instead, it could now throw its weight around, and Western states had to make concessions and pay attention to the Kremlin. Moscow fully expected the West to keep doing what it had been doing since 2008, no matter what would happen in Ukraine after February 24, 2022. However, the Kremlin has clearly miscalculated. Still, the West's appeasement policies following the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 had contributed significantly to the formation of Moscow's distorted perceptions of the world.

Appeasement in International Relations

Historically, policymakers in the West have been more critical of appeasement in foreign policy than scholars, due to the negative association of this approach with Franco-British efforts to appease Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. At the same time, Western scholars have not spent much energy debating appeasement as a tool in foreign policy. Since the appeasement of Nazi Germany was understood as a bad policy, the question of the usefulness of appeasement in foreign policy was understood as settled once and for all. However, is all appeasement inherently bad? After all, the main alternative to appeasement is war. If appeasement helps avoid war clearly, there must be something positive about it. One study sympathetic to the phenomenon defines appeasement as “the policy of reducing tensions with one’s adversary by removing the causes of conflict and disagreement.” In other words, appeasement could be understood as “a policy of tension-reduction.”² Further, “as a short-term strategy for maintaining the international status quo, appeasement may be a policy of *crisis reduction*.”³ As a long-term strategy, appeasement could be viewed as a policy of crisis prevention, also within the context of maintaining the *status quo*. In terms of the alteration of the *status quo*, appeasement serves as a short-term tool for “limited political trade,” and a long-term objective toward “friendship/alliance.”⁴ Historically, great powers trade with each other, while the interests of smaller powers serve as the key currency for trade. There is nothing inherently harmful in such conceptual definitions, and they sound rather abstract and benign, unless one’s state or home is included in the proposed “limited political trade.” Such trades concern primarily more minor powers (*nichtgrossmachten*) in international politics that do not have a decisive voice in either alliance formation or maintaining the international status quo. On the other hand, trade between a great power and an aggressive minor power does not necessarily involve the interests of other states. Instead, the commitment to a non-nuclear status or state support of terrorism could be the objective of trade.

Ferguson notes that A.J.P. Taylor’s *The Origins of the Second World War* examination of the appeasement approach that preceded World War II “has stood up remarkably well to subsequent scholarship.”⁵ The appeasement of Hitler had many parents, none of them pretty: “the pusillanimity of the French statesmen, who were defeated in their hearts before a shot had been fired; the hypocrisy of the Americans, with their highfaluting rhetoric and low commercial motives; above all, the muddle-headedness of the British.”⁶ Hitler’s appeasement was not at all a problem if, for instance, the British wanted to align themselves with Nazi Germany—and in fact, on numerous occasions Hitler expressed his desire to have an alliance with London.⁷ Evidence suggests that Hitler did not really want a war with Britain as he hoped that London would let Poland go with some rhetoric and no action the same way the rump Czechoslovakia was dumped. Reportedly, Hitler told Alfred Rosenberg that “he couldn’t grasp” what the English were after by honoring their defense commitment to Poland and declaring war on Germany. Hitler argued that “even if England secured a victory, the real victors would be the United States, Japan, and Russia.”⁸ Hitler did miss on Japan, but his prediction was otherwise correct. However, the British evidently did not fancy the idea of playing the second violin to the Germans by

appeasing them indefinitely, and the war was on. Indefinite appeasement of a great power with unlimited foreign policy objectives makes no logical sense: indefinite appeasement engenders demands for indefinite concessions, and the concessions that great powers demand are primarily territorial or material.

Stephen Rock argues that appeasement as such is not inherently bad, and provides few examples to demonstrate its usefulness: “British appeasement of the United States, 1896-1903,” “Anglo-American appeasement of the Soviet Union, 1941-1945,” and “American appeasement of North Korea, 1988-1994.”⁹ He argues that the case of the failed attempt by Great Britain and France to conciliate Nazi Germany carries with it many misperceptions and “a good deal of what is commonly supposed to be true of this case is in fact myth.”¹⁰ Rock demonstrates that the British “pursued a conciliatory policy in part because he [Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain] saw it as the only chance—albeit a slim one—of avoiding war.”¹¹ The argument makes sense as Britain was not ready for war in 1938 or even 1939 when it actually started.¹² Regardless, the Munich approach failed and “even if appeasement did not actually encourage Hitler to commit further acts of aggression, it failed to satisfy him and thereby preserve peace and stability in Europe.”¹³ Ferguson notes that some historians have even imagined “that the great mistake was not appeasement but its abandonment in 1939 ... it has even been suggested, peace could have been restored in 1940 or 1941, if only someone other than [Prime Minister Winston] Churchill had been in charge of British policy.”¹⁴

No matter how one interprets the usefulness of a particular appeasement policy or specific historical events, appeasement has at least one theoretical problem that cannot be overcome by alternative interpretations of events or by counterfactual history. This theoretical problem is rooted in empirical realities of international politics, and in general, an understanding of how power relations work among states. The idea that appeasement of an aggressive major state can succeed is based on the assumption that there exists in international politics something like a “stationary state,” to borrow J.S. Mill’s concept.¹⁵ If it were possible to reach a stage in international politics in which power competition or self-affirmation, self-assertion by great powers no longer mattered, appeasement could be viewed as a valid tool for guiding aggressive powers toward that end. That is, if the desire for more international power and influence by a single state or an alliance of states had a logical end without destroying the existing international system, appeasement would make sense. However, since such a stage in international history appears to be utopian or located somewhere in a very distant future, making concessions to an aggressive major state results in a continuous process that increases the aggressor’s appetite by making its objective achievable at a very low cost. The drive for more power will not cease after each such concession—there is no absolute power, and even if there were such a thing, those driving for it will not recognize it as long as others possess some power. The only end of appeasement to an aggressive big power will be the end of the international system, that is, the establishment of a world state. Suppose a great power already occupies about 18 percent of the world’s land surface, as the USSR did during the Cold War, or has an outline to become a truly global empire, as Nazi Germany did. In that case, the idea of appeasement

to such entities should appear even more unacceptable. The Russian Federation circa 2008-2022 is somewhat smaller than the Soviet Union, and less ideologically odious than Nazi Germany. However, its leaders have voiced threats never before heard in world history: a promise to unleash a nuclear war if Russia did not achieve its great power goals. Just like in the case of Nazi Germany, the foreign policy goals of the Putin regime are territorial and material: they are aimed at the conquest or destruction of other states.

The 2008 War and Its Aftermath

The August 2008 war began after the separatist forces in Georgia's breakaway South Ossetia started attacking Georgian villages and peacekeepers with artillery fire in July 2008, and this continued as Russia's 58th Army invaded on August 8. The Russian troops massed at the Georgian border in July: similar to what would happen before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow staged large-scale fake war games there called "Kavkaz-2008." In late July, Moscow announced that the war games had ended and Russian military units were heading back to their bases. This fake announcement signaling the ostensibly peaceful conclusion of military maneuvers would also be repeated before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It was a ruse, and when those Russian military units invaded Georgia few days later, they arrived fully armed and ready to fight. The fact that the Russian forces were getting ready to invade Georgia from mid-July 2008 should have been apparent to anyone who had information about the logistics of the Russian military units in the North Caucasus. Military maneuvers or games do not involve mass supplies of combat munitions, bombs, and missiles: troops engage in mock battles during exercises and do not shoot each other with actual combat projectiles. However, when the Russian troops invaded Georgia soon after the conclusion of the military exercises, they were armed with far more lethal munitions than inert bombs and empty warheads customarily used for military maneuvers.

Georgia's breakaway South Ossetia is linked with Russia through a single mountainous highway, which snakes down from the high Caucasus mountains into the valleys of central Georgia. While the Russian troops were progressing through the mountains, a small Georgian army fought them successfully and slowed their advance. However, a couple of days later Russia's Black Sea Fleet joined the fight by sailing several surface ships from Sevastopol, Crimea. Georgia had no coastal defenses and Russian amphibious landings went without significant resistance in Abkhazia, Georgia's other breakaway region controlled by Moscow, and Georgia proper. The Georgian army units fighting the bulk of the invading Russian troops in mountainous areas risked becoming encircled and destroyed by the Russians. To avoid this, the Georgian government ordered its military to withdraw from South Ossetia and sued for peace. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France mediated between Tbilisi and Moscow, and a ceasefire agreement was signed in mid-August. Soon after, Moscow declared Georgia's two breakaway provinces "independent states" and set up a large-scale military presence in both of these statelets.

In August 2008, the Russian leadership was very cautious when invading Georgia with an army not fully ready for a large-scale war. It was believed that Georgia had been armed and equipped by the US, and fighting with a modern army, albeit small, carried not insignificant risks. After the war, Russian leaders held a closed-door meeting to analyze the lessons learned from the Georgia campaign. First, they had discovered that the Georgian army was armed and equipped with small American arms and rubber boats for coastal defense—the country was nowhere ready to fight a Russian invasion. The successes that the Georgian army had in battles were due to the old Soviet air defense system S-300 borrowed from Ukraine, and the initiative and courage of artillery detachments successfully resisting the Russian troops in mountainous areas. Second, the Russian leadership heard that the Black Sea Fleet was late to act, and that delay nearly cost them. Overall, in 2022 Moscow would repeat its Georgia invasion scenario in Ukraine, albeit on a larger scale, but with one key difference: in Georgia, the Russian troops agreed to a peace agreement quickly, because they were not ready, and the Russian army has never fought in the mountains to start with. However, the short war in Georgia was a key dress rehearsal for the Russian army. It was in Georgia that Moscow first used its new combat groups built around heavy mechanized enhanced infantry battalions. More than one hundred of these battalions would be used at a much larger scale 14 years later in Ukraine.

After the war, Moscow highlighted a critical shortcoming in the Georgia campaign: the lack of seafaring helicopter carriers for amphibious assault operations. Russia traditionally manufactures and procures all its military resources and material domestically. Still, they have never had large support vessels for amphibious assaults—as a continental power Russia seldom staged amphibious assaults and never with helicopters. Those seeking appeasement of Russia in the West noticed this problem and used it to get on Moscow's good side and make profits along the way. Paris offered Moscow to sell them the French-made Mistral-class amphibious assault ships. The French were so enthusiastic about supplying Russia with this weapon that President Francois Hollande would not stop his sales pitch even after the Russian-backed rebels in Ukraine's Donbas region shot down a Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 and killed scores of European citizens in July 2014.¹⁶

The European Union was likewise eager to put Russia's conquest of Georgian territory in the rear-view mirror and to resume business as usual with Moscow. After the ceasefire, the EU organized a study group to investigate the origins of the Russo-Georgian war and subsequently produced a report, published on September 21, 2009, in which its authors unequivocally blamed Georgia for attacking Russia. The report committee was headed by a Swiss diplomat, Heidi Tagliavini, the head of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission to Georgia during the war. Officially called the "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," but informally called the "Tagliavini Report," it "discovered" that Georgia started the war with Russia on August 7-8, 2008.¹⁷ This "discovery" was made through a superficial study of the movements of the Georgian troops and their actions on the eve of the war. The EU group failed to account for or investigate parallel moves made by the Russian troops

across the Russo-Georgia border or in South Ossetia itself. The claim made by EU's "fact-finding mission" was a deliberate lie—there was no factual evidence provided in the report to support it.

Regardless, the report was immediately embraced by Western friends of Georgia, and thus a myth about Georgia starting the 2008 war with Russia was born. The myth survived the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the annexation of Crimea, promulgated by, among others, Western friends of Georgia and even Georgia's high officials.¹⁸ This despite the fact that the EU report that runs for more than 700 pages has no account on how more than the 70,000-strong invading Russian force appeared at the Russo-Georgian border within minutes of Georgian artillery opening fire on the rebel forces in South Ossetia. The OSCE report identifies the time of the Georgian artillery attack as "the night of 7 to 8 August 2008." This narrative is contradicted by the account of the Russian general who actually led the ground assault on Georgia. According to the commander of Russia's 58th Army, which commenced the military invasion of Georgia, he received a sealed order from his superior concerning Georgia on August 5. In an extensive interview with a Russian news agency, Lieutenant-General Anatoliy Khrulev stated that he received an alert exactly at midnight from August 7 to 8 from Major-General Marat Kulakhmetov, the commander of the Russian troops stationed in South Ossetia, suggesting that "Georgia started a war."¹⁹ Three minutes after midnight on August 8, Khrulev was allegedly directed to open the sealed order received on August 5, and seven minutes after midnight, he received a confirmation from his superior authorizing the 58th Army to start the invasion. Fifteen minutes after midnight, according to Khrulev, all the officers were in their posts, and the invasion commenced. Khrulev's account did not mention that the Russian troops were preparing for the invasion for weeks by staging war games, and by shipping and storing combat, as opposed to training, ammunition closer to the Georgia border. Even then the advancing Russian troops still should have required at least a couple of hours to drive from North Ossetia's lowlands toward the pass in the Caucasus mountains.

It was impossible for the Russian troops to arrive at the Georgian border within 15 minutes from their bases located closer to urban areas of the North Caucasus. The Russo-Georgian border is drawn through the Caucasus mountains, the highest mountain range in Europe. Two narrow and difficult-to-navigate roads connect the two countries through high mountain passes. To achieve that incredible feat of military efficiency by invading Georgia through the Caucasus mountains within minutes after receiving an order, Khrulev's troops should have been stationed right at the border crossing long before August 8. As for the Tagliavini report, it was a one-sided narrative created to assign the blame to the victim, Georgia, and find justifications for the actions of the aggressor, Russia. This could not have been done for any other reason but to appease Russia and limit the Western reaction to Russian military aggression with largely symbolic sanctions.

The US and the EU imposed few weak economic sanctions on Russia after its invasion and occupation of Georgia. None of the sanctions damaged the Russian economy

even remotely, not to mention its military machine. As Russia's former President Medvedev noted just before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the West removed those sanctions from Russia on its own; Moscow did not even have to ask. On the other hand, by spring of 2008, Georgia had openly declared that it wanted to join NATO and expected to get a so-called Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the NATO Bucharest summit in May 2008. Germany and France deliberately blocked MAPs for both Georgia and Ukraine. That was a signal for Russia that NATO was not really interested in Georgia or Ukraine, and the same Bucharest declaration essentially imposed a military embargo on Georgia, which badly needed modern military equipment to defend itself from Russia. After the Bucharest summit, the West's disinterest in helping Georgia was so severe that when Russia invaded in August of that same year, Georgia did not even have military-grade communications equipment. As a result, the Georgian military's commercial-grade communications were quickly compromised by the Russian army, and Georgian military leadership could not even issue orders to its troops through secure channels.

Most damaging to Georgia has been the unwillingness of the US and its Western allies to rearm and reequip Georgia to defend itself from another attack from Russia. Although Georgia had been praised for its democratic and economic reforms and its steadfast Western orientation, the country was literally undefended when Russia invaded, and remains poorly armed and underequipped to this date. The Georgia military had participated in the US-sponsored missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, expecting to be helped by the US, but no real help came from Washington or any other Western capital except small arms that Georgia was allowed to purchase. During and after the August war, the general message to Georgia voiced in Washington and other Western capitals simply stated: "There is nothing much we can do." The same message was repeated in February 2014, when Russia attacked Ukraine and annexed Crimea. However, the 2022 Russo-Ukraine war has demonstrated that, most definitely, there had been many decisive and effective things that the West could have done in 2008 or 2014. By pretending to be helpless in the face of Russian aggression, the West was trying to appease Moscow, hoping that the Kremlin would be satisfied with the conquered territory and would not try to continue its military conquest. As the events of February 2022 have demonstrated, the appeasement policies produced the most undesirable results. Now facing long and highly destructive war prospects in Europe, the West had no choice but to take decisive steps.

After the August war, Georgia tried to rearm since what little it had was spent or destroyed in the war with Russia. Once again, it found a cold shoulder from the West, presumably because Moscow objected to any country giving arms to Georgia. Moscow has fully exploited Georgia's defenseless state: it has adopted a policy of moving the demarcation line separating the breakaway South Ossetia and Georgia proper and capturing more land for the renegade regime. This process labeled "borderization" in Georgia has continued since the war stopped in August 2008, and every year since, the Russian troops have captured a few hundred yards of Georgian land. Clearly designed to provoke Georgia into a new armed conflict, the practice has been met with no official protests from the West except the occasional statements by Western ambassadors posted in Georgia.

Washington's Reset Policy and Europe's Indifference

The argument made in this essay is that the Western appeasement of Russia following the 2008 Russo-Georgian war made the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war possible. In this, we echo the sentiments expressed by the former foreign minister of the Russian Federation, Andrei Kozyrev. Soon after the start of the Russo-Ukraine war on February 24, 2022, Russia's former top diplomat was quoted saying that the West's appeasement of Putin made him "delusional," implying that the Western appeasement made Putin believe that he could do whatever he wanted.²⁰ The fact that the US and some of its Western European allies tried to appease Moscow from 2009 on has been noted by a few observers, but there has been a disagreement about whether this appeasement has been positive or negative. For instance, just before the start of the Russo-Ukraine war in February 2022, Cato Institute's Doug Bandow called the appeasement of Russia "a good cause."²¹ On the other side, the Heritage Foundation's Daniel Kochis warned in July 2021 that the US "would regret this shameful appeasement of Russia."²² Mitt Romney, the Republican Party's presidential candidate in 2012, warned about the threat posed by Russia, suggesting that the Obama administration was making too many concessions to Moscow. Romney was criticized for this in American mass media, and Obama made fun of his warning, but after Russia invaded Ukraine, even Romney's opponents acknowledged that he was right about Russia.²³ According to Benjamin Haddad and Alina Polyakova, Obama's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and intervention in Syria in 2015 "was cautious at best, and deeply misguided at worst." They noted that "the imposition of sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine was accompanied by so much propitiation and restraint elsewhere that it didn't deter Russia from subsequent aggression, including the risky 2016 [presidential election] influence operation in the United States."²⁴

In the case of Georgia, the West's appeasement of Russia was the most damaging in the refusal to sell Western weapons to Georgia. Following the August 2008 war, Moscow made several public and diplomatic demands not to supply weapons to Georgia.²⁵ Washington obeyed the Russian demands even though, in January 2009, the US and Georgia established a strategic partnership charter, which among other things, called for cooperation in defense and security fields.²⁶ The Obama administration fully complied with Moscow's request to impose an arms embargo on Georgia, which lost most of its modern military equipment during the August 2008 war. The most significant loss for Georgia was the destruction of its nascent Black Sea navy—a maritime country was left without any kind of maritime force or coastal defense. The Western embargo on arms sales to Georgia was so comprehensive that a largely symbolic act by the Trump administration of selling a small batch of anti-armor Javelin missiles to Georgia was seen as a groundbreaking event.²⁷ In late November 2017, it was announced that the US would allow Georgia to purchase Javelin anti-tank missiles worth \$75 million.²⁸ The shipment included Georgia 46 Javelin FGM-148s launchers with 82 missiles. To put it in a military context, this shipment would allow a defending side to fight one Russian enhanced combat battalion for a couple of hours.

The collective Western effort to make the Russian Federation a member of the WTO was no less harmful to Georgia and beneficial to Russia. In 2011, the West started pressuring Georgia to make concessions to Russia on its application to the WTO. Russia had occupied two breakaway provinces in Georgia since the mid-1990s, and from August 2008 had a large number of military and civilian personnel deployed there. These provinces, formally part of Georgia, were fully integrated into the Russian economic space and they continue to be so to this date. Georgia initially vetoed Russia's WTO application for very valid reasons: Moscow had captured its territory, operated there under a false pretext that these were independent countries, and Georgia did not want to set up customs and border checks between Georgia proper and the Russian-occupied Georgian regions. Georgia resisted as much as it could but had to yield under heavy Western pressure, and in early 2012, Russia became a member of WTO. According to a senior Georgian official, in order to obtain concessions from Georgia favoring Russia, "they [the West] put a gun at our head."²⁹

America's appeasement policy toward Russia was developed very early in its first term of the Obama administration. Guided by Clinton, the policy was labelled "reset," implying starting Russo-American relations from a clean sheet. Whether the Obama administration ever blamed its predecessor, the George W. Bush administration, for problems in bilateral relations with Russia was never openly stated. However, it became very clear very soon that the US blamed Georgia for the difficulties that it found itself vis-à-vis Russia. The US and Georgia became gradually distant under Obama, and by 2016, almost nothing was left of the former "strategic partnership" between the two countries. The Trump administration had an even lower opinion of Georgia and Ukraine. Trump's White House was only too happy to continue Obama's reset-like approach, even though now Russia was under a set of mild economic sanctions created after Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014.

It has been argued that the West bears significant responsibility for what has transpired between Russia and Ukraine.³⁰ Indeed, the first significant challenge thrown at the Russian Federation by the West took place in 1995, when the "Study on NATO Enlargement" was published in Brussels.³¹ The Russian government objected strenuously, and Russia nationalist adopted this issue to rally their supporters. However, the Russian public remained largely indifferent to the prospect of NATO moving eastward.³² The post-Cold War thaw was still on and most Russians distrusted their own government more than they did the West. The post-Cold War thaw was still on, and most Russians distrusted their own government more than the West. Public indifference in Russia to NATO enlargement did not last: the second humiliation to Moscow was delivered in a more physical and dramatic way by the NATO-Serbia war over Kosovo in 1999.³³ The Kosovo War changed many things in Russia: It helped to turn Russian public opinion dramatically anti-Western within a week;³⁴ it essentially killed the credibility of Russia's budding Western-style liberal democratic political forces; it allowed the nationalist-revanchist forces to acquire credibility and power base among the people; and it propelled Vladimir Putin and his associates to the very top of Russia's government structure.

Putin owed his ascent to the reignited anti-Western feelings in Russia, courtesy of the Kosovo War. He made explicit promises from the very beginning of his presidential activities to recover as much as possible of Soviet Union's lost glory. Putin's first administration encountered several challenges that were not much different from what Russia had faced in the 1990s: the expansion of NATO, Chechnya spinning out of control, and Russia's declining military and economic power. However, one new major issue that arose with the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) was even more formidable than the old ones: Washington decided to walk away from the 1972 ABM Treaty. In 2001-2002, Russia was in no position to counter this development, and the Russians felt vulnerable. On the other hand, the rising oil prices and higher international demand for oil and gas helped the Putin government to fill the country's coffers, consolidate state power, and start a slow recovery of Russia's military might.

The first step of the post-Cold War NATO enlargement was taken in 1999, during the NATO-Serbia war, and the process continued in the early 2000s. In the eyes of Russia, NATO was pushing its armies toward Russia. In 2003, a group of radical reformers came to power in Georgia—the process that Moscow initially helped and supported, presumably expecting in return Western support in keeping pro-Russian forces in charge there.³⁵ However, the Orange Revolution of Ukraine in 2004 prompted Moscow to seek more forceful and radical measures. Now explicitly pro-Western and anti-Russian governments in Tbilisi and Kyiv developed a “join-NATO and the EU” axis that Moscow viewed as the final red line it could not allow NATO to cross.³⁶ In February 2007, Putin delivered a litany of warnings and admonitions to a group of high-level Western politicians, journalists, and pundits gathered for an annual security meeting in Munich.³⁷ Among other things, he warned against recognizing Kosovo's independence from Serbia. Exactly a year after the Munich conference, Kosovo declared its independence, and it was duly recognized by the US and all NATO members except Spain, Greece, Slovakia, and Romania.³⁸ This could not have been taken in Moscow any other way but as a direct insult—no matter what Moscow said and asked, the West was not going to take it seriously unless Russia was ready to act. Putin's determination to bring Russia back as a global power has been absolutely resolute, even if it took him a series of military crises and confrontations to achieve his goal. Unfortunately for the Georgians, and subsequently for the Ukrainians, this path of action commenced in August 2008 with the war in Georgia—a brief war that allowed the Russian leadership to gain immense confidence in their ability to enact changes through the use of force. The results of the war were dramatic but should not have come as unexpected: Putin had pretty much laid his intentions in his Munich performance in February 2007, with which he was pleased, and which he later fondly recalled as “memorable.”³⁹

When it came to bilateral Russo-American relations, the Obama administration stepped into an environment of confusion and bewilderment—a product of the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. The relations between the outgoing Bush administration and Moscow were business-like, but the Russo-Georgian war poisoned many good prospects. To conciliate the Russians, the Obama administration essentially acknowledged that the

American approach to the issues that bothered Moscow had been rather thoughtless. The US suspended two important programs: the placement of anti-missile defense components in Eastern Europe, and its defense and anti-terrorism cooperation with Georgia. In response, the Russian Federation did not have to make compromises or give up on anything, and if they were asked to reciprocate in kind, nothing was publicly stated to that effect. The Russians made no effort to show reciprocity anyway. In fact, Russian attitudes hardened on some issues, namely Iran, and more decisively on Syria. Some of the rhetoric voiced in Moscow, specifically by Putin who was running for president again, was insulting and clearly designed to provoke Washington. Putin even claimed that political opposition protests in Russia during the parliamentary and presidential elections of late 2011 and early 2012 had been incited by the US, and he even accused Clinton personally.⁴⁰ The purported author of the “reset” policy, Michael McFaul, became the US ambassador to Russia, where he was greeted with insults and enjoyed the kind of “following” (organized by Russia’s state security service) frequently practiced in the USSR.⁴¹ The insults on McFaul opened a long season of open harassment of American diplomats by Russians, about which Washington finally publicly complained in June 2016.⁴² The Obama-Clinton “reset” policy led to more problems than it tried to amend, the chief disaster being Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a direct continuation of the 2014 events. Shortly before the Crimea invasion, McFaul tried to defend the “reset” in Washington,⁴³ while populist leaders in Moscow openly denounced him.⁴⁴ The American ambassadors represent the US president personally, and it was remarkable that McFaul was directly attacked by Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, who called him arrogant, and admonished him to behave better.⁴⁵ The failure of the “reset” appeasement of Russia had nothing to do with McFaul’s personality, but it was all due to ever-increasing Russian demands in foreign policy: since the original pre-reset grievances had been resolved to its satisfaction, Moscow learned this lesson well and advanced new demands.

The best audio-visual representation of America’s appeasement of Russia was Obama’s plea to then-President Medvedev to intercede with then-Prime Minister Putin on the issue of the missile defense. Prior to the March 26, 2012, meeting in Seoul, Korea, Obama asked Medvedev to inform Putin, who was returning as president, to give him “some space,” presumably to be better positioned for the November 2012 presidential elections. Medvedev promised to talk about this with his mentor.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, this exchange produced some harsh criticism in the US, especially in Republican political circles, but in fact, the Obama was fully in line with the symbolic “reset” button pushing in early 2009, and even with some steps undertaken by the outgoing Bush administration. Bush’s Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and Russian’s foreign minister Lavrov had made every effort to minimize the negative fallout after Russia’s war with Georgia. According to Rice, at their first post-war meeting at the United Nations,

We agreed to pass a Security Council resolution on Iran simply reaffirming past resolutions. The reason was to send a signal to Iran that the Georgian war had not

caused us to abandon our joint efforts toward Tehran. It was never quite the same, but we managed to work together for the rest of our term. Nonetheless, I'm sure Lavrov looked forward to the arrival of another team in Washington.⁴⁷

America's perceived unique power status in an alleged unipolar world ended with the question posed by Steve Hadley, national security advisor in Bush's second administration: "Are we prepared to go to war with Russia over Georgia?"⁴⁸ One could easily imagine similar questions asked in London and in Paris in 1939 after Germany swallowed the whole of Czechoslovakia.

Trump, who succeeded Obama in 2018, announced his vision of transatlantic relations by openly questioning the validity and usefulness of NATO—music to the ears of those in the Kremlin. Trump substantively continued Obama's failed "reset" policy by giving Russia a free hand in Syria, and not pressing it over the issues in its immediate neighborhood, specifically Ukraine. Trump has openly admired Putin both during his presidency and after. In his unique vision of the world, Russia was in the Trump camp, while Ukraine was in that of President Joe Biden's. Trump's men tried hard to find dirt on the Biden family in Ukraine, emboldened by the fact that Biden's son been given a cushy job in a large oil corporation there. During his one-term presidency, Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, were primarily preoccupied with several issues to aid and assist the State of Israel in both diplomatic and international security arrangements. Indeed, the Trump team managed to do much for Israel, and both American and Israeli officials held several productive meetings to find common grounds regarding problems crucial to Israel. Significant breakthroughs that Israel achieved during the Trump presidency suggest that Moscow was helpful and assisted the joint US-Israeli efforts. However, Russian leaders do not just help America or any other country out of the goodness of their hearts—they always want something in return. That something most likely was American non-interference in the military preparations that Moscow was holding in its neighborhood, specifically in Georgia and Ukraine.

Conclusion

Once a darling of American foreign policy during the George W. Bush presidency, Georgia largely fell from the American foreign policy radar after 2008. Obama avoided the Georgia question entirely but did interfere in Ukrainian affairs during the domestic protest rallies in early 2014, which produced a firestorm of criticism in Moscow. The Kremlin partly used American interference in Ukrainian politics during the unrest in early 2014, which forced President Viktor Yanukovich out of the country, to justify its attack on Ukraine in February 2014 and its subsequent annexation of Crimea. Moscow identified then-Vice-President Biden as the chief boogiemanager calling him America's "viceroy" in Ukraine. The 2014 annexation of Crimea was followed by eight years of anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda in Russian mainstream media. The Russian government slowly eliminated independent media sources and severely curtailed freedom of speech. The pro-government media in Russia dehumanized and ridiculed Ukrainians for eight years, helping the Russian

government prepare the public opinion for the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The Russian government propaganda denounced and ridiculed the US and the West in a similar light. In late 2021, the Kremlin propagandists started openly talking in Russian mass media about “conquering Western Europe” soon. However, the US and its European allies did not waver in their collective efforts to appease Russia until Moscow launched open military aggression against Ukraine with an unlimited objective of destroying Ukraine’s statehood. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 ended Western appeasement of Russia. However, even then, the US has struggled to find common ground with Europeans to stop and reverse Russian aggression.

With the war in Ukraine, an ugly spectrum of thermonuclear war is more likely to materialize than ever before in history. Kremlin officials and propagandists have touted the alleged invincibility and superiority of their country’s nuclear arsenal as they had praised their conventional forces. However, with the war in Ukraine it has become clear that the information these propagandists and their leaders relied on in preparation of their armed forces for war was largely false. There is a distinct and clear danger that the Russian leadership has similarly false information regarding their nuclear forces’ alleged superiority and invincibility. If they were to make the same mistake in the application of their strategic forces, the consequences will be truly tragic: they will successfully kill themselves and take millions of innocent people along.

Lasha Tchantouridzé is professor and director of the graduate programs in diplomacy and international relations, Norwich University. He is also a Davis Center associate, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts; research fellow, the Center for Defence and Security Studies, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada; and advisory board member of Peace & War Center at Norwich University. He earned his PhD in international relations from Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

Endnotes

1. “Zasedanie Soveta Bezopastnosti” (video), speech by the president of Russia, February 21, 2022, The Kremlin, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67825/videos>.
2. Stephen R. Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 12.
3. Rock, *Appeasement*, 13 [emphasis in the original].
4. Rock, 13.
5. Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 313.
6. Ferguson, *War of the World*, 313.
7. Ferguson, 316.

8. Ferguson, 317.
9. Stephen R. Rock devotes large sections of his book to these topics.
10. Rock, *Appeasement*, 49.
11. Rock, 50.
12. The army, which would be soon routed in Dunkirk, was not ready; the Royal Air Force was not either. Only the Royal Navy kept combat superiority over the German navy. For more about the Royal Air Force, see: George H. Quester, "Strategic Bombing in the 1930s and 1940s," in *The Use of Force*, eds. Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 184-202.
13. Rock, *Appeasement*, 50.
14. Ferguson, *War of the World*, 317.
15. John Stuart Mill, Book IV, Chapter VI, "Of the Stationary State," in *Principles of Political Economy with some of their Applications to Social Philosophy* (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1909).
16. Robert C. O'Brien, "After MH17, France Must Cancel Sale of Warships to Russia," *The Diplomat*, July 20, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/07/after-mh17-france-must-cancel-sale-of-warships-to-russia/>.
17. "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," September 2009, https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf.
18. Thomas de Waal, "The Still-Topical Tagliavini Report," Carnegie Moscow Center, September 30, 2015, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/61451>.
19. "Voina 08.08.08: Vpervie o ee tainakh v intervieu Vladislavu Shuriginu general Khrulev," *IA Regnum*, April 27, 2012, <https://regnum.ru/news/society/1525951.html>.
20. "Russia's former top diplomat says the west's previous appeasement of Putin has made him 'delusional,'" *Business Insider*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/former-russian-foreign-minister-says-west-appeasement-made-putin-delusional-2022-3>.
21. Doug Bandow, "Appeasement for a Good Cause," Cato Institute, February 3, 2022, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/appeasement-good-cause>.
22. Daniel Kochis, "U.S. Will Regret this Shameful Appeasement of Russia," The Heritage Foundation, July 26, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/us-will-regret-shameful-appeasement-russia>.
23. Chris Cillizza, "It's time to admit it: Mitt Romney was right about Russia," *CNN Politics*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/22/politics/mitt-romney-russia-ukraine/index.html>.
24. Benjamin Haddad and Alina Polyakova, "Don't rehabilitate Obama on Russia," Brookings, March 5, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/05/dont-rehabilitate-obama-on-russia/>.

25. “U.S. failure to restrain Georgia harmed Russia-U.S. relations – Putin,” *Sputnik International*, August 28, 2008, <https://sputniknews.com/20080828/116360840.html>; and “Russia Accuses West of Re-Arming Georgia,” *Voice of America*, November 1, 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2008-09-06-voa5/346312.html>.
26. U.S. Department of State, “United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership,” January 9, 2009, <https://www.state.gov/united-states-georgia-charter-on-strategic-partnership/>.
27. Alexis Mrachek, “US Arms Sale to Georgia a long-Overdue Show of Support for Eurasian Ally,” *The Daily Signal*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2017/12/12/u-s-arms-sale-georgia-long-overdue-show-support-eurasian-ally/>.
28. “Saqartvelo a.sh.sh.-sgan ‘javelinebis’ saraketo sistemis akhal partias sheidzens,” *civil.ge*, January 31, 2022, <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/469898>.
29. A conversation in March 2022.
30. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
31. Study on NATO Enlargement, September 3, 1995, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_24733.htm.
32. According to the January 2012 VTsIOM opinion survey, around 50 percent of the Russians have a negative view of NATO. The negative opinion reached its peak during the 1999 Kosovo war, after which it subsided and stayed around 50 percent, <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=112359>. The 1999 war was condemned by 80 percent of the Russians (V. V. Serebriannikov, “Massovoe soznanie: problem vojni I armii” in *Voennaya Sotsiologiya* (1999), 42, http://ecsocman.hse.ru/data/056/092/1217/007_Voennaya_sotsiologiya.pdf). In 1998, only 16-18 percent of the Russians saw possibility of an external aggression (Serebriannikov, 41-42). Shifting attitudes in Russia toward the West are discussed in Leonid Kossals, “Russia’s Elite Attitudes to the NATO Enlargement: Sociological Analysis,” NATO-EAPC Research Fellowship Final Report (Moscow, 2001), <http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/99-01/kosals.pdf>.
33. “Mogla li Rossiya spastic Iugoslaviyu ot Natovskikj bomb?” in *Pravda.ru*, March 24, 1999, <http://www.pravda.ru/world/europe/balkans/24-03-2009/305840-serbianwar-0/>; and Lasha Tchantouridze. “Russia and NATO: A New Play in the Old Theatre,” in *New NATO, New Century: Canada, the United States, and the Future of the Atlantic Alliance*, ed. David G. Hagland (Kingston, ON: QCIR, 2000).
34. Before the Kosovo war, around 57 percent of the Russians viewed the US positively; the war saw a dramatic reduction to 14 percent. On the other hand, the number of those who viewed the US negatively increased from 28 to 72 percent. During the Kosovo war, 73 percent of the Russians expressed fear of Russia would be attacked (in 1997, only 44 percent of the Russians believed this). In 1997, one-third of the Russians expected the US to attack Russia, as a result of the Kosovo war their number increased to about 50 percent. In April 1999, 70 percent of the Russians believed that the war in Kosovo represented a direct threat to security of the Russian Federation. “‘Zapad’ i Rossiyskoe obshchestvo,” *Baza dannikh FOM*, December 7, 2001, http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/pro_snv/dd012541.
35. Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia’s Choice* (New York: Routledge), 295-296.

36. According to Allen Lynch, Putin invaded Georgia in August 2008 to deter both Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO. During the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Putin tried to convince President Bush that Ukraine was not a real country. Allen C. Lynch, "Dealing and Misdealing with Ukraine, 2004-2009," in *Vladimir Putin and Russian Statecraft* (Washington, Potomac Books, 2011).
37. Vladimir Putin, "Vistuplenie na Miunkhneskoi konferentsii," February 10, 2007.
38. International Recognition of Kosovo, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_recognition_of_Kosovo.
39. Putin's Q&A, Russia Today, an English-language Russian state TV channel, December 16, 2011, accessed July 5, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gWMPVcCh74&feature=related>. Russia Today has terminated its YouTube channel since.
40. "Putin Contends Clinton Incited Unrest Over Vote," *The New York Times*, December 8, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/world/europe/putin-accuses-clinton-of-instigating-russian-protests.html>.
41. "US Ambassador to Russia Suggests his Emailed Hacked, Phone Tapped," *ABC News*, March 29 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/03/us-ambassador-to-russia-suggests-his-emails-hacked-phone-tapped/>.
42. "US accuses Russia of harassing diplomats," *CNN*, June 27, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/27/politics/us-accuses-russia-of-harassing-diplomats/>.
43. From the very first days in Russian, McFaul had to defend his "reset" and clarify its purpose. "US ambassador says seeks reset, not revolution in Russia," *Russia Today*, January 25, 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/us-seeks-reset-russia-635/>.
44. Zhirinovskiy called to punish those who met with McFaul. "Deputies who met with U.S. ambassador must surrender their mandates' – Zhirinovskiy," *Russia Today*, January 24, 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/zhirinovskiy-mcfaul-protests-us-russia-duma-545/>.
45. "Deputies who met with U.S. ambassador."
46. Barack Obama in open microphone gaffe with Dmitry Medvedev, [telegraph.co.uk/video](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/video), March 26, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=MNxEDomUIXw.
47. Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012), 692-693.
48. Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 689.

The Russo-Chinese ‘Strategic Partnership’ Enters a New and Dynamic Phase

Lyle Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev

Abstract: This paper explores the recent developments in Russo-Chinese strategic alignment in the security sphere. Prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the alliance-like relationship between Moscow and Beijing had been driven by the two parties’ shared threats perception on the global level and regionally. The two Eurasian great powers demonstrated their concerted effort to alter both structural (power balance) and normative aspects of security. Along with some tangible progress in terms of interoperability between the two militaries, the Russian and Chinese leadership were prepared in principle to pursue a coordinated strategy in the field of nuclear deterrence, missile defense, militarization of space, and cyber warfare. This momentum in the security sphere of the bilateral relationship, built up over the course of decades, does not appear to have been interrupted by the Russian war against Ukraine—and with accelerated US strategic pressure—may even lead to a more robust quasi-alliance.

Keywords: US-China-Russia; Russian-Chinese quasi-alliance; China and Ukraine War; “securitization” of Russian-Chinese partnership; balance of power in Eurasia; US “Smart Power.”

Introduction

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has shaken the foundation of the post-Cold War international order, reversed globalization, and shocked the world. While many countries demonstrate unprecedented solidarity in supporting Ukraine and mitigating this new security conundrum, the government in Beijing explicitly and implicitly concurs with Moscow’s “legitimate security concerns” aroused by the Western strategic decision to proceed with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) eastward enlargement by integrating Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance. From the outset of Russia’s intervention in Ukraine, the Chinese regime under Xi Jinping has retranslated Russia’s position concerning regional and national security issues, calling for realization of the “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security concept” respecting the idea that “one country’s security cannot be at the expense of harming the security of other countries, and regional security cannot be guaranteed by strengthening or even expanding military blocs.” The Chinese government, in fact, approved the Kremlin’s interpretation of the crisis stressing that, in the case of NATO’s five consecutive rounds of eastward expansion, “Russia’s legitimate security demands deserve to be paid attention to and properly resolved.”¹

As the relations between the West and Russia become ever more aggravated, the administration of US President Joseph Biden had to warn Beijing of the isolation and potential penalties Beijing will face if it helps Moscow to bail out the Russian economy hit

by Western sanctions or even dares to assist the Kremlin in its invasion of Ukraine.²

A debate has emerged among specialists concerning the extent to which the Russia-China quasi-alliance will be strengthened by the Russia-Ukraine War, or whether a new conflict will severely strain or even break the unique relationship linking Beijing and Moscow.³ This debate reflects a long argument, at least a decade old, regarding the nature, strength, and strategic implications of that relationship.⁴ Western academics have delved into the new Russo-Chinese rapprochement looking at the alignment between the two Eurasian great powers from different theoretical perspectives, focusing on the distribution of global power and China's and Russia's role in it, balancing and counter-balancing strategies in the US-dominated world, Beijing-Moscow order-forming efforts and great power management strategies to secure global stability, common ideational and cultural foundations, or the shared status-seeking and identity-related aspirations of China and Russia in the changing global environment.⁵ One powerful argument in the West explaining this new "entente" stems from interpreting it as just a manifestation of the "axis of authoritarianism." Just prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, some analysts predicted that a shared Russian-Chinese "hostility towards the United States, and an overlapping (though not identical) illiberal vision of the world order are likely sufficient to power the relationship for at least the next decade."⁶ At the start of the conflict, Graham Allison of Harvard asserted that, despite all their sovereignty-related rhetoric, the Chinese leaders have "essentially defied geopolitical gravity in building a functional 'alliance' between China and Russia that is operationally more significant than most of the formal alliances the United States has today."⁷ Yet, contrary to these assessments, many Western analysts believe that the conflict will illustrate the brittle nature of the Russia-China relationship. Thus, Yun Sun of the Stimson Center argues, "There is no better example of a 'marriage of convenience' than [current Russia-China relations], and China will pay dearly for this choice [to back the Kremlin]."⁸ Quite similarly, Yale's Odd Arne Westad asserts that Beijing "gave [Russian President Vladimir] Putin the green light to invade," decries "China's pro-Russian rhetoric since Putin's attack began," but ultimately argues that "Russia and China are not natural partners," and they are likely to be driven apart by cultural differences and power asymmetries.⁹ Bobo Lo's interpretation is that Moscow and Beijing actually see the world very differently. While admitting that they have developed a certain durable "habit of partnership," this author nevertheless believes their relationship will become more akin to that between Pyongyang and Beijing—a relationship "defined principally by its limits."¹⁰

The analysis presented below, however, demonstrates that the picture is much more complex. The model of comprehensive strategic partnership of a new type, constructed by the Chinese and Russian leaders in the recent years, reflects the effect of multiple foreign (structural) and domestic variables that could yet increase durability of the current Russia-China quasi-alliance based on their shared world vision, security considerations, as well as the dynamics of the war in Ukraine. To be sure, this is not the first academic paper to underline the relatively strong foundations of the Russia-China quasi-alliance. Indeed, a 2022 book by Australia-based scholar Alexander Korolev does an admirable job at

describing the strength and durability of this unique partnership, while also attempting the laudable goal of building a theory of great power strategic alignment based on objective metrics.¹¹ As admirable as that objective may be, the goal in this paper is not to build theory, but rather to simply gather crucial data, relying heavily on Chinese and Russian language source materials, to paint a more accurate picture of this crucial bilateral relationship for the future of world politics.

Recent dramatic geopolitical shifts demonstrate that, at the time of an acute security crisis unprecedented since the end of the Cold War, the Russian-Chinese rapprochement does not dissipate. Even after the battles in Ukraine have passed the six-month benchmark, the political willpower of the Xi-Putin leadership seems to be boosted by coming of a “new reality” which Richard Sakwa describes as Beijing and Moscow’s attempt to challenge the West on the level of *power, norms, and ideas*.¹² The Kremlin’s actions against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 had set off significant alarm bells already in the West, but Russia’s initiation of a major conflict in Europe creates a previously unimaginable situation of a nuclear confrontation between the major great powers, which generates new security risks for all.¹³ The outcome of Russia’s war in Ukraine is becoming a factor impacting a prospective conflict between China and US over Taiwan.¹⁴ Closer ties between Russia and China have been at the center of policy debates in Washington that have induced some revision of the Pentagon’s force planning construct (FPC).¹⁵ Some experts have predicted since 2018 that the US military might fight a war against China or Russia on two or more fronts simultaneously.¹⁶ Matthew Kroenig suggests that Washington and its allies should develop a defense strategy capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating Russia and China at the same time.¹⁷

This paper examines the Sino-Russian partnership in the security sphere in the context of the crumbling global security order and the system of international governance. The key questions that arise are how feasible the two countries’ prospective security alliance might be; will such an alliance be possible; and would this alliance indeed challenge America or even engage the US into the “two-front” armed conflict. The paper *first* focuses on the changing geostrategic environment and recent political perceptions of the Russian and Chinese leadership in the sphere of security. *Second*, the paper provides an overview of the strategic partnership “of a new type” between Russia and China, established prior to the war in Ukraine, including the rapidly growing component of security cooperation, with its advancement and limitations. The *third* section will examine some developments in the two countries’ cooperation in the sphere of nuclear planning, missile defense, and space and cyber cooperation, and also speculate about the impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the realization of Russo-Chinese projects.

This paper drives from the assumption that the Russian and Chinese leadership have embarked on a much more systemic security dialog and counter-balancing against Western dominance, by not only delegating some responsibilities to each other in their respective regions, but also possibly extending mutual support and cooperation to even more spheres

of security. By deepening their interactions at times of an unprecedented security crisis, both China and Russia seek to hedge the US strategic preponderance in Eurasia. Being driven into the Chinese orbit due to the pressure by the West, the Kremlin might be obliged to provide some back-up capabilities to China's assertive regional policy in the Asia-Pacific, possibly in the form of fostering security ties with China within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China has exploited its multiple diplomatic and institutional tools to provide political support to Russia in the international arena.¹⁸ By potentially making tacit commitments to Russia in the midst of a serious security confrontation with the West, China further develops its continental counter-strategy which might deepen a bipolar confrontation between the groups of states and alter security architecture in Eurasia. The paper demonstrates that, in the context of the Russo-Chinese partnership "of a new type," strategic security issues have moved to the center of this regional quasi-alliance, and the degree of bilateral cooperation in the security sphere will determine the solidity of their prospective alliance in the near future. Building on some recent interpretations of the current Chinese-Russian partnership as a well-prepared framework for alliance without political decision to formalize it, this paper adds that political decision in Beijing and Moscow will be contingent of American policies toward China and Russia. Given China's deepening strategic interdependence with Russia in the security sphere, as well as its increased capacity to influence Russia's behavior by economic and political means, the US administration should be observant of some potentially new forms of security cooperation between China and Russia in the near future, which might challenge America's alliance-building effort in both Europe and Asia.

New Geostrategic Environment and the Russo-Chinese Vision of the Crumbling Global Security Order

The new era of Russo-Chinese security cooperation in the years of Putin-Xi presidency has largely been informed by the two countries' shared vision of geopolitical environment, threat perceptions, and their perceived responsibilities in the sphere of preserving global peace and stability. In both capitals, major security concerns all relate to the U.S.-induced challenges to global strategic stability, interconnected global economy, and homeland (domestic) security and socio-political stability challenged by external forces.

The crisis of neoliberal globalization and political cosmopolitanism has prompted the return of state-centered geopolitics, power balancing, the policies of alliances, and the security dilemma. One Russian analytic report points to the return to the pre-World War I condition stating that "the rise of nationalistic sentiments (currently they have anti-globalist flavor), re-emergence of aggressive forms of economic behavior in a neo-mercantilist spirit all make us recall the atmosphere in Europe and in the world in the beginning of the last century." At present, as the authors of the above-mentioned report suggest, in order to fix the shaky foundation of the current order, the international community should either enhance the framework of the global open system or restore the mechanisms of stability based on deterrence and arms control applicable to the condition of a cold war between superpowers.¹⁹

Currently, neither solution seems to be feasible. With a gradual shift of the major world powers toward “local contentism” and neomercantilism, some repetitive calls at international forums to reverse economic globalization might not be sufficient as the major economic powers—the US, the European Union, or Japan—continue pursuing their own inward-looking competition strategies while simultaneously updating their defense postures and reviving their military potential. The active use of economic statecraft for political or geopolitical ends leads to mistrust and alienation due to the destructive effect of sanctions and the asymmetric character of interdependence. Hence, western analysts have returned to studying the utility of various containment strategies, by learning from the lessons of the first Cold War of 1946-1989.²⁰

So, for Moscow and Beijing, the current major security threats stem from the deterioration of the globalized liberal order, the return of great power rivalry, and the challenges of a “rules-based” post-sovereign world. More importantly, turbulence within the current world order and the danger of a new world war are regarded in Russia and China as a result of America’s hegemonic decline and Washington’s aggressive attempts to preserve its global supremacy. The image of the “hegemon-in-agony” remains popular among the politicians and think tanks in both Russia and China. Moscow and Beijing consider America’s rapid imperial decline as the cause of Washington’s unpredictability, aggressiveness, zero-sum mentality, excessive uses of force, confrontational behavior, and ignorance of the norms of international law. China’s 2019 National Defense White Paper comments that growing [US] hegemonism and unilateralism undermine the world’s universal “pursuit of peace, stability, and development,” and US policies have “provoked and intensified competition among major countries, significantly increased its defense expenditure, pushed for additional capacity in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defense, and undermined global strategic stability.” For example, as the Chinese document states, while NATO continues its enlargement and increases its military deployment in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia is strengthening its nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities for strategic containment and striving to safeguard its strategic security space and interests.²¹ The post-hegemonic America, as many believe in Russia and China, is retreating from its leadership role as a conductor of free trade and globalization, and it is no longer capable of preventing the emergence of a new architecture of global politics, new modernization models, new industrial revolution, and new format of global governance.²² Russian and Chinese strategists acknowledge, however, that the US is not ready to voluntarily surrender its global predominant position; hence, serious conflicts and crises between the great powers could occur.²³ One year before the Russian intervention in Ukraine, one of Putin’s key advisors, Sergei Karaganov, openly called for toughening deterrence against the US, since the behavior of its ruling elite leads to a high degree of chaos and unpredictability in global politics.²⁴ At present, Karaganov explains that Russia perceived Ukraine’s pro-Western orientation as an existential threat since the “declining West” decided to turn Ukraine into “a spearhead aimed at the heart of Russia.” This Russian strategist considers that the belligerent aspirations of the Western powers have resulted from the economic, moral, and political collapse of the West, which has made this conflict

imminent and pushed Moscow to “pre-empt and to dictate the terms of the conflict.”²⁵ In the world which is becoming increasingly “uncertain and unstable” (Xi) and “complicated and volatile” (Putin), China and Russia have to “help each other,” and to “support each other in pursuing their own development path and safeguarding their core interests, and to safeguard the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of each country.”²⁶

Some Chinese analysts contend that America’s “irrational” global behavior stems from its disruptive attempts to link the changes in power capacity of a state with excessive uses of force and the desire to impose a new set of values. While some key Western authors justify the inevitability of confrontation between the US and its major contender China, the latter seeks to promote the idea that a country’s material power status may not necessarily be converted into aggressive behavior. In the case of China, while being in par with the US in terms of power potential, it is still possible to avoid rigid bipolarity through the policy of multilateralism. This focus on a state’s behavioral choice which is not necessarily determined by structural factors and which depends on political will, justifies a new type of relations between great powers and explains China’s reluctance to acknowledge China-US structural bipolarity as central for international politics, leaving it up to a superpower to decide if a rigid bipolar confrontation or just multilateral order would be more favorable.²⁷ Even well after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Xi, the Chinese leader, launched his “Global Security Initiative,” which resonated closely with the rhetoric of Sino-Russian joint statements in the recent years.²⁸ Trying to avoid its involvement into a major confrontation between Beijing and Washington, the Kremlin has adopted a similar posture calling for prevention of a rigid bipolarity and the enhancement of the old military blocs or the formation of the old ones.²⁹

In their February 4, 2022, Joint Statement, the leaders of Russia and China expressed grave concern about serious international security challenges caused by some Western attempts to ensure its own security “separately from the security of the rest of the world and at the expense of the security of other States,” which contradicted the principles of “universal, comprehensive, indivisible and lasting security” supported by Russia and China. This document directly points to the West which attempts to undermine security and stability in the regions adjacent to China and Russia, enhance military and political alliances and coalitions to obtain “unilateral military advantages to the detriment of the security of others, including by employing unfair competition practices, intensify geopolitical rivalry, fuel antagonism and confrontation, and seriously undermine the international security order and global strategic stability.”³⁰

The danger of strategic instability has been placed to the forefront of Russo-Chinese security cooperation. Leading Russian security expert Dmitry Trenin formulated some key features of the Cold War-era strategic stability system. They included a bipolar global system with just two major adversaries; mutual expectations that any war between the two superpowers would go nuclear, and rise to the strategic level; a degree of confidence that the prospect of mutually assured destruction would deter both sides from attacking each other;

a constant fear that the adversary would find a way to break out of the mutual suicide pact; bilateral arms control as a method of limiting the arms race; and arms control negotiations as a way for the two antagonists to adjust to the strategic status quo. It is noteworthy that there was a clear understanding that any conventional war between the nuclear powers could evolve into a full-fledged nuclear exchange, and all doctrines of a limited nuclear warfare were dismissed by specialists as unrealistic. Besides, the history lessons of the Cold War teach the contemporaries that deterrence was no guarantee of stability since it could easily fail. By the mid-2010s, strategic stability again became an issue, and the relationship between the major great nuclear powers became more complex.³¹ At that time, those major actors, the US and Russia in particular, abandoned the previously adopted concept of “strategic stability,” which meant by 1990 a state of strategic relations that removed incentives for a nuclear first strike, losing the common ground in their interpretation of the term, which now needs to be updated in the context of the emergence of effective long-range cruise missiles and hypersonic weapons, and the deployment of missile defense systems in the US, Russia, and China. Some Chinese scholars contend that there is a large deviation between the nuclear strategy actually implemented by the US and the classical nuclear deterrence theory. They point to the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty as the turning moment which facilitates the actual combat nature of nuclear weapons and triggers nuclear proliferation potentially involving Japan and South Korea, provoking a new round of the arms race.³²

In the context of the recent Ukraine war-related dangers of a new nuclear conflict, Otto Dettmer points to the possibility of wars and conflicts which becomes high even in the nuclear age due to the stability-instability paradox—because the threat of a nuclear war is too terrible to contemplate, smaller or proxy conflicts become “safer,” then rival superpowers feel confident that neither side will allow the fight to escalate too much.³³ Besides, as Barry Posen indicates, the prospect of mutual nuclear destruction constrains great power war and has limited US and NATO support for Ukraine. Other states may take note and seek their own nuclear deterrents.³⁴ This means that for China, the only option is to increase its nuclear potential.

The prospect of a new nuclear arms race has also caused non-nuclear states to disagree with nuclear states for failing to realize their nuclear disarmament obligations as soon as possible in accordance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Some other factors such as potential space warfare systems, cyber warfare technologies, and growing nuclear forces of third states should also be taken into consideration, let alone the lack of strategic security negotiations and the ongoing disintegration of the arms control system and regimes.³⁵ Russian strategists contend that one of the causes of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, for example, has been Moscow’s concerns of Ukraine’s effort to restore its status as a nuclear power. Simultaneously, Russo-Chinese concerns and military upgrades inform America’s own security dilemma. Some experts draw attention to Russia’s and China’s increased missile capabilities that challenge the US in different domains, calling for further investment to the space-based layer of proliferated satellites (to track hypersonic missiles), as well as to the

development of the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI), the directed energy and the Glide Phase Interceptor programs.³⁶ As a result, the prospective developments of the SM-3 Block IIA interceptor and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems, which might be deployed on the regional theatre raise concern among the Russian and Chinese analysts.

As tensions among the major economic actors aggravate, the Chinese and Russian leaders have elevated the importance of economic security, considering America's ongoing trade wars and economic sanctions as a security threat. China considers its economic security, along with the security of the people and political security, as the cornerstone of national security—the formula that was first presented by Xi on April 15, 2014, in a special report, which comprised all aspects of national security into an amalgamated concept. In 2015, Beijing adopted the “National Security Law of the [People's Republic of China] PRC,” which addressed such aspects of economic security as foreign investments, globalization risks, trade-related risks and financial risks, calling for supervision and market management, control over international supply of resources, export control. Since the outset of trade wars with US, Beijing prioritized the technological security intellectual property rights supply chain as well as data management as important aspects of economic security. While continuing the new course of the two-step strategic arrangement in economic modernization announced in 2017, which prioritized the quality of development (including quality, efficiency, and power) to high-speed growth, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government promoted the idea of “self-reliance” and the concept of “dual circulation” of the economy.³⁷ After the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the Kremlin passed a federal law, “On Strategic Planning in the Russian Federation” (June 28, 2014), and Putin signed a decree on May 13, 2017: “On the Strategy for the Economic Security of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030,” which addressed Russia's overdependence on global markets and the financial system, and the problems of governance and economic regulation, calling for strengthening Russia's economic sovereignty, reducing the impact of external and internal challenges, ensuring economic growth, and developing scientific and technological potential and competitiveness of the Russian economy, including the capabilities of the military-industrial complex.³⁸ In June 2018, Russia and China added global economic stability to the list of major security risks. Along with such threats as confrontation in cyberspace, terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and illegal migration, Beijing and Moscow regarded the trade wars waged by the US as a new dangerous blow to the architecture of the world order.³⁹ Long before the current “sanctions from hell,” Russian commentators explained Russia's changed attitudes toward the US treasuries through the prism of geopolitics. To hedge new economic security challenges, Russia since 2014 has launched “de-dollarization” campaign seeking new terms of trade operations with its economic partners on the base of national currencies. Since 2018 China has been supportive of a number of new projects within the other BRICS ((Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations and SCO aimed at the formation of alternative currency transaction mechanisms, fostering regional integration to reduce dependency from West and creating the economic foundation for strengthening national military capacity to prevent a disarming strike by any power. The recent exchanges

within these organizations signal that the alternative currency plans are on the agenda today.⁴⁰ Since the beginning of war in Ukraine, however, the meaning of economic security for Russia under the sanctions is no longer associated with the preservation of an open trade and investment environment, which has been the core principle of China's current position toward economic globalization.⁴¹ Russia is struggling to adopt a new model of economic survival based on self-reliance, import substitution, and some elements of mobilization economy. At the same time, its dependence on China's economic support has grown tremendously.⁴² In addition, China seems to be helping Russia stabilize its economy by assisting in the control and stabilization of the ruble's value.⁴³ Korolev documents well that substantial tensions have existed in the China-Russia relationship, which has been viewed as imbalanced, so that Russia could turn into "China's resource appendage." But he explains that this is recognized now as a problem in both Beijing and Moscow: "The year 2013 appears as a relative transition point after which Russia's non-energy exports to China started to pick up slowly."⁴⁴ Nevertheless, there is still evidence in 2022 that Russia does not want to get too economically dependent on China.⁴⁵

The strengthening of cultural security (ideological battles) of the Chinese and Russian nations to offset the impact of the Western "democratic offensive" may be considered the third pivotal aspect that underpins Russian-Chinese security cooperation. In his observation of Russia's and China's international behavior since 2014, Gilbert Rozman highlighted the importance of ideology, culture, and value systems that boosted their ties, separated these countries from the West and undermined global normative consensus. This ideational aspect of Sino-Russian cooperation which relates to the overlapped national identities of these post-communist countries, explains, according to Rozman, durability of Sino-Russian "tacit partnership."⁴⁶ From the early days of Xi's presidency, external threats to Chinese cultural security became the focus of the Third Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which took place on November 2013, and prioritized cultural development in China by stating the need "to improve the cultural management system, establish and improve the modern cultural market system, and build a modern public cultural service system." In pursuit of its cultural security strategy, the key Chinese analysts even recommend globalizing the fundamental principles and virtues of the traditional Chinese culture, which may be complementary with the fundamental Western values.⁴⁷ On par with the Chinese efforts, the Russian leadership has also become alerted by Western "cultural imperialism" and concerned about the "cultural crisis" resulted from Russia's involvement into the globalized cultural and normative environment. In the view of some Russian experts, similar to China, the Russian society has to address the Western "hybrid warfare" which represents a "transition to non-military, non-forced, veiled, psychologically implicit ways and means of destroying the foundations of statehood and indirect mechanisms for managing the situation in the victim country has been practiced by the United States for a long time."⁴⁸ Along with the implementation of the official cultural policy strategy, the Russian experts suggest that a public-private partnership should be established to formulate Russia's own value set and improve regulatory measures

over the web-based media which endanger the cultural-information security of each Russian individual.⁴⁹ Both Russian and Chinese elites continue developing new tools to address the challenge of “hybrid warfare,” in which ideology, public opinion, online rhetorical constructs, cultural narratives, and social protests have become a powerful and destructive weapon. Putin’s self-perception as a missionary representing a “civilization state” pursuing its own interests have dramatically fueled Russia’s encroachment in Ukraine.⁵⁰ The months of Russia’s war in Ukraine have demonstrated the importance of some alternative historic narratives and the competing assessments of right-wing movements and the Nazi legacy in the information warfare between East and West.

The Formation of Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership of a ‘New Type’ and Its ‘Securitization’

Strategic competition between China and the US in East Asia and the clash between Russia and the West over Ukraine have produced a situation of an unprecedented Western pressure on Russia by means of sanctions, and on China by further pursuing the policy of rebalancing in the Asia-Pacific. This American policy of estrangement of Russia and “smart pushback” against China have predictably resulted in the speedy development of a “new type of strategic partnership” between the two major Eurasian powers determined to expand cooperation, in Xi’s words, “no matter what changes occur in the world.” Moscow and Beijing have become more articulate about their intent to challenge the existing US-dominated world order in a coordinated practical way, on the base of inclusiveness and cooperation. Those efforts have not been intended to create rifts or stimulate divisions in the world. The “new type” does not mean confrontation. The concept of a “new type” stems from China’s reluctance to sign a formal alliance which would prompt it to jointly use force with the other party. Han Shiyong draws attention to Xi’s principled position toward alliances which he noted in his speech at the UN General Assembly on September 28, 2015. Xi, in fact, called for a “global partnership at the international and regional level,” developing a “new approach to interstate relations, characterized by dialogue rather than not an alliance.” By considering “bloc mentality” and “alliance-building” unacceptable in the new century, Beijing, in fact, disavows the possibility of a formal alignment with Russia. China’s relations with Russia, therefore, may be regarded as part of China’s holistic approach toward universal cooperation and development.⁵¹

For China, alliance relationship concerns the commonality of the allied party’s joint political goal, to be achieved by military means. In Russia, emphasis is placed on the real military interaction as a foundation of an alliance. The relationship is “new” because it contains some elements of a de-facto alliance but rejects the classical alliance-building principles. The new nature of an “alliance-like partnership” targets the existing US practices of alliance-building in the twenty-first century, which are driven, in the view of China and Russia, by “bloc mentality.” These practices create political rifts in the international community, establish hierarchies of states, and eventually undermine stability. Russia has accommodated China’s holistic approach to partnerships which are “not directed against”

the third party. Xi's "New Security Initiative" at the Boao Forum for Asia in April 2022 demonstrates China's devotion to this principle, which China and Russia intend to legitimize to prevent global political polarization. In his speech at the SCO summit in Samarkand on September 16, 2022, the Chinese president once again stressed the significance of security cooperation within the SCO, according to the principles of "common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security" and aimed at the formation of a "balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture."⁵²

Hence, Sino-Russian strategic closeness has been based on their willingness to consider one another's national interests and create the mechanism of conflict aversion and build "great power relations of a new type," which would determine the parameters of a new security and economic order, beneficial for all nations. Prior to the recent deterioration of US-Russia and US-China relations, two major drivers determined the essence of the renewed partnership between Moscow and Beijing. One driver related to status-seeking and norms-adjustment effort. The two countries' aggravated concerns about the state of international norms, rules, and institutions modified by the American hegemony, reflected the two countries' dissatisfaction with the way the international system was functioning. Beijing and Moscow were eager to be rightful members of the international community, on the same footage with other great powers, to build a multipolar order. Another driver was the opposition to the political globalization and post-sovereignty narrative. Both Moscow and Beijing were alarmed by the neoliberal narrative of political globalization, which undermined the role of the state in all countries other than the hegemonic ones (favoring the latter). Chinese and Russian security analysts have a shared perception of "Gray Zone" threats, allegedly instigated by the US and West in general.⁵³ The fear of domestic turbulence and social unrest inspired by the ideological, political, and normative incursion of the West in their domestic affairs drove the Russian and Chinese leadership toward an even more autocratic condition. Homeland security and stability in the era of open markets and open societies seemed to be even more prone to challenges and threats. In 2017, the Russian defense minister, Sergey Shoigu, stressed the importance that Russia and China were "ready to defend the world with mutual effort and strengthen international security."⁵⁴ In April 2018, the newly appointed Chinese defense minister, General Wei Fenghe, warned that the US should pay close attention to the bolstered military ties between Russia and China.⁵⁵ In 2020 Putin did not rule out the possibility of forming a military alliance with China.⁵⁶ In 2020-2021, Beijing and Moscow shared similar approach to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which enhanced, at least in public narratives, their strategic cohesiveness.⁵⁷ Along with numerous joint maneuvers in the air, at sea, and on the ground, the governments of both countries have recently agreed to jointly address the potential threat of US nuclear attack on Russia and China and step up strategic military exercises and coordination between the two country's nuclear strategic forces, to offset US pressure and military threats.⁵⁸ Beijing remains particularly concerned that ballistic missile defense could be used to pressure China in a crisis with the US and seeks to learn from Russia's experience with nuclear strategy.⁵⁹ In the Russian-Chinese joint statement signed

just before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, one could discern the views, shared by Beijing and Moscow, on international security and global strategic stability, on the prospect of nuclear non-proliferation, on the risks of nuclear wars, embracing the principle of indivisible security, criticizing US security strategy in both Europe and Asia, and condemning the unrestricted development of anti-ballistic missile defense systems, formation of closed blocs, "ideologized cold war approaches" including the formation of the Australia, United Kingdom, and US (AUKUS) security pact and America's Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁶⁰

It is noteworthy that Xi and Putin tried to emphasize the factor of a great power's policy behavior, in addition to the balance of power or other structural factors, as a prerequisite for strategic stability, which went beyond the notion of nuclear stability and now involved the use of conventional forces, the principles of uses of force, and also required an adequate "political behavior" in the global arena.⁶¹

A new type of Russian-Chinese partnership is driven by a staunch opposition to the Western policy of alliances. Until the recent security crisis, Moscow and Beijing had been calling for the formation of an inclusive security mechanism, in the Russian version, a "collective leadership," to address global challenges, while remaining devoted to the realist logic of the balance of power.

In their opposition to the West, Moscow and Beijing have tried to dismiss ideologization of international relations fostered by the West. While the US position has increasingly drifted toward the confrontational rhetoric of fighting the "axis of authoritarianism" and illiberal practices, Russia has remained supportive of China's holistic order-forming concept of the "community of the common destiny of mankind." In the June 2021 Joint Statement between the two countries, the US was criticized for splitting the world "along ideological lines," and for "unceremonious interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, arbitrary application of sanctions unilaterally, undermining the legal framework of the system of international relations, including the sphere of arms control." Unlike the US, the two Eurasian great powers have pledged to "unify the world," instead of splitting the world into rival blocs, and "postpone differences, show genuine humanism and solidarity, strengthen cooperation, refuse from attempts to use in geopolitical interests the problems that have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic." To contribute to the reform of global governance system, Xi agreed with Putin's initiative to convene a summit of the states—permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, to jointly address common challenges and maintain international peace and security.⁶² In the area of global economic governance, it is China that opposes the emergence of trading blocs and remains the major proponent of economic liberalization and open trade, and Moscow actively backs up Beijing's stance against protectionism and the use of restricting economic sanctions initiated by the West.⁶³

Overall, in their 2021 Joint Statement, the leaders of Russia and China agreed that, while "not being a military-political alliance, similar to alliances that developed during the

Cold War, Russian-Chinese relations are superior to this form of interstate interaction.” These relationships were declared as “not opportunistic in nature, free from ideologization, presuppose a comprehensive consideration of the partner’s interests and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, are self-sufficient and not directed against third countries.”⁶⁴ Along with the continuation of anti-nuclear rhetoric, the recent February 4 Joint Statement has significantly enhanced the homeland and cultural security component of this partnership, stating that any nation “can choose such forms and methods of implementing democracy that would best suit its particular state, based on its social and political system, its historical background, traditions, and unique cultural characteristics.” In the sphere of global governance, the known Chinese idea of democratization of international relations were also formalized. The parties insisted that in international affairs nobody can “draw dividing lines based on the grounds of ideology, including by establishing exclusive blocs and alliances of convenience, prove to be nothing but flouting of democracy and go against the spirit and true values of democracy.” This includes opposition to “color revolutions,” strengthening the international human rights architecture, which should be based on the “principle of equality of all countries and mutual respect.” To address economic security challenges, the two parties intend to enhance cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China “in various areas” and promote the Greater Eurasian Partnership and “greater interconnectedness between the Asia Pacific and Eurasian regions,” including Russia’s support of the China-initiated Global Development Initiative (GDI), and cooperation in the Arctic region.⁶⁵

The authors of the influential Russo-Chinese analytical report published by the Russian International Affairs Council explain that the formation of an institutionalized alliance might create additional demarcation lines in the world; hence, Beijing and Moscow strengthen ties by developing a joint vision of cooperation priorities and the ability to set their own agenda on the regional and global level.⁶⁶ It is absence of clear alliance commitments promulgated by the original 2001 Sino-Russian Friendship Treaty that could explain unique sustainability of the document for the period of 20 years.⁶⁷

Many experts explore the question if the Russian-Chinese construction is indeed a functional analysis, how their inter-military cooperation actually works, and whether there are systemic incentives for the two countries to align with each other. The phenomenon of a Chinese-Russian “entente” may be comprehended neither on the base of any established theories of alliances nor on the base of examination of some pragmatic elements of the two countries’ collaboration resulted from just their ad hoc reactions to US policies or regional events or developments.

In his 2018 study of *the international-systemic incentives* for the China-Russia alignment and the actual mechanisms of the China-Russia military cooperation, Alexander Korolev argued that by that time Russia and China were “on the verge of an alliance,” that a strong basis for an alliance was in place, and only minor steps are needed for a fully-fledged alliance to materialize; the occurrence of such steps is still an open question. Korolev noted

that both China and Russia interpreted the US and its policies as an explicit external threat, which would constitute a foundation for a China-Russia military alignment.⁶⁸

Some Russian and Chinese observers believe however, that in the new era of anti-US counterhegemonic confrontation, Moscow and Beijing need security guarantees toward each other, in case conflict occurs between either Russia or China, and the US. China might be compelled to use force against the US Navy in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait, which requires a firm backup from its northern ally. Despite the uncertainty about China backing Russia in case of a Russia-NATO conflict, some Chinese publications are still speculating about that possibility.⁶⁹ David Sacks argues, that, given the increasing alignment between Russia and China, the US cannot rule out that Russia would offer significant assistance to China during a conflict over Taiwan, including arms, energy, food, and intelligence. The US should also assume Russia would seek to distract it from any fight against China by conducting cyberattacks or seeking to destabilize Europe.⁷⁰ During the Aug 2022 Taiwan Crisis, China expressed its thanks to Russia for backing its position so overtly.⁷¹ This logic stimulates Russo-Chinese defense cooperation which includes continuous arms sales and military-technical cooperation, joint exercises (including new counter-space and anti-access/area denial) and military exchanges (which deepen interoperability of the two countries' armed forces), expanded technology exchanges and joint development, though joint operations against the prevailing US forces might be realistic only if China and Russia achieve a high degree of technological superiority, which is problematic joint operations and assistance countering US forces.⁷²

Meeting the New Challenges: Dramatic Shifts in Sino-Russian Security Realm

Facing the “new reality,” Russo-Chinese defense coordination and military cooperation have gained new momentum. Russia has upgraded its previous model of defense industry cooperation with China. Prior to the current war in Ukraine, this cooperation has ceased to be the “one-way street” when Russia provided China with defense equipment and technology in exchange of Chinese cash.

Three major developments could be observed in the recent years. The first one is the growing role of the Russian companies as subcontractors in the Chinese defense industry research and development (R&D) and production projects. A good example of such cooperation is the agreement on cooperation on advanced heavy helicopter project signed during Putin's visit to China in June 2016. According to this agreement, Russia will help to design and supply a number of subsystems (including the engines) for the Chinese heavy helicopter which will be assembled in China and for the Chinese market. In early 2022, it was reported in Chinese military media that this project continues and will eventually yield helicopters that can carry up to 60 persons or heft ten tons.⁷³ The second one is the start of major joint projects, including joint large body civilian aircraft which is supposed to be produced jointly for the markets of the two countries. The third one is the start of significant imports of the major Chinese components for the Russian platforms and systems. During

Putin's visit to China in June 2016 an agreement on large scale procurement of the Chinese electronic components for the Russian space satellites was signed. Russia's current missile capabilities may be explained by the fact that these arrangements have brought some results. This practice can be expanded to the new areas, including unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) technology, marine gas turbines etc.⁷⁴

There is a more nuanced and coordinated policy aimed at blocking US anti-missile efforts regionally and globally. This includes potential alliance in space reconnaissance technologies and weapons, and probably joint effort to offset these new US developments. One special document issued by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 2017 stressed the significance of China-Russia military relations in the sphere of joint maritime drills, and international military skill competitions, including the First Joint Computer-Enabled Anti-Missile Defense Exercise in 2016, and close coordination within the defense and security cooperation framework of the SCO.⁷⁵

Cooperation in space. In September 2018, the Chinese side proposed Russia to join a special project which involves the creation of satellites in low, medium, and geostationary orbit to compete with the 900-satellite-strong British OneWeb Global Internet coverage system and share the benefits of using it. Given the recent statements from Roskosmos that Russia will no longer cooperate with OneWeb, there is a possibility that Moscow will intensify the implementation of a joint Internet system with China, probably by aligning Russia's own global low-orbit project Efir with it.⁷⁶ A special US Defense Intelligence Agency report published in 2019 indicates that Beijing and Moscow have reorganized their militaries, incorporating since 2015 new space programs and space capabilities into their future defense potential. In particular, the development of space-based intelligence, fostering new launch technologies and satellite operativity, as well as improving counterspace capabilities—this all enable the two Eurasian rivals to advance their command and control systems and “reduce US and allied military effectiveness.” One of the most notable aspect is Chinese and Russian anti-satellite operations on high altitudes in all earth orbits. Special emphasis is placed to “jamming and cyberspace capabilities, directed energy weapons, on-orbit capabilities, and ground-based antisatellite missiles that can achieve a range of reversible to nonreversible effects.”⁷⁷

As the US global defense system develops, the Russian and Chinese strategists express their deeper concerns about the danger of America's “prompt strike” on their territory. Moscow and Beijing seek to respond the NATO's Space Defense Concept (June 2019) and the US's intention to create a space echelon with missile defense systems to destroy ballistic missiles in the early stages of their flight would stimulate militarization of the outer space.⁷⁸ By 2022, China intends to assemble and operate a permanently inhabited, modular space station that can host Chinese and foreign payloads and astronauts. Not so long ago, China landed an automatic station on the moon. Beijing has also invested into the Asia-Pacific Ground-Based Optical Space Object Observation System (APOSOS), which includes telescopes in Peru, Pakistan, and Iran, capable of tracking objects in Low Earth

orbit (LEO) and Geostationary orbit (GEO). By 2025, it is planning to send a new AMS to a natural satellite, and a manned flight is expected in the thirties.⁷⁹

Another aspect of Sino-Russian cooperation in space is their persistent attempts “weaponization of space,” by engaging the US into legal, binding space arms control agreements. In order to integrate cyberspace, space, and electronic warfare (EW) capabilities, China and Russia reorganized their air and space capabilities into China’s Strategic Support Force (SSF) and Russia’s Aerospace Force, respectively. If deterrence fails, Russia believes its counterspace forces will offer its military leaders the ability to control escalation of a conflict through selective targeting of adversary space systems. The defense minister stated the change was “prompted by a shift in the center of gravity... towards the aerospace sphere” and as a counter to the US Prompt Global Strike (PGS) doctrine. Russia numbers third in the world, behind the US and China, in terms of operational satellites, with over 140 in various orbits. These systems provide Russia’s military with satellite communications, high-resolution imagery, navigation, ballistic missile early warning, electronic intelligence, and meteorological services.⁸⁰

The Russia-Ukraine War has become a serious cause for extending Russian-Chinese defense cooperation and military exchange. Since the beginning of Russia’s military operations in Ukraine, SpaceX’s support of Ukraine’s defense forces with the Starlink communications technologies demonstrated their utility as the critical part of “US space military industrial complex,” which stirred significant alarm in China. Western observers refer to the multiple publications in China which have been critical of SpaceX’s deep links to the US armed forces, including commercial contracts with the military, slamming Starlink’s capacity to “enhance the US military’s combat capability” and “bringing the world into chaos or calamity,” so that China is prompted to pursue “soft and hard kill methods” to be prepared to take down Starlink satellites and destroy its operating system.⁸¹

In his excellent description of China’s diplomatic actions to support Russia since the beginning of the “special operation” in Ukraine, Evan Medeiros refers to the continued practice of joint patrolling by Russian and Chinese bomber jets in the region, particularly, a demonstrative joint strategic bomber patrol over the Sea of Japan in late May 2022, and the timing of this patrol coincided with the meeting of the leaders of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in Tokyo. Medeiros concludes that “as the first military exercise since February, this action offers some indication of the type of activities China will conduct under its modified policy of ‘no ceiling’ but also a bottom-line.”⁸²

Meanwhile, since 2014 Moscow has decided to upgrade significantly the level of sophistication of its arms sales to China. After Russia’s supply of the advanced S-400 surface-to-air missile systems to China, Russian military expert Vassily Kashin noted that with its firing range of up to 400 km, Beijing’s possession of these systems would signify a fundamental change in the rules of the game in Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands, two potential hot spots where China is involved.⁸³ Another Chinese acquisition—two dozen

SU-35s fighter jets from Russia for \$2 billion—also may have a considerable impact on regional security: experts estimate that even a single regiment of Su-35s may be enough to affect the balance of power in Taiwan. Being deployed in the reclaimed artificial islands in the South China Sea, those jets could employ their Irbis radar systems that can detect airborne targets at a range of up to 400 kilometers, which will improve Beijing's access denial capabilities.⁸⁴

Russia's growing strategic importance vis-à-vis the US is being appraised in China. Medeiros points to the risk for the US if Russia were to face mounting military challenges in Ukraine, then it might request military assistance from China. According to this scenario, Russia could offer "heretofore inaccessible Russian military technical assistance," especially if China "were to become less invested in US-China ties or were it to believe that ties may soon deteriorate." To satisfy Russia's economic demands, Beijing could start providing substantial economic assistance to Moscow, taking more risky behavior regarding the sanctions, potentially putting Chinese firms at risk of secondary sanctions from Washington.⁸⁵

Thus, Moscow and Beijing have set the foundation for the prospective military and defense cooperation—which might include joint operations, if a political decision is made. Since 2016 the Russian and Chinese militaries have pledged to "defend the world with mutual efforts and strengthen international security."⁸⁶ In November 2021 the defense ministries of the two countries extended the "roadmap for military cooperation" until 2025, indicating the role of this partnership as a stabilizing factor in global affairs.⁸⁷

Cybersecurity cooperation. This is considered as an increasingly important area of Russo-Chinese strategic partnership. As prominent Russian expert Fyodor Lukyanov suggests, global strategic stability until the mid-twenty-first century will not be determined by the nuclear factor only, and "what is happening in cyberspace can be far more destructive than even a nuclear conflict."⁸⁸ Driven by their growing concern over the recent decade about threats to national sovereignty, the US democratic offensive along with its ideological and cultural domination, as well as technological dependence from the leading Western powers, the Chinese and Russian governments have developed a comprehensive set of laws and regulations aimed at safeguarding their Internet security and the critical infrastructure in the cyber space. Both China and Russia relate cybersecurity to the other essential aspects of national security—economic, energy, financial, communication, socio-political, and military. As an inherently transnational information environment, the cyberspace is regulated in Russia by the federal law "Information, Information Technologies, and Information Protection" (passed by the State Duma on July 8, 2006), substantiated by the "Outlines of the Russian Federation National Policy in the Sphere of International Information Security for the Period till 2020" (2011) and the "Doctrine of the Information Security of the Russian Federation" (December 2016). For its part, Beijing has methodically deepened control over information security and linked cybersecurity issues with the core national interests and protection of sovereignty. China's "Anti-Espionage Law" of 2014,

and “Anti-Terrorism Law” and “National Security Law” of 2015 promulgate that the government develops systems to ensure network and information security, accountability of basic network and information technologies, strengthening network regulation, and improving its capacity to protect network operations and information security, as well as the Critical Information Infrastructure (CII) including critical information systems and the data.⁸⁹ In 2016 the Chinese government formulated its vision of information security in the national segment of the global Internet publishing the “Cybersecurity Law” (November 2016), followed by a comprehensive “International Cooperation Strategy in the Cyberspace” (March 2017).⁹⁰

The latter is the first official strategic document regulating China’s participation in international exchange and cooperation in cyberspace. China prioritizes data safety, critical infrastructure protection, and assurance of cybersovereignty. According to this document, the primary goals of China’s policy were the “creation of an international mechanism for its implementation and are based on the principle of preventing interference in internal affairs, holding measures against the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of states,” which is synchronized with Russia’s major documents in this field aimed at the development of an international code of conduct on the Internet that is common to all participants in the development of cyberspace. Chapter IV of the strategy defines the PRC action plan to establish peace and stability, international rules of order in cyberspace, and partnerships, and to reform the global Internet governance system.⁹¹ Interestingly, by introducing its cyberspace security principles, Beijing demonstrates its compliance with the principles of the UN Charter, and the provisions of the SCO Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of International Information Security, including the updated International Code of Conduct for Information Security submitted in January 2015 by the SCO to the UN General Assembly.⁹²

As US-Chinese and US-Russian relations deteriorated, the two Eurasian giants strengthened their bilateral cooperation in the cybersecurity sphere. During Xi’s visit to Russia in May 2015, Moscow signed a special agreement with China on international information security cooperation. Observers noticed that, prior to signing, Russia had not had such close cooperation in cyberspace with any country that was not a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The document identifies the key threats to global information security, which include the use of technology “to carry out acts of aggression aimed at the violation sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of states,” “to interfere in the internal affairs of states,” to cause economic damage, to commit crimes, including data breach, for terrorist purposes, or to disseminate information that “harms political and socio-economic systems, or the spiritual, moral, and cultural environment of other states.”⁹³

Military aspects of cybersecurity lie at the center of this cooperation. Russia is aware of China’s posture on the threats of information warfare. For Beijing, “networkization” of the battlefield accelerate confrontation, and the struggle for control over the information space becomes a priority. China also seeks to secure its dominant positions in cyberspace

and guarantee its own attack on the adversary's cybersystems. "Information superiority" may be achieved by weakening the enemy's ability to receive, process, transmit, and use information. Both China and Russia are adamant to secure the protection of the internal information space from outside interference, and to sustain ideological control over the net since some alien services may support the content which confronts the political and ideological guidelines of the national governments and may affect the state power.

Moscow and Beijing are set to combat these threats by developing communication channels within the framework of the Russian-Chinese Subcommittee on Communications and Information Technology, between the defense ministries and law enforcement agencies or national response centers to computer incidents. The parties agree to activate the information and technology exchange, ensuring the security of critical information infrastructure (defense, nuclear, transport, and other facilities).⁹⁴ The public-private partnership, as well as cooperation between the major IT companies are seen as an optimal mechanism for successful cooperation.⁹⁵ On the regional level, both Moscow and Beijing are trying to incorporate cybersecurity cooperation into the existing regional multilateral mechanisms, the SCO in particular. However, even within the SCO sporadic attacks on Russian, Mongolian, or Indian energy, or research networks and enterprises from Chinese domains occur.⁹⁶

For many years Moscow and Beijing—often within the format of the SCO—have been conducting special military simulations and exercises in the cybersecurity sphere. In December 2017, for example, Russia and China conducted the second joint computer-based command-and-staff missile defense exercises "Air and Space Security 2017." Observers noticed in summer of 2017 that Moscow and Beijing were considering a joint Russian-Chinese technological platform to repel cyber threats and reduce risks in the information space. As Russian analyst Alexander Isaev concludes, the two parties are developing "mutually acceptable approaches to solve problems arising in the developing cyber space, identifying mutually acceptable criteria and possibilities for creating a secure network environment."⁹⁷ In the wake of the war in Ukraine, China and Russia coordinate their cyber efforts. Western cyber threat security experts maintain that China's belief that their state-backed technological advancement "will make them highly capable of overturning the Western world makes them the perfect ally to Russia's current power play over Ukraine."⁹⁸

China and Russia also accelerate their cooperation in the "hardware" production (e.g., microchips, processors, digital memory) for IT needs. The IT production technology components have been one of the most important conditions for ensuring national cyber security. Both China and Russia to a different degree are dependent on imports of these products from the Western markets. In the period from 2012 to 2016 China spent up to \$211 billion on the import of microchips. US-China decoupling in the recent years has prompted Beijing to heavily invest in import substitution in the IT industry. By 2018, 40 factories for processing 300 mm and 200 mm plates were operational in the country, and 13 more plants were under construction.⁹⁹ Being isolated from the major producers of global microchip

industry, Russia deepens its cooperation with China in this area under the auspices of the Greater Eurasian Partnership. Chip shipments from China to Russia more than doubled to about \$50 million in the first five months of 2022 compared with a year earlier, and the US authorities noticed continuous trade deals between Russian defense firms and China Poly Group, a defense conglomerate already sanctioned by US authorities.¹⁰⁰ Besides, the Chinese observers have highly appreciated Russia's own model of industrialization in the sphere of microelectronics, focusing on quartz-crystals inverted mesa-technologies which are based on the highly reliable analog technologies that play a crucial role in the modern military sphere.¹⁰¹

Scientific and technology cooperation in strategic industries. Major directions of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing in the sphere of science and technology have been determined by the mutual complementarity between Russia's tradition of fundamental research and China's ability to transfer scientific innovations to the real sector production.¹⁰² Started in the early 1990s, Russo-Chinese scientific cooperation has been managed by a special inter-governmental Russian-Chinese Subcommittee on Scientific and Technical Cooperation, which set the foundation for institutional cooperation between the two countries. In 2000, the two parties signed a special Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China, which prioritized innovation as the driver of bilateral cooperation. By the end of the 1990s Russian and Chinese enterprises and research centers were involved in the realization of 79 joint projects in automation, new materials, biotechnologies, nuclear physics, space and communications, chemistry, cyber technologies, machinery, seismology, metallurgy, mining, and oceanography. The Russian Ministry of Industry and Science in 1995 sponsored the formation of the Russian-Chinese consortium "Center of Science and High Technologies," followed by the establishment of direct ties between Russian and Chinese institutions, which formed multiple centers of industrial and technological cooperation across China (such as the joint research center in Yantai, Shandong province, scientific parks in Jiuzhou, Zhejiang province, or Changchun, Jilin province). By the beginning of Xi's presidency, more than 30 institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences carried out scientific cooperation with various scientific organizations of China under interinstitutional direct agreements.¹⁰³

Funded by the two countries' governments, particularly by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research and the Chinese Foundation for Basic Research, the existing joint programs cover multifarious research interaction between institutions, academic exchanges, production of scientific equipment, and innovative products predominantly for the Chinese market, and the creation of joint technology parks to commercialize and implement the scientific developments of the two countries. Russia's most advanced technologies inherited from the Soviet times—in the areas of nuclear physics, astrophysics of high and ultrahigh energies, micro- and optoelectronics, powerful pulsed sources of x-ray and neutron radiation, the numerical solution of plasma physics problems, diamond synthesis, nanotechnologies, gyroclotron complex and sonar emitters and their software—

may successfully be used in China's military-industrial complex. Along with China's and Russia's participation in the development of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), the world's largest nuclear fusion reactor in Cadarache, France, China has advanced in the construction of its own Experimental Advanced Superconducting Tokamak project (HL-2M Tokamak), and some Russian sources report about China's success on the way toward a controlled thermonuclear reaction, which provides the opportunity to build a "pure hydrogen bomb" in the future.¹⁰⁴

One notable example is cooperation between Russia's academic and research institutions in Siberia and the Far East and China's northeastern provinces in the spheres of geology and geophysics, biological sciences, nuclear physics, aerodynamics, new materials, ecology, and chemistry of various directions. Among these joint projects, the most remarkable have been the study on semiconductor physics, composite solid electrolytes for fuel cells, formation of integral metal compounds, advance material and structural chemistry, applied mechanics, and geochemistry.¹⁰⁵ Chinese participants are active at the many annual scientific symposia and workshops, and even within specialized international conferences the parties convene separate Russo-Chinese workshops.¹⁰⁶ On August 26, 2020, Chinese Vice Premier Sun Chunlang confirmed that, during the Russian-Chinese Year of Science and Technology Innovation announced in 2020, the number of joint projects surpassed 1,000, showing the great potential for cooperation in science and technology innovation. At the opening ceremony of the Year, a road map for Russian-Chinese cooperation in the field of science, technology and innovation for the period 2020 to 2025 was signed.¹⁰⁷

Concluding Remarks

Overall, in the recent years, Russia has abandoned its previous role as a neutral onlooker of China's rise and accommodated the Chinese leadership. Commenting on the prospect of Moscow's alliance with China, Russian former foreign minister Igor Ivanov explains that China and Russia "enjoy flexibility in their decision making, avoid balancing against one another, promote their interaction in the form of new international regimes, favorable for both parties, [and] develop multi-layered partnership, addressing simultaneously security and development issues."¹⁰⁸ But clearly the two countries' bilateral relationship has grown from the energy-based to a geopolitical one—driving China and Russia toward economic complementarity and potentially mutual security commitments. Indeed, among the many facets of this renewed relationship between Moscow and Beijing, the regional and global security cooperation has gained utmost importance given the profound shifts in the international order over the last decades. While in the post-Cold war era Sino-Russian efforts in the security sphere were aimed to stabilize the post-Soviet space, secure peaceful environment for modernization, and address numerous non-traditional threats in Eurasia, today the policies of Moscow and Beijing have increasingly been driven by the revived logic of great power politics and anti-hegemonic balancing. Leaders in both countries often justify Russo-Chinese strategic closeness by the need to prevent the deterioration of the current international system dominated by the West.

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, it is risky to underestimate the increased role of security relations in the forming of this alignment. In order to make a judgment about the quality of an alliance, one should examine the major factors fueling such an alliance. The paper states that most of the aspects of this strategic partnership have become “securitized”—i.e., seen from the perspective of their national security. Tensions from the Ukraine War are spilling over into the Asia-Pacific and seem to be pulling China and Russia into deeper security cooperation. For example, a Chinese perspective views Japan as using the Ukraine Crisis to “exaggerate the ‘China threat,’ strengthen the Quad, build its own military and security cooperation with NATO, and instigate regional confrontation.”¹⁰⁹ Another recent Chinese analysis observes that “the US will use the [Ukraine] conflict to speed up the building of alliance and partner systems, especially the enhance ... military offensive capabilities...”¹¹⁰ On the Russian side, a sense of solidarity with China seems even more widespread. As one Russian strategist observed in mid-2022: “China and Russia went to war with the Western world. Each in their own way, but we have a lot in common. It cannot but be used for the common good.”¹¹¹ Such viewpoints serve to deepen security cooperation between the two countries enhances the alliance-type relationship.

The Ukraine War is a challenge for both countries. As noted above, many Western analysts contend that the stresses of the current Ukraine War could severely challenge the underlying premises of the current quasi-alliance that exists between Beijing and Moscow. They contend that the war has sullied Moscow’s prestige and presents Beijing with the possibility that Russia could become more of burden for China than a valued partner. They note that China has not stepped up with major material support for Russia in the conflict, and that many Chinese businesses have proven to quite risk averse when presented with the possibility of Western sanctions. While very much in the minority, there are still voices in both China and Russia that question the viability of the quasi-alliance.¹¹² It may be true that China is seeking a kind of “neutrality” with respect to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet, it is also widely recognized that this is a distinctly pro-Russian neutrality. Ali Wyne calls the Sino-Russian relationship is “kind of a paradox” which has grown stronger since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and which reflects the strengthening of strategic cooperation and a more strained mode of alignment simultaneously.¹¹³ Beijing stands to benefit from wider access to Russian resources, especially energy.¹¹⁴ Not surprisingly, China-Russia trade has witnessed a significant bump in the first half of the year 2022.¹¹⁵ After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leading Chinese academic experts on Russia are calling for Russian studies in China to be prioritized, since it has sometimes been neglected in the recent past.¹¹⁶ Others specialists in China, likewise, have defended the Kremlin’s invasion as a “strategic awakening” [战略觉醒] in response to NATO’s allegedly myriad provocations.¹¹⁷ No doubt, Beijing is buoyed by the fact that much of the Global South has refused to go along with Western sanctions against Russia. While there have been few signs of overt Chinese military aid to Russia, Chinese drones are now apparently a common site on Ukrainian battlefields.¹¹⁸

Russia’s catastrophic war in Ukraine continues and it is far from clear how this will end. While the China-Russia quasi-alliance seems to be strengthened by this test, there

clearly are costs to Beijing for adopting a relatively pro-Russian stance. The room for policy change in Western capitals seems quite limited, but one overall conclusion of this study is that increased Western pressure simultaneously on both Moscow and Beijing—even if somewhat justifiable when considering the maintenance of global norms—is nevertheless driving these Eurasian giants into an ever closer embrace as a consequence. Therefore, a prudent policy might strive for a “reset” with Beijing in order to stem that worrisome tendency, which could threaten the global balance of power. Further measures to stabilize a clearly explosive international security environment would be to revive arms control efforts, and even more obviously to engage diplomatically with both Beijing and also Moscow. After all, during the first Cold War, the US and Soviet Union always continued diplomatic talks and these were crucial to defusing numerous major crises. In the nuclear era, there is no option to shut down diplomatic channels – as seems to be the case at present – an obvious strategic error of massive proportions. Moreover, the US should act extremely cautiously in both the Ukraine situation and also with respect to the delicate Taiwan issue. Both of these crises concern the “core interests” of Russia and China—and therefore have the potential to result in catastrophic (nuclear) wars among the great powers. Creative diplomacy or “smart power” could alternatively be employed to lower global tensions. With China, this could mean energizing climate change diplomacy—on which Beijing has demonstrated considerable concern. Likewise, Russia could be drawn back into multilateral negotiations to support stability by reengaging with Kremlin on Arctic diplomacy and development—an area that Russia evidently has great enthusiasm for. In both cases, the goal should be to elevate issues that are non-zero sum, in order to reduce major tensions between the great powers.

There can be no doubt that Beijing’s diplomatic, organizational, and information support of Russia’s policies have become invaluable for Moscow. The very fact that Russia continues conducting joint exercises Vostok-2022 with China (along with other friendly militaries) demonstrates the degree of trust and coordination among these allies. Chinese military media continue to enthusiastically laud military cooperation activities with Russia in mid-2022.¹¹⁹ Moreover, there is little doubt that China will be striving to learn the military lessons of the war in Ukraine, so these lessons could help in honing Chinese military capabilities.¹²⁰ Russian military specialists talk more and more about the experience they can lend to the Chinese military in terms of planning large-scale military exercises and operations.¹²¹ They openly admit, moreover, that Russia benefits from US-China tensions over Taiwan.¹²² Russian military strategists have also recently been publicly praising Chinese military equipment, including tanks and artillery, implying the possibility that Russia could import some of these key items in the future.¹²³ China has pulled no punches when supporting Moscow on a rhetorical level, as when Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian critiqued the West as: “[those] that delude themselves into thinking that they can lord it over the world after winning the Cold War, those that keep driving NATO’s eastward expansion five times in disregard of other countries’ security concerns, and those that wage wars across the globe while accusing other countries of being belligerent.”¹²⁴

There is little reason to question the sincerity of such articulations by the Chinese leadership, since Beijing has had substantial bitterness toward the West going back well over a decade now. Xi himself appears to have an affinity for both Russia and for Putin—no small factor in the enduring quasi-alliance. Then, Beijing likely does not mind that China is, at least to some extent, out of the world headlines while Russia absorbs much of the attention of the global media. Meanwhile, Russian elites seem increasingly comfortable with the growing coziness between the two Eurasian giants.¹²⁵ In the end, they have little choice but to accommodate to the new geopolitical reality of China's ascendance and extraordinary influence. Chinese may continue to strive for neutrality, in some sense, but ultimately the CCP leadership envisages much harder times for its own strategic survival, should Russia collapse under the increasingly damaging pressures from the West.

Lyle Goldstein is the director of Asia engagement at Defense Priorities. Formerly, he served as a research professor at the US Naval War College for 20 years. In that post, he was awarded the Superior Civilian Service Medal for founding and leading the China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI). His main areas of expertise include both maritime security and nuclear security issues. Major focus areas have also recently included the Arctic, as well as the Korean Peninsula. He has published seven books on Chinese strategy, including *Meeting China Halfway* (Georgetown UP, 2015). He speaks both Chinese and Russian and is currently writing a book on China-Russia relations. He has a PhD from Princeton, an MA from Johns Hopkins SAIS, and a BA from Harvard.

Vitaly Kozyrev is a professor of political science and international studies at Endicott College in Beverly, Massachusetts and adjunct faculty at Northeastern University's College of Professional Studies. He is also affiliated with the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University as an associate in research. He has a PhD from Princeton University; an MA from Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS); and a BA from Harvard University.

Endnotes

1. "Wang Yi Presented 5 points of the Chinese Position Toward the Ukraine Issue" (王毅阐述中方对当前乌克兰问题的五点立场), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 26, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202202/t20220226_10645790.shtml.
2. Antonio Denti, Michael Martina, and Andrea Shalal, "US Raises Concerns About China Aligning with Russia at Meeting It Calls 'Intense,'" *Reuters*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-warn-china-perils-aiding-russia-rome-meet-2022-03-14/>.
3. "Ask the Experts: Will China and Russia Stay Aligned?," *Foreign Affairs*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2022-06-21/will-china-and-russia-stay-aligned>.

4. For background on the China-Russia relationship, see James Bellacqua, ed., *The Future of China-Russia Relations* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2010); Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order: National Identities, Bilateral Relations, and East Versus West in the 2010s* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2014); Douglas Schoen and Melik Kaylan, *The Russia-China Axis: The New Cold War and America's Crisis of Leadership* (New York: Encounter Books, 2014); Marcin Kaczmarski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order* (London: Routledge, 2015); Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World* (Australia: Penguin, 2017); Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018); Richard Ellings and Robbert Sutter, eds., *Axis of Authoritarians: Implications of China-Russia Cooperation* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2018); Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross, *China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Ed Pulford, *Mirrorlands: Russia, China, and Journeys in Between* (London: Hurst and Co., 2019).

5. Stephen Blank, "The Un-Holy Russo-Chinese Alliance," *Defense & Security Analysis* 36, no. 3 (2020): 249-274, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14751798.2020.1790805>; John S. Van Oudenaren, "America's Nightmare: The Sino-Russian entente," *National Interest*, January 12, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america%E2%80%99s-nightmare-sino-russian-entente-41447>; Paul Haenle and Ali Wyne, "The Paradox of the Russia-China Relationship," *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 18, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/08/18/paradox-of-russia-china-relationship-pub-87695>.

6. Jude Blanchette and Bonny Lin, "China's Ukraine Crisis: What Xi Gains—and Loses—From Backing Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-02-21/chinas-ukraine-crisis>.

7. Graham Allison, "Ukraine Crisis: Will China Have Putin's Back?" *National Interest*, February 25, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/ukraine-crisis-will-china-have-putin%E2%80%99s-back-200851>.

8. Yun Sun, "China's Strategic Assessment of Russia: More Complicated Than You Think," *War on the Rocks*, March 4, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-russia-more-complicated-than-you-think/>.

9. Odde Arne Westad, "The Next Sino-Russian Split: Beijing Will Ultimately Come to Regret Its Support of Moscow," *Foreign Affairs*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2022-04-05/next-sino-russian-split>.

10. Bobo Lo, "Turning Point? Putin, Xi and the Invasion of Ukraine," *Lowy Institute Analysis*, May 25, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/turning-point-putin-xi-and-russian-invasion-ukraine>.

11. Alexander Korolev, *China-Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022). He characterizes these relationships as developing gradually and evincing characteristics that can be allow classification as "early ... moderate ...and advanced" (p. 23). His model introduces "three balances" to help determine the intensity of a given bilateral relationship, including the "balance of power," the "balance of threat," and the "balance of interests" (p. 26). Moreover, he makes an innovative and intellectually rewarding check on his theoretical claims by comparing the Russia-China relationship to the budding US-India alignment (pp. 157-188). While this line of theorizing seems to be strongly rooted in the realist tradition, building on issues of power and interest, it is quite weak in considering history, identity, culture, and domestic politics. For major contributions relating to these vital theoretical issues related to China-Russia relations, see also Deborah W. Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (New London: Yale UP, 2019); and Karrie Koesel, Valerie Bunce, and Jessica Chen Weiss, eds., *Citizens & the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

12. Richard Sakwa, "The International System and the Clash of World Orders," in *Multipolarity*, ed. Peter W. Schulze (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2018), 31.
13. Joseph S. Nye, "Nuclear Deterrence After Ukraine," *Project Syndicate*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nuclear-deterrence-after-ukraine-by-joseph-s-nye-2022-03>.
14. James Palmer, "Did Russia Catch China Off Guard in Ukraine?" *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/02/china-russia-ukraine-invasion-surprise/>; Bonny Lin and Jude Blanchette, "China on the Offensive: How the Ukraine War Has Changed Beijing's Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, August 1, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-offensive>.
15. "War in Ukraine Forces a Rethink in Pentagon Planning," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/whats-news/war-in-ukraine-forces-a-rethink-in-pentagon-planning/ba166902-d6ce-40d5-9167-a5b11e70793f>; David Ochmanek, Peter A. Wilson, Brenna Allen, John Speed Meyers, and Carter C. Price, "US Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World: Rethinking the US Approach to Force Planning," RAND Corporation Report, 2017, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1782.html.
16. "Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessments and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission," The United States Institute of Peace, November 13, 2018. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/11/providing-common-defense>.
17. "Providing for the Common Defense."
18. See more details in: "China's Position on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Key Events and Statements from February 21, 2022, through August 17, 2022," US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, August 17, 2022, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-position-russias-invasion-ukraine>.
19. Oleg Varabanov, et al. "Life in the Crumbling World" (Олег Барабанов, Тимофей Бордачёв, Ярослав Лисоволик, Фёдор Лукьянов, Андрей Сушенцов, Иван Тимофеев. Жизнь в осыпающемся мире), Valdai Discussion Club Report, October 2018, <http://ru.valdaiclub.com/files/22596/>.
20. Thomas J. Christensen, "There Will Not Be a New Cold War: The Limits of US-Chinese Competition," *Foreign Affairs*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-03-24/there-will-not-be-new-cold-war>; Odd Arne Westad, "The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?" *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-08-12/sources-chinese-conduct>; Deborah Welch Larson, "The Return of Containment," *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/15/containment-russia-china-kennan-today/>.
21. "China's National Defense in the New Era," The State Council of the People's Republic of China, July 24, 2019: 3, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html.
22. Jin Canrong, "Interpretation of 'Major Changes Unseen in a Century', the Most Crucial Independent Variable for China or the World" (金灿荣: 解读“百年未有之大变局”, 中国或是世界变局最大的自变量), Observer (观察), October 16, 2020, https://www.guancha.cn/JinCanRong/2020_10_16_568238.shtml.
23. Sergey Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov, "A New World Order; A View from Russia," in *Multipolarity*, ed. Peter W. Schulze (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2018), 59.

24. Sergey Karaganov, “In This World Russia Must Be a Fortress” (В этом мире Россия должна быть крепостью), *The Expert Magazine*, March 1, 2021, <https://expert.ru/expert/2021/10/v-etom-mire-rossiya-dolzha-byt-krepostyu/>.
25. Serge Schmemmann, “Why Russia Believes It Cannot Lose the War in Ukraine,” *The New York Times*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/19/opinion/russia-ukraine-karaganov-interview.html>.
26. “Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the Development of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Collaboration in the New Era,” *Xinhua News*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.bilaterals.org/?joint-statement-of-the-people-s>.
27. Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, “China’s ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’: A G2 with Chinese Characteristics?,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July 2016): 773-794, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12656>.
28. “Xi Jinping Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022,” April 21, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202204/t20220421_10671083.html. Xi affirmed Beijing’s desire to “uphold the principle of indivisible security, build a balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture, and oppose the pursuit of one’s own security at the cost of others’ security; stay committed to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, support all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of crises, reject double standards, and oppose the wanton use of unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction.”
29. Zhao Huasheng and Andrey Kortunov, “The Coming Bipolarity and Its Implications: Views from China and Russia,” Russian International Affairs Council Policy Paper, November 23, 2020, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-coming-bipolarity-and-its-implications-views-from-china-and-russia/>.
30. “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” The President of the Russian Federation Official Website, February 4, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.
31. Dmitri Trenin, “Mapping Global Strategic Stability in the Twenty-First Century,” Russian International Affairs Council, November 1, 2018, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/comments/mapping-global-strategic-stability-in-the-twenty-first-century/>.
32. Jiang Tianjiao, “US Nuclear Deterrence Strategy in Action: Theory, History, and Reality” (江天娇, 美国实战威慑核战略: 理论、历史与现实), *International Security Studies* (国际安全研究) 2 (2021): 29.
33. Otto Dettmer, “The Disturbing New Relevance of Theories of Nuclear Deterrence,” *The Economist*, March 19, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2022/03/19/the-disturbing-new-relevance-of-theories-of-nuclear-deterrence>.
34. Barry Posen, “Hypotheses on the implications of the Ukraine-Russia war,” Defense Priorities, June 7, 2022, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/hypotheses-on-the-implications-of-the-ukraine-russia-war>.
35. Alexey G. Arbatov, “The Threats to Strategic Stability – Imagined and Real” (Арбатов А. Г. Угрозы стратегической стабильности – мнимые и реальные), *Polis: Political Studies*, no. 3 (2018): 7-29, <https://www.polistudies.ru/files/File/2018/3/Polis-2018-3-Arbatov.pdf>.

36. "DoD Official Outlines the 2022 National Defense Strategy," US Department of Defense, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2869837/dod-official-outlines-2022-national-defense-strategy-in-cn-as-forum/>; Patty-Jane Geller, "How the Upcoming Missile Defense Review Can Make America Safer," The Heritage Foundation, October 4, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/how-the-upcoming-missile-defense-review-can-make-america-safer>.
37. Yang Weimin, "Two-step" National Rejuvenation Roadmap: Timetable and Roadmap for Realizing the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" (杨伟民, 两步走" 国家复兴路线图: 实现中华民族伟大复兴的时间表、路线图), The Office of the Central Financial and Economic Leading Group, China Post Network, October 27, 2017, <http://zj.chinapost.com.cn/html1/report/171355/3634-1.htm>; and Takahiro Tsuchiya, "China Strengthens Its Economic Security," Japan Institute of International Affairs Report, May 12, 2021, <https://www.jiia.or.jp/en/column/2021/05/12-china-strengthens-its-economic-security.html>.
38. "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of May 13, 2017, No. 208, On the Strategy for the Economic Security of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030," The Russian Government Documents Database Garant-Service, May 15, 2017, <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/71572608/>.
39. Igor Ivanov, "Russia, China and the New World Order," Russian International Affairs Council, June 19, 2018, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-china-and-the-new-world-order/>.
40. "BRICS Working on New Global Reserve Currency and Alternative Mechanism for Int'l Payments: Vladimir Putin," *India Times*, June 23, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/brics-working-on-new-global-reserve-currency-and-alternative-mechanism-for-intl-payments-vladimir-putin/articleshow/92407851.cms>.
41. "President Xi Jinping's Message to The Davos Agenda in Full," The World Economic Forum, January 17, 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/01/address-chinese-president-xi-jinping-2022-world-economic-forum-virtual-sessionn/>.
42. Polina Ivanova, "Russia Prepares to Mobilize Economy for Longer War in Ukraine," *Financial Times*, July 7, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/fe233252-69fa-4259-8b35-a34d8738b968>; Alexander Gabuev, "China's New Vassal: How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow Into Beijing's Junior Partner," *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-new-vassal>.
43. "The Economist Called Currency Interventions with the Yuan One of the Reasons for the Weakening of the Ruble" [Экономист назвал валютные интервенции с юанем одной из причин ослабления рубля] *Izvestiya* [Известия], July 7, 2022, <https://iz.ru/1361222/2022-07-07/ekonomist-nazval-valiutnye-intervencii-s-uanem-odnoi-iz-prichin-oslableniia-rublia?ysclid=l7i9bgz3vq780759673>.
44. Korolev, *China-Russia Strategic Alignment*, 146.
45. See, for example, Vladimir Skosyrev, "Vietnam Helps Russia Reduce Dependence on China" (Вьетнам помогает России уменьшить зависимость от КНР), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, July 5, 2022, https://www.ng.ru/world/2022-07-05/6_8478_vietnam.html?ysclid=l7i9361ocf689412930; or Leonid Uvarchev, "Putin Discussed with Joko Widodo Transfer of Indonesian Capital, Flights to Bali and Supply of Fertilizers" (Путин обсудил с Джоко Видодо перенос столицы Индонезии, рейсы на Бали и поставку удобрений), *Kommersant*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5436768?ysclid=l7i9jegjoy973228163>.
46. Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge*, 178; 252.

47. Yan Xuetong, “Chinese Values vs. Liberalism: What Ideology Will Shape the International Normative Order?” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (2018): 1-22, <https://doi:10.1093/cjip/poy001>.
48. Alexey Evstafiev, “Culture and the Country’s National Security Threats” (Культура и угрозы национальной безопасности страны), The Research Center of the Problems of National Security, Moscow, February 27, 2021, <https://nic-pnb.ru/raboty-molodyx-uchyonyx/kultura-i-ugrozy-naczialnoy-bezopasnosti-strany/>.
49. “The Strategy of Cultural Policy of the Russian Federation Till 2030,” The Russian Government Documents Database Garant-Service, February 29, 2016, <https://base.garant.ru/71343400/>; and Elena Shjukina, “Contemporary Russia’s Cultural Security As the Element of National Security” (Культурная безопасность современной России как элемент национальной безопасности), *Federal and Municipality Governance*, Issue 3 (2015), <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/kulturnaya-bezopasnost-sovremennoy-rossii-kak-element-natsionalnoy-bezopasnosti/viewer>.
50. Jeremy Cliffe, “Putin’s War Risks a “Clash of Civilizations” – the West Must Not Fall Into His Trap,” *The New Statesman* (UK), March 23, 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/international-politics/geopolitics/2022/03/putins-war-risks-a-clash-of-civilisations-the-west-must-not-fall-into-his-trap>.
51. Han Shiyong, “The Views of Chinese and Russian Experts On the Formation of a Defense Alliance Between the Russian Federation and the PRC” (Взгляды китайских и российских экспертов по вопросу создания военного союза между РФ и КНР), *Problemy Dalnego Vostoka (Far Eastern Affairs)*, Issue 2 (2022): 111-122, <https://doi:10.31857/S013128120019581-0>.
52. “Full text of Xi’s Speech at SCO Samarkand Summit,” *Xinhua News*, September 16, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220916/bccf28f3bcd9442f9d501a8a07f067a7/c.html>.
53. See, for example, Yang Guanghai “Returning to the ‘Gray Zone’: A Policy Choice of America’s Strategic Competition with China” (杨光海, 重拾 ‘灰色地带’: 美国对华战略竞争的策略选择) *Peace and Development* (和平与发展) (February 2022): 41-55.
54. “Russia and China Prepared a Military Cooperation Roadmap for the Period of 2017-2020,” (Россия и Китай подготовили дорожную карту военного сотрудничества на 2017-2020 годы), Interfax News Agency, June 7, 2017, <http://www.interfax.ru/world/565589>; “Shoigu Proposed China to Fight Together,” (Шойгу предложил китайцам бороться вместе), *Gazeta.ru* online, June 7, 2017, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2017/06/07/10711685.shtml>.
55. “US Take Note: Chinese, Russian Militaries are Closer than You Think, China’s Defense Minister Says,” *The South China Morning Post*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2140301/us-take-note-chinese-russian-militaries-are-closer-you>.
56. Vladimir Putin, “Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club,” October 22, 2020, The Official Web Site of the President of the Russian Federation, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>.
57. Alexander Gabuev and Temur Umarov, “Emergency Rapprochement: How the Pandemic Strengthens Russia’s Dependency on China” (Экстренное сближение. Как пандемия усилит зависимость России от Китая), The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Moscow Center, April 27, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81633>.

58. Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia and China Sign Road Map for Closer Military Cooperation," *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-11-23/russia-china-sign-roadmap-for-closer-military-cooperation>.
59. Hu Gaochen, "An Analysis of China-US Asymmetric Nuclear Stability and US Strategic Opportunism" (胡高辰, 中美不对称核稳定与美国战略机会主义论析), *Chinese Foreign Policy* (中国外交) (May 2021): 71; and Zhou Wei, "An Analysis of Tendencies in Russia's Development of Tactical Nuclear Missiles" (周伟, 俄罗斯战术核导弹发展特点分析) *Naval and Merchant Ships* (舰船知识) (August 2020): 47-52.
60. "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," The President of the Russian Federation Official Website, February 4, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.
61. During Putin's visit to Beijing on June 25, 2016, the packet of joint declarations on the international order and global strategic stability was signed by the leaders of the two countries. These documents included the Joint Declaration of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation; Joint Declaration on the Strengthening of Global Strategic Stability; and Joint Declaration on Cooperation in the Development of the Information Space. See: "Press statements following Russian-Chinese talks," The Official Web Site of the President of the Russian Federation, June 25, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/52273>; and "China, Russia Sign Joint Statement on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability," *Xinhua News*, June 26, 2016, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/32618/Document/1481826/1481826.htm>.
62. "Full text of the Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the 20th Anniversary of the Signing of the Treaty on Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation," *Xinhua News*, June 28, 2021, http://russian.news.cn/2021-06/29/c_1310032875.htm.
63. Denis A. Degterev, "Multipolar World Order: Old Myths and New Realities," *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2019): 404-419, <http://journals.rudn.ru/international-relations/article/view/22590/17656>.
64. "Full text of the Joint Statement," June 28, 2021.
65. "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China." February 4, 2022.
66. "Russian-Chinese Dialog: Model 2021," (Российско-китайский диалог: модель 2021), *Russian International Affairs Council Special Report*, no. 70 (2021): 5, <https://russiacouncil.ru/papers/Russia-China-2021-Report70.pdf>.
67. Igor Denisov and Alexander Lukin, "Correction and Hedging: Twenty Years of the 'Big Treaty' and the Evolution of Russo-Chinese Relations," *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 4 (July-August 2021) (in Russian), published online July 1, 2021, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/korrekcziya-i-hedzhirovanie/?fbclid=IwAR0g-YD9hI5n9tpaVpk69s5r5GmsbQn1SzDIlhWBxb-WL8vYhgFZNVEr7Bs>.
68. Alexander Korolev, "Beyond the Nominal and the Ad Hoc: The Substance and Drivers of China-Russia Military Cooperation," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 1 (2018): 28.

69. Sergey G. Luzyanin and Vassily B. Kashin, “New Dimensions of Strategic and Military-Political Partnership between Russia and China, Model 2017-2022” (Новые измерения стратегического и военно-политического партнерства РФ и КНР. Модель 2017 – 2022), IFES-RAS Report, http://www.ifes-ras.ru/images/stories/2018/report_2018-luzyanin-kashin.pdf; and “If Russia Goes to War with NATO, Will China help? The Joint Statement Has the Answer!,” *Tencent News* (俄罗斯如果与北约开战，中国是否会帮忙？联合声明已给出答案), February 7, 2022, https://view.inews.qq.com/a/20220207A07FSX00?startextras=0_a2f8a6b3b1354&from=ampzkw.
70. David Sacks, “What Is China Learning from Russia’s War in Ukraine?,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-05-16/what-china-learning-russias-war-ukraine>.
71. See, for example, Ou Yi, “Expose and Criticize Pelosi’s Farce on Stage, Russia Stands Firm” (欧诒，揭批佩洛西窜台闹剧，俄罗斯坚定站了出来), *Global Times* (环球时报), August 6, 2022, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/4983Pog7APm>.
72. Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, “Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership,” Center for a New American Security, January 14, 2021, 6-9, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/navigating-the-deepening-russia-china-partnership>; Lyle J. Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev, “China-Russia Military Cooperation and the Emergent US-China Rivalry: Implications and Recommendations for US National Security,” *Journal of Peace and War Studies* (2020): 24-48, <https://www.norwich.edu/pawc/journal/2767-2020-second-edition-journal-of-peace-and-war-studies>.
73. “Details of China’s Heavy Lift Helicopter Exposed” (中国被露重型直升机细节), *Weapon* (兵器), no. 274 (March 2022): 11.
74. On Russia’s purchase of Chinese marine engines, see Korolev, *China-Russia Strategic Alignment*, 77.
75. “China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, January 11, 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1429771.shtml.
76. “China Invited Roskosmos to Create a Satellite Constellation,” Cableman, September 7, 2018, <https://www.cableman.ru/content/kitai-predlozhit-roskosmosu-sozdat-sputnikovuyu-gruppirovku>.
77. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Challenges to Security in Space* (January 2019), 3, 14-16, 23-25, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1082341.pdf>.
78. “The General Staff Assessed the US Ability to Launch a Nuclear Strike On Russia” (В Генштабе оценили возможности США нанести ядерный удар по России), *Izvestia.ru*, April 24, 2019, <https://iz.ru/871898/2019-04-24/v-genshtabe-otcenili-vozmozhnosti-ssha-nanesti-iadernyi-udar-po-rossii>.
79. “General Staff,” 18, 20.
80. *Challenges to Security in Space*, 24; and Evgeny Devyatyarov and Nikolai Surkov, “Russia and China Establish a Unified System of Satellite Surveillance System,” (Россия и Китай создают объединенную систему спутниковой навигации), *Izvestia.ru*, March 28, 2018, retrieved from <https://iz.ru/722968/evgenii-deviatyarov-nikolai-surkov/rossiia-i-kitai-sozdaiut-obedinennuiu-sistemu-sputnikovoi-navigacii>.
81. Edward White and Eleanor Olcott, “Elon Musk’s Starlink Aid to Ukraine Triggers Scrutiny in China over US Military Links,” *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/df032357-51e7-4635-baaa-f053dcc0c4c1>.

82. Evan S. Medeiros, "China's Strategic Straddle: Analyzing Beijing's Diplomatic Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *China Leadership Monitor*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.prcleader.org/medeiros-1>.
83. Vasily Kashin, "Selling S-400s to China: A New Front in the Cold War?," The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Moscow Office, April 27, 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=59908>.
84. Vasily Kashin, "Why Is China Buying Russian Fighter Jets?," The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Moscow Office, September 2, 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=62701>.
85. Medeiros, op. cit.
86. "Russia and China Prepared a Military Cooperation Roadmap for the Period of 2017-2020" (Россия и Китай подготовили дорожную карту военного сотрудничества на 2017-2020 годы), Interfax News Agency, June 7, 2017, <http://www.interfax.ru/world/565589>; see also: "Shoygu Proposed China to Fight Together" (Шойгу предложил китайцам бороться вместе), *Gazeta.ru* online, June 7, 2017, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2017/06/07/10711685.shtml>.
87. "Russia, China Sign Roadmap for Closer Military Cooperation," *Military Times*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2021/11/24/russia-china-sign-roadmap-for-closer-military-cooperation/>.
88. "Russia and China: Cooperation in a New Era" (Пятая международная конференция «Россия и Китай: сотрудничество в новую эпоху»), Fifth International Conference, Moscow, May 29-30, 2019, 40, <https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Conference-Report-RUCN2019-ru.pdf>.
89. "The National Security Law of the PRC" (中华人民共和国国家安全法), China's Defense Ministry Network (国防部网), July 1, 2015, http://www.81.cn/2017gjaqjyr/2017-04/07/content_7553456.htm. Article 15 of the "National Security Law promulgates that "the state builds a network and information security assurance system...strengthen network management..., and...safeguard national cyberspace sovereignty, security and development interests"; and Alexander Isaev, "Russian-Chinese Interaction on Information Security Problems," (Российско-китайское взаимодействие по вопросам обеспечения информационной безопасности), in *China in Global and Regional Politics: History and Present Times* (Китай в мировой и региональной политике. История и современность) (Moscow: Institute of Far Eastern Affairs, the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2018), 205, http://www.ifes-ras.ru/online-library/book/12-kit-polit/340-kitmir_2018_v23.
90. Chen Wei, "Legal Update: China's Cybersecurity Law," The AmCham China, December 7, 2016, <https://www.amchamchina.org/news/legal-update-chinas-cybersecurity-law>.
91. Larisa P. Zveryanskaya, "Institutional and Legal Support for International and National Information Security: Experience of the People's Republic of China" (Зверьянская Л.П. Организационно-правовое обеспечение международной и национальной информационной безопасности: опыт Китайской Народной Республики), *Proceedings of the Institute of State and Law of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 12, no. 5 (2017): 196-214.
92. "International Strategy of Cooperation on Cyberspace," March 1, 2017, *Xinhua News*, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2017-03/01/c_136094371_4.htm.
93. Alexandra Kulikova, "China-Russia Cyber-Security Pact: Should the US be concerned?" *Russia-Direct*, May 21, 2015, <https://russia-direct.org/analysis/china-russia-cyber-security-pact-should-us-be-concerned>.

94. “Will Be Friends Between Domains: Moscow and Beijing are Ready to Jointly Confront Cyber Threats” (Будем дружить доменами: Москва и Пекин готовы вместе противостоять киберугрозам), *Kommersant*, May 7, 2015, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2723155>.
95. “Dmitry Medvedev Meets Heads of Russian and Chinese IT-Companies” (Встреча Дмитрия Медведева с руководителями российских и китайских IT-компаний), Official Website of the Government of the Russian Federation, December 16, 2015, <http://government.ru/news/21076/>.
96. Isaev, “Russian-Chinese Interaction,” 234-235.
97. Isaev, 236.
98. “Cyber-Attacks: Is China Giving Russia a Helping Hand?” Talion (blog), <https://talion.net/blog/cyber-attacks-is-china-giving-russia-a-helping-hand/>.
99. Isaev, “Russian-Chinese Interaction,” 235.
100. Brian Spegele, “Chinese Firms Are Selling Russia Goods Its Military Needs to Keep Fighting in Ukraine,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinese-firms-are-selling-russia-goods-its-military-needs-to-keep-fighting-in-ukraine-11657877403>.
101. “China Appraised Russia’s Maneuver in the Microchip Industry, Appreciated Even in the US” (В Китае восхитились маневром России с микропроцессорами, которые одобрили даже США), The Southern Federal Region Official Portal, December 30, 2021, <https://u-f.ru/news/economics/u25711/2021/12/30/328618>.
102. Pavel B. Kamennov, “Russo-Chinese Scientific and Technical Cooperation” (П.Б. Каменнов, Российско-китайское научно-техническое сотрудничество), *Problemy Dalnego Vostoka (Far Eastern Affairs)*, no. 5 (2017): 82.
103. “Cooperation Between the Russian Academy of Sciences and National Academic and Research Centers in Foreign Countries” (Сотрудничество Российской Академии Наук с национальными академиями и научными центрами зарубежных стран), Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, <http://www.ras.ru/about/cooperation/internationalcooperation4.aspx>.
104. Hannah Osborne, “China Is About To Fire Up Its ‘Artificial Sun’ In Quest For Fusion Energy,” *Newsweek*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-about-fire-its-artificial-sun-quest-fusion-energy-1477705>; and “China’s Z-Machine: Research at the Epicenter of Nuclear Explosion” (Китайская Z-машина: Исследования в эпицентре термоядерного взрыва), *Military Review (Военное Обозрение)*, December 18, 2018, <https://topwar.ru/151417-kitajskaja-z-mashina-issledovanija-v-jepicentre-termojadernogo-vzryva.html>.
105. Vladimir I. Syryamkin, B. Yan, and Elena V. Vaganova, “Interaction Between the Russian Association of Siberian and Far Eastern Cities and China’s Northeastern Provinces as an Example of Regional Cooperation with China” (В. И. Сырямкин, Б. Янь, Е. В. Ваганова, Опыт регионального сотрудничества с Китаем на примере взаимодействия Ассоциации Сибирских и Дальневосточных Городов и северо-восточных провинций Китая), *Problems of Audit and Finances (Проблемы Учета и Финансов)*, no. 3 (2011): 51-52, <http://journals.tsu.ru/uploads/import/961/files/03-049.pdf>.

106. Examples may be found in the conference agendas of this year's scheduled conferences such as the Russian-Chinese symposium on Organoelement Chemistry between the A.N. Nesmeyanov Institute of Organoelement Compounds of Russian Academy of Sciences and its Chinese partners at Nankai University in Tienjin, <https://ineos.ac.ru/conferences/rossijsko-kitajskij-simpozium>; or between the Nikolaev Institute of Inorganic Chemistry in Novosibirsk and its Chinese partners, <http://www.niic.nsc.ru/institute/conferences-inx/826-conferences-2020/2900-13-symposium>.
107. Valery Rubín, "China's Strategic Interests – A Threat for Russia?" (Валерий Рубин. Стратегические интересы Китая – угроза для России?), *Military-Industrial Courier*, September 30, 2020, https://vprk.name/news/449157_strategicheskie_interesy_kitaya_ugroza_dlya_rossii.html.
108. "Russia and China: New Partnership in a Changing World," (Конференция «Россия и Китай: новое партнерство в меняющемся мире»), *Lenta.ru*, May 29, 2015, <https://lenta.ru/video/2015/05/29/russiachina/>.
109. Wang Shan, "Japan's Strategic Consideration in its Response to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict" (王珊, 日本应对俄乌冲突的举措及战略构想), *Contemporary International Relations* (现代国际关系), no. 6 (2022): 20, <https://www.cnkan.com/567313.html>.
110. Zhao Minghao, "An Analysis of the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on China-US Relations" (赵明昊, 俄乌冲突对中美关系的影响论析), *Peace and Development* (和平与发展) 3, no. 22: 1, <https://iis.fudan.edu.cn/e9/c4/c6852a453060/page.htm>.
111. Roman Skomorokhov, "China: Already at War" (Китай: Уже на Войне), *Military Review* (Военное Обозрение), July 14, 2022, <https://topwar.ru/198885-kitaj-uzhe-na-vojne.html?ysclid=l7i9spzrfo140119772>.
112. See, for example, Wen Min, "The Soviet Union's Border Strategy with China after the Secret 1969 Zhenbao Island Incident" (闻敏, 秘密1969年珍宝岛事件后苏联对华边境战略), *Ordnance Science and Technology* (兵工科技), no. 10 (2022): 120-123.
113. Paul Haenle and Ali Wyne, "The Paradox of the Russia-China Relationship," The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 18, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/08/18/paradox-of-russia-china-relationship-pub-87695>.
114. See, for example, Irina Slav, "China Plans to Take Advantage Of The Big Oil Exodus From Russia," *Oilprice.com*, March 10, 2022, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/China-Plans-To-Take-Advantage-Of-The-Big-Oil-Exodus-From-Russia.html>.
115. "Russia's China Trade Up 28.7% In Q1 2022," *Russia Briefing*, Apr 18, 2022, <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/russia-s-china-trade-up-28-7-in-q1-2022.html/>.
116. Zhao Kejin, "Contemporary Russian Studies: Core Issues, Paradigm Evolution and Development Trends" (赵可金, 当代俄罗斯研究的核心问题范式演变与发展趋势), *Russian Studies* (俄罗斯研究), no. 2 (Apr 2022): 20-21, <https://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotal-ELSY202202002.htm>.
117. Wu Wencheng, "From the Kosovo War to the Ukraine Crisis: NATO's Eastward Expansion and Russia's 'Strategic Awakening'" (吴文成, 从科索沃战争到乌克兰危机: 北约东扩与俄罗斯'战略觉醒'), *Russian, East European, & Central Asian Studies* (俄罗斯东欧中亚研究) 246, no. 3 (2022): 1, http://www.oymj-oys.org/UploadFile/Issue/201605310001/2022/6//20220601054943WU_FILE_0.pdf

118. Anton Troianovski, “Drone. Crutches. Potatoes. Russians Crowdfund their Army,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/28/world/europe/russian-soldiers-military-supplies.html>.

119. See, for example, coverage in CCTV7, Military Report (军事报道), July 25, 2022.

120. Indeed, Chinese military media are now full of such analyses. See, for example, Feng Jian, “The Importance of Helicopter Self-Defense Jamming System Viewed from the Russian-Ukrainian War” (冯健, 从俄乌战争看直升机自卫干扰系统的重要性), *Ordnance Industry Science Technology* (兵工科技), May 2022: 70-72.

121. “The Great Game” (Большая Игра), Channel 1 (Первый Канал), August 30, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCQfg7s05Nk&list=PL8vSwHqVh6ObT7YDZIAWqFZ7IgzWvArnQ&index=48>.

122. See, for example, Ilya Polonsky, “Due to Pelosi’s Likely Visit to Taiwan, China Began the Transfer of Military Equipment to the Coast” (Из-за вероятного визита Пелоси на Тайвань Китай начал переброску военной техники к побережью), *Military Review* (Военное Обозрение), July 30, 2022, <https://topwar.ru/199703-iz-za-verojatnogo-vizita-pelosi-na-tajvan-kitaj-nachal-perebrosku-voennoj-tehniki-k-poberezhju.html?ysclid=I7i8svt1if191934785>; or “The Great Game” (Большая Игра), Channel 1 (Первый Канал), August 2, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

Not Your Father's Disinformation: Emerging Technology, Social Media Advances, and the Growth of Smart Disinformation

Mary Manjikian

Abstract: Recent technological advances empower organizations engaged in online disinformation in new and unpredictable ways. Contemporary disinformation techniques share common ground with classic disinformation—in terms of goals, methods, and their role in more extensive subversion campaigns. However, today's disinformation techniques differ in the volume of information produced, the speed at which it is produced, and the degree of customization that is carried out, as themes are targeted to appeal to specific “customer bases.” In addition, disinformation is adjusted based on the responses received. Comparing the 1980 AIDS disinformation campaign known as Operation Denver and the recent COVID disinformation campaign highlights differences between new and old disinformation strategies and tactics.

Keywords: Emerging technology; disinformation; cyberwarfare; grey zone conflict; hybrid war.

Introduction

Even before the advent of social media, Russia and its intelligence services were highly skilled practitioners of the intelligence tradecraft known as disinformation; Russia carried out active measures or political warfare characterized by disinformation, propaganda, deception, sabotage, destabilization, subversion, and espionage, both in the past and present. Indeed, the definition of disinformation, which appears in the 1972 classified KGB Dictionary, is still just as valid today. In that publication, disinformation data was described as “especially prepared data, used for the creation, in the mind of the enemy, of incorrect or imaginary pictures of reality, on the basis of which the enemy would make decisions beneficial to the Soviet Union.”¹

But how does today's disinformation differ from that used in the past? This paper aims to demonstrate how disinformation today is fundamentally different from what has been in the past—mainly due to the changes in communications resulting from emerging technologies. Disinformation has always represented part of a larger strategy of covert intelligence operations aimed at influencing the outcomes of specific events (like elections)—as well as undermining public support for adversary governments.² However, current Russian disinformation efforts include a larger number of actors—including public organizations, private institutions, and even organized crime—which are utilized in laundering money and purchasing accounts for the creation of deceptive online identities, including both false persons and automated bots.³

In addition, while intelligence service branches have always coordinated with each other to seek common goals—with intelligence collectors, for example, sharing information

about the targets of disinformation campaigns and the likelihood that certain themes might be picked up and amplified by a key audience—this task has been facilitated by the creation of vast troves of open source intelligence, including social media intelligence. Identifying targets and tailoring themes to specific audiences is now easier than ever, since gathering information about audiences no longer requires the same degree of expensive or extensive intelligence collection.⁴ For example, analysis by Stephen McCombie et al. of Russian election hacking prior to the 2016 presidential election shows that the use of technologies like geofencing, which allows the targeting of online messaging to specific zip codes and areas, meant that voters in swing states were more likely to be the target of this messaging than those in states where the election was less contested.⁵ In this way, disinformation resources are deployed more efficiently, rendering disinformation operations more efficient as well.

In addition, today, troll farms have been enlisted to engage in activities like answering online polls and swaying the results. Posing as legitimate respondents, they can misrepresent public opinion and influence others who might see their opinions or desires reflected in these polls. Here, for example, David Goie points to an online Twitter poll established by a critic of British Prime Minister Theresa May and later analyzed by the Atlantic Council.⁶ In this way, current disinformation campaigns can be seen as less static and more interactive than previous campaigns.

Goie, therefore, describes disinformation today as part of a more extensive “suite” of complex active measures—in which states can both amplify key themes through social media engineering as well as engaging in more overtly aggressive activities such as taking down or defacing platforms offering alternate information, seamlessly integrating disinformation into a larger cyberwar agenda. In this way, disinformation today can be seen to exist as both an offensive and a defensive activity.⁷

At the same time, there are more channels available to those wishing to “seed” disinformation themes. These channels include covert methods like the use of chat forums found on the dark web as an initial ground for testing and seeding themes, which will be more widely disseminated later. For this reason, the task of those engaged in “counter subversion” is complicated—it may be harder to find the source or sources of disinformation, and the weaponized information may be more effective at hitting its target and causing a behavioral change.⁸

In addition, one of emerging technology’s critical characteristics is its unpredictability. Therefore, we should ask how technology evolves and how disinformation practices might evolve. The term “affordances” refers to the qualities or properties of an object that define or constrain its possible uses. (For example, solid material is more likely to be used to make tools, while a more flexible or soft material might be used to create other objects that require shaping. A sharp object may be used to stab one’s opponents more efficiently than a liquid object.)

Considering how disinformation practices are carried out, particularly on social media platforms, it becomes clear that today's information environment contains affordances that empower different actors. In addition, social media today operates at a different speed and makes certain possible types of actions that were not possible in the days of newspapers and printing presses. Disinformation 2.0 is characterized by greater interactivity between the target and the attacker, more transparency for attackers regarding the responses received as a disinformation campaign, and the ability to constantly reshape the environment where interactions occur, refining narratives and segmenting them for different audiences.

This paper considers Operation Denver, a Soviet attempt to sow disinformation in Africa during the 1980s AIDS crisis. We then discuss the affordances provided to disinformation creators by today's emerging technologies. Finally, we compare the contemporary information campaigns about COVID-19 to show how they differ from traditional medical disinformation campaigns like Operation Denver.

Operation Denver: Disinformation 1.0

In the early 1980s, the KGB conducted a successful disinformation campaign coordinated with the state-owned Novosti Press Agency. This campaign sought to undermine African support for US foreign policy initiatives by alleging that the AIDS virus was a biological weapon created by the US government.⁹ It began with placing an article in an Indian print newspaper, *The Patriot*, in 1983. *The Patriot* was a news source supported by the Soviet KGB through advertisements, beginning in 1962. (That is, the infrastructure needed to support the 1983 disinformation campaign had been created a full twenty years previously.)

In 1983, *The Patriot* ran an article quoting an anonymous scientist who alleged that the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Pentagon (through its Center for Biological Warfare at Fort Detrick, Maryland) had worked together to weaponize an African virus which eventually became the AIDS virus. A Soviet KGB agent placed the article, seeking to have its content disseminated widely beyond the original story. The placement of a story in the Indian newspaper created distance from its source—in the Soviet Union—and conferred journalistic credibility. The story was then picked up by other news outlets in the Indian subcontinent and eventually in Africa. The campaign was carried out mainly by official government actors—including the Soviet KGB, in coordination with actors like the East European Stasi.¹⁰

Russia and its allies were limited in the number of simultaneous disinformation campaigns they could carry out in the 1980s since each campaign required establishing an expensive infrastructure (of false newspapers, etc.) that took time to build and needed to be managed by professional intelligence agents. In his analysis of Soviet disinformation, Max Holland notes that even at its height, the Soviet disinformation machine may have

produced between 300 to 400 disinformation “products” per year. Each product required a significant investment of human resources and funds compared to the large volume of disinformation produced today.

In his analysis, Holland also describes how the Soviet intelligence services coordinated with those throughout the Eastern Bloc in finetuning and producing targeted disinformation. However, the timeline for producing these products involved yearly meetings and five-year plans—compared to today’s lightning-speed responses!¹¹ In one example, he describes Soviet efforts to circulate a fake *Newsweek* magazine with incriminating information about then-President John F. Kennedy. However, President Kennedy was assassinated in the month the magazine was circulated. The campaign was relaunched with new materials, which occurred one month later. Today, such a relaunch might occur in hours or even mere minutes.

In contrast to events today, the 1983 events can be described as scattershot—as a specific audience was not identified, nor was it possible to target the disinformation toward only a select group of readers. Finally, the campaign operated linearly. The information was “seeded” (placed in a newspaper abroad), “copied” to other sources in other nations, and amplified as it reappeared in other sources.¹²

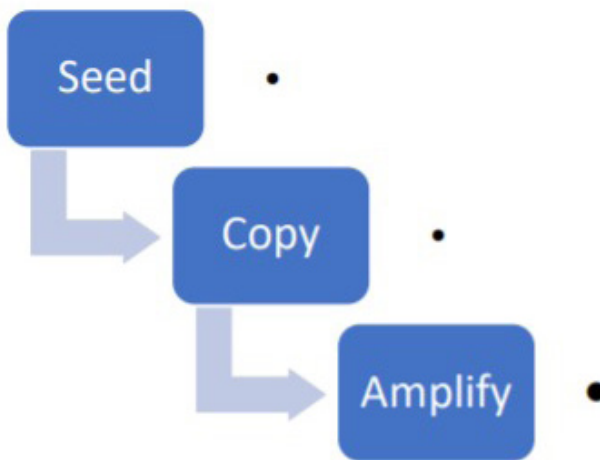


Figure 1: Traditional Disinformation Process

Disinformation 2.0 Today

In contrast to the environment for Operation Denver, today’s online information environment is characterized by several key features. First, platforms (and the information collected on platforms) are dynamic and connected. Information (including user information) can be easily moved from one platform to another through practices like retweeting a narrative, aggregating user information through application programming interfaces (API) or constructing data pipelines between platforms.¹³ The information does not simply exist in one location; it is siloed and only available to a discrete set of users.

Instead, information easily transfers across systems and borders. And users can be tracked across information platforms through customer relations management (CRM) software programs. As a result, an individual can be targeted multiple times using various methods. In this new environment, the attack surface is more significant than ever before—since there is more information available to people and more information available to manipulate.

Next, a disinformation operative no longer has to construct his platform by, for example, acquiring a newspaper. Instead, narratives can be served upon preexisting platforms for which others bear the cost of construction and maintenance. At the same time, their entrance as actors on these platforms is often cost-free or minimal. To establish credibility as an actor, one must merely purchase a domain name or establish an account. There are significantly fewer barriers to entry for disinformation actors operating in cyberspace today.

Furthermore, today's disinformation environment is both dynamic and opaque. The opaque nature of the social media environment means one is not always entirely clear with whom one interacts. In this new environment, individual and corporate users may change their identities, and site references may also change their identities. As a result, it is difficult to ascertain the social media environment's topography. Furthermore, it is much more difficult to gauge the credibility of an online source. Knowledge production is democratized in today's new environment, flattening the hierarchy. Anyone in the environment can function as a knowledge producer. Simon Springer describes a "new epistemology" in which users often assume that all the information they encounter is equally valid and no sources enjoy the unique epistemic privilege.¹⁴

The velocity at which information travels across and between platforms today also means that disinformation actions can occur much faster. In this new environment, offensive players appear to have an advantage since they reach their audience first and then describe the consumer's reality. It is, therefore, more challenging for counter-propagandists to undo these established and entrenched narratives. Furthermore, it is harder for defenders to interpolate Russia's strategy and track it in this rapidly moving environment since a strategy may be dynamic or quickly changing and can be conducted on multiple fronts.

Finally, individual users are more willing to outsource information-seeking activities (e.g., conducting a Google search) to entities—like Alexa or Siri. Information seeking may be automated, and one cannot properly speak of an empowered information consumer.

As noted earlier, affordances refer to a material or tool's characteristics and the types of activities conducted using this tool as a result. In thinking about the affordances associated with the opaque, dynamic, and non-hierarchical online information environment, it becomes clear that some activities become more complex while others become easier. What activities can occur, and what do they mean to develop Disinformation 2.0?

Disinformation 2.0: Target Acquisition

One set of actions that differs markedly between Disinformation 1.0 and Disinformation 2.0 is the target acquisition process. The new disinformation environment allows for “reader” and “publisher” interactions that were impossible in a material, printed newspaper world. Traditionally, information was disseminated hierarchically, and readers were essentially information consumers. Today, in contrast, the audience or readers can speak back to the news, participate in the process of disseminating news, and participate in the co-creation of news and narratives. Users are not merely targets; instead, they are “co-authors” or “force multipliers” since they can react to narratives by upvoting and downvoting them, adding to the narrative, or sharing it with their network.¹⁵

While traditional disinformation practices sought to acquire a static asset (like a newspaper) and the static audience that followed this asset, disinformation merchants today seek to utilize a prebuilt or preexisting static asset—to acquire or co-opt an engaged audience. This audience comprises preexisting interest groups and influencers who can be deployed to disseminate a narrative while lending their credibility to it, imbuing it with additional authority and credibility. Since this strategy rests on targeting and acquiring dynamic users rather than a static target, any defense strategy against disinformation must consider what adversarial actors themselves do, the audiences they target, and the response they seek to elicit.

In addition, the ability to track followers in the online environment allows today’s disinformation merchants to access a much greater universe of data regarding the audience (or audiences) they are reaching. The availability of metadata allows adversarial actors to carry out new, highly sophisticated activities, including data market segmentation and predictive analytics, to better target and manipulate data themes and campaigns. By subscribing to software as a service (SaaS) tools—such as customer relations management software—disinformation actors can easily collect data, such as how long a visitor spends on a site; demographics associated with active site users; which types of users are most likely to like, forward, or share a post; what other platforms visitors are coming from; where in the country they are located; and the time of day and frequency of unique visits to the site. Visitors can quickly be sorted into categories to include highly engaged users, less engaged users, and those who are influencers. Today, user data can be targeted in granular ways—using techniques like geofencing.

Disinformation 2.0: Customized and Granular

While Disinformation 1.0 was “diffuse,” Disinformation 2.0 is granular. Open-source information, such as public opinion data, can identify a specific audience—such as those who believe in other conspiracy theories—to target a particular narrative toward them. One can understand a group’s perceptions and then use media manipulation to exploit the difference between perception and reality, shaping an alternate reality that they are the most likely to believe.¹⁶

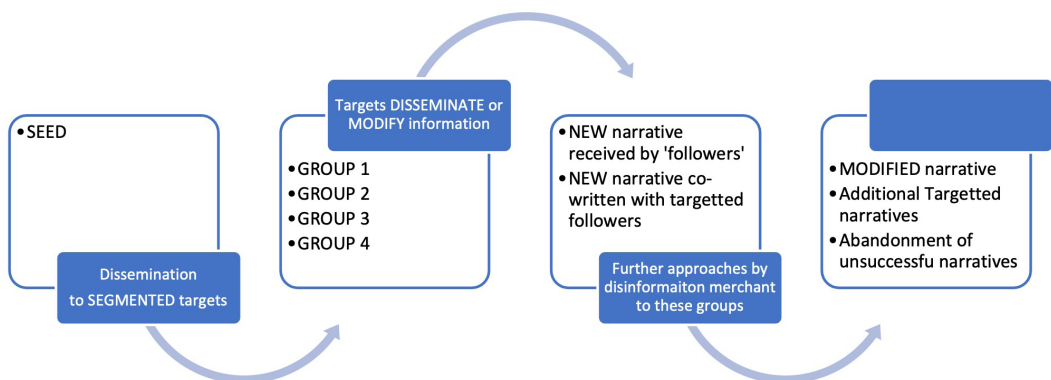
Due to the dynamic nature of today's online media environment, the strategic advantage or the ability to win market share is naturally granted to the individual or group that can act most quickly. Large government organizations with hierarchies and budgets have no inherent advantage in such an environment. Instead, lithe, agile organizations have the advantage.¹⁷ Such groups can better retool in response to information about environmental changes quickly. For this reason, Russia and China have outsourced much of their disinformation activity, setting up multiple public and private groups, some specializing in particular narratives or types of disinformation.

Disinformation 2.0: Iterative

At the same time, while Disinformation 1.0's messaging was singular, Disinformation 2.0 is iterative. A particular target or target group may receive multiple messages through multiple channels (an SMS on their phone due to filling out a form or petition, a tweet, a targeted ad on Facebook, or an email, for example). Using the same technology that a political candidate might use to solicit donations or to encourage someone to vote, or which your university might use to solicit an alumni donation, a malicious actor in cyberspace might seek to recruit an individual into an extremist group or encourage an individual to adopt a conspiracy theory or further disseminate this information. The software can be used to carry out a "campaign" (or series of messaging opportunities) to bring a "prospect" along on a "customer journey"—to sell them anything from a new pair of sneakers to the realization that they should participate in an insurgency against their government.

The lack of a hierarchy, barriers to entry, and the ability to share information across platforms mean that actors can conduct coordinated campaigns using multiple attack vectors. Multiple actors can pursue an objective simultaneously, as illustrated in examining Russian disinformation activities regarding COVID-19. Here, public relations firms, government, contractors, think tanks, journalists, and academics worked together to fine-tune the package of narratives utilized to undermine international confidence in US vaccine and public health measures.¹⁸

The graphic explanation of Disinformation 2.0 might therefore be pictured as follows:



One final affordance of the online environment that must be considered is how increasingly computer usage is becoming democratized. While previously, only people with PhDs in computer sciences and mathematics could put together a sophisticated predictive model that relied upon machine learning and algorithms. However, programs like IBM's Watson and Salesforce's Einstein are increasingly making these tasks accessible to anyone with a computer. The availability of off-the-shelf SaaS packages—often designed for other activities, like sales—allows disinformation merchants to adjust better the “product” they are selling. In this way, CRM software is a dual-use technology that can be activated for civilian and military use. The same database programs that can track which users have “liked” a new type of tennis shoe to send them a coupon via email or place a targeted ad on their Facebook page can also be used to “sell” users a political candidate or a disinformation theme.

CRM SaaS programs are being used to aid the dissemination of online disinformation in several ways. They can increase the efficiency or “hit rate” of online disinformation, mainly targeted at specific demographics. CRM databases likely allow adversary disinformation factories to better target or segment the market for online disinformation. They are less likely to waste resources creating information that will not be forwarded or picked up. Online disinformation groups can now shape a disinformation campaign through better interactivity using simple sales techniques. They can quickly determine which themes are most likely to appeal and even conduct experiments in which group A might receive one type of message while group B receives another. Messaging can thus be fine-tuned. It is dynamic.

The final way Disinformation 2.0 differs from Disinformation 1.0 is in the variety of actors who can participate in disinformation tradecraft today. While previous studies emphasized intelligence agents' skills and training to participate in disinformation tradecraft, disinformation practices today may be carried out by multiple actors—including public servants and private citizens, those who work directly for the government, who are contractors. Disinformation practices rely on national civilians, private companies, and actors like public relations firms. For this reason, the US State Department's Global Engagement Center today refers to a “disinformation ecosystem” established by Russian intelligence, including pseudo-academic think tanks, relationships with academic departments, state-sponsored television stations, and civilian social media channels.¹⁹

In addition, as Milena Dimitrova notes, “Disinformation as a service exists. Individuals or groups wishing to disseminate a false narrative may request service on the Dark Web and hire someone to carry out this work on their behalf.”²⁰

And finally, today's attackers may be both humans and bots. Artificial intelligence (AI) elements of CRM programs may assist in market segmentation, carry out targeted tests of various disinformation narratives, and map out possible customer journeys for recruited groups.

Table 1 summarizes the specific technological affordances that cause Disinformation 2.0 to differ significantly from Disinformation 1.0.

Table 1: Specific Technological Affordances in Disinformation 2.0

Characteristics of Platform	Linked/connected (more excellent attack surface)
	Fewer barriers to entry
	Non-hierarchical arrangement of information (leading to “new epistemology”)
Attack Surface	Opaque, Dynamic, Larger
Characteristics of Information/Big Data	Velocity: speed of information change advantages an attacker over a defender
	Veracity: harder to verify information sources and attribution.
	The high volume of information
	Greater variety of types of data
	The advantage for first movers is those who move most quickly.
	Democratization of data manipulation skills due to off-the-shelf SaaS CRMs
Weaponized information	Faster, more dynamic, cheaper, more varied, easier to manipulate
Actions Possible on platforms	Interactivity: Users co-create narratives of information through liking and retweeting
	Surveillance: can better segment information through knowing who is liking and sharing (availability of metadata)
	Iterated “information journey” versus one-off encounter
	Narratives can be dynamic—evolve in response to user reactions.
	Narratives can be TESTED and modified by testing different narratives on different users
Strategies	Dynamic Iterated Interactive

Types of Actors	Large and small actors
	Outsourcing: disinformation as a service, use of private providers
	Overlaps between sales, public relations, and disinformation
	Automated actors like bots
	Use of automated algorithms to segment information test varied narratives

Disinformation 2.0: A Smart Weapon

As this short history of disinformation’s technological evolution illustrated, today’s disinformation is, in actuality, a type of intelligent weapon. Smart weapons possess three significant characteristics. They can be controlled remotely, often from a distance, by operators who no longer need to be physically present. Intelligent weapons are also precision-guided, enabling the operator to be more precise in her targeting rather than simply blasting away at a target. Precision-guided munitions, guided by technologies like facial recognition, can be aimed only at a specific individual. Finally, intelligent weapons are dynamic—a bomb’s coordinates might be adjusted and readjusted while in flight in response to new information received about the environment.

These characteristics—remote guidance, precision guidance, and dynamic adjustments—also characterize disinformation vectors being “fired” today. First, as noted, disinformation is remotely guided by various actors who do not have to be physically present in a specific location to deliver a disinformation bomb.

Disinformation can now also be precision guided. With the 2012 advent of the Internet of Things, users are engaged in man-machine interactions, increasingly not merely accessing the web but producing and interacting with data. As a result, users today experience a customized environment that adapts and changes to their likes and dislikes.²¹ Every user receives unique curated information, different from anyone else. AI is used to curate user feeds, even without the user’s knowledge of these practices.

And this new customized environment doesn’t merely present information for the user to take or leave but is designed to draw the user in, taking them on a “customer journey.” And just as a uniquely designed customer journey may have an end goal of causing you to make a purchase, the consumer’s disinformation journey has an end goal of galvanizing them toward actions. Individuals can be recruited and activated in new and unexpected ways in this environment.

Finally, disinformation today represents a dynamic type of warfare. Russian analyst Evgeni Pashentshev describes another unique feature of the online environment today. Just

as an individual might manipulate our emotions toward a real-life environment through, for example, playing music or “staging” an apartment for sale, an online environment can be manipulated through invoking psychological practices. He describes how AI programs can gauge the emotional temperature of an online environment through sentiment analysis. Analyzing the words used and the images shared, disinformation warriors can determine which narratives might play well at a given time. (Are people feeling angry? Are they threatening violence?) Narratives can be fine-tuned to play well at a particular historical juncture (like an election) and match what audiences already feel.

In contrast to the single-themed Operation Denver, which was designed to “hit” all audiences in the same way, today’s COVID Disinformation 2.0 campaign had two prongs—those aimed at a diffuse audience and those which are highly targeted and specific (or segmented).

A diffuse or general goal of today’s disinformation campaigns is to sow confusion and chaos in the online environment. US adversaries may therefore contribute information of dubious quality and provenance to undermine user confidence in the online medium. Drawing on Luciano Floridi’s work, one can conceptualize the “infosphere” as a domain or field that can be degraded through various actions. Floridi suggests that just as a bad actor can pollute a familiar territory, such as the air or the water, rendering it unusable or unsafe for all users, an actor can degrade the online environment through the proliferation of spam or the unleashing of bots. Just as people’s activities are constrained if they cannot readily access safe drinking water or clean air but must instead devote time and energy to engaging in risk calculi before utilizing these resources, people’s abilities to utilize the online environment are degraded when questions exist as to its safety and potential harmfulness.²²

Vladislav Surkov refers to this tactic as the “firehose of falsehood.” Here, the objective is to confuse those attempting to communicate in a chaotic online environment. The actual choice of narratives can include multiple narratives, some of which may even be contradictory. The aim is not to create a coordinated strategy but to introduce as much noise as possible in the environment.²³ Productivity and efficiency suffer when individuals must navigate a chaotic, unpredictable environment characterized by high noise levels. And user trust in the environment is lessened as the impression may be created that all information encountered is untrustworthy.

When adversaries choose to “pollute” the online information, state and commercial actors are forced to devote significant resources to safeguarding that environment. The term “infodemic” describes the overall degradation of the information environment about COVID-19 information. Combatting the disease has been rendered more difficult because of attempts (by both Russia and China) to breed user distrust of official sources, confuse official and unofficial sources, and amplify conspiracy theories and rumors that have no basis.²⁴ Such diffuse environmental degradation strategies rest on adversaries’ ability to insert large amounts of information into the environment. For this reason, states seek ways to

leverage economies of scale. Thus, degradation attempts may be automated and outsourced to domestic and foreign actors who specialize in creating online media campaigns.

At the same time, one can identify targeted narratives designed to appeal to a pre-selected group and often piggybacked onto or using existing infrastructure. A theme that emphasizes that “Big Pharma can’t be trusted” might be targeted toward those opposing vaccination on principle, those who oppose “Big Government,” and believing that government policies are frequently racist. In the US, the vaccine denial movement is already established, encompassing, for example, those who believe vaccines cause autism. Therefore, such groups might be predisposed both to believe Russian disinformation regarding the efficacy of a COVID vaccine and to amplify information that they receive that accords with their preexisting belief systems due to a phenomenon known as confirmation bias. The theme of COVID vaccines as harmful could thus find a ready-made home on anti-vaccine websites and within anti-vaccine channels on sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest. Thus, contemporary disinformation practices may be described as parasitic. By attaching themselves to legitimate platforms, Russian agents improved the impression of credibility and authenticity of their information. They saved the costs (and time) associated with creating accounts and developing followers.

In their analysis of Russian disinformation practices implemented in the 2013 Russian/Ukraine conflict, Ulises Mejia and Nikolai Vokuev describe how Russian agents utilized public members as “force multipliers,” coopting existing mass movements and seeding these movements with disinformation.²⁵ In this way, they argue that citizens, often unwittingly, were led to amplify and recirculate disinformation. Rather than the “blast” of information that might have been produced in the past, disinformation in the Euromaidan era was more like a precision weapon. Russian authorities were much better able to control what information was passed, the exact moment it was passed, and the audiences that would receive it.

In addition, one can see how the theme of “COVID as a racist bioweapon” is merely a variant of the theme of “AIDS as a racist bioweapon.” One such set of “facts” already exists within an information environment, making it easier for the second set of “facts” to gain a foothold.

Table 2 describes the themes used in COVID disinformation campaigns, showing how they are deployed for both diffuse and segmented audiences.

Table 2: COVID Disinformation Campaigns

THEME	DIFFUSE	TARGETTED
COVID AS DISEASE (military strategic)	US-Developed Bioweapon Not from China	US Racist Bioweapon US military exercises in the EU spread COVID to allies.
POLICY RESPONSE (efficacy of response; motives)	The US was unprepared WHO is lying? The US government/CDC is lying.	Russian foreign aid is being provided to the developing world.
TRUST (quality of information; sources)	USG is lying about deaths USG is lying about the efficacy of the vaccine WHO is lying? (Your sources of information are untrustworthy) (Many people who provide information have ulterior motives for doing so) CDC is lying about YOUR risk of contracting the disease	The US is lying about vaccine efficacy. The US is lying about vaccine side effects. US/CDC is lying about alternative treatments and their efficacy US/CDC is keeping alternative treatments from the American people Fauci and members of congress are benefitting financially from vaccines
FREEDOM (civil rights during crisis/disease/ security)		US/CDC is lying about the efficacy of masking Shutdowns violate civil rights Vaccine mandates should be opposed Medical personnel should have the right to oppose vaccination Military personnel should have the right to oppose vaccination Mandates represent a type of (Nazi) authoritarianism Mandates are one more way the Left imposes its values on others
VACCINE		Vaccine is dangerous Russian vaccine is better The vaccine is a medical experiment Microchip/Bill Gates Alternative Treatments are Effective

Comparing Disinformation 1.0 and Disinformation 2.0

In contrast to Operation Denver, the COVID information campaign represented a new technological sophistication, offering multiple advantages to the attackers. First, the overall “attack surface” for disinformation campaigns was larger since, in addition to utilizing traditional print and broadcast media, today’s disinformation merchants can utilize additional techniques like instant messaging, social media, and websites—often in unison to amplify their messages, to build a more extensive web of sources containing the information (therefore achieving a larger illusion of credibility) and to bring the reader on a “journey” in which they encounter messaging in a variety of formats over a variety of times.

In addition, one can identify an evolution and a segmentation of themes—with some themes selected to appeal to a group like anti-vaccine activists. In contrast, others were targeted toward anti-government activists and conspiracy theorists. In the two years of the pandemic, some themes have been abandoned in favor of other themes, and vaccine themes have merged and piggybacked onto other themes, including elections, civil rights, and minority rights.

Table 3 provides a comparison of new and old disinformation practices.

Table 3: New and Old Disinformation

OLD Disinformation	NEW Disinformation
Discrete (self-contained, professional tradecraft activity); “Home-grown.”	Co-optation of legitimate social movements and channels. outsourcing of information production and replication (Overlap between disinformation and public relations)
Long-term deeply rooted in cultivated sources; Strategic	“Agile,” dynamic, shifting; both strategic and tactical
One-way	Interactive
Scattershot	Targeted, segmented
One-off	Iterative (build on successes, use of AI to better target and predict effects); shares territory with online radicalization
Expensive	Cheap (through cooptation); low-entry costs
Dumb	“smart” disinformation – define

How to Combat Disinformation 2.0

Disinformation 2.0 departs significantly from earlier forms of disinformation and earlier disinformation strategies and tactics. How, then, should those who seek to disarm Disinformation 2.0 proceed?

First, the new disinformation cannot be combatted using old tactics and strategies. Instead, what is required is a new way of conceptualizing the problem. As shown throughout

this paper, the battlefield upon which today's disinformation wars will be fought bears minimal resemblance to the previous battlefield. Today's battlefield is multidimensional and dynamic and, most importantly, creates new relationships between those who create and those who receive disinformation.

Therefore, traditional notions of "defending the information domain," which relies upon a territorial analogy, are no longer valid. Because information users are implicated in the co-creation and dissemination of disinformation, it is incorrect to conceptualize them as passive subjects who need to be defended. Instead, online radicalization is a reciprocal, iterated (or ongoing) process.²⁶ The interaction between buyer and seller is not coercive but rather persuasive. Each participant acts agentially in the "dance of disinformation."

The disinformation actor is thus better described as a "merchant"—intent on selling a particular narrative to a specific buyer and enlisting the buyer as an influencer who will encourage others to buy (or buy into) the narrative. The term "disinformation merchant" describes someone working in an information market where information of varying provenances and quality is available. Each agent competes for buyers in this market, competing against other "information merchants" offering competing products. As with an actual market, the information market is largely unregulated and open to all sellers. And, like an economic market, the information market is segmented. Some merchants may offer a niche product (i.e., anti-vaccine disinformation) and may work to capture that market segment while undercutting and driving out others in that information space.

This metaphor of competing for market share with other information merchants allows us to think of neither side as taking an offensive or a defensive position since the space does not implicitly belong to one or another player. Instead, both players must take an offensive or activist position to outcompete their opponents.

This is not to say that actors do not act strategically. Each side acts to identify vulnerable consumers of information and disinformation and then persuade (but not coerce) them to buy what is on offer. For example, Russian and Chinese governments may have identified Western audiences for anti-vax activism narratives. They appealed to existing groups, like those opposing other vaccines, and utilized their resources to spread anti-COVID vaccine information further.

The disinformation merchant then has two goals: to sow disinformation diffusely into the environment to degrade the overall quality of the information environment for all users equally; and to target specific individuals and groups to radicalize them toward the support of specific positions or the taking of specific actions.

Conclusion

Given the unique characteristics of Disinformation 2.0, what strategies and tactics would be most effective in combatting it? An anti-disinformation strategy might be constructed by looking at how, for example, nations and the international community have acted to control the dissemination and weaponization of nuclear materials, which have both peaceful civilian and military uses. In this situation, civilian and military facilities are subject to inspections and monitoring by the international community. Nations are required to furnish annual reports of their inspection and monitoring activities.

The US government should coordinate more closely with the top customer relations management software producers to combat online disinformation, including recruiting more personnel from this industry. Civilian companies should be required to conduct due diligence regarding their clients' identities and activities—both those deploying software and those storing their results in the cloud. Legislation that creates regulations governing the inspections and monitoring of clouds like the Amazon commerce cloud or the Salesforce Business Cloud should be enacted.

Furthermore, stricter regulations need to be enacted governing the use of artificial intelligence programs to engage in customer segmentation and test customer relations content. Today, emerging concerns in the information space include the possibility of training personalized chatbots furnished with disinformation scripts. Just as US military regulations require a human in the loop during certain military operations, regulations should be enacted to require a human during the testing and deployment of narratives in the information space.

Finally, the US should enact stricter privacy laws governing the collection of user information, the storage of that information, and the sale. Here the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) can serve as a model. Stricter rules governing who may collect user information, the requirement that users be informed (and consent) to collect such information, and regulations governing the storage and sale of user information can help stem online disinformation efforts.

Mary Manjikian is a professor at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. She received her BA from Wellesley College, an MPhil from Oxford University, and an MA and PhD from the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Apocalypse and Post-Politics: The Romance of the End* (Lexington, 2012); *Threat Talk: Comparative Politics of Internet Addiction* (Ashgate, 2012), *The Securitization of Property Squatting in Western Europe* (Routledge, 2013); and *Gender, Sexuality and Intelligence: The Spy in the Closet* (Palgrave, 2020). She also authored two textbooks: *Cybersecurity Ethics: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2017) and *Introduction to Cyber Politics and Policy* (Sage, 2019). She is also a former US foreign service officer with service in the Netherlands, Russia, and Bulgaria.

Endnotes

1. Herbert Romerstein, "Disinformation as a KGB Weapon in the Cold War," *Journal of Intelligence History* 1, no. 1 (2001): 54.
2. Stephen McCombie, Allon Uhlmann, and Sarah Morrison, "The US 2016 Presidential Election and Russia's Troll Farms," *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 1 (2020): 95-114.
3. McCombie et al., "The US 2016 Presidential Election," 100.
4. Kira Renn and Sille Soe, "Is Social Media Intelligence Private? Privacy in Public and the Nature of Social Media Intelligence," in *Intelligence on the Frontier between State and Civil Society*, ed. Kira Petersen and Kira Renn (London: Routledge, 2020): 1-17.
5. McCombie et al., "The US 2016 Presidential Election."
6. David Goie, M.S. Frey, and David Goodman, "Unforgiven: Russian Intelligence Vengeance as Political Theater and Strategic Messaging," *Intelligence and National Security* 34, no. 4 (2019): 561-575.
7. David Goie, "Cyber operations and useful fools: the approach of Russian hybrid intelligence," *Intelligence and National Security* 33, no. 7 (2018): 954-973; and Jon Lindsay, "Cyber conflict vs. Cyber command: Hidden Dangers in the American military solution to a large-scale intelligence problem," *Intelligence and National Security* 36, no. 2 (2021): 260-278.
8. Robert Dover, "SOCMINT: A Shifting Balance of Opportunity," *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 2 (2020): 216-232.
9. Jennifer Bales, "The Damage of Disinformation: A Glaring Omission in the US Global Health Security Strategy," *The Strategy Bridge*, July 16, 2020, accessed September 2, 2022, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/7/16>.
10. Erhard Geisler and Robert Sprinkle, "Were our critics right about the Stasi? AIDS disinformation and 'disinformation squared' after five years," *Politics and the Life Sciences* 38, no. 1 (2019): 32-61.
11. Max Holland, "The Propaganda and Power of Communist Security Services Dezinformatsiya," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 19, no. 1 (2006): 1-31.
12. "DHS Campaigns," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://www.dhs.gov/dhs-campaigns>.
13. Klaus Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2013).
14. Simon Springer and Vural Ozdemir, "Disinformation as COVID 19's Twin Pandemic: False Equivalences, Entrenched Epistemologies and Causes of Causes," *OMICS: A Journal of Integrative Biology* 26, no. 2 (2021): 82-87.
15. Ulises Mejias and Nikolai Vokuev, "Disinformation and the Media: The Case of Russia and Ukraine," *Media, Culture and Society* 39, no. 7 (2017): 1027-1042.

16. Ryan Holiday, "What is Media Manipulation – A Definition and Explanation," *Forbes*, July 16, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanholiday/2012/07/16/what-is-media-manipulation-a-definition-and-explanation/?sh=459804e39397>.
17. Nahema Marchai and Hubert Au, "Coronavirus EXPLAINED: Youtube, COVID-19 and the Socio-Technical Mediation of Expertise," *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 3 (July-September 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948158>.
18. "Computational Propaganda," Oxford University, accessed September 1, 2022, <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/computational-propaganda/>.
19. US Department of State, *Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2022).
20. Milena Dimitrova, "Disinformation-as-a-Service Now Offered on Dark Web Forums," *Sensortechforum.com*, accessed September 2, 2022, <https://sensortechforum.com/disinformation-as-a-service-dark-web/>.
21. Roco Bellanova, Kristina Irion, Katja Jacobsen, Francesco Ragazzi, Rune Saugmann, and Lucy Suchman, "Toward a Critique of Algorithmic Violence," *International Political Sociology* 15, no. 1 (2021): 121-150.
22. Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).
23. Edward Lucas, Jake Morris, and Corina Rebegea, *Information Bedlam: Russian and Chinese Information Operations During COVID-19* (Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, April 14, 2021), <https://www.stopfake.org/en/information-bedlam-russian-and-chinese-information-operations-during-covid-19/>.
24. Antonias Nestoras and Raluca Cirju, "The Rise of China in the Information Domain? Measuring Chinese Influence in Europe During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *EU Policy Review* 1, no. 1 (2021): 199-201.
25. Mejias and Vokuev, "Disinformation and the Media," 1027-1042.
26. Mehmet Bastig, Aziz Douai, and Davut Akca, "Exploring the 'Demand Side' of Online Radicalization: Evidence from the Canadian Context," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43, no. 7 (2020): 616-637.

Bosnia and Russia: The Implications for European Security and US Interests

Nadina Ronc

Abstract: Twenty-seven years since the end of the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia) remains a dysfunctional, poverty-stricken ward of the international community and requires greater analytical and policy attention to ensure the situation does not result in an environment conducive to the security threat from Russia. The ever-growing presence of Moscow's influence in the political system of Bosnia is through the Bosnian Serb dominated entity of Republika Srpska (RS). Because of Bosnia's central location at the crossroads of the Balkans, its weak central government institutions, inadequate military capabilities, and hobbled economy, it is vulnerable to external interference. Not only would Europe and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries be susceptible to such developments, but so would US security, political, and economic interests. This study intends to assess the current nature and extent of the threat, the factors that promote such threat domestically, and the international community's effect on the situation.

Keywords: Bosnia; Russia; EU; NATO; Republika Srpska.

Introduction

This year marked 30 years since the siege of Sarajevo and the start of the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia), in which over 100,000 people lost their lives. Since the Russo-Ukraine war started on February 24, 2022, Bosnia has been on high alert as a possible next country where Russian President Vladimir Putin could push for stronger influence. This time it would erupt by the forceful secession of Bosnia's Bosnian Serb entity of RS, whose leader is the sanctioned member of the Bosnia presidency, Milorad Dodik. The backing would come from Putin as the main instigator of fresh new conflict in Bosnia, joined by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and the leader of the Bosnian Croats and president of HDZ-BiH, Dragan Covic. The latter has gone on to say that Russia should have a more significant influence in Bosnia, primarily because it benefits him in pushing for the creation of a third entity for Bosnian Croats.

The security in Bosnia is at significant risk of collapse. While the country has been vying for NATO membership since 2006, Dodik constantly objected to it because his views are aligned with Russia and Serbia, the former which opposes NATO enlargement and the latter, NATO membership. In recent months, Dodik has made secession threats that earned him further sanctions from the US and then from the UK. The European Union has yet to act on sanctions but has deployed a small number of European Union Force (EUFOR) troops to Bosnia, including armored vehicles. Further to this, Dodik recently said that he would not agree to any foreign military presence in Bosnia. But he does not have to agree because "under the UN [United Nations] Chapter VII mandate Dayton's Annex 1A, and the Berlin-plus arrangement, NATO has the authority to deploy" to Bosnia.¹ However, this

issue is not so simple. NATO must assert that this annex means that. Because the current issue is that military presence in Bosnia must be renewed every year, and this UN Security Council vote is coming up in November 2022. There is a high probability that Russia will object to this and will be backed by RS and Belgrade, while China will completely veto it. Therefore, it is important that NATO ground forces are in Bosnia prior to the general elections on October 2, 2022. Unfortunately, this is still being reviewed—all while the US government is focusing upon electoral reform instead of the security issue.²

The thesis will prove that international community has turned a blind eye to the events unfolding in Bosnia and that it is watching as the crises unfold while doing very little to prevent it. For instance, EU and NATO are aware of Russia's meddling in Bosnia's security and internal politics. Russia sees Bosnia in terms of its confrontation with the EU and NATO, while for the RS, the interest is local to secede and keep Dodik in power. The RS views the current situation in Ukraine favorably as a means to achieve its goals since NATO and the EU are busy with Ukraine. Putin would like to see the RS create problems so it diverts the attention of the EU and NATO away from Ukraine war, but Putin is aware that due to his war in Ukraine, he just cannot bring assets to help Dodik. Therefore, his influence would be political as it does not have direct access to Bosnia, apart from limited degree through Hungary.³

EU and NATO in Bosnia

The Russo-Ukrainian war has opened new paths to international organizations for countries at risk of Russia's interference. Bosnia and Kosovo had asked the EU to accelerate the accession process for its EU candidate status to help prevent security instability in the two countries. However, such a move was only made in favour of Ukraine and Moldova, both of which became EU candidate states within a few months of requesting it. Since the end of the Bosnia war, the country has sought membership with the EU and NATO. But the EU has always blamed the Bosnia's government for the lack of reforms, even when the blame lies with the "global powers, and architects of the Accords."⁴ And most recently, in March 2022, while the Bosnia parliament tried to vote on Russia's sanctions over the war in Ukraine, Covic and Dodik voted against sanctioning Russia. However, Johan Sattler, an EU ambassador and special representative, took to Twitter to express his disapproval, blaming the entire Bosnia Parliament, but refusing to name those responsible. For that he was criticised by Bosniak analysts and diplomats.

Bosnia is a country that is highly dependent on external powers administering how the country operates. One of the biggest is through the High Representative whose role is to help implement reforms agreed upon between Bosnia and the EU and help it achieve its road to EU membership. It also has the power to fire elected Bosnian officials and enforce the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). But in recent years, it has been reluctant to use these powers, "fearing a backlash among Bosnian Serb leaders," until a new High Representative, Christian Schmidt, was appointed.⁵ Schmidt used Bonn Powers, which comes under

the DPA, to scrap the law on immovable property that the National Assembly of the RS introduced giving themselves power to decide how forests and agricultural land is used and who they can sell it to.

However, the most recent disagreements amongst the political parties centred on electoral reforms. Schmidt wanted to introduce a three percent rule favouring Bosnian Croats, a move strongly supported by Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic. The provision would mean the representatives from all three people would have been elected only if more than three percent of them lived in the constituency, not to mention that it would heavily discriminate against minorities such as Jews and Roma people. That would have favoured Covic's HDZ-BiH, who would dominate decision-making in the House of Peoples. It would also help Dodik's party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), meaning Bosniaks would be a minority in their own country. This provision would also pave the way for the eventual creation of a third entity for Bosnian Croats, which would in time see a way to seek secession and join Croatia, as would the RS to Serbia. As the news broke, the US and UK ambassadors to Bosnia said they supported the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in its decision. But due to heavy protests in Sarajevo, Schmidt changed his mind and only introduced technical changes. But according to an expert on the Bosnia Constitution, Joseph Marko, Schmidt does not have the authority to introduce the three percent change because it would oppose Annex 10 of the DPA.⁶ While he has the power to control the implementation of the DPA, "he is not authorized to deal with the entities' autonomous legal systems, i.e., their constitutions, if they have not adopted in the application" of the DPA.⁷ Therefore, the international community's support for Schmidt's provision would mean support for the disintegration of Bosnia. So, we can argue that not only is Russia's interference in the internal issues of Bosnia a problem, but also is interference by the international community that seeks to, by force, change rules in Bosnia when the three constitutional people have not agreed on that issue.

Further, recent sanctions imposed on the RS and Dodik by US President Joe Biden's administration came with support from the EU but no intention to do the same. That is primarily due to Hungary's far-right Prime Minister Victor Orban, who has publicly supported the RS. Oliver Varhelyi, the EU's commissioner for enlargement and a close ally of Orban's, allegedly supported secession talks at a private meeting with Dodik, according to the leaked documents.⁸ He also blamed the current situation in Bosnia on the former High Representative Valentin Inzko, who issued a ban on genocide denial in the country.⁹

Serbia, along with EU member state Croatia, supports local proxies seeking to fragment Bosnia. Croatia and Hungary use their EU positions to prevent positive policy changes in Bosnia and have voted against sanctioning Dodik. When right-wing Slovenian President Janez Jansa was in power, alongside Serbia and Hungary, a non-paper was authored in which it described the carving of Bosnia. According to this paper, the RS would join Serbia, creating Greater Serbia, and part of Herzegovina would join Croatia, creating Greater Croatia. The small piece of Bosnia would be left to Bosniaks, "a Muslim island with

significant conflict potential” that would never join the EU and NATO.¹⁰ It would be like a Palestine of Europe. The existence of this non-paper was denied by Jansa, but Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama confirmed he was consulted about it.¹¹ The non-paper was Jansa’s “peaceful” plan, but it would have caused another war in the Western Balkans that would spill into the EU. Despite all these issues that could cause a major security crisis in the region, EU and NATO continue to push for reforms, despite knowing that Dodik and Covic are preventing it. The key deliverables Bosnia must meet for the EU candidate status are constitutional and electoral reforms. While for the NATO candidacy, Bosnia must register the immovable property at the state level. However, Dodik is blocking this request because he believes that immovable property belongs to the RS and not the state.¹² Currently, there are 39 military bases in the Federation of Bosnia, 23 in the RS used by the Armed Forces of Bosnia and one used by the Ministry of Defense.

On December 5, 2018, NATO activated a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Bosnia and invited the country to submit its first annual national program of political, economic, and defense reforms. At the beginning of 2021, Bosnia established the Commission for Cooperation with NATO to facilitate the Reform Program 2021-2022 and other matters to help Bosnia’s accession into the alliance.

In 2014, the minister for foreign affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov, was quoted as saying that NATO expansion to Bosnia, Macedonia and Montenegro would be seen as “provocation.”¹³ But, as Bosnia was the only non-NATO member by 2019, Lavrov again said that he does not want Bosnia in NATO, a view shared by Putin, who said Bosnia would never and can never be in the alliance.¹⁴ The Russian Embassy in Sarajevo has threatened to “react” if Bosnia takes steps to join NATO and would perceive any such action as a hostile act.¹⁵ But NATO was quick to shut down the Russian Embassy, stating that no third party can prevent a country from joining an alliance and that it is a sovereign right of Bosnia to choose its path.

“Bosnia’s membership in NATO is a necessity for stability and sustainable peace in the region and beyond, indeed all of Europe. Otherwise, this vacuum that remains as political or strategic temptation in now an ever-heightened atmosphere of continental and global nationalism, and Putin is the greatest risk of seeking to exploit it for some big or small perceived advantage.”¹⁶

Putin’s Foreign Policy from 2001 Onwards

An assessment of the security documents from 2000 describes Russia’s hostility toward the West, particularly NATO’s use of force against the Serbs in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999. Russia claimed NATO’s involvement in the Yugoslav wars was hostile and disregarded “the UN and the standards of international law” and had argued that they were not consulted, acting against the consent of the UN Security Council.¹⁷

According to Putin, it is a clear example of NATO's policy that ignores Russia, which claimed a decisive role in Europe and has a disregard for the UN's standards of international law. Other concerns were the expansion of NATO, which sought to join neighbors in the East into its alliance and go as far as Russia's front door.¹⁸

Russian foreign policy is to run counter to the US national security interests and values. There are five foreign security policy objectives of the Kremlin:¹⁹

1. Putin, as a president of the Russian Federation, retains the autocratic political system and mafia-style crony economy, which are all equal to Putinism.
2. Reinstate Russia's status as a great power.
3. Prevent intervention that could harm its citizens by rewriting the international rules and norms.
4. Maintain political control of Russia's geographical periphery, Eastern Europe and Central Asia.
5. Break up NATO, EU, and transatlantic unity.

After the September 11th attacks, Putin took the West's side for economic reasons. Putin was aware that if he was to exert influence on a global scale, he had to look at it from an economic perspective and not military, at least briefly. He was aware that stronger links to the EU economy would also help boost Russia's. But he knew that supporting EU's independent security policy would mean he would help distance it from the US, "which most certainly would be in contrast with American interests."²⁰ As this unraveled, Russia gained new economic power, especially from its oil and gas sales, using the revenue to strengthen its military. And as its economy continued to improve, Russia stayed with the policy of discrediting NATO, the EU, and the US, and treating these as a security threat, and pushing out the thought that the current world order, especially the European security, is of a significant disadvantage to Russia.²¹

Putin's strategy began with Orange Revolution in Ukraine, a country he was reluctant to leave alone. But the war in Georgia was the turning point for how Russia saw its ties with the West. The bickering between the EU and the US on responding to that crisis slowed progress. Putin took it to mean that in any future conflict Russia may be involved in, no one would stop him, and that Europe would not engage with him in those conflicts because it was too reliant on energy from Russia.²² In 2008, Russia's military reforms started, and the country used Georgia as its exercise ground to determine how it wanted to carry out their reforms. Only in 2011 did Russia begin to rearm and modernize its defense sector.²³ The Ukraine was a target again, this time the annexation of Crimea and the fighting in Donbas, all leading to the current crises.

But Russia's economic growth was not meant to last, and it took a hard hit as the world economy collapsed in 2007-2008. This changed Russia's stance toward the West once again as it needed to sustain its economic growth. As part of Putin's foreign policy, he continued with the use of energy as a weapon by building various pipeline projects—Blue, Nord, and South Stream—“to divert from the Ukraine transit route and to discourage Western alternatives:” the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and Nabucco.²⁴

But even energy is not providing returns as it used to. For example, the South Stream gas pipeline that began construction in 2012 and was supposed to go through the Black Sea to Bulgaria through Serbia, Hungary, Slovenia and onwards to Austria was stopped by Russia in 2014 due to non-compliance with the EU laws as well as sanctions it was facing over the Crimea crises. Sanctions have also crippled Russia's economy and squashed the military budget. As a result, the glory Russia felt during the Georgia war has diminished, as did their attempt to take on the West, the US, and NATO by surprise as they did in Syria and Ukraine.²⁵

The most recent Russo-Ukrainian war has damaged Russia's economic stability. The Western world placed heavy sanctions against the country and its oligarchs and withdrew all the Western companies, leaving Russia on the breadline and crashing its currency. The US has also banned imports of Russian oil, liquefied natural gas and coal, while the UK has said it would reduce its dependency on Russian energy by the end of 2022. However, some of the EU, especially Germany, which is most reliant on the resource, is still reluctant to follow suit as it could shutter their industry, leave millions in the cold, and trigger a “deep recession.”²⁶ A further setback to Russia is the new EU deal with Israel and Egypt which would see significant exports of Israeli gas to Europe.²⁷

What Is Russia's Main Interest in Bosnia?

The East and West have been at war for many years in the most critical geopolitical area, Bosnia, and in recent years that war has been between the US and Russia. While the US is the backer of the DPA, Putin's attention is not only devoted to the RS only but also to Bosnia, with the primary aim to keep the country divided along political and ethnic lines.²⁸ According to former Kremlin advisor under Boris Yeltsin, Aleksandar Nekrasov, “there is a lot of diplomatic maneuvering going on with Russia trying to influence the political process in the Balkans and in and around Serbia,” adding that membership in the EU and NATO is destructive and “creates more destabilization.”²⁹

Russia's players in the Western Balkans are Serbia and the RS, and with that, it is preventing the “consolidation of the region, which is its main interest now.”³⁰ The only viable game Putin has is Vucic and Dodik, both whom he finds extremely useful to help him carry out his targets in Bosnia.³¹

Bosnia remains the most vulnerable in the region to Putin, due to both a power vacuum and local collaborators such as Dodik. These vulnerabilities are used by the Russia to its advantage, especially since there is no proper rule of law to prevent it. According to the Serbian press close to Vucic, at the meeting in Moscow in 2017, Putin told his ministers not to worry about the Western threats against Russia, that Kremlin had started a project where by 2022, all Serbs will live in one country.³³ That is also the long-held desire of Serbs to create Greater Serbia, which was the reason for the 1990s-era war. The memorandum published by the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts (SANU), a document known as the SANU Memorandum created between 1985 and 1986, described that in detail. Even convicted war criminal Vojislav Seselj and his Serbian Radical Party used *Velika Srbija* (Greater Serbia) as its official magazine's title. Serbian nationalists and the Serbian Orthodox Church not only wanted all Serbs in one state but also pushed for control over territories where Serbs were a minority or did not exist, using history as a basis (Kosovo) or pseudo-history (Dubrovnik, Macedonia).³⁴ Even Putin said he would make sure that Bosnian Serbs in the RS have the same independent rights that US president Bill Clinton handed to Albanians in Kosovo and that Serbs in the northern part of Kosovo would join Serbia.³⁵

Arming and Training Bosnia Serbs

In 2014, the financier of the separatist groups in Ukraine, Russian billionaire Konstantin Malofeev, met with Dodik bringing Cossacks that were seen walking nearby polling stations on the day of the 2014 elections.³⁶ Malofeev would also be seen in Bosnia on four different occasions in February, September, and October 2017, but in November 2017, he entered Bosnia illegally. Both the US and the EU sanctioned him, and on May 30, 2018, he was barred entry to Bosnia at the airport in Banja Luka, forcing him to go back to Moscow. He was in Bosnia to meet with Dodik.

In 2015 in Moscow, Russia's defence ministry signed a joint agreement with the defence minister of the RS for "Implementation of joint training and training in various professional tasks and staff mobility."³⁷ In other words, Russia would send military consultants and would train police units in the RS in the new police base in Zaluzani, which opened on April 4, 2018. RS police would also purchase military-grade weapons.

In April 2017, the minister for internal affairs of the RS, Dragon Lukac, said that KM8 million (approximately £3.5 million) would be taken out of the budget to arm the law enforcement of the RS. On November 20, 2017, the RS signed arms deal with Serbia's firearm and artillery manufacturer, Zastava Arms, which will see the entity receive \$930,000 (approximately £808,516) worth of weapons.³⁸ By March 2018, Bosnia Serbs spent one million KM (approximately £443,000) purchasing 2,500 assault rifles, of which 1,500 are MO5 EI 7,62mm caliber and 1,000 automatic AKSU47 M92 7,62mm calibers, to arm the police of the RS. Further to this, the RS will invest KM6.5 million (approximately £2.8 million) to reconstruct army infrastructure and build other military installations in the former army base in Zaluzani. This center will serve as a training ground for all members

of law enforcement of the RS, and many different units will be based in that location, and weapons will arrive just before the opening of the center.³⁹ According to the memorandum signed by Lukac in Moscow in 2015, Russia's special forces will train Bosnian Serbs in Zaluzani. It also states that there will be a military exchange whereby Bosnian Serb "special forces" will be training with the Russian special forces in Russia.

While the RS was arming itself, the presidency of Bosnia was not aware of any such activity, even though this sort of purchase and training must go through the approval process of the central and not the entity government. Responding to questions regarding arming the RS police, Dodik said this is against the US and political elites in Sarajevo whom he considers to be traitors. At that time, he was running for a chairman of the presidency of Bosnia and awaiting Lavrov's arrival to the RS. During this same time, various reports showed that Russian elite special forces, Spetsnaz, were also in the RS training police into an army. The presence of the Russian special forces in Bosnia could be taken as an act of aggression against the country. The person who gave authority for this training without consulting the central government was the now-former minister of defense Marina Pendes, who has very close links to Dodik and Covic, of whose party, HDZ-BiH, she is a member.

Bosnian newspapers obtained and published various documents describing the coalition of armed and nationalistic groups led by Dodik, Lukac, Serbia, and Russia. These explained how they would join forces to create a financial body that would work to fund and organize an army or even a National Guard of the RS with Russia's help. After the RS army would be formed, they would be joined by members of the clero-nationalist and extremist organizations of Serbia and Russia, including organizations that belong to the Chetnik movement and their voluntary formations. Some of them are Serbian Honour (*Srbska Čast*), a Russian trained Serbian paramilitary unit, and Russia's motorbike gang Night Wolves, including some influential far-right groups from Serbia who oppose membership in the Western institution.

It has also been identified that Banja Luka International Airport and Zaluzani, a small village within the municipality of Banja Luka, are all the bases of the armed Russian proxies and volunteers. Therefore, if the RS had called for referendum to separate from Bosnia in 2014, Russians would have backed this. Their various well-armed military groups would be ready to defend the RS from the Armed Forces of Bosnia and multiple police units.

At a meeting in Moscow, Dodik offered Putin a chance to build a base on the condition that Russia would help the secession of this entity from Bosnia and would inject millions of euros into its economy.⁴¹ "Spread of Putin's military into Bosnia via RS is not only negation of NATO but an advance into Europe and NATO's backyard, unprecedented. Sarajevo has the right to oppose it legally based on the Accords, but Putin is in effect giving new definition where the West failed over two decades ago. Sarajevo government can only succeed with the full support of Euro-Atlantic institutions and not leaving such vacuum to be again exploited."⁴²

However, NATO is also interested in housing its military in the now disused and damaged underground base Veliki Zep in Han Pijesak, RS. Bosnia's state court ruled in 2017 that it can be added to the military state property, making way for NATO membership, but the RS has argued it is a property of the entity.⁴³ The base is 11,474m of land.² It was severely disabled during the 1990s war when NATO bombed Serb positions, including Veliki Zep, which is believed to have been used by now-convicted Bosnia-Serb war criminal General Ratko Mladic. But Dodik has warned should NATO have a base in Bosnia, even the one reported to be a US base in Brcko, then Russia should also have a base in the country.⁴⁴ However, the RS has no power over Brcko, a self-governed administrative unit, also known as Brcko District, and, as a result, it has the right to invite a foreign military power onto its territory. But because the RS was split in two, and Brcko sits between the two sides, Dodik fears that the arrival of NATO under the banner of the US Army would pose a threat to his intention of secession.⁴⁵ Even with the smallest contingent of the US Army in Brcko, Bosnia would be untouchable.

Conclusion

Considering the above analysis, the level of security problems facing Bosnia carries great repercussions for the entire Western Balkans, the EU, and the US. It will be difficult for Western policymakers to ignore security issues gripping the country. That would most certainly spill into neighbouring states in the Western Balkans, many of which are now members of the EU and/or NATO and further afield. It would engulf US and EU interests and its key allies in the region, setting back economies and affecting stability that would be in grave danger. The magnitude of the crises this would produce, and the effects on NATO would be significant. That would not be a war for Bosnia but a war amongst world powers fighting for dominance on the world stage. Bosnia would only be a space that the international community kept unstable with the unworkable Dayton Accord with which it created a problem for itself by testing its own security. They did this by allowing for the creation of the Bosnian Serb entity and have remained silent while Dodik threatens to destabilize Bosnia further, which is "more fragile now than it has been since the war."⁴⁶

Any new conflict in the Western Balkans will produce a new flow of refugees into an already overwhelmed EU. That means that European, NATO countries, and the US would unknowingly import security threats in the form of the far-right trained and funded by Russia. That would be a far greater threat than it is now and would cause unforeseen problems for the West, which Russia would see favourably.

The EU cannot afford any more conflicts in its neighbourhood. War in Ukraine has already overwhelmed Eastern Europe and set back economic growth. More wars in Bosnia would engulf the EU for years to come. But the EU must also decide will it be on Bosnia's side or on the side of those who seek to partition it for themselves to achieve what they failed during the 1990s wars.

The solution is not only to send EUFOR troops, whose contingent is currently far too low, nor is it to keep sending weapons because either one of those two will not stop fresh new conflict in Bosnia. But if we argue for more foreign troops in Bosnia, the reasonable size would be around 23,000 for a population of 3.2 million.⁴⁷

To prevent any future conflict in Bosnia from spreading wide into the region, NATO must accelerate the country's entry into the alliance, at least as a special case. Only this action would deter Russia from any continued and serious interference in Bosnia. The EU could also do much more for Bosnia by allowing it to have an EU candidate status which is strongly favoured by Slovenia's President Borut Pahor. Although Bosnia has not fulfilled all the criteria, the candidate status could be conditional—after all Ukraine and Moldova did not fulfil all the criteria when they became member states. However, due to the threat from Russia, which Bosnia and Kosovo are also facing, Ukraine and Moldova became EU candidates. To have economic and security stability, Bosnia too, should have been granted candidate status. With that, NATO and the EU would be the barrier against any further aggression and security instability in the country and the broader region.

Nadina Ronc is a foreign affairs analyst, journalist, and broadcaster specialising in Russian foreign policy, energy security, and the Western Balkans. She is the recipient of a research grant from the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, which funded the 2018 research monograph on Russia's involvement in Bosnia's internal issues. Educated at the University of Bonn, and City, University of London with master's degrees, Nadina is a published writer and broadcaster based in London. She has previously worked for Anadolu Agency, CNBC, and Fox Business Network.

Endnotes

1. Baroness Arminka Helic, "Bosnia-Herzegovina," Hansard, UK Parliament, Volume 817, debated on December 16, 2021, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2021-12-16/debates/8608DD22-8B79-49CC-A126-D8EF6130473D/Bosnia-Herzegovina>.
2. Dr. Kurt Bassuener, co-founder and senior associate of Democratization Policy Council, email exchange, August 2-3, 2022.
3. Dr Norman Cigar, former director of regional studies (retired), Marine Corps University, email exchange, August 5, 2022.
4. Muhamed Sacirbey, wartime Bosnia's ambassador to the United Nations, email interview, January 24-25, 2019.
5. Steven Woehrel, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Current Issues and U.S. Policy," U.S. Congressional Research Service, January 24, 2013, fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40479.pdf.

6. “Bivši sudija Ustavnog suda BiH Joseph Marko: Schmidt nema ovlasti da mijenja Ustav FBiH” (Former judge of the Constitutional Court of BiH Joseph Marko: Schmidt does not have the authority to change the FBiH Constitution), Klix.ba, Sarajevo, July 22, 2022, www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/bivsi-sudija-ustavnog-suda-bih-joseph-marko-schmidt-nema-ovlasti-da-mijenja-ustav-fbih/220722084.
7. “Bivši sudija Ustavnog suda BiH Joseph Marko.”
8. “Is the EU assisting in the ‘breakup’ of Bosnia?” TRT World, December 23, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/is-the-eu-assisting-in-the-break-up-of-bosnia-52951>.
9. “Is the EU assisting.”
10. Dr. Emir Suljagic, “Opinion: Bosnia does not need another dishonest broker,” Anadolu Agency, September 9, 2021, www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/opinion-bosnia-doesn-t-need-another-dishonest-broker/2360019. In his article, the author includes the quote from Wolfgang Schäuble mentioned at a conference in Germany.
11. Vesna Pusic and Sonja Biserko, “The ‘Non-Paper’ Carving up Balkans and Undermining Europe,” Tirana Observatory, July 14, 2021, tiranaobservatory.com/2021/07/14/the-non-paper-carving-up-balkans-and-undermining-europe/.
12. Daniel Kovacevic, “Bosnian Military Property Dispute Bars Way to NATO,” *BIRN*, November 23, 2016, balkaninsight.com/2016/11/23/bosnia-constitutional-court-mulls-key-military-property-issue-11-22-2016/.
13. “NATO’s planned Balkan expansion a ‘provocation’: Russia’s Lavrov,” *Reuters*, September 29, 2014, www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-balkans-russia-iduskcn0ho11w20140929.
14. “Lavrov vows proper response to NATO activity near Russia’s borders,” *TASS*, Russian News Agency, January 16, 2019, tass.com/politics/1040206.
15. “Russia warns it will ‘have to react’ if Bosnia moves to join NATO,” *Reuters*, March 18, 2021, www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-russia-nato/russia-warns-it-will-have-to-react-if-bosnia-moves-to-join-nato-idUSKBN2BA2FL.
16. Sacirbey, email interview.
17. Marcel de Haas, *Russia’s Foreign Security Policy in the 21st Century: Putin, Medvedev and Beyond* (London: Contemporary Security Studies, Routledge, 2010), 53.
18. de Haas, *Russia’s Foreign Security Policy*, 17.
19. Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Congress, House of Representatives., *Understanding and Deterring Russia: U.S. Policies and Strategies*, 114th Congress, 2nd Session, February 10, 2016, Washington, DC, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg98915/html/CHRG-114hhrg98915.htm>, 8.
20. de Haas, *Russia’s Foreign Security Policy*, 156.
21. Committee on Armed Services, *Understanding and Deterring Russia*, 3.
22. Committee on Armed Services, 4.

23. Committee on Armed Services.

24. de Haas, *Russia's Foreign Security Policy*, 160.

25. Committee on Armed Services, *Understanding and Deterring Russia*, 12.

26. Joe Miller and Guy Chazan, "Russian gas cuts threaten to shutter Germany industry," *Financial Times*, July 18, 2022, www.ft.com/content/07df3f2e-6991-4842-a047-41f2b6fb853d.

27. Sarah El Safty and Ari Rabinovitch, "EU, Israel and Egypt sign deal to boost East Med gas exports to Europe," Reuters, June 15, 2022, www.reuters.com/business/energy/eu-israel-egypt-sign-deal-boost-east-med-gas-exports-europe-2022-06-15/.

28. "Kazazovic za NI: Rusija nije zainteresovana samo za RS, nego za cijelu Bosnia" (Kazanovic: Russia's interested isn't only in the RS, but in the entire Bosnia), *NI*, January 18, 2019, ba.n1info.com/Vijesti/a310257/Neven-Kazazovic-o-ruskom-uticaju-u-Bosnia.html.

29. Alexander Nekrassov, phone interview, January 21, 2019.

30. S. Congradin, "Biserko: Sva tri člana Predsedništva BiH su saveznici Rusije" (Biserko: All three members of the Bosnia Presidency are Russia's allies), *Danas*, September 24, 2018, www.danas.rs/politika/biserko-sva-tri-clana-predsednistva-Bosnia-su-saveznici-rusije/.

31. Vlado Vurusic, "Koji su stvarni interesi Rusije u BiH i Regiji" (What are Russia's interests in Bosnia and the region), *Jutarnji List*, October 2, 2016, www.jutarnji.hr/komentari/koji-su-stvarni-interesi-rusije-u-Bosnia-i-regiji-dodik-jedini-putinov-adut-za-povratak-u-europu/4763606/.

32. M. Osmovic, "Ide li BiH u 'Rusku zonu utjecaja?'" (Is Bosnia headed towards the 'Russia's sphere of influence'), *Dnevni List*, December 19, 2016, 2.

33. M. Osmovic, "Moskva hoće da se RS odcijepi do 2022 godine" (Moscow want RS to secede by 2022), *Dnevni List*, August 24, 2017, 2-3.

34. Cigar, email exchange.

35. M. Osmovic, "Moscow want RS to secede by 2022."

36. Stratfor Global Intelligence, "Russia Stirs the Hornet's Nest," Stratfor Global Intelligence, March 28, 2017, bit.ly/2TFFwfN.

37. Edin Barimac, "Milion dolara za puske" (Million dollars for guns), *Oslobodjenje*, February 10, 2018, 6-7.

38. Edin Barimac, "Puske su razlog za brigu" (Guns are a cause for concern), *Oslobodjenje*, February 15, 2018, 4-5.

39. Barimac, "Million dollars for weapons."

40. Sasa Rukavina, "MUP RS-a Postaje Vojska!?" (RS Ministry for Internal Affairs is becoming an army!?), *Dani*, January 27, 2017, 14-17.

41. Andrej Mlakar and Natasa Andzelkovic, “Otkrivamo—Ruska baza u Srpskoj: Ide Putin preko Romanije” (Exclusive: Russian base in Republika Srpska: Putin goes through Romanija), *Ekspres*, September 28, 2017, www.ekspres.net/otkrivamo/otkrivamo-ruska-baza-u-srpskoj-ide-putin-preko-romanije.
42. Sacirbey, email interview.
43. “NATO’s Balkan Dream: ‘Gaining Access to Key Strategic Facilities,’” *Sputnik*, August 20, 2017, sputniknews.com/europe/201708201056618421-Bosnia-military-facilities/.
44. “Dodik: Ako u BiH bude NATO baza, onda će i Rusi imati svoju bazu” (Dodik: If there is a NATO base in Bosnia, then the Russians will have one too), *Klix*, January 5, 2018, www.klix.ba/vijesti/Bosnia/dodik-ako-u-Bosnia-bude-nato-baza-onda-ce-i-rusi-imati-svoju-bazu/180105113.
45. Mira Kankaras Trklja, “Najopasniji naum za cepanje Srpske: Americka vojan baza u Brckom” (The most dangerous intention to split Republika Srpska: the American military base in Brcko), *Sputnik*, December 4, 2017, rs-lat.sputniknews.com/komentari/201712041113667044-najopasniji-naum-za-cepanje-srpske/.
46. Chris Murphy, “Senator Murphy Joins CNNi’s Amanpour on CODEL to the Balkans,” interview by Christiane Amanpour, CNNi, April 20, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9w6AUW3IiQ>.
47. As the war ended in 1995, the IFOR troops numbered about 60,000, but it was cut to 32,000 a year later when SFOR was created. At that time, Bosnia’s population was just under 5 million. At that ratio—about 1 troop to every 140 citizens—and given Bosnia’s population today of 3.2 million, it’s reasonable to estimate that roughly 23,000 troops would be needed today to approximate the capability and capacity of SFOR.

Russian Information Operations: The Kremlin's Competitive Narratives and Arctic Influence Objectives

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Troy Bouffard, and Adam Lajeunesse

Abstract: Although the Arctic states share many common interests in the circumpolar region, resurgent strategic competition globally and the war in Ukraine have reinforced how Russia and the other seven Arctic states are not like-minded and are competing for international legitimacy. This article examines how Russia wages its perpetual adversarial competition in the information environment via state-funded media channels and proxy websites. These tools reinforce Russian strategies to *legitimize* its position as the major Arctic power and to frame its military investments as *defensive* in nature against potential North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) aggression. First, we frame Russia's core Arctic goals, using its strategic plans unveiled in 2020 as the official framework guiding national action. Second, we describe Russian propaganda and disinformation ecosystem, with particular emphasis on two major state-funded media outlets and various proxy sites. Third, we provide an analysis of various themes in Russia's anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives and how these align with that country's strategic interests—including varied approaches that disseminate individual messages that appear contradictory but are mutually reinforcing in seeking to discredit others and legitimize Russian actions.

Keywords: Russia; Arctic; disinformation; misinformation; information domain; strategic narratives.

Introduction

Although the Arctic states share many common interests in the circumpolar region, resurgent strategic competition globally and the war in Ukraine have reinforced how Russia and the other seven Arctic states are not like-minded and are engaged in competition for international legitimacy. Some Western analysts suggest that Russian international behaviour since the 2014 Crimean crisis portends similar revisionist designs for the Arctic region (sometimes drawing a distinction between the European and North American sub-regions), while others emphasize vested Russian national interests in preserving the regional *status quo*.¹ Similarly, Russian media discourse spans a range of opinion, from hard “conflict” frames that emphasize NATO aggression to those promoting “Arctic exceptionalism” with the region as a “zone of peace.”² Official Russian messaging associated with increased investments in Arctic military capabilities also signifies both competition with NATO adversaries and dual-use applications to address “soft security” needs.³ In all cases, prescribed language and delivery of official Russian narratives remains consistent and competitive.

Most Arctic states assess a relatively low risk of armed conflict in the Arctic compared to

other regions, with forms of interstate competition likely to occur below the threshold of armed conflict—including the information domain.⁴ After all, hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns have become central pillars of Russia's evolving approach to waging twenty-first century conflict.⁵ While conventional Russian military action against other Arctic states (all of which are NATO members or have applied to join the alliance) remains highly unlikely given the probability that such aggression would escalate into a general war that Russia could not win, Russia could seek to exploit divisions amongst and within the other Arctic states through concerted disinformation campaigns designed to polarize populations and exacerbate tensions.⁶ Divergent Norwegian and European Union positions on fishing rights and quotes with respect to the waters around Svalbard is a case in point.⁷

In this article, we observe how Russian efforts to frame Arctic positions in ways that are favourable to its interests appear to be occurring in an overt manner using Russian state media channels and proxy sites. Our approach and findings are consistent with Russia's strategies to *legitimize* its position as the major Arctic power and to frame its military investments as *defensive* in nature against potential NATO aggression. Instead of offering evidence of a clandestine, high-level Russian strategy to influence Arctic debates through a concerted misinformation campaign, we analyze how Russia wages its perpetual adversarial competition in the information environment via state-funded media and proxy websites.

First, we frame Russia's core Arctic goals, using its strategic plans unveiled in 2020 as the official framework guiding national action. Second, we describe Russian propaganda and disinformation ecosystem, with particular emphasis on two major state-funded media outlets and various proxy sites. Third, we provide an analysis of various themes in Russia's anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives and how these align with that country's strategic interests—including varied approaches that disseminate individual messages that appear contradictory but are mutually reinforcing in seeking to discredit others and legitimize Russian actions. For example, Russia would benefit from efforts to hinder or undermine enhanced NATO involvement in the Arctic or North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) modernization efforts. Accordingly, misinformation efforts may seek to reinforce the narrative that increased Western military investments in the Arctic will unduly antagonize Russia and lead to unprovoked escalation. Russian narratives may simultaneously downplay Russia's strategic interests in the region, and instead accuse other Arctic states and NATO of "militarizing" the region. Accordingly, narratives that either promote pro-Russian narratives or foment anti-US and anti-NATO narratives are commonplace in Russia's Arctic information space. The conclusions highlight that effective counter-messaging must be coordinated and aligned with strategic objectives to marginalize hostile information operations and develop opportunities for proactive information use—two goals that should now drive Western thinking and purpose.

While empirical studies such as this one can inform the growing literature on Russian information operations, we recognize that the current Russian propaganda campaign against Ukraine and the West falls within the conflict continuum, whereas this

study remains focused on explaining information operations in the Arctic competitive continuum context.⁸ Furthermore, Russia consistently manages regional affairs separately, meaning that behavior and narratives in Ukraine are not inherently associated with the Arctic and elsewhere. Accordingly, more research is needed to properly understand the effects of current Russian propaganda and how the Kremlin may reform information operations strategies as a result. Furthermore, the Ukraine crisis reveals Western biases and incomplete understandings of Russian narratives and behaviors. Ultimately, this article provides insights into competitive Russian information use, seeking to support Western deterrence. Remembering that deterrence is meant to avoid conflict, lines of efforts pursuant to this competitive activity endure as the most prevalent diplomatic and defense priority against adversaries, sometimes in the form of strategic communication (e.g., info ops) and other times operationalized (e.g., sanctions, forward presence). As the Circumpolar North shifts into a more competitive environment, the use of information will represent a leading support role to signal Russian national interests and intent for the Arctic—and require effective responses from our alliance of like-minded Arctic states.

Russia's Arctic Goals

Russia has laid out a comprehensive strategic plan for the Arctic region in a series of documents released since March 2020.⁹ While most of the challenges identified in the strategy are domestic in nature, these core documents provide guidance and content for internal actors to develop and deliver consistent narratives.¹⁰ First, they articulate a whole-of-government approach to Arctic development, promoting economic, social, political, and security priorities and objectives. It begins with a statement of Arctic exceptionalism from a Russian national perspective, emphasizing specific characteristics that demand “special approaches to its socio-economic development” in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) and to “ensure national security in the Arctic.”¹¹ This lays the foundation for Russia to build its case for why the AZRF is important for socio-economic development and national security, with a deliberate emphasis on oil and gas resources (both terrestrial and on the continental shelf), expectations of heightened demand for the Northern Sea Route (NSR) “as a transport corridor of global importance,” climate change effects on the environment and security, the presence of Indigenous peoples, and Russia’s positioning of strategic deterrent forces in the region.¹²

The external-facing dimensions of Russia’s strategy articulate core objectives to foster international cooperation, as well as those intended to bolster defense, security, and border protection. Specific language promises to implement “multi-vector foreign policy activities aimed at preserving the Arctic as a territory of peace, stability, and mutually beneficial cooperation.” External priorities also include asserting control over foreign activities in the NSR by operationalizing the position that these are “internal-like waters;” reducing the impact of foreign sanctions; securing international recognition for its extended continental shelf; and limiting the role of NATO in the Arctic and in the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap. Within the Russian Arctic, the strategy commits to “improve the

composition and structure of Armed Forces” and maintain an appropriate level of combat readiness “in compliance with the actual and forecast military dangers and threats faced by the Russian Federation in the Arctic.”¹³ While military considerations do not dominate the 2020 strategy, political scientist Sergey Sukhankin emphasizes that they still “constitute one of the central pillars of Russia’s overarching approach to the High North and will be the main recipients of financial outlays from the federal center.”¹⁴

In 2019, veteran analyst Pavel Baev of the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) observed that Russia’s two-track Arctic policy pursues “poorly compatible tracks of expanding military activities and committing to international cooperation.” He notes specific hallmarks of Russian narratives, which “grossly overestimate” the volume and value of natural resources (particularly hydrocarbons) on the country’s continental shelf, describe the “appetites of international oil companies ... as insatiable,” and depict competition for resources and access to maritime transportation routes as key drivers of escalating global tension. Despite small volumes of international traffic along the NSR (Sevmorput), Russian narratives predict meteoric growth in this sector. Baev observes that “the most dramatic of all exaggerations, however, is about the intensity of external military threats to Russia’s interests in the Arctic.”¹⁵

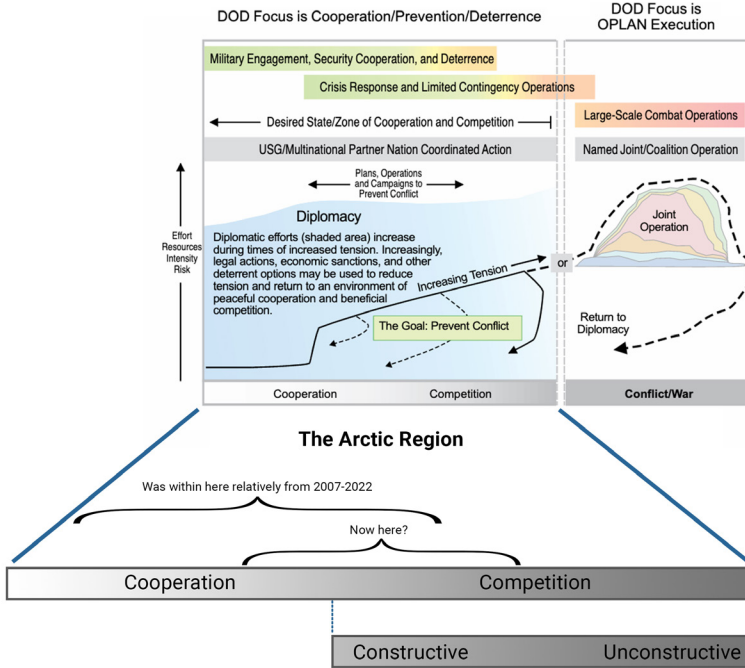
Baev’s nuanced critique also explains why Moscow’s “oscillating” commitment to circumpolar cooperation “should not be taken for a mere camouflage for Russia’s military buildup in the High North,” given the benefits to stakeholders such as Gazprom and Rosneft if regional relationships are insulated from resurgent strategic competition between Russia and NATO (and punishing sanctions that limit cooperation with Western energy companies). Furthermore, Russian investments to promote the NSR as a major international transportation artery benefit from geopolitical certainty in the region.¹⁶ Russia’s strategic documents thus reflect two-track messaging promoting both international cooperation and the perceived need for robust national defenses. Breaching the threshold of armed conflict as an aggressor in the region would not serve its economic or wider foreign policy interests. Legitimizing its interests and discrediting its competitors in the information domain, however, could advance them.

Russia and Competition in the Information Domain

The Arctic is an emergent region of the world in terms of growing access, burgeoning international interest, and potential Great Power Competition (GPC). Over the last decade, the eight Arctic states and other actors have worked diligently to define the Arctic in their own terms within what is militarily known in notional operational plan phases as the “phase 0-shaping phase.” Defense-related shaping activities include “long-term persistent and preventive military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence efforts to assure friends, build partner capacity and capability, and promote regional stability.”¹⁷ At the higher levels, joint planning exists in two modes: contingency and crisis.¹⁸ Phase 0, being the furthest from conflict, indicates regional circumstances involving cooperation

and competition which limits efforts to contingency planning and relies on foreseeable and creative scenario development for guidance (see figure 1). Presently, this is the case for the Arctic—a region in which states seek to promote their national interests for the purpose of establishing favorable norms or defining the region in their preferred terms.¹⁹ Russian narratives propagated in media, policy, and political discourses are designed to serve these strategic goals.²⁰

Figure 1: The Conflict Continuum adapted to illustrate the Arctic



Russia’s Arctic narratives should be understood and analyzed as part of a grand *legitimizing strategy*. In anticipation of its two-year chairmanship of the Arctic Council which began in May 2021, Russia seized opportunities to promote its Arctic narratives, influence agenda setting, and attract attention to the region on its terms (which is a key national priority).²¹ Like all of the Arctic states, it seeks to define the region in its preferred terms by publishing the definitions, conditions, and circumstances that facilitate Russia’s national interests as a norm- and condition-establishing venture.²² For example, one goal is to get other Arctic stakeholders to internalize and repeat the language and narratives that Russia is promoting, particularly Russia’s self-perception as the largest, strongest, most developed—and most legitimate—Arctic player.²³ Another is to advance Russia’s goals of questioning democratic institutions and of weakening the international credibility and cohesion of the US and its allies and partners. “Because some pillars of this ecosystem generate their own momentum,” the United States Department of State explains, “as opposed to waiting for specific orders from the Kremlin on every occasion, they can be responsive

to distinct policy goals or developing situations, and then pivot back to their status quo of generally pouring scorn on Russia’s perceived adversaries.”²⁴

The State Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) defines Russia’s disinformation and propaganda ecosystem as “the collection of official, proxy, and unattributed communication channels and platforms that Russia uses to create and amplify narratives.” It identifies five main pillars:

- 1) official government communications;
- 2) state-funded global messaging;
- 3) the cultivation of proxy sources;
- 4) the weaponization of social media; and
- 5) cyber-enabled disinformation.²⁵

For our analysis, we turn to known disinformation and misinformation sources tied to Russia, focusing on the second and third pillars and on specific sources targeting English-language audiences. As entities in the second pillar, Russian state-funded outlets RT and Sputnik play an important role in disseminating Kremlin narratives to foreign audiences, working in concert with other elements in the ecosystem to create or propagate disinformation or narratives under the guise of conventional international media outlets.²⁶ These news outlets also “interact with other pillars within the ecosystem by amplifying content from Kremlin and Kremlin-aligned proxy sites (some of which are connected to Russian intelligence), weaponizing social media, and promoting cyber-enabled disinformation.” Proxy sites serve as “an unofficial mouthpiece promoting disinformation and propaganda,” sometimes with “direct links to the Russian state, some are enmeshed in Russia’s disinformation and propaganda ecosystem, and others are more loosely connected via the narratives they promote. The connections are intentionally murky.”²⁷

Figure 2: Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem.



Source: US Department of State Global Engagement Center (GEC)

As an emerging region of increasing strategic importance, the competition involving the Arctic information domain is occurring in the open and in a manner designed to encourage public consumption of narratives. Based on open access media scrapes of RT, Sputnik, and known proxy sites identified by the GEC, we show how Russian propaganda from 2016 to 2020 communicated Arctic-related pro-Russian/anti-Western narratives in mainstream media and regional outlets using both traditional news and social media.²⁸ Internationally, such information-related efforts remain a critical part of establishing defensible positions for actions by the Kremlin and of seeking to undermine the narratives espoused by the other Arctic states.

Themes in Russia's Anti-Western Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem

Pro-Russian messaging suggests Russian superiority over the West, seeks to legitimize Russia as the largest Arctic rightsholder, and establishes the requirement for Russia to defend its Arctic territory against the US and NATO as strategic competitors. The state does so by promoting Kremlin statements and its Arctic Development Doctrine, touting Russia's icebreaking and construction programs in the North (including the refurbishing and modernizing of military infrastructure and air-defense systems), and claiming the superiority of Russian weapon systems in the Arctic region.²⁹ Furthermore, Russia trumpets its extensive energy resources in the Russian Arctic—and suggests that these are a primary driver of the Americans' covetous interest in the region. In terms of the NSR, Russian official messaging suggests that the country promotes control over waters and stability in the region to ensure conflict-free operation of the route as a Russian economic artery. Finally, Russian narratives also highlight the country's adherence to international law, respect for sovereignty, openness to dialogue, and readiness to discuss common issues. Even in the wake of Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it has maintained consistent—albeit convenient—justifications regarding its official positions.

Anti-Western messaging by Russia and its proxies alleges that the US and NATO threaten Russia in the Arctic and deny its right to exploit sovereign resources. Framing NATO as an aggressor (and US-NATO military exercises as provocative, directed at Russia) and suggesting that Western countries are readying for confrontation serve as a justification for Russia to bolster its “defensive” military capabilities in the region. Accordingly, narratives cast Russia as a peaceful target of Western intimidation and aggression with sovereign rights that NATO refuses to recognize. Russian news media often frame the other Arctic states as competitors for Arctic territory and resources. Illustrative of this trend, a March 2020 RT story justifies how “Russia has been heavily investing in the exploration and development of the Arctic in recent years as other regional players—Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the US—are also looking to lay their claim in the area, due to its rich natural resources and strategic geographical position.”³⁰ They also accuse the US of an aggressive, global disinformation campaign that sets up an imaginary Russian threat to the Arctic to serve the US military-industrial complex. Counterintuitively (but fitting with the idea that individual narratives can be contradictory within the information ecosystem as long as they serve

general strategic goals), Russian stories often emphasize the supposed weakness of Western states in the Arctic, whether limited US icebreaking capability, or NATO's alleged inability to build anything significant north of the Arctic Circle, or the quality, scale, and outcomes of NORAD military exercises.³¹ These narrative arcs are intended to demonstrate Russia's regional superiority—while simultaneously reinforcing the message that Russia must build and show strength in the region to remain secure.

Theme 1: US and NATO Are Destabilizing Forces in the Arctic

While Western narratives often highlight Russia's military buildup in the Arctic, Russian narratives emphasize the opposite. For example, a February 2020 story in *Global Research* proclaiming the Far North as “World War III's Newest Battlefield” cast the NATO Exercise Cold Response 2020 as an escalatory move “staged above the Arctic Circle, far from any previous traditional NATO battlefield, ... [which] raises to a new level the possibility of a great-power conflict that might end in a nuclear exchange and mutual annihilation.”³² Two years earlier, other proxy site stories depicted Exercise Trident Juncture in a similar light, “marking a new milestone in the rapid military escalation between the West and Russia”—allegedly because NATO was “increasingly frustrated with Moscow's persistent presence in the Arctic, as this region is extremely rich in hydrocarbons and Washington is reluctant to surrender it to Moscow. Therefore, this recent demonstration of Western military might was nothing more than a blatant attempt to scare Russia into submission.”³³

In keeping with broader Russian Arctic narratives about American objectives in the Arctic, Russian narratives often depict the US as a “sabre-rattler” that has “turned [its] menacingly mercenary gaze on the Arctic.”³⁴ In so doing, stories not only position the US as the disrupter of regional peace but also a catalyst for insecurity amongst its allies. For example, the US presence in Greenland is depicted as dangerous both because it facilitates Washington's dangerous ratcheting up of regional tensions and because it supports the US's ability to “project power” into the Arctic.³⁵ Proxy site narratives also warn that this American presence invites Russian retaliation against Greenland in the event of a major power conflict. By extension, Russian narratives insist that Greenland should make its own decisions as to whether it needs other nations' military bases on its territory, bases which “only make it a target in the event of an armed conflict that doesn't concern Nuuk.”³⁶ In this respect, Russian sources use implication and coercion tactics to threaten smaller Arctic states.

Common Russian security narratives aimed at Sweden and Finland insist that NATO is luring Finland and Sweden into joining the organization and that doing so would provoke a strong Russian response. This narrative assumes NATO aggression against Russia and targets traditional pride in neutrality in these countries.³⁷ Along these lines, analysts have identified forged documents and false claims about the supposed dangers of joining NATO, broadcast by Russian outlets and amplified on social media.³⁸ Lange-Ionatamišvili et al. explain that this narrative seeks to imprint the idea that Sweden and Finland will be pulled into NATO conflicts, not in defense of themselves but because of NATO's broader plan to

start a war with Russia. Membership means that the alliance will dictate to Sweden, which would have no independent decision-making power in its foreign policy and—ultimately—the decision to make war. As such, because Scandinavia is being used as a bridgehead to attack Russia, Russia will be forced to act in self-defense and attack Sweden.³⁹ This narrative is supported by official Russian statements, like Russian Ambassador Viktor Tatarinstev’s 2015 warning that a NATO-aligned Sweden will face “counter measures.” He emphasized that Russia “will have to resort to a response of the military kind and re-orientate our troops and missiles... the country that joins NATO needs to be aware of the risks it is exposing itself to.”⁴⁰ With Finland and Sweden having applied for full NATO membership in 2022, Russia has already expressed intense displeasure and concern which, as the Arctic region shifts into a more competitive mode, are likely to manifest in more intense information operations involving Finland and Sweden as NATO members.⁴¹

Reminiscent of Soviet support to the Western peace movement during the Cold War, some Russian proxy sites also seek to amplify marginal pacifist arguments that seek to discredit NATO and its partners.⁴² For example, *Geopolitica.ru* applauds Iceland’s pacifist government and states that it “should be welcomed by those who seek to limit the peripheral area of Atlanticist hegemony.” That site continues to say: “if the pacifist position of the Left-Green Movement could gain more followers among the population and help sway the other political parties toward neutrality it is likely that Iceland could become the ‘Switzerland of the North’ and function as a Nordic buffer zone between ‘Western Atlanticism’ and ‘Eurasian Continentalism.’”⁴³ By extension, Russian state media pays relatively little attention to the strategic considerations surrounding NATO’s Icelandic presence. Nevertheless, *Sputnik* ran an article in 2016 which misleadingly claimed that “there is a strong movement to withdraw from NATO in Iceland,” and an entire story dedicated to the decision by Iceland’s Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir not to meet with then-US Vice President Mike Pence during his 2019 visit to the island—citing “prior commitments.”⁴⁴ Russian media connects this snub to the recent arrival of a US B-2 Spirit stealth bomber at Keflavik in Iceland ahead of regional military exercises.⁴⁵

The threat posed by US “militarization” of the Arctic is often interwoven and linked to notions of colonial subservience.⁴⁶ For example, US military activity is typically framed as something done *to* Greenland against Greenlandic interests, with Denmark building its relationship with NATO “at islanders’ expense.”⁴⁷ An American/NATO presence on the world’s largest island is also portrayed as a false choice imposed by colonial governments. Russian proxy sites suggest that Greenlanders should “not have to choose between the West or the East but could freely define its own national interests and do the right thing as interpreted in Nuuk—and Moscow—rather than in the capitals of the NATO member states.”⁴⁸ We expect Russia to continue strategic messaging about “the United States and NATO as destabilizing forces in the Arctic.” Such themes are typical of the Kremlin manufacturing and leveraging peripheral security-related issues in support of justification for authoritarian behaviors. As of February 24, 2022, however, these fabricated concerns by Moscow are rather moot.

Theme 2: Arctic States Are Pawns of the US

A common, related theme in Russian narratives is that the US uses its smaller allies as pawns in its global strategy. A 2017 NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (STRATCOM COE) report identified this narrative in Iceland and some of the smaller Baltic alliance members.⁴⁹ The crux of this theme is that the US manipulates small nations to host military bases and that they lose their own neutrality in the process. Examples of this can be found in RT and Sputnik, which have run articles highlighting the US plan to secretly store nuclear weapons in Iceland in the 1950s.⁵⁰ This plan was formed “unbeknownst to Icelanders.”⁵¹

The STRATCOM COE report also notes that this narrative could be understood in various ways. First, it might show that small European countries should not be taken seriously and are not credible partners in the international community because they are dependent and easily manipulated. Second, if the message that the smaller countries are being used as pawns is systematically repeated, then they might refuse to let themselves be used in this manner. This would be an example of reflexive control—the method of conveying to an opponent specifically prepared information in order to put them in a position where they make a predetermined decision “voluntarily.” This is a recognised Soviet technique with deep roots in Russian military strategy that is experiencing a renaissance in modern hybrid warfare.⁵²

In any case, Russian narratives often suggest that US-led NATO activities or postures designed for “war against Russia” draw Arctic states into “unprofitable competition.”⁵³ As a June 2020 *NewsFront* story stated, “according to experts [unspecified], the US uses a system of incentives to drag Norway into an unfavorable confrontation with Russia, pursuing its own interests to undermine the situation in the Arctic region.”⁵⁴ These narratives seek to drive a wedge between allies, alleging a divergence in interests. They also serve as a vehicle to drive home threats to states that align against Russia. For example, a 2018 Strategic Culture Foundation story alleged that “the Norwegian government’s decision to extend and expand the [US] Marines’ presence [in northern Norway] is part of NATO’s vigorous war preparations, making Norway a state on the front lines and the prime target for the Russian military.”⁵⁵ In short, the narrative suggests that US-led NATO, not Russia, is undermining the “high north, low tension” logic promoted by the Nordic countries that sought to foster cooperation and downplay the risk of conflict.⁵⁶

Theme 3: The Idea of a Russian Threat is Ridiculous

According to Russian media, all fears of Russia’s military actions should be considered paranoid.⁵⁷ This is a common narrative used to dismiss American and NATO concerns over Russian militarization and, likewise, call into question the value of NATO involvement in the Arctic region. A clear example is Russian responses to frequent Swedish sightings of submarines in their territorial waters, which the Russian Embassy in Sweden dismiss in various Facebook posts as disinformation and as evidence of Swedish hostility

toward Russia.⁵⁸ In 2017, RT reported that there had never been a “bogeyman Russian submarine” in the waters and implied that Sweden foolishly squandered “hefty amounts of money” looking for it.⁵⁹ Russian narratives also focus on Swedish troop deployments close to the Russian border, questioning Sweden’s deployments to the strategically vital island of Gotland and the rebuilding of the Swedish military after Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine. The message is similar to that pushed out across the circumpolar world: why deploy military assets to the Arctic when Russia does not pose a threat? The Russian media suggests, by extension, that the only answer is that the US and NATO are preparing for an offensive against Russia.⁶⁰

Russian proxy sites also characterize any concerns about Russian militarization as a symptom of “Russophobia” and calls for citizens to look at developments “objectively”—meaning through a pro-Russian lens.⁶¹ These talking point magnifiers frequently thrive on citing Russian officials who are experts at delivering sophisticated versions of logical fallacies in the highly competitive international arena. They also often cite Russian officials and Western academics depicting Russia as a stable proponent of peace and security in the Arctic while lamenting alleged Western disrespect and bias that victimizes Moscow. A News Front story from October 2019 is illustrative:

The NATO’s conduct of military maneuvers in the Arctic directed against Russia only undermines stability in the Arctic, said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in a comment to the Norwegian Aftenposten. In addition, the escalation of tension is provoked by European countries, which, to please Washington, join the US anti-Russian sanctions. However, a meeting between Russian leader Vladimir Putin and Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg in the framework of the Arctic Summit of Dialogue summit in St. Petersburg contributed to the normalization of bilateral relations. And on October 25, the Russian delegation will take part in the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of East Finnmark by the Soviet troops ... [from] the Nazi invaders. Events will be held in the Norwegian Kirkenes. Such trends are becoming an excellent example for European countries, which are still promoting Russophobia to the detriment of themselves and for the sake of American interests.⁶²

The prolific use of history in Russian narratives is not just for contextual flavor, given how history forms a powerful part of Russian culture and politics. When Russian authorities invoke history in an official capacity, it should be taken as a serious aspect of the stated or implied position.

Theme 4: NATO and the US Are Poor Houseguests

A common theme in Russian messaging is to highlight misbehaviour of US/NATO forces deployed abroad. RT offered a clear example of this approach when describing NATO’s 2018 Trident Juncture exercise as a “debacle” in which “Iceland was drunk dry

by US troops.”⁶³ It also reported that US troops had sent Reykjavik’s bars into “state of emergency” after drinking all their beer and that many soldiers “needed medical help after overindulging in local alcoholic beverages.”⁶⁴

Russian narratives also highlight military-source pollution from NATO forces in the Arctic. US Cold War-era bases in Greenland have long been a politically sensitive topic. For example, Russian state news agency Sputnik has run nine stories since 2010 dedicated to the environmental damage done to Greenland by the Americans’ Camp Century and other Cold War-era military activity.⁶⁵ One article from 2017 described these “toxic remnants of ... US military bases” as having damaged “some of the world’s most pristine areas” while continuing to “sow seeds of discord in the Danish Realm.”⁶⁶ A related piece from the previous year connects that damage to Greenland’s colonial status highlighting that as “an autonomous, though not fully independent nation ... [Greenland] is tired of being America’s junkyard.”⁶⁷ Articles in the *Strategic Culture Foundation* assert that Greenlanders are tired of their island being used as a “garbage dump,” and that further American activity would exacerbate the “Pentagon’s trash-laden presence.”⁶⁸ Russian proxy sites also point to NATO forces as a source of environmental degradation in Iceland, allegedly that the Americans had left the Keflavik area an “environmentally-destructive wasted dump just as it does in so many other locations.”⁶⁹

Theme 5: US Colonialism and Interference in Internal Arctic State Affairs

Russian state-funded media and proxy sites also adopt a common trope accusing the US of colonialism and interference in the internal affairs of other Arctic states. This seeks to delegitimize the American presence and those Arctic states or citizens who support it. Russian coverage of the Faroe Islands and Greenland serves as a prime example. As these two semi-autonomous jurisdictions have increased in strategic importance for the US, Washington has moved to expand the breadth of its diplomatic relations.⁷⁰ Russian narratives point to this increasingly direct relationship as a subversion of Danish rights. For example, Russian proxy site Geopolitica points to the establishment of a consulates on Greenland and the Faroe Islands as direct lines of communications that “bypass Denmark.”⁷¹ According to state news site Sputnik, these steps toward “direct cooperation” have “riled up many Danish politicians who see it as undue and unacceptable interference.”⁷² RT provides a similar narrative, citing Danish MPs who see these moves as an attempt to “undermine” Denmark’s ties with the islands and have called the American “agenda” in the country “unacceptable.”⁷³ Russian misinformation sites align with and go further than the state media narrative, suggesting that Greenlandic and Faroese independence is something that Washington could *encourage* to enhance its control over Denmark, playing a game of “divide and conquer” using “soft-power” coercion to eventually “occupy” Greenland and the Faroe Islands.⁷⁴

Russian government proxy sites regularly highlight Greenland’s colonial status and Denmark’s alleged disrespect for Greenlanders.⁷⁵ This narrative predates former US President Donald Trump’s efforts to buy Greenland in August 2019, which provided a perfect

framework for Russian efforts to portray Greenlanders as the object of colonial forces. The offer inspired a surge of attention in Russian proxy and state news websites. Much of the Russian material was fact-based, often quoting Danish official rejections—such as Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen’s insistence that Washington cannot merely “buy and sell other countries and populations.”⁷⁶ Other material engaged in disinformation, such as speculating that NATO forces have been preventing Greenland from ever achieving true autonomy or independence.⁷⁷

Economic messages are a subordinate part of the colonial narrative. Because Greenland is not economically self-sufficient it is difficult to argue that its relationship with Denmark is economically damaging. Unlike the situation of the Faroe Islands’ fishing industry, closer relations with Russia offers no obvious benefits.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, messaging in Russian state media and proxy sites emphasizes the benefits of independence by pointing to the increased control Greenland would gain over its resource and harvesting industries.⁷⁹ Where Russia does enter the narrative in Russian news or proxy sites, it is as a benevolent contrast to the US. In the aftermath of Trump’s purchase offer for Greenland, NewsFront cited Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov’s statement that Moscow did not engage in “international shopping of that kind” and “would like to stay away from that”—painting Russia as an anti-colonial power.⁸⁰ By contrast, Russian state media frequently highlights American and NATO countries’ history of imperialism, lumping Western countries into a common colonial box.⁸¹

Theme 6: Participation by Arctic States in US/EU Sanctions Damages their Own Arctic Economic Interests

Beginning in 2014, European and North American states imposed a broad range of economic sanctions against Russian individuals and entities owing to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. These include an export ban of energy technology goods related to Arctic, deep water, and shale exploration/production in Russia. These Western sanctions have prompted large capital outflows from Russia and have had a significant effect on the Russian economy, weighing heavily on investor confidence. Russia is highly resentful of these actions and seeks to have the sanctions lifted.

One Russian narrative strategy seeking to undermine support for sanctions in the other Arctic states suggests that the sanctions are actually hurting those states more than Russia. For example, NewsFront alleged in February 2016 that “Finland and Norway plan to unfreeze trade and economic relations with Russia despite the sanctions imposed on it because of Crimea. Both countries are increasingly less willing to comply with the sanctions that are actually affecting their economic interests.” While Finland and Norway emphasized during meetings with Russian officials that they were not prepared to remove sanctions, the story suggested that “many experts do not believe this” and that this “gesture on the part of some Western countries signals a change of attitude toward Russia” and was “a sign of devaluing the meaning of the sanctions.”⁸²

Russian narratives surrounding expanded Western sanctions imposed in the wake of its further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have consistently reiterated that Europe is particularly vulnerable because of its reliance on Russian oil and gas. Accordingly, Russian media ties the rising cost of living and elevated energy costs across the continent to “illegitimate” Western sanctions, echoing official Kremlin messaging that insists increasing prices are having “devastating consequences” on the global economy.⁸³ By contrast, Russian official messaging continues to maintain that its economy has been “resilient” and well managed.⁸⁴ Narratives describing the economic sanctions against Russia as having little effect and, ultimately, backfiring on those that imposed them, are often crafted by taking numbers and statistics out of context. The message of this narrative is to suggest that the sanctions are useless and, in the long run, will destroy the sanctioning countries’ own economies while Russia has no difficulty in finding other economic partners outside of Europe. These are highly dubious claims with little grounding in empirical reality.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Russia’s Arctic narratives should be analyzed as part of a grand *legitimizing strategy*. Like all of the Arctic states, it seeks to define the region in its preferred terms. It does so by publishing the definitions, conditions, and circumstances that facilitate Russia’s national interests as a norm- and condition-establishing venture.⁸⁶ The goal is to get other Arctic stakeholders to internalize and repeat the language and narratives that Russia is promoting, particularly Russia’s self-perception as the largest, strongest, most developed—and most legitimate—Arctic player. While we have uncovered no evidence that these disinformation and misinformation efforts have had a significant impact on Western public, political, and expert opinion on Arctic affairs, we argue that discerning specific narratives promoted in Russian state-funded media and proxy sources yields insights into how it seeks to justify its place and behaviour as a state actor in the Arctic region. With no regional partners to turn to for help after launching its brutal further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the burden of upholding Moscow’s claim to be the most legitimate Arctic power falls entirely on Russia. As it becomes increasingly isolated from the West in the Arctic and globally, Russia risks its strategic talking points becoming «пустые слова», or a narrative of “empty words.”

As Richard Stengel notes in *Information Wars*, the asymmetry of disinformation is its key attraction, with the sowing of confusion representing both a *method* and an *objective*.⁸⁷ This is true of Russia’s behaviour in the information domain in the Arctic. Even individual narratives that are contradictory when read alongside other narratives serve Russia’s political goals to spread confusion and encourage disunity amongst competitors and within individual countries.⁸⁸ Effective counter-messaging amongst NATO allies and partners in the Arctic must be coordinated and aligned with our strategic objectives—and should not attempt to mirror Russia’s disinformation and propaganda ecosystem. Instead, carefully calibrated strategic communications should emphasize how NATO is a defensive alliance, whose purpose is to protect our member states.⁸⁹ A collective allied presence in the region represents a measured and proportionate response to Russia’s growing military

presence in its Western Arctic and its provocations.⁹⁰ Audiences must also be reminded that a fundamental precondition for the Arctic states to realize their common goal of stability and predictability is that all states respect sovereignty, international law, and established rules. This is the case in the Arctic as elsewhere.

Military strategic planning phase 0 (shaping) focuses on influencing affairs during peacetime. Since February 24, 2022, however, the situation has changed. Management of circumpolar Arctic issues that benefited from interstate cooperation through forums like the Arctic Council has now assumed competitive characteristics. The information domain will be part of this degrading shift, necessitating preparations for phase 1 (deter) and phase 2 (seize initiative). We expect that Russia will escalate its narrative in terms of stated positions and interests by operationalizing intent. Previously passive and/or seemingly semi-benign statements may become hardened positions. In these phases, information will be used to assess resolve, create confusion, invoke reactions, and seek to dictate momentum. The West must be careful to use official statements and mass media consistently, preserving healthy democratic debate without providing Russia the legitimacy that it seeks.

Proactivity remains the foundation of robust narratives, meaning the Kremlin understands the significance of seizing the messaging initiative as well as the difficulties and messiness of trying to respond or defend against dis/misinformation. Russia has done this for many years, ensuring that its Arctic national strategies and developed narratives are highly aligned, synchronized, and delivered. Alternatively, isolated and reactive messaging is easily dismissed. As the shift to the new phases occur, the West will need to be more diligent and committed to articulating stronger positions on its terms. As allies and partners work to navigate through the exhausting rhetoric and deter from increased dangers, the West must effectively compete in all aspects of the information environment. The like-minded Arctic states maintain a profound advantage in their shared responsibilities, values, and principles, while Russia is increasingly isolated. In this context, the Western allies must take proactive measures to neutralize Russian information warfare and support efforts to secure Western Arctic interests.

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, PhD, is Canada Research Chair (Tier 1) in the Study of the Canadian North and a professor in the School for the Study of Canada at Trent University. He also leads the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN). He is (co-)author and (co-)editor of more than fifty books, many of which deal with Arctic defense, security, sovereignty, and governance issues.

Troy Bouffard is the director of the Center for Arctic Security and Resilience at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He has been a full-time faculty instructor at UAF in the Homeland Security and Emergency Management program since 2015. He is the designer and instructor for the Arctic Security graduate concentration and graduate certificate in the Master of Security and Disaster Management (MSDM) program. He was also the co-principal investigator and program manager of the USNORTHCOM/ALCOM Arctic Defense and Security Orientation (ADSO) program from 2013 to 2021.

Adam Lajeunesse, PhD, is an associate professor teaching in the Public Policy and Governance program at St. Francis Xavier University. He is the author of the award-winning book *Lock, Stock, and Icebergs* (2016), a political history of the Northwest Passage, as well as co-author of the 2017 monograph *China's Arctic Ambitions and What They Mean for Canada*, and co-editor of *Canadian Arctic Operations, 1941-2015: Lessons Learned, Lost, and Relearned* (2017).

Endnotes

1. Valery Konyshv and Alexander Sergunin, "Is Russia a revisionist military power in the Arctic?," *Defense & Security Analysis* 30, no. 4 (2014): 323-335; and Pavel Baev, "Russia's ambivalent status-quo/revisionist policies in the Arctic," *Arctic Review* 9 (2018): 408-424.

2. See, for example, Ekaterina Klimenko, Annika Hilsson, and Miyase Christensen, *Narratives in the Russian Media of Conflict and Cooperation in the Arctic* (Stockholm: SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security 2019/5, August 2019), <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/sipriinsight1908.pdf>; and Evgeniia Sidorova, "Content Analysis of the Russian Press Before and After the Ukraine Crisis," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 25, no. 3 (2019): 269-287.

3. Valery Konyshv and Alexander Sergunin, "The Changing Role of Military Power in the Arctic," in *The Global Arctic Handbook*, eds. M. Finger and L. Heininen (Cham: Springer, 2019), 171-95; P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Alexander Sergunin, "Canada's and Russia's Security and Defense Strategies in the Arctic: A Comparative Analysis," *Arctic Review of Law and Politics* 13 (2022): 232-257.

4. Current defense assessments and consensus reinforced at the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable and Arctic Chiefs of Heads of Defence meetings in 2022.

5. Although the term "hybrid warfare" (when describing Russian military capabilities) remains contested, a basic definition is "set of activities below the level of conventional conflict" (from: Mason Clark, "Russian Hybrid Warfare," The Institute for the Study of War (September 2020)). On this, see also: Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: the Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007); Andrew Monaghan, "The 'war' in Russia's 'hybrid warfare,'" *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2015): 65-74; Bettina Renz, "Russia and 'hybrid warfare,'" *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 283-300; Alexander Lanoszka, "Russian hybrid warfare and extended deterrence in eastern Europe," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 175-195; Christopher Chivvis, *Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare"* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT468/RAND_CT468.pdf; Ofer Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare": Resurgence and Politicization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Valery Konyshv, "Is the Arctic on the Brink of a Hybrid

War?," *Arctic and North* 40 (2020): 136-49; Silvie Janičatová and Petra Mlejnková, "The ambiguity of hybrid warfare: A qualitative content analysis of the United Kingdom's political-military discourse on Russia's hostile activities," *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 3 (2021): 312-344; Maxim Suchkov, "Whose hybrid warfare? How 'the hybrid warfare' concept shapes Russian discourse, military, and political practice," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 3 (2021): 415-440; and Jakub Eberle and Jan Daniel, "Anxiety geopolitics: Hybrid warfare, civilisational geopolitics, and the Janus-faced politics of anxiety," *Political Geography* 92 (2022): 102502.

6. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Why Fear Russia in the Arctic? Contemplating Scenarios as an Exercise in Assumption-Testing and 'Red Teaming,'" North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN) Strategic Perspectives, May 5, 2020, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Why-Fear-Russia-in-the-Arctic-upload-20may.pdf>.

7. See, for example, Torbjørn Pedersen, "The dynamics of Svalbard diplomacy," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 19, no. 2 (2008): 236-262; Erik Molenaar, "Fisheries regulation in the maritime zones of Svalbard," *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 27, no. 1 (2012): 3-58; Andreas Østhagen and Andreas Raspotnik, "Why is the European Union challenging Norway over snow crab? Svalbard, special interests, and Arctic governance," *Ocean Development & International Law* 50, no. 2-3 (2019): 190-208; Marianne Riddervold and Mai'a Davis Cross, "Reactive power EU: Russian aggression and the development of an EU Arctic policy," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 24, no. 1 (2019): 43-60; Adam Grydehøj, "Svalbard: International relations in an exceptionally international territory," in *The Palgrave handbook of Arctic policy and politics*, eds. Ken Coates and Carin Holroyd (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 267-282; and Trond Bjørndal, Torben Foss, Gordon R. Munro, and Mogens Schou, "Brexit and consequences for quota sharing in the Barents Sea cod fishery," *Marine Policy* 131 (2021): 104622.

8. On Russian hybrid warfare and information operations, see, for example, Andrew Monaghan, "The 'war' in Russia's 'hybrid warfare,'" *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2015): 65-74; Bettina Renz, "Russia and 'hybrid warfare,'" *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 283-300; Rod Thornton, "The changing nature of modern warfare: responding to Russian information warfare," *RUSI Journal* 160, no. 4 (2015): 40-48; Christopher Chivvis, *Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare"* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2017), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT468/RAND_CT468.pdf; Maria Hellman and Charlotte Wagnsson, "How can European states respond to Russian information warfare? An analytical framework," *European Security* 26, no. 2 (2017): 153-170; Ulises Mejias and Nikolai Vokuev, "Disinformation and the media: the case of Russia and Ukraine," *Media, culture & society* 39, no. 7 (2017): 1027-1042; Media Ajir and Bethany Vailliant, "Russian information warfare: Implications for deterrence theory," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (2018): 70-89; Peter Pomerantsev, *This is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the war against reality* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019); Alexander Lanoszka, "Disinformation in international politics," *European journal of international security* 4, no. 2 (2019): 227-248; and the reports produced by the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Riga available at <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications>.

9. In March 2020, President Putin signed the "The Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic through 2035," which outlines key goals and Moscow's Arctic agenda. "Президент утвердил основы государственной политики в Арктике The President approved the Principles of State Policy in the Arctic, администрация президента России, updated March 5, 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/62947>. Following this direction, the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic submitted a draft implementation strategy for the government's consideration in May 2020. "Минвостокразвития начало разработку новой

госпрограммы развития Арктики The Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East begins the development of a new state program for the development of the Arctic, TASS, May 13, 2020, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/8464809>. The third document, released on October 26, 2020, outlines the mechanisms to realize the “State Policy” and “Socio-Economic Development” plans in the Arctic. Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 26.10.2020 № 645, “О Стратегии развития Арктической зоны Российской Федерации и обеспечения национальной безопасности на период до 2035 года” [“Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2035”], October 26, 2020, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202010260033>.

10. “Russia’s Updated Arctic Strategy: New Strategic Planning Document Approved,” *High North News*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russias-updated-arctic-strategy-new-strategic-planning-document-approved>.

11. The narratives proffered by the prominent Russian intellectual Alexander Dugin, which infuse geopolitical questions with a strong emphasis on history, mysticism, and Russia’s existential destiny, also invoke the Arctic as part of the push to embrace a unified Eurasian identity and to provide Russia a strong negotiating position to engage other countries. See, for example, Alexander Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii [Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia]* (Moscow: Arktogeya, 1997); Alan Ingram, “Alexander Dugin: geopolitics and neo-fascism in post-Soviet Russia,” *Political Geography* 20, no. 8 (2001): 1029-1051; Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008); Charles Clover, “The Unlikely Origins of Russia’s Manifest Destiny,” *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/27/geopolitics-russia-mackinder-eurasia-heartland-dugin-ukraine-eurasianism-manifest-destiny-putin/>; and Jacquelyn Chorus, “Putin’s Geopolitical Policy Paradox in the Arctic,” *High North News*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/putins-geopolitical-policy-paradox-arctic>.

12. Президент Российской Федерации, “О Стратегии Развития Арктической Зоны Российской Федерации И Обеспечения Национальной Безопасности На Период До 2035 Года,” ed. Администрация Президента России (Москва, Россия: Кремль, 2020), [“On the Strategy of the development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring the National Security for the Period until 2035”] (hereafter Russia, “Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone”), <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202010260033>.

13. Russia, “Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone.”

14. Sergey Sukhankin, “Russia Unveils New Arctic Development Strategy: Focal Points and Key Priorities,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 158 (November 9, 2020), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-unveils-new-arctic-development-strategy-focal-points-and-key-priorities/>.

15. Pavel Baev, “Threat Assessments and Strategic Objectives in Russia’s Arctic Policy,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32:1 (2019): 25-26.

16. Baev, “Threat Assessments and Strategic Objectives,” 26.

17. US Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-0: Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Joint Staff, 2018).

18. US Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 5-0: Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: Joint Staff, 2017).

19. See, for example, E.C.H. Keskitalo, *Negotiating the Arctic: The Construction of an International Region* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Leif Jensen and Pål Wilter Skedsmo, "Approaching the North: Norwegian and Russian foreign policy discourses on the European Arctic," *Polar Research* 29, no. 3 (2010): 439-450; P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Mirror Images? Canada, Russia, and the Circumpolar World," *International Journal* 65, no. 4 (2010): 879-897; Elana Wilson Rowe, "A Dangerous Space? Unpacking State and Media Discourses on the Arctic," *Polar Geography* 36, no. 3 (2013): 232-244; Iona Mackenzie Allen and Troy Bouffard, *Arctic Narratives and Political Values: Arctic States, China and NATO* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, 2020); and Andreas Østhagen, "The Arctic Security Region: Misconceptions and Contradictions," *Polar Geography* 44, no. 1 (2021): 55-74.

20. See, for example, Marlene Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North* (New York: ME Sharpe, 2013); Elana Wilson Rowe and Helge Blakkisrud, "A New Kind of Arctic Power? Russia's policy discourses and diplomatic practices in the Circumpolar North," *Geopolitics* 19, no. 1 (2014): 66-85; Alexander Sergunin, *Russia in the Arctic: Hard or Soft Power?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Olga Khrushcheva and Marianna Poberezhskaya, "The Arctic in the political discourse of Russian leaders: the national pride and economic ambitions," *East European Politics* 32, no. 4 (2016): 547-566; Daria Gritsenko and Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen, "Telling domestic and international policy stories: The case of Russian Arctic policy," in *Russia's Far North: The Contested Energy Frontier*, eds. Tynkkynen et al. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 191-205; Alexander Sergunin and Valery Konyshev, "Forging Russia's Arctic strategy: actors and decision-making," *Polar Journal* 9, no. 1 (2019): 75-93; Ekaterina Klimenko, *Narratives in the Russian media of conflict and cooperation in the Arctic* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2019), <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/2369941/narratives-in-the-russian-media-of-conflict-and-cooperation-in-the-arctic/3390956/>; Jakub Godzimirski and Alexander Sergunin, "Russian Expert and Official Geopolitical Narratives on the Arctic: Decoding Topical and Paradigmatic DNA," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 11 (2020): 22-46; Julia Wilhelmsen and Anni Hjermann, "Russian Certainty of NATO Hostility: Repercussions in the Arctic," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 13 (2022): 114-142; and Anastasia Likhacheva, ed., *Arctic Fever: Political, Economic & Environmental Aspects* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022).

21. Troy Bouffard and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "The Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship: National Security Considerations in the Shadow of Regional Cooperation," *Russian Analytical Digest* no. 269 (June 2021): 2-4, <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD269.pdf>.

22. Troy J. Bouffard, "A Developing Maritime Operational Environment: Forward Presence and Freedom of Navigation in the Arctic," NAADSN Strategic Perspectives, January 12, 2021.

23. Sergey Sukhankin, Troy Bouffard, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Strategy, Competition, and Legitimization: Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation," *Arctic Yearbook 2021* (November 2021): 207-33, https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2021/Scholarly-Papers/12_AY2021_Sukhankin.pdf.

24. US Department of State, *GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem* (August 2020), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf.

25. US Department of State, *Pillars of Russia's Disinformation*.

26. US Department of State, *Pillars of Russia's Disinformation*. The outlets' "opaque organizational structure and lack of financial transparency obscure the true extent of the Russian government's control" over editorial processes and staffing, and "Russian government officials and the outlets' leadership have openly discussed RT and Sputnik's role as tools of state propaganda." US Department of State, *GEC Special Report: Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem* (January 2022), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf. RT, formerly known as Russia Today, began broadcasting internationally in December 2005 and has developed into a global network of television channels, websites, and social media accounts operating in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, German, and Russian. Sputnik, launched in November 2014, is the main international-facing element of Rossiya Segodnya, an international news agency created by Putin's executive order which runs radio broadcasts, websites, and social media channels in more than thirty languages. These outlets are not comparable to independent international media outlets in that they do not provide objective, fact-based reporting, but instead "operate as state-funded global messengers of Russian government disinformation and propaganda." US Department of State, *Kremlin-Funded Media*, 4, 18.
27. US Department of State, *Kremlin-Funded Media*, 4.
28. US Department of State, *Pillars of Russia's Disinformation*.
29. "Russia to build 2, reconstruct 7 airstrips in the Arctic before 2030 — Admiral," TASS, June 1, 2022, <https://tass.com/society/1459075>.
30. "Arctic military force & coastal security system created as Putin approves state policy for key region," RT, March 5, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/russia/482414-arctic-military-force-russia/>. Variations on this wording commonly appear in RT stories.
31. See, for example, Martin Berger, "NATO's Military Buildup along Russia's Borders is No Joke, or is It?," *New Eastern Outlook*, November 17, 2018, <https://journal-neo.org/2018/11/17/natos-military-buildup-along-russias-borders-is-no-joke-or-is-it/>.
32. Michael T. Klare, "World War III's Newest Battlefield: U.S. Troops Head for the Far North," *Global Research*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/>.
33. Martin Berger, "NATO's Military Buildup along Russia's Borders is No Joke, or is It?," *New Eastern Outlook*, November 17, 2018, <https://journal-neo.org/2018/11/17/natos-military-buildup-along-russias-borders-is-no-joke-or-is-it/>. See also Jonathan Sigrist, "Norway in the Middle of NATO's Arctic Wargames," *Global Research*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/norway-middle-natos-arctic-wargames/5657722>.
34. Brian Coughley, "Washington's Plans for Heating Up the Arctic," Strategic Culture Foundation, August 25, 2020, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2019/09/24/washingtons-arctic-antics/>.
35. See, for example, the following: Brian Coughley, "Washington's Plans for Heating Up the Arctic," August 25, 2020, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2020/08/25/washington-plans-for-heating-up-arctic/>; Tim Kirby, "Is Greenland the Last Chance to Make America Great Again?," Strategic Culture Foundation, August 23, 2019, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2019/08/23/is-greenland-last-chance-to-make-america-great-again/>; and Paul McLeary, "US's New 'Atlantic' Fleet's 1st Drill Is on Russia's Coast 'Bristling With Guided Missiles,'" *Russia Insider*, May 9, 2019, <https://russia-insider.com/en/uss-new-atlantic-fleets-1st-drill-russias-coast-bristling-guided-missiles/ri26991>.

36. Alex Gorka, “Will Greenland Join the Family of Independent Nations?” Strategic Culture Foundation, May 5, 2018, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2018/05/05/will-greenland-join-family-independent-nations/>.
37. Māris Cepurītis et al., *Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020), 45.
38. Todd Helmus et al., “Russian Social Media Influence,” (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018). While use of these narratives have fallen off since discussions of NATO membership peaked in the immediate aftermath of the Crimean invasion, related messaging is still found surrounding joint Swedish-NATO and Finnish-NATO military exercises, with the clear implication that NATO is behaving aggressively toward Russia. See, for example, Boris Rozhin, Максимально ускорить процесс отделения Гренландии от Дании (2019), <https://mediarepost.ru/blogs/335104-maksimalno-uskorit-process-otdeleniya-grenlandii-ot-danii.html>.
39. Elina Lange-Ionatamišvili et al., *Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2018), 65.
40. Zachary Davies Boren, “Russia warns Sweden it will face military action if it joins NATO,” *Independent*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-warns-sweden-it-will-face-military-action-if-it-joins-nato-10331397.html>.
41. See William Alberque and Benjamin Schreer, “Finland, Sweden and NATO Membership,” *Survival* 64, no. 3 (2022): 67-72; NATO, “Finland and Sweden submit applications to join NATO,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, May 18, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_195468.htm; and NATO Parliamentary Assembly, “Ratification of Finland and Sweden’s Accession to NATO,” NATO Parliamentary Assembly, <https://www.nato-pa.int/content/finland-sweden-accession>. The Kremlin may pull almost any Finnish or Swedish Arctic issue into the Baltic theater, regardless of Nordic intent. Such opportunities would provide Russia with the ability to escalate select issues to Moscow’s benefit, since the Baltics remain the primary strategic, external geographic location for Russia. Moreover, the 2022 Russian Maritime Doctrine presents updated priorities concerning the four Russian fleets and respective operating regions. President of Russia, “Russian Federation Naval Doctrine approved,” July 31, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69084>. While not much has changed for Russian Arctic maritime priorities, the Pacific and Baltic fleets are expected to gain importance, adding to concerns about Baltic vulnerabilities to Russian malevolent information intent and how the Kremlin could convolute NATO membership of Finland and Sweden.
42. “Pacifists rebel against NATO exercises in Arctic Finland,” *NewsFront*, May 2017, <https://en.news-front.info/2017/05/15/pacifists-rebel-against-nato-exercises-in-arctic-finland/>.
43. Mads Jacobsen, “Iceland, NATO and the Prospect of Neutrality,” *Geopolitika.ru*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.geopolitika.ru/en/article/iceland-nato-and-prospect-neutrality>.
44. “Russian Diplomats in Iceland Battling NATO-Inspired ‘Fakes and Lies,’” *Sputnik*, November 11, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201611111047329523-russia-nato-iceland-fakes/>.

45. Indeed, there are multiple articles on the Sputnik website about the arrival of the B-2, potentially because this aircraft is a strategic weapon more commonly associated with nuclear strike than defensive operations. See, for example, “US Vice President Mike Pence to Visit Iceland on Tuesday,” Sputnik, September 3, 2022, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201909031076709293-us-vice-president-mike-pence-to-visit-iceland-on-tuesday/>; “US Nuclear-Capable B2 Stealth Bombers in UK Send ‘Powerful Message’ to ‘Bad Actors’ – USAF,” Sputnik, September, 1, 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201909011076698902-us-nuclear-capable-b2-stealth-bombers-in-uk-send-powerful-message-to-bad-actors---usaf/>; and “US Stealth Bomber Arrives in Iceland Amid Washington’s Efforts to Expand Military Presence in the Area,” *Sputnik*, August 29, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201908291076668039-iceland-us-bomber-arrival-drills/>.
46. See, for example, Vladimir Odintsov, “Washington’s New Ambitions in Arctic Region,” *New Eastern Outlook*, May 4, 2020, <https://journal-neo.org/2020/05/04/washington-s-new-ambitions-in-arctic-region/> and “Trump Promises no Tower if US Purchases Greenland,” *South Front*, August 20, 2019, <https://southfront.org/trump-promises-no-tower-if-us-purchases-greenland/>.
47. “World’s Largest Island Drifting Towards Independence Amid Beef with Denmark,” *Sputnik*, December 14, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201612141048533922-greenland-denmark-independence/>.
48. Gorka, “Will Greenland Join.”
49. Elina Lange-Ionatamišvili, *Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment* (NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 2017), 67; <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-footprint-in-the-nordic-baltic-information-environment-20192020/24>.
50. See, for example, “US Military Base Puts Nail in the Coffin of Iceland’s Neutrality,” *Sputnik*, August 15, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201608151044296087-iceland-nato-vassal/>; and “Secret nukes: US mulled storing atomic weapons in unwitting Iceland, declassified docs reveal,” RT, August 18, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/356360-nuclear-weapons-iceland-us/>.
51. “US Considered Secretly Storing Nuclear Arms in Iceland During Cold War,” *Sputnik*, December 30, 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201912301077900343-us-considered-secretly-storing-nuclear-arms-in-iceland-during-cold-war/>.
52. Lange-Ionatamišvili et al., *Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment*, 67.
53. “US continues to occupy Norway,” *Geopolitica*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/agenda/us-continues-occupy-norway>.
54. “US continues to drag Norway into unprofitable confrontation with Russia,” *NewsFront*, June 25, 2020, <https://en.news-front.info/2020/06/25/us-continues-to-drag-norway-into-unprofitable-confrontation-with-russia/>.
55. Arkady Savitsky, “Assessing US Marines Deployment to Norway: No Big Deal or Serious Threat to Russia?,” Strategic Culture Foundation, August 17, 2018, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2018/08/17/assessing-us-marines-deployment-norway-no-big-deal-serious-threat-russia/>.

56. See, for example, the speeches by Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre from 2008 to 2010; Louwrens Hacquebord, “High North, Low Tension?,” *Atlantisch Perspectief* 40, no. 2 (2016): 15-19; Therese Ekkfeldt, “High North-low tension? A case study of the Norwegian-Russian bilateral relation Jonas Gahr Støre in the Arctic through the theoretical lens of securitisation” (Lund University, 2017); Mathieu Boulègue, “Russia’s Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a ‘Low Tension’ Environment” (London: Chatham House, 28 June 2019); Andreas Østhagen, “Norway’s Arctic policy: still high North, low tension?,” *Polar Journal* 11, no. 1 (2021): 75-94.

57. Cepuritis et al., *Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment*, 37.

58. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, *Hybrid Threats: Disinformation in Sweden* (Riga, 2015), 139.

59. “And again not the Russians: Mystery vessel in Swedish waters wasn’t ‘foreign sub,’ military says,” *RT*, November 7, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/443367-sweden-not-foreign-submarine/>.

60. Lange-Ionatamishvili et al., *Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment*, 66. See, for example, Martin Berger, “NATO’s Military Buildup along Russia’s Borders is No Joke, or is It?,” *New Eastern Outlook*, November 17, 2018, <https://journal-neo.org/2018/11/17/natos-military-buildup-along-russias-borders-is-no-joke-or-is-it/>.

61. “Norway calls to look at international events objectively, supports Russia,” *NewsFront*, March 17, 2020, <https://en.news-front.info/2020/03/17/norway-calls-to-look-at-international-events-objectively-supports-russia/>. The allegation of Russophobia is a common tool employed in Russian information operations, designed to intimidate and deter critics of the Kremlin from voicing their views in public, simply dismiss critics as anti-Russian (and thus avoid having to address their critiques), or accusing people of identifying disinformation as deliberately spreading lies about Russia. Anke SchmidtFelzmann, “More than ‘just’ disinformation: Russia’s information operations in the Nordic region,” in *Information Warfare: New Security Challenges for Europe*, ed. Tomas Cizik (Bratislava: Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, 2017), 37-38.

62. “Norway shows European countries an example of torpedoing forced Russophobia,” *NewsFront*, October 24, 2019, <https://en.news-front.info/2019/10/24/norway-shows-european-countries-an-example-of-torpedoing-forced-russophobia/>.

63. “Pooping troops, empty bars, sinking frigate and other takeaways from NATO largest drills,” *RT*, November 10, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/443633-norway-nato-failures-drill/>.

64. “US troops sent Reykjavik’s bars into ‘state of emergency’ after drinking all their beer,” *RT*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/442529-us-troops-beer-iceland/>. See contrasting stories in Stefán Ó. Jónsson, “Beer-thirsty dates wiped up downtown Reykjavik,” *Visir*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.visir.is/g/2018181029653/bjorthyrstir-datar-thurkkudu-upp-midborg-reykjavikur>; and Martin Egnash, “Iceland bars run out of beer supplying thirsty US sailors, Marines,” *Stripes*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/iceland-bars-run-out-of-beer-supplying-thirsty-us-sailors-marines-1.554176>.

65. See, for example, the Sputnik stories: “Abandoned US Military Base in Greenland Will Spill Its Secrets as Ice Melts Away,” *Sputnik*, August 9, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201608091044096419-us-base-greenland-radioactive/>; “Greenland’s Glaciers Uncover Secret Cold War US Base With Tons of Toxic Waste,” *Sputnik*, September 26, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/20160926/usa-denmark-greenland-toxic-waste-1045702868.html>; “Greenland Pushes Denmark to Clean Up Dangerous American Military Junk,” *Sputnik*, November 27, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/20161127/greenland-wants-us-junk-cleaned-up-1047882225.html>; and “NASA Maps Radioactive US Base in Chilly Greenland, Poised to Poison the Atlantic,” *Sputnik*, February 4, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/20170204/map-greenland-united-states-base-1050344426.html>.

66. “Greenland Dishes on Denmark to UN over US Junk, Then Backtracks,” *Sputnik*, May 18, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201705181053726730-greenland-denmark-usa-military-junk/>.

67. “Greenland Pushes Denmark to Clean Up Dangerous American Military Junk,” *Sputnik*, November 27, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/environment/201611271047882225-greenland-wants-us-junk-cleaned-up/>.

68. See, for example, Wayne Madsen, “Trump wants to Buy Greenland, but it’s not for Sale,” Strategic Culture Foundation, August 19, 2019, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2019/08/19/trump-wants-buy-greenland-but-its-not-for-sale/>; and Alex Gorka, “Will Greenland Join the family of Independent Nations?” Strategic Culture Foundation, May 5, 2018, <https://strategic-culture.org/news/2018/05/05/will-greenland-join-family-independent-nations/>.

69. See, for example, Wayne Madsen, “Trump Threatening the World’s Most Eco-Sensitive Habitats,” Strategic Culture Foundation, June 24, 2019, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2019/06/24/trump-threatening-the-worlds-most-eco-sensitive-habitats/> and “The Pentagon Will Refurbish an Air Base in Iceland,” *Geopolitica.ru*, January 27, 2016, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/agenda/pentagon-will-refurbish-air-base-iceland>.

70. The US opened a new consulate in Nuuk (2020) and signed a partnership declaration with the Faroe Islands on November 12, 2020.

71. Mads Jacobsen, “The USA Uses Soft-Power Tactics On Greenland and Faroe Islands,” *Geopolitika.ru*, July 25, 2020, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/usa-uses-soft-power-tactics-greenland-and-faroe-islands/>.

72. See, for example, “‘We Shouldn’t Just Slam the Door;’ Greenland Wavering Over US Financial Help Bid as Denmark Rages,” *Sputnik*, April 23, 2020, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202004231079062735-we-shouldnt-just-slam-the-door-greenland-wavering-over-us-financial-help-bid-as-denmark-rages/>; and “‘We Love Israel;’ Faroe Islands Defy Denmark With Plan to Set Up Embassy in Jerusalem,” *Sputnik*, November 19, 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201911191077346196-we-love-israel-faroe-islands-defy-denmark-with-plan-to-set-up-embassy-in-jerusalem/>. The websites OneWorld and Global Research offer similar messages. See, for example, Paul Antonopoulos, “U.S. Again Trying to Control Greenland to Dominate Arctic,” *Global Research*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/u-s-trying-control-greenland-dominate-arctic/5710659>.

73. “China shreds US for decrying Beijing’s ‘predatory interests’ in Arctic ... while seeking to buy Greenland,” *RT*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/news/488694-china-denmark-us-greenland/>. See also “US woos Greenland with financial aid package & first consulate in 50 years – because Russia,” *RT*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/news/486709-usaid-greenland-russia-purchase-diplomacy/>.

74. Jacobsen, “USA Uses Soft-Power Tactics.” “The USA uses soft-power tactics on Greenland and Faroe Islands,” *Geopolitika.ru*, July 25, 2020, <https://www.geopolitika.ru/en/article/usa-uses-soft-power-tactics-greenland-and-faroe-islands>.

75. See, for example, Wayne Madsen, “NATO: a Promoter of Colonialism in the 21st Century,” *Strategic Culture Foundation*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2018/05/07/nato-promoter-colonialism-21-century/>; and Alex Gorka, “Will Greenland Join the Family of Independent Nations?,” May 5, 2018, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2018/05/05/will-greenland-join-family-independent-nations/>.

76. “China shreds US for decrying,” *RT*.

77. Madsen, “NATO: A Promoter of Colonialism.” *Global Research*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/nato-a-promoter-of-colonialism-in-the-21st-century/5639581>.

78. The Russian narrative being developed around the Faroe Islands centres on local control of the islands’ fisheries. This industry is central to the Faroese economy and Russia is a major customer. This trade connection is an important consideration in the Faroese relationship with Russia and a crucial consideration in Faroese public opinion and decision making. Martin Breum, “Protecting its booming fish exports, the Faroe Islands refuse to support EU and US sanctions against Russia,” *Arctic Today*, September 11, 2018, <https://www.arctictoday.com/protecting-booming-fish-exports-faroe-islands-refuse-support-eu-us-sanctions-russia/>. See also Heini í Skorini, *The Faroe Islands, Foreign Policy and Security: What Do Faroese People Think?* (Tórshavn: University of the Faroe Islands, 2022), <https://setur.cdn.fo/media/8230/fr%C3%A1grei%C3%B0ing-um-uttanrikis-og-trygdarpolitikk.pdf>.

79. “World’s Largest Island Drifting Towards Independence.”

80. “Trump’s Intent to Buy Greenland ‘One Way to Stop Russians,’” *NewsFront*, August 26, 2019, <https://en.news-front.info/2019/08/26/trump-s-intent-to-buy-greenland-one-way-to-stop-russians/>.

81. See, for example, content on the Strategic Culture Foundation website: Madsen, “NATO: a Promoter of Colonialism,” <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2018/05/07/nato-promoter-colonialism-21-century/>; Madsen, “Trump wants to Buy Greenland,” <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2019/08/19/trump-wants-buy-greenland-but-its-not-for-sale/>; and Tim Kirby, “Is Greenland the Last Chance to Make America Great Again?,” *Strategic Culture Foundation*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2019/08/23/is-greenland-last-chance-to-make-america-great-again/>.

82. “Finland and Norway to resume relations with Russia,” *NewsFront*, February 12, 2016, <https://en.news-front.info/2016/12/02/finland-and-norway-to-resume-relations-with-russia/>.

83. See for instance: “As UK Prepares for New PM, Truss ‘Mulls Freezing’ Energy Bills to Avoid ‘Armageddon Scenario,’” *Sputnik*, August 5, 2022, <https://sputniknews.com/20220905/as-uk-prepares-for-new-pm-truss-mulls-freezing-energy-bills-to-avoid-armageddon-scenario-1100373722.html>; “Russia: New EU sanctions will hurt global economy, hopes for food export progress,” *Reuters*, July 21, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-new-eu-sanctions-will-hurt-global-economy-hopes-food-export-progress-2022-07-21/>.

84. “Putin says sanctions hurting West more than Russia,” *Euroactive*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/putin-says-sanctions-hurting-west-more-than-russia/>.

85. See, for example, Jeffrey Sonnenfeld et al., *Business Retreats and Sanctions Are Crippling the Russian Economy: Measures of Current Economic Activity and Economic Outlook Point to Devastating Impact on Russia* (Yale Chief Executive Leadership Institute, Yale University, July 2022), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4167193; and Sergey Sukhankin, “War in Ukraine Dilutes Russia’s Arctic Successes and Damages Future Plans,” NAADSN Strategic Perspectives, July 22, 2022, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/22jul-Sukhankin-upload.pdf>. On Russia’s messaging on sanctions, see also Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili et al., *Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2018), 70.

86. Troy J. Bouffard, “A Developing Maritime Operational Environment: Forward Presence and Freedom of Navigation in the Arctic,” NAADSN Strategic Perspectives, January 12, 2021, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Strategic-Perspectives-A-Developing-Maritime-Operational-Environment-Bouffard.pdf>.

87. Richard Stengel, *Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2019).

88. Martin Kragha and Sebastian Åsberg, “Russia’s strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40:6 (2017): 788.

89. NATO StratCom is defined as “the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities—Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations, and Psychological Operations, as appropriate—in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims.” Quoted in Linda Rizzo, “Squaring the Circle: The Evolution of NATO’s Strategic Communication Since the 1990s,” *Journal of Peace and War Studies* (2021): 158.

90. Gerard O’Dwyer, “Nordic countries see Russia flex its missile muscles,” *DefenseNews*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2019/08/05/nordic-countries-see-russia-flex-its-missile-muscles/>.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Vision of Ukrainian Nationhood

Jessica Pisano

Abstract: Much of the world has come to know Volodymyr Zelenskyy through his wartime leadership, but before electing him president, Ukrainians knew him for over two decades through his career on stage and television. As a showman, Zelenskyy articulated a pluralistic vision of Ukrainian political nationhood that intervened in long-standing tropes about Ukrainian society as divided and polarized. That trope of division had been dominant within Ukraine—invoked by international partners and instrumentalized by the Kremlin—during much of its contemporary independence. This article examines Zelenskyy's stagecraft in the years following Russia's annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbas, arguing that Zelenskyy's work as a showman during this period laid conceptual groundwork for the national unity his leadership has helped achieve during Russia's full-scale invasion.

Keywords: Zelenskyy; Ukraine; leadership; identity; belonging.

Introduction

For two decades before his global fame as a wartime president, his reported bravado and need for “ammo, not a ride” accompanied by actual courage, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was widely known in Ukraine and throughout the Russian-speaking world for his artistry, humor, and moral leadership. If the Soviet period had been distinguished for some above all by its *bezzhalostnost'*—its ruthlessness or pitilessness—and the 1990s by mercilessness of a different sort, as a screen and stage performer Zelenskyy had consistently embodied and articulated humanistic values, telling the truth about politics and everyday life even when the stakes of doing so were high.¹ As a satiric actor, Zelenskyy articulated a way of thinking about national belonging in Ukraine that included space for diverse political identities while promoting patriotism and unity. While to some, Ukrainians' current unity may seem a crisis response that may not survive victory or an inadvertent product of Russian President Vladimir Putin's choices, an examination of Zelenskyy's work as a showman illuminates his sustained efforts to lead Ukrainians and foster societal unity well before Russia's full-scale war.²

Although some observers in the West have interpreted their own discovery of Zelenskyy's wartime qualities as his “emergence” as a leader, Zelenskyy has long been known as such in Ukraine—albeit in the realm of artistic, rather than political, performance.³ Years before his formal presidential campaign or presidential leadership, Zelenskyy articulated a vision of Ukrainian political nationhood from the stage. Even as Zelenskyy's record in governance prior to February 2022 elicited mixed responses from Ukrainians, the ideas about Ukrainian political identity that helped propel Zelenskyy to a landslide victory in 2019 have been resilient in the face of full-scale war.⁴ The following pages examine key ideas Zelenskyy communicated as a performer during the eight years prior to Russia's full-scale invasion, analyzing the content of Zelenskyy's stagecraft and the concepts and discursive frames he and his troupe Studio Kvartal-95 used in their show “*Vechirni (Evening) kvartal*” to build a vocabulary of national unity following years of societal polarization.

Zelenskyy's Approach

Most discussions of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the context of his wartime presidential leadership note in passing that he is a former comedian, but Zelenskyy was no minor figure in the worlds of Ukrainian and Russian show business. As players in international improvisational comedy competitions (KVN, or Club of the Merry and Resourceful) broadcast on Russian state television, drawing millions of viewers, Zelenskyy and his troupe were familiar to audiences across Ukraine, Russia, and other independent states that had been part of the Soviet Union by the late 1990s.⁵

By 2003, after Zelenskyy's popularity and talent yielded overtures from Moscow to work as a writer for KVN, which he refused, he and his teammates set out on their own.⁶ Zelenskyy created his own production company, Kvartal-95, which would go on to produce dozens of television shows and films viewed on Ukraine television and on Russian state television. In 2021, Kvartal-95's show *Svaty* ("In-laws") was the most popular series on Russian state television and on Ukrainian television, where the series attracted 12.8 million viewers and a 24 percent share of Ukrainian audiences that year.⁷

Ukrainians of all ages followed their show *Vechirni kvartal*, which aired at prime time on Saturday evenings. In its final year with Zelenskyy, prior to his inauguration as president, *Vechirni kvartal* was watched by 18 percent of television audiences across the country.⁸ A musical revue that leaned heavily on political satire, *Vechirni kvartal* addressed topics of interest to everyday people, making jokes highlighting the absurdities of contemporary post-Soviet life. Whether playing a hospitalized psychiatric patient pressured to vote for former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich or an apartment dweller waiving a shotgun to threaten a postal worker delivering an electricity bill, Zelenskyy and his troupe invited his audiences to laugh not at the people they portrayed, but at the absurdity of the world as seen through their eyes.⁹ There were exceptions, as when they satirized politicians, skewered Russians gloating over the annexation of Crimea, or ridiculed Russians over their stereotypes about Ukrainians.¹⁰ After 2014 Zelenskyy and his troupe used the show to advance ideas about democracy and Ukrainian sovereignty and unity.

From the stage, Zelenskyy and his troupe told stories that follow Aristotelian conventions, leading the audience through a narrative arc that ended in catharsis.¹¹ At the same time, they suffused that dramatic form with social reflection more typical of modern theater.¹² In contrast to dramatic theater, in which the viewer closely identifies with characters on the stage, and different from modern theater's critical distance from the action on the stage, Zelenskyy engages each member of his audience not *with* the characters, but *as* a character. This move involves the viewer as a political subject, making possible an emancipatory politics that ordinarily is rendered impossible by the structure of dramatic form. In other words, Zelenskyy tells a compelling story—but still prompts the viewer to leave the theater primed to act to improve the world.

International audiences viewed examples of this approach in Zelenskyy's March 2022 presidential speeches before the US Congress, the German Bundestag, the Canadian Parliament, and other national governing institutions. In each case, Zelenskyy delivered appeals tailored to a particular audience, interweaving references to national histories, landmarks, and touchstones, connecting Ukrainian experiences to events international audiences could understand and viscerally feel. Speaking to those audiences, rather than merely showing the audience what is happening to Ukrainians and leaving viewers to marinate in pathos, Zelenskyy also asked his audiences to reach into their own life histories and social memories—for example, September 11, Pearl Harbor, life behind the Berlin Wall—and even to imagine the presently unimaginable, like a Russian bombing of the Ottawa airport or Vancouver under siege—to try to apprehend and emotionally partake in what Ukrainians are now experiencing, prompting his audience to act.

As a showman, Zelenskyy articulated a political vision that consistently emphasized not only freedom and ambition but also responsibility and brotherhood--sisterhood later would become a theme of *Zhinochyi kvartal*, a show also produced by Zelenskyy's company. Zelenskyy preached not loyalty to a leader but fidelity to the idea of Ukraine—and proceeded to offer a vision for that idea that viewers of *Vechirni kvartal* absorbed and engaged with on Saturday evenings and when Zelenskyy and his troupe toured Ukraine and Ukrainians' vacation destinations around the world. Building a vision of Ukrainian nationhood on a foundation of specific values, he and his troupe emphasized the idea that the state has a responsibility to build honest people, and that people have a responsibility to work on themselves. Their version of a ballad illustrating this idea paraphrased biblical ideas as they sang, "It's not worth looking for fault other than in yourself," urged individual responsibility, for "No one will build this country but you," and emphasized personal agency, "It's not important who's in power—old or new / What's important is the order in your head."¹³

Divide et Impera

In a widely read and discussed essay published nearly two decades before Ukrainians would elect Zelenskyy as President of Ukraine, Ukrainian scholar Mykola Riabchuk proposed the idea of "two Ukraines," referring to an historical, cultural, and societal divide in Ukraine between east and west.¹⁴ Despite critical engagement from colleagues, the trope quickly became dominant in discussion of Ukrainian identity.¹⁵ In a 2002 essay, "The Myth of Two Ukraines," Tatiana Zhurzhenko highlighted the trope's omnipresence. Zhurzhenko pointed out that amid the external pressures Ukraine faced by virtue of its geopolitical position, the questions Ukrainians asked each other and themselves had become not "who are we?" but "whose side are we on?"¹⁶

During the same period, Kremlin and Kremlin-adjacent actors, including some Ukrainian politicians, picked up and amplified the trope, promoting the idea of Ukrainian social polarization as they intervened in Ukrainian elections and Ukrainian public discourse. On television and newspapers and in street demonstrations, Russian politicians, journalists, and other public figures repeated the same talking point: Ukraine was a divided country.¹⁷

Over the following years, social scientists and journalists in Europe and North America also would regularly publish articles that portrayed Ukraine as two societies, with people in the west of Ukraine oriented toward Europe and people in the east of Ukraine either loyal to Russia or self-identified as culturally Soviet. Conference papers discussed the possibility of civil war, and even American intelligence services concurred, as Yaroslav Hrytsak would later recall in a review of the evolution of this discourse.¹⁸ After the Revolution of Dignity and policies restricting the use of Russian in Ukrainian mass culture amid Russia's first invasion, political elites lined up on either side of the same apparent divide.¹⁹

In the West, observers long had interpreted the outcomes of Ukrainian elections through this lens, imagining that the reason that many in the south and east of Ukraine had cast ballots for Kremlin-leaning candidates prior to 2014 was because of how they saw themselves culturally, linguistically, or ethnically. Yet many Ukrainians in those regions had turned out to vote for incumbent pro-Russia politicians because they had been pressured to do so at work, at school, and where they lived. The factory towns, large agricultural enterprises, and other institutions that offered opportunities to exert such pressure were more prevalent in the east and south of Ukraine than in the west of the country.²⁰

Beyond the halls of academia and government, over time many other Ukrainians also internalized the trope of "two Ukraines," the idea that the history and geography were in some sense destiny and their single state might really be two countries, as Riabchuk had once put it.²¹ After all, there were real historical regional variations and disagreements, and evidence of contemporary division was present in everyday life. For example, in the years immediately following the massive demonstrations of Ukraine's Orange revolution, which coalesced in response to documented electoral fraud, members of the same family often couldn't agree about whether protest was a legitimate path to political change.²²

If a split approximately along the Dnipro had been the dominant framework Ukrainians and others long had used to organize Ukrainians' ideas about their relationships with their compatriots, Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 offered a different way of seeing Ukraine and the world. Both drawing on and articulating a form of national patriotism that was emerging in Ukrainian society following Russia's 2014 invasion, Zelenskyy and his troupe supplied their audiences a language and framework to think and talk about modern Ukrainian political nationhood that broke through dominant tropes of polarization.²³ Like the Ukrainian professional historians who worked on the "historical front" during the same period to provide a framework for a decolonial and constructivist politics and history that emphasized change and fertile engagement among groups rather than an essentialist nation, Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 worked on an artistic and entertainment front to shift how their Ukrainian audiences saw themselves and each other.²⁴

From the stage, Zelenskyy and his troupe cultivated a way of thinking about Ukrainian identity that included a diverse range of people and articulated values that were

patriotic and liberal—yet included elements of religious culture and broad humanism that appealed to a wide range of Ukrainians.²⁵ Their approach provided language and a national concept that russified Ukrainians, who did not think of themselves as nationalists, could use to identify as patriots. In this sense, the televised stage performances of Zelenskyy’s troupe Studio Kvartal-95 can be understood as the kind of “pre-political work” that Czech playwright and president Václav Havel called “the living humus from which genuine political change usually springs.”²⁶

Ex Duobus Ad Plures

In contrast to the binary thinking that dominated Russian official discourse and some analyses of Ukrainian politics, Zelenskyy used an approach to discussing the recent past that reflected a growing understanding in Ukraine of the country as a multicultural polity. In their songs, Zelenskyy and his team reframed Ukrainian identity to focus on recognition and validation of ways of belonging that often did not map onto the categories of analysis social scientists usually used to examine identity. Through lyrics and other elements of performance, Zelenskyy and his team disaggregated elements of the seemingly bipolar world of Ukrainian domestic politics to articulate ideas of Ukrainian identity that focused on a diversity of possible personal and group identities.

For decades following independence, many people in Ukraine had regarded regional and local dialects, including *surzhyk*—that mélange of Ukrainian and usually Russian whose name also refers to an admixture of rye and wheat, as expressions of incomplete education or insufficient nationalization.²⁷ Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 instead performed musical covers that elevated and recognized Ukrainian linguistic regionalism. Such an approach validated and amplified beliefs in different parts of Ukraine about the value of localism and its relationship to democracy.²⁸ In a musical number playing on the Russian band Leningrad’s song “In Petersburg one drinks” (*V Pitere--pit’*), Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 sang, “In Kyiv one lives” (*V Kieve--zhit’*). Their lyrics elevated features of different Ukrainian cities--and slyly highlighted the urgency of joining the European Union, noting that England had left a spot open for Ukraine.²⁹

Meanwhile, their cover *De Spasibo* (sung to the tune of hit song “Despacito”) emphasized mutual comprehension across national territory and expressed appreciation for diverse regional variations of ways to say “thank you” and “you’re welcome,” validating the lived experiences of the many Ukrainians for whom linguistic variety and richness has long been a part of everyday life in independent Ukraine. In the lyrics of Studio Kvartal-95, Ukrainian nationhood and freedom resided not in homogeneity but rather in a celebration of local identities.³⁰ Some Ukrainians might have recoiled at Studio Kvartal-95’s celebration of linguistic diversity, as when Yevhen Koshovyi invoked a phrase usually applied to the Ukrainian language: “Our *surzhyk* is a nightingale.” But for the bilingual Ukrainians who followed Studio Kvartal-95, this approach was welcoming and inclusive—and carved space for russophone Ukrainian patriotism.³¹

Kvartal-95's *Zhinochyi kvartal* (Women's Quarter) starring Studio Kvartal-95's Olena Kravets, tackled gendered themes with a mainly female, ethnically and linguistically diverse cast that embodied and articulated a variety of Ukrainian identity practices.³² *Zhinochyi kvartal* satirized the panoply of contradictory gendered expectations and practices that constitute Ukrainian female identity, creating unicity through laughter and recognition of shared challenges and realities.³³

As president, Zelenskyy took the approach he used on stage further, invoking identities that cohered not only around language or region, but also around individual beliefs and everyday practices that did not always seem political. In his New Year's presidential greeting in 2020, Zelenskyy articulated a plural vision of politics that expanded the categories Ukrainians used to identify themselves and that others use to identify them.³⁴ Elevating regional identities, he spoke Ukrainian but also pronounced sentences in other languages spoken in Ukraine: Russian, Crimean Tatar, and Hungarian. He then led his viewers through recognizable identity categories and experiences, alighting upon a variegated societal taxonomy. Setting aside concepts ordinarily used in political analysis, Zelenskyy recognized and elevated Ukrainian citizens as individual humans:

Who am I? An agronomist from Cherkasy, a former photographer who defends his country in the east? A former physicist who washes dishes in Italy, or a former chemist who builds skyscrapers in Novosibirsk? Someone who has lived abroad for ten years and loves Ukraine over the Internet? Someone who lost everything in Crimea and started again from nothing in Kharkiv? Someone who learned Ukrainian because it's normal to know the state language. Someone who doesn't want to? Someone who pays her taxes? Someone who breaks the traffic laws? Someone who has a dog? A redhead? A Muslim? Someone who is hearing-impaired? Someone who hates olives? A liberal? An excellent student? Someone who didn't watch Game of Thrones? A sanguine temperament? A vegan? A Capricorn? Someone who doesn't offer his seat on the subway? A blood donor? Someone who refuses to use plastic?³⁵

Zelenskyy went on to add, "This is each of us, Ukrainians, as we are. Not ideal, not saints, because we're just people, living people, with our flaws and eccentricities." Responses to the address brought an avalanche of appreciation within and especially beyond Ukraine, as many remarked on the contrast between Zelenskyy's warm, human thoughtfulness, and individuality and the uniform, cardboard character of the greetings distributed by the Russian, Belarusian, and Kazakhstan presidents.³⁶ Some wondered at the fact of such an intervention, asking, in Russian, *Razve tak možhno?*—Is that even possible? But the speech drove home a message Zelenskyy and his team had cultivated from the stage for years: Ukrainians are individuals, not market demographics, and differences among them part of the country's strength.

E Pluribus Unum

Having produced performances that tried to break apart the dualities that dominated Ukraine's polarized politics, focusing instead on a diversity of constituent identities, Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 used two key focal points to gather individual parts into a coherent whole. For Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95, those focal points were interlocking foils: the actions of Ukraine's own oligarchic political class, which treated Ukrainians as background players, not agents of change, and Putin's political regime and its war against Ukraine. Focusing on issues about which Ukrainians of different political, linguistic, and other stripes could agree, Studio Kvartal-95 used these two themes to articulate the idea of a united popular front.

In artistic work that laid the ground for Zelenskyy's presidential campaign, Studio Kvartal-95 rallied Ukrainians behind frank speech about and criticism of the regional kleptocrats whose assets and activities straddle the Ukraine-Russia border. This critique suffused their musical numbers which described Ukrainian oligarchs as divided between "a body in Ukraine and a soul off-shore."³⁷ In their parody "I stay silent and smoke," members of Studio Kvartal-95 used a #MeToo leitmotif to recount how Ukraine's political-economic elite had treated the country's population in ways that "Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey could hardly dream of."

Describing the Ukrainian government's sustained abuses of its citizens in areas from educational to health care reform, as well as people's resulting need to constantly go to court to protect their economic interests, the troupe asked, "How to go on? Smoke." After the number, Zelenskyy remained on stage to announce, "Respected powers-that-be, we warn you: *Our* smoking is hazardous to *your* health."³⁸ Meanwhile, in another musical number, the ensemble reminded that same nexus of oligarchic and political power that Ukrainian society could always decide to hold them accountable: "Thank you, elites, for sitting [in our audience], and for the fact that you're not sitting [in prison], you can thank us."³⁹

At first glance, such statements could seem to resonate with the speech of contemporary demagogues and leaders of populist movements. But the vision of politics Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 articulated clearly distinguished between earthly authority and a higher one, leaving little room for the idea of a cult figure. In a musical variation on "Hi, God," their lyrics combined religious vernaculars of twenty-first century evangelical Christianity, in which individuals could address the deity directly, offering "respect" and clicking "like" for God, with acknowledgement of a heavenly authority that stood above human affairs. In the face of oligarchs' ongoing predations, Studio Kvartal-95 kept alive the idea of divine accountability: "No one will escape his judgement. He doesn't have electronic bracelets."⁴⁰

Connected to critique of the abuses of Ukrainians by their own government was the war in the Donbas, which also took center stage in Zelenskyy's artistry during this period. The musical number that criticized years of oligarchic capital flight from Ukraine

also implicitly linked the same to political positions regarding Russia's war in the Donbas: evoking then President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko and his ownership of chocolate company Roshen, Zelenskyy sang that "in the news, they react to the number of dead kids like to an ad for candy."⁴¹

Musical numbers focusing on the war in the Donbas emphasized national unity, as Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 used allegory to describe Ukrainians' struggle to choose their own way notwithstanding Putin's wishes. In "Hold Me, Motherland," Studio Kvartal-95 members sung in unison of a twenty-five year old with "heaven-colored eyes" who could not break free of the liar who always found her, no matter what path in life she chose.⁴² Their parody "My Girl" told of the early years of Russia's war on Ukraine with lyrics about a village boy in a place where "the fence was only on paper" and the girl he loved—and the "strange fellow with a judo wrestler's gait" who wanted to dance with her. As part of the performance, background dancers held popcorn as in a cinema, the outside world regarding the drama as entertainment. Articulating a unified, inclusive vision of Ukrainian identity, "My Girl" prompted roars of audience approval when Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 member Yevhen Koshovyi used terms of endearment ranging from western Ukraine ("my Banderovka") to the Russian-speaking Donbas ("my little miner").⁴³

Zelenskyy also encouraged Ukrainian unity from the stage as he and Studio Kvartal-95 validated Ukrainian people's pain in the face of Russia's war in the Donbas and their sense then of having been abandoned by the Western world and international community. Singing of "European 'brothers' who traded us for gas," Zelenskyy and his troupe told evocative stories ending with catharsis that conveyed experiences of loss shared by their compatriots.⁴⁴ In November 2014, singing of the war's impact on children and on the mothers of soldiers in both Ukraine and Russia, their lyrics told of a young daughter in blue and yellow ribboned pigtails and a flowered sundress, a rabbit under her arm, and "a smile like the sun," asking "Dad, when are we going to wake up?"⁴⁵

Zelenskyy reminded Ukrainians to remember, amid their disagreements, that a foreign power was actively trying to turn Ukrainians against one other. Working from the stage to keep Ukrainians' eyes on the source of their troubles, Zelenskyy and members of Studio Kvartal-95 sang a variation of a song by the Russian band DDT that told of having "lit all the candles in all the churches, save for one." In Studio Kvartal-95's version of the song, the dedicatee of the unlit candle was unmistakable: "For the one who made Ukraine go to war / For the one about whom they sing in Kharkiv football fans' songs."⁴⁶ In televised performances, the camera would focus on Zelenskyy, his face screwed in visible anger, pain, and defiance, as he sung of "the one who so generously handed out lead to our boys."⁴⁷

In their work to project the idea of Ukrainian national unity, Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 connected that unity with territory, enjoining audiences to "look up Ukraine in Google" and "search for Ukraine on the map" because Ukraine would not become part of anything else.⁴⁸ In contrast to the imperial imaginaries of Soviet songs that blurred boundaries

projecting a “boundless” expanse “from Moscow to the very reaches,” Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 traced the geographical features of a sovereign state clearly and concretely in song, naming specific elements like the Dnipro river, the Carpathian mountains, and the Crimean peninsula, of which they sang, “Let them repaint the colors for a time / But it will never become ‘Rasha.’”⁴⁹ In a televised performance in 2014, as Zelenskyy and his troupe sang, background players traced the outlines of Ukraine, including Crimea, on a white board as children came onto the stage to fill its contours with yellow and blue fingerpaint.

Seeking to convince their audience to set aside their differences and live together, Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 sang a cover anthem “I sort of love my motherland” that spoke in far more positive terms about Ukraine than Russian band AnimatsiYa’s original lyrics about Russia, expressing the adult love for country that recognizes the beloved’s quirks and contradictions and loves nonetheless. Of Ukraine, they crooned, “Her head is sometimes a total mess,” but “I love her like a fool.”⁵⁰ In another number, asking “And do you remember?” (*A pam’iataiesh?*) they articulated narratives of shared experience that admitted mistakes and imperfections. For example, of Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, they sang, “those hands didn’t steal at all...but they didn’t build the country either.”⁵¹ Departing from the this-or-that thinking that defined Ukrainians for each other as left or right bank, east or west, mainly Ukrainian or Russian-speaking, Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 acknowledged dissension and imperfection to create a “we” that could include all Ukrainians.

Conclusion

Performing mainly in the Russian language for russified Ukrainians, Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 articulated for their audiences an idea of Ukrainian national identity that broke through long-standing societal polarization and interference from Russia to create a space in which Ukrainians could find an idea of multicultural patriotism and community, a mirror image of the robust civil society that had developed in Ukraine during the same period. While others have noted Zelenskyy’s ordinariness, describing him as a reflection of the society in which he lives, this article has highlighted the ways Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 intervened and led in Ukrainian mass culture, providing a vocabulary and concepts for articulating an inclusive vision of Ukrainian political nationhood.⁵²

The ideas Zelenskyy and Studio Kvartal-95 articulated from the stage did not attempt to sort out a shared national past through power-laden competition among different groups’ versions of history. Instead, setting their audience’s eyes on a shared horizon, they abandoned the analytical categories social scientists use to sort people’s identities and recognized the possibility of fostering unity by validating a great diversity of possible taxonomies that could be used for thinking about belonging. In Zelenskyy’s vision of politics, recognition of diversity also included an embrace of agonism, a radical acceptance of messiness and disagreement in democratic society, a willingness to look with humor and understanding upon human frailty, and a recognition that strength is to be

found in variety: that a social fabric woven of many different visible threads can be more flexible and resilient, and more resistant to damage than an undifferentiated weft.

Jessica Pisano is an associate professor at the New School for Social Research in New York City and an associate of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. She has been conducting research and writing about people and land in Ukraine and Russia for three decades. She is the author of *Staging Democracy: Political Performance in Ukraine, Russia, and Beyond* (Cornell UP, 2022). Her prize-winning book, *The Post-Soviet Potemkin Village: Politics and Property Rights in the Black Earth* (Cambridge UP, 2008), drew on research she conducted in villages on both sides of the Ukraine-Russia border over the course of a decade. She currently writes about national political imaginaries in the work of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and is writing twentieth-century history of a single street in southwestern Ukraine. She has published a widely-read article about Zelenskyy in *The Journal of Democracy* and numerous pieces about Zelenskyy, Putin, and former US President Donald Trump in *Politico* and the online *Washington Post*. She is a member of the board of trustees of the Kharkiv Karazin University Foundation in Ukraine.

The author thanks participants in the Peace and War Summit on Russia at Norwich University, March 2022, and the Politics of Russia and Eurasia Seminar Series (PRESS), April 2022, as well as anonymous readers at JPWS, for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of his approach accessible to English-language viewers, see his subtitled interview with Dmitrii Gordon, "Vladimir Zelensky, Part 1 of 3, 'Visiting Dmitry Gordon,'" 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8OBR9yjfFA>. Additional details are available in the multi-part Russian-language documentary, "Kvartal i ego komanda," October 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMBNvKWrn8&list=PL58H4uS5fMRxViavaZJjhov0DLukPAxYn>.
2. Lucan Ahmad Way, "The Rebirth of the Liberal World Order?," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 2 (April 2022): 5-17.
3. Among many others, Anton Troianovski, "Ukraine Live Updates," *The New York Times*, March 16, 2022.
4. Mykhailo Minakov, "Just Like All the Others: The End of the Zelensky Alternative?," Focus Ukraine, Kennan Institute, Wilson Center, November 2, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/just-all-others-end-zelensky-alternative>.
5. "Zaporozh'è - Krivoi Roh - Tranzit; DZ na finale 1997," 1997, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMa2d28DzxQ>.
6. "KVN 2003 - VL -Vtoraia 1/8 - Privetsvie - 95-y k.vartal," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOKkIoZDn8k>. Zelenskyy describes his break with Klub Veselykh i Nakhodchivkykh (KVN) in an interview with Dmitrii Gordon, "Zelenskii o KVN konflikte s Masliakovym," October 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sTJ2DLJLg>.

7. “Samym populiarnym teleserialom v Rossii stal ‘Svaty-7’ ot ‘Kvartal-95’” [“The most popular TV series in Russia was ‘Inlaws-7’ from ‘Quarter 95’], News for me, January 13, 2022, <https://russiatube.ru/samym-populiarnym-teleserialom-v-rossii-stal-svaty-7-ot-kvartala-95/>.
8. Iuriy Tarasovskii, “Kvartal 95’ bez Zelens’koho. Forbes nazvav p’iat’ faktiv pro problemy studii” [“Kvartal 95’ without Zelensky. Forbes named five facts about the studio’s problems], Liha.biznes, November 25, 2021, <https://biz.liga.net/ua/ekonomika/reklama-marketing/novosti/kvartal-95-bez-zelenskogo-forbes-nazval-pyat-faktov-o-problemah-studii>.
9. “Vybory: psikhiatricheskaia bol’nitsa. Vechernii kvartal,” August 3, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXxtMDEEOIo>; this paragraph also draws from Jessica Pisano, “Trump says he was looking for corruption in Ukraine—where President Zelenskyy was known for mocking corruption in Ukraine. Like Trump, Zelensky was a showman before he entered politics. So what does he stand for?” *The Monkey Cage*, *The Washington Post*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/11/14/trump-says-he-was-looking-corruption-ukraine-where-president-zelensky-was-known-mocking-corruption-ukraine/>.
10. “KrymNash. Kak rossiiane otdykhaut v Krymu posle anneksii. Vechernii kvartal,” October 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hD_QJ68zqfl; the skit opens with Zelenskyy acting out an ethnic slur long told as a joke in Russia about people who live in Ukraine; and “Ukrainskaia sem’ia glazami rossiian. Vechernii kvartal,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hj0Gic5irg>.
11. Jessica Pisano, *Staging Democracy: Political Performance in Ukraine, Russia, and Beyond* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).
12. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Farrar, Hill & Wang, 1992), 37.
13. “Kraina syl’nykh liudei - final’naia pesnia. Novyi Vechernii kvartal,” October 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tT1yJhCCSwM>.
14. Mykola Riabchuk, “Dvi Ukrainy,” *Krytyka* 10, no. 48 (September 2001): 10-13. Still arguing that Ukraine was divided, Riabchuk revised his initial thesis in 2015, locating the division between neo/post-Soviet and European identities among Ukrainians. Mykola Riabchuk, “‘Two Ukraines’ Reconsidered: The End of Ukrainian Ambivalence?,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2015): 138-156.
15. Yaroslav Hrytsak, “Dvadtsiat’ dvi Ukraiiiny,” *Krytyka* 4, no. 54 (2000): 3-6.
16. Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “The Myth of Two Ukraines,” *Eurozine*, September 17, 2002, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-myth-of-two-ukraines/>.
17. Taras Kuzio, “Russian Stereotypes and Myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and Why Novorossiya Failed,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52, no. 4 (2019): 297-309.
18. Yaroslav Hrytsak, “What Do We Write About When We Write About Ukraine,” *Ab Imperio* 1 (2022): 51-64.
19. Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Fighting Empire, Weaponising Culture: The Conflict with Russia and the Restrictions on Russian Mass Culture in Post-Maidan Ukraine,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 73, no. 8 (October 2021): 1441-1446.

20. Pisano, *Staging Democracy*, 165.
21. Mykola Riabchuk, "Ukraine: One State, Two Countries?," Eurozine, September 16, 2002, <https://www.eurozine.com/ukraine-one-state-two-countries/>.
22. Paul D'Anieri, ed., *Orange Revolution and Aftermath* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); and author field interviews, Kharkiv and Kharkiv region, August 2006.
23. Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "From borderlands to bloodlands," Eurozine, September 19, 2014, <https://www.eurozine.com/from-borderlands-to-bloodlands/>.
24. The historians' organization Likbez, whose name plays on the term for Soviet-era literacy campaigns, maintains a website: <http://likbez.org.ua/ua/>. On the activities of Likbez, see Yuliya Yurchuk, "Historians as Activists: History Writing in Times of War. The Case of Ukraine in 2014–2018," *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 4 (July 2021): 691–709.
25. Several years later, Riabchuk also would argue that a liberal nationalism was needed. See "Mykola Riabchuk prezentuie knyhu 'Leksykon natsionalista ta inshi esei,' Moderuie Volodymyr Yermolenko," February 22, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7CjCN5zhrY&t=20s.
26. Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," in *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. Václav Havel et al. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1985), 23–96.
27. Anthropologist Laada Bilaniuk treated this phenomenon in "Speaking of 'Surzhyk': Ideologies and Mixed Languages," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 21, no. 1/2 (June 1997): 93–117. See also Bilaniuk, *Contested Tongues: Language Politics and Cultural Correction in Ukraine* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).
28. Emily Channell-Justice, "'We Made a Contribution to the Revolution': Shifting Scales of Politics and Unity in Ukraine," *City & Society* 31, no. 3 (2019): 462–483. Since Russia's full-scale invasion, others have argued that this same principle of localism should guide assistance to Ukraine during the war and after victory; and Jennifer Brick Murtaashvili and Nataliia Shapoval, "Drowning Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* (post), August 2022, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/drowning-democracy/>.
29. "V Kieve zhyt' - final'naia pesnia. Vechernii kvartal," September 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKoGwbE08EY>.
30. See Jessica Pisano, "How Zelenskyy Has Changed Ukraine," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 3 (July 2022), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-zelensky-has-changed-ukraine/>; Studio Kvartal-95, "De Spasibo," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wv5z_AslP64.
31. As president of Ukraine, Zelenskyy echoed this discursive move. In the nightly videos he has produced since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Zelenskyy uses language that articulated a vision of political rather than ethnic nationhood, regularly addressing his compatriots not as the "Ukrainian people," but as the "Ukrainian peoples," an apparent explicit acknowledgement of Ukraine's ethnic diversity.
32. "Ya zhe Bohynia, vrode! Zhenskii kvartal," October 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWMILLmOErA>.

33. “Pesnia pro silnyi pol. Novyi Zhenskii kvartal 2019,” November 16, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qH5ylk6yh-E_

34. See also the discussion of this message in Jessica Pisano, “Yes, Putin cares about Trump’s impeachment trial - but not for the reason you might imagine. He has another target in mind,” *The Monkey Cage*, *The Washington Post*, January 24, 2000, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/01/24/yes-putin-cares-about-trumps-impeachment-trial-not-reason-you-might-imagine/>.

35. “Pryvitannia prezidenta Zelens’koho z Novym 2020 rokom,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C44D-Hxj8OM>.

36. “Pozdravlenie Zelenskogo, Putina i Lukashenko s Novym Godom 2020,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AfE5ovn7vE>.

37. “Zhizn’ na otkup - Final’naia pesnia. Novyi Vechernii kvartal,” October 14, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hj5O_g_Itj8.

38. “Molchu, kuriu. Muzikal’nyi Novogodnii Vechernii kvartal,” December 31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqnAFmxrVjU>.

39. “De spasibo.”

40. “Pryvit, Boh - final’naia pesnia. Novyi Vechernii kvartal v Odesse,” October 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvdzRR43Imo>.

41. “Zhizn’ na otkup - Final’naia pesnia. Novyi Vechernii kvartal,” October 14, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hj5O_g_Itj8.

42. “Derzhi menia, Rodina. Final’naia pesnia. Novyi Vechernii kvartal,” March 25, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbJbhN8Wlzs>.

43. Jessica Pisano, “Trump says he was looking for corruption in Ukraine and where President Zelenskyy was known for mocking corruption in Ukraine,” *The Monkey Cage*, *The Washington Post*, November 14, 2019; and “Devochka moia - Novyi rep ot Vovana i Zheki,” November 11, 2017; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s03t00D4szw&list=RDs03t00D4szw&start_radio=1&t=0.

44. “V natiashenii nervy - Vechernyi kvartal,” November 10, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7m932B5mMfc>.

45. “V natiashenii nervy,” November 10, 2014.

46. The song to which they referred, which rang out in stadiums during football games beginning in 2014, was composed of a single lyric: “Putin is a d#&khead, la-la-la-la-la-la-la.” For example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_Rl_idM0eI and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54bTUKaVqLs>.

47. “Ya zazheg v tserkvakh vse svechi- Vechernii kvartal,” November 10, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5kaln3sBUc_

48. “Naberi Ukraina v Gugle. Final’naia pesnia Vechernego Kvartala na Kontserte Yurmaletu,” September 24, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKzEXCnjHPE>.

49. Vasiliĭ Lebedev and Issak Dunaevskii, "Shiroka strana moia rodnaia," 1936. The original refrain goes on to say that, "Man strides as master of his boundless homeland": "Ot Mosvky do samykh do okrain / S yuzhnykh gor, do severnykh morei / Chelovek prokhodit kak khoziain / Neobiatnoi Rodiny svoei.;" and "Final'naia pesnia - Naberi 'Ukraiina' v Gogle - Vechernii kvartal," May 31, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OWTWVwvtNw>.

50. "Ya liubliu svoiu Rodiny - Vechernii kvartal v Yurmale 2016," September 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xnqHS9h_PM.

51. "Kraiina syl'nykh liudei - final'naia pesnia. Novyi Vechernii kvartal 2017," October 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tT1yJhCCSwM>.

52. On civil society during Russia's full-scale invasion, see Tymofii Brik and Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, "The Source of Ukraine's Resilience: How Decentralized Government Brought the Country Together," *Foreign Affairs*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-06-28/source-ukraines-resilience>; and Olga Onuch and Henry Hale, "The Zelenskyy Effect: Why Ukraine's 'Ze' is defeating Russia's 'Z,'" *The Toronto Star*, March 26, 2022.

Borderland No More? Shifting Security Dynamics in Ukraine

Angela Kachuyevski

Abstract: This paper examines how Ukraine has been seen as a contested borderland between Russia and the European Union, within which both see an important normative and political role for themselves—a role that has increasingly become mutually exclusive as trade and political alliances become increasingly more formalized. This “shared neighborhood” falls within what Russia views as the “Russian World,” and as such constitutes a core part of Russia itself. Yet, this view has come into increasing conflict with identity dynamics in Ukraine, where there is a growing nationwide consensus on foreign policy and increasing identification with Ukraine as a national homeland in areas traditionally considered “pro-Russian.” Given significant shifts since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Russian-supported separatist conflict in Donbas, I conclude with some suggestions about how the current war might strengthen these tendencies and further consolidate Ukrainian national identity.

Keywords: Identity; Russian World; Ukraine; Russia; EU.

Introduction

At the time of writing this article, Russia is engaged in a brutal and broad scale attack on Ukraine. Despite the fact that conflict over Ukraine’s future and the future of regional alliances, east and west, are longstanding, and indeed the fact that active military confrontation has been ongoing since 2014, most did not expect the scale and intensity of the military action that we have seen unfold for several months. This article cannot address the dynamic and tragic events unfolding in real time. Rather, I hope to offer some context to help shape understanding of earlier conflict and the current war in Ukraine. While not denying the importance of how material factors, such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion and EU enlargement, may have contributed to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to go to war, I focus on important identity issues that add additional context through which to examine these events. Specifically, I illustrate how post-Soviet Russian efforts to construct a national identity have coalesced around a neo-imperial vision of Russia’s place in the world that posits a special role for itself in the post-Soviet space. This vision has driven much of Putin’s thinking about Ukrainian statehood and Russia’s interests. This article adds to the broad conversation on imperial impulses in Russian foreign policy by including an analysis of Ukrainian perspectives, which makes clear that Russia’s neo-imperial vision of a “Russian World” is unlikely to achieve its desired objectives, and in fact may be leading to the opposite—a major shift in Ukrainian identity led in significant part by shifting identities of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. I argue that identity issues are a significant cause of Russia’s war in Ukraine, but also are precisely the reason this war will not achieve Russian objectives due to the shifts in Russian-speaking Ukrainian identity.

To this end, I first consider how Ukraine has been seen as a contested borderland between Russia and the EU, within which both see an important normative and political role for themselves—a role that has increasingly become mutually exclusive as trade and political alliances become increasingly more formalized. I then outline how the concepts of a “near abroad” and a “Russian World,” developed in Russia, have come into increasing conflict with European integration, which contributed to Russia’s decision to engage in a “special military operation” to instill a friendly regime in Kyiv. Russia’s assertion of a special role in the post-Soviet space, however, is increasingly at odds with identity dynamics in Ukraine, where there is a growing nationwide consensus on foreign policy and increasing identification with Ukraine as a national homeland in areas traditionally considered “pro-Russian.” Given significant shifts since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Russian-supported separatist conflict in Donbas, I conclude with some suggestions about how the current war might strengthen these tendencies and further consolidate Ukrainian national identity.

Ukraine as a Contested Borderland in the ‘Shared Neighborhood’

Russia and the EU have each defined a role for themselves in the region surrounding their borders that is based upon both economic interests and shared cultural values. That is, each imagines a normative, cultural space that unifies populations beyond their geographic borders, and an economic zone that benefits from deeper integration. This opens, in principle, the possibility for both cooperation and for conflict in the “shared neighborhood” as the economic interests and the cultural values of Russia and the EU could be mutually reinforcing, but could also be cast in mutually exclusive, incompatible terms, which unfortunately has been the case in Ukraine. Ukraine has in general served as a contested borderland between Russia and the EU wherein each has offered competing and exclusionary visions for cooperation. For example, economic integration has required a choice between an association agreement with the EU and membership in Putin’s regional alternative, the Eurasian Union. Further, cultural values have at times also been presented in exclusionary rather than inclusive terms, especially as Moscow asserts the existence of a “Russian World” in the same exact space where the EU is promoting a normative order that seeks to solidify common European values.

Russia has defined the former Soviet republics as part of their special sphere of influence since the fall of the Soviet Union, given the long history as a shared state and the corresponding economic, cultural and social ties. While, upon independence, then-President Boris Yeltsin initially adopted a more liberal, Western-oriented foreign policy, domestic pressure, international events, and perceived disregard for Russia’s interests, as well as perceived discrimination against the Russian-speaking population left living outside of Russia, encouraged a turn to a more nationalist policy.¹ The former Soviet space has a long history as a shared state and long-standing economic, cultural and social ties. Yet, this space is currently populated with independent states that have their own national interests and that are engaged in nation-(re)building processes that in many cases emphasizes national

languages and culture rather than a regional shared past. Thus, the character of this space is contested in terms of cultural ties, security cooperation, and economic integration. Russia has preferred to take the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that was created in 1991 as a replacement for the Soviet Union as a base from which to build a regional order, which some former Soviet republics have rejected in favor of greater national autonomy and sovereignty in foreign policy, possibly due to Russia's own policies and self-asserted role in the region.

The EU has also developed specific policies toward states in the region. In 2004, with the accession of several new members in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic, the EU developed the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). The objective was to avoid "the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and our neighbors and instead strengthening the prosperity, stability and security of all."² The underlying concept is that this increased prosperity, stability and security are enhanced by encouraging shared values, including democracy, the rule of law, and the respect for human rights.

The ENP applies to states that border on the EU, thus extends to the east and the south of the EU border, which includes states from the former Soviet Union and also the countries along the Mediterranean basin. In 2009, regional engagement and cooperation in Eastern Europe was strengthened through the creation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The EaP has three objectives: accelerating political association, furthering economic integration between the EU and EaP neighbors, and providing for citizen mobility.³ Multilateral cooperation includes cooperation in four main areas, designated as platforms. Platform one focuses on democracy, good governance, and stability; platform two focuses on economic integration and convergence with EU policies; platform three focuses on energy security; and platform four focuses on contacts between people. Thus, the EaP provides significant and substantive support from the EU specifically targeted on democratic and market-based reform in order to promote mutual security through enhanced political and economic integration and greater stability in the region.

In 2011, through the ENP, the EU promised additional support for and greater cooperation with states that could exhibit success in promoting "deep and sustainable democracy" and "inclusive economic development." For democracy to qualify as deep and sustainable, it must include free and fair elections, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, an independent judiciary, anti-corruption tools, and democratic control over the military, and must foster a strong and vibrant civil society.⁴ In the EaP, economic integration plays an additional important role in the project to build a normative space that also promotes prosperity and interdependence. Association agreements, which include Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA), are an integral part of this economic integration process. The goal is to build greater prosperity through interdependence by the creation of a free trade zone that requires Eastern European participating states to meet EU standards for business, finance, banking, and trade. By strengthening governance and increasing prosperity in the "neighborhood," deepening

regional integration would hopefully lead to greater stability and security in the region. Yet, deepening regional integration through the EaP could also be seen as a threat to Russia's own plans for economic integration in the "neighborhood," especially given that signing an association agreement would preclude membership in the Eurasian Customs Union. Whether or not this was the intention of the EU, or even a valid concern, Moscow indeed viewed the EaP as "a way to isolate Russia from its neighbors," which stands in direct opposition to Russia's plans for the "neighborhood."⁵

From the Soviet Union to the 'Russian World'

Russia's plans for regional integration, and its vision of its role in the world and, in particular, in the post-Soviet space, stem from the dissolution of the USSR and the resulting consequences for Russia. On December 8, 1991, Russian President Yeltsin, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk, and Belorussian President Stanislav Shushkevich met in secret to reach an agreement on dismantling the Soviet Union. Seeking greater political and economic autonomy for their respective republics, the three leaders designed a loose union of independent states to replace the highly centralized USSR. This arrangement, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), provided for economic cooperation and joint control over strategic forces, but removed the central political structure headed at that time by former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. The role of the CIS was vaguely specified, opening the way for future conflict over plans for regional integration.

A number of factors led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but the role of Yeltsin should not be underestimated as his drive to maximize Russia's sovereignty and material interests and defeat his foes in the Kremlin played a critical role. Not long after the dissolution, however, it became clear that the Soviet demise would lead to major challenges for Russia. For example, Russia had to deal with the loss of control over strategically important territory, including a number of bases in neighboring states that housed Soviet forces. The presence of very large Russian minority populations living outside Russia's borders in the newly independent states further complicated matters, and Russia's potential role in protecting their interests became a matter of regional contention.⁶

The term "near abroad" entered mainstream discourse in 1993, when then Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev laid out the tenets for a new Russian foreign policy concept. The term connotes a feeling of closeness that, in turn, offers a nuanced distinction between territory that is "truly" abroad, and thus considered a foreign country, from neighboring territory that was part of the former Soviet Union, and therefore not "truly" a foreign country. Russian policy has been that Russia has the right, indeed responsibility, to exert special influence in these territories.⁷ Building upon this concept, a political movement in the 1990s arose that sought protection for Russian minorities in the "near abroad," and even possibly a change in borders to incorporate the Slavic lands of Belarus and Ukraine into the Russian Federation.⁸ Indeed, Russian policy has articulated the concept of "compatriots" as a category of non-citizens, living outside of Russia, who nonetheless, to a certain extent,

fall under Russian responsibility. The definition is extremely broad, extending to anyone who feels a “spiritual connection” with and an ancestral connection to Russia, which in effect confers a sort of ideational citizenship upon this group that, even if only symbolic, nonetheless seeks to extend Russian influence beyond its geographic borders.⁹

The compatriot policy exists within the context of the “Russian World” concept that is not only popular, but in fact constitutes a core element of Russia’s current state-driven national identity project. This concept posits Russia as a distinct civilization that transcends Russia’s current territorial borders to constitute a wider “Russian World” that extends beyond Russia’s geographic and ethnic boundaries.¹⁰ The “Russian World” concept asserts that it is a “*naturally existing* civilizational community,” not a branch of European civilization, and emphasizes the cultural basis of identity rooted in the Russian language and shared Orthodox Christian faith.¹¹ This civilization shares a common past, and is currently wrongfully, indeed perversely, divided into separate states, resulting in a “divided people.”¹² In this context, Ukraine and Belarus are seen not only as members of Russia’s natural zone of special influence, but as integral parts of the “Russian World” based upon the Eastern-Slavic “civilization” rather than as separate nations or nationalities. This construct, together with the earlier concept of the “near abroad” justifies, from the Russian perspective, a special role for Russia in former Soviet republics in protecting the security of the Russian World civilization.

But this view of a “natural” special role for Russia is not necessarily shared. Ukraine, in particular, has been quite protective of their sovereign interests, irrespective of whether leaders have been from the east or the west of the country and irrespective of their first language. Given that Russia has constructed for itself a role as regional protector of Russian-speakers, ethnic Russians and compatriots living in neighboring states, they have consistently engaged in an “othering” process by which Ukrainian officials are accused of violating minority rights if they promote Ukrainian as the state language and are framed as nationalists if they do not share Russia’s articulated historical memory.

Identity Dimensions of the Current War

Russia’s decision to launch military action in February 2022 is not only due to what it perceives as threats to its security, but also due to its perception that a core part of what it defines as the Russian civilization, the “Russian World,” is being torn away from Moscow’s grasp. This is made clear by the numerous official public statements questioning Ukrainian statehood on cultural and spiritual grounds. Russia has often asserted a connection between historical and cultural ties on the one hand and economic interests on the other in the Ukraine case, wherein numerous official statements underscored Russia’s opposition to Ukraine’s pursuit of European integration through an association agreement. In the summer of 2013, only months in advance of the *Maidan* revolution, Putin tied economic arguments together with a cultural-historical case for Ukrainian integration with Russia, noting that while, in modern times, the Ukrainian and Russian peoples exist as distinct

nations, nonetheless a shared heritage, as expressed most fundamentally by the birth of orthodox Christianity in ancient Kyiv, has resulted in “common spiritual values that make us a single people.”¹³ He then went on to discuss the rapid economic growth and success after a previously divided Ukraine was “reunified” with Russia in the seventeenth century. He emphasized Ukraine’s role in Russian, and later Soviet, spiritual and cultural life, and stressed the economic and technological successes of the time.¹⁴

The clear message conveyed was that Ukraine is a fundamental part of the Russian civilization and has always been better off when firmly tied to Russia. He ended his remarks by noting that, “we live in different countries today, but this fact in no way crosses out the common historic past that we share, and that is our asset and the foundation upon which we can build new integration ties,” and further, “competition on the global markets is very fierce today. I am sure that most of you realize that only by joining forces can we be competitive and stand a chance of winning in this tough environment.”¹⁵ Thus, Putin’s argument explicitly tied cultural and historical elements to economic interests and, in so doing, essentially laid the basis for an identity conflict as EU expansion was seen as directed not only against Russian political and economic dominance in the region, but also Russian cultural dominance as Western norms of democratic governance, tolerance and secularism spread into the Eastern Partnership countries. Indeed, “Putin appears to truly believe that the West poses a threat not only on the state level (the level of Russia’s external interests) but also on the level of society and the Russian way of life.”¹⁶

Thus, while for Ukraine integration with the EU could be part of a balanced policy of cooperation with both eastern and western neighbors, for Russia this would be seen as a departure from the “Russian World” and therefore unacceptable on both economic and cultural levels as it would not only challenge Russia’s plans for regional economic integration, but would also challenge Russia’s perception of self as Ukraine shares the “common spiritual values that make us a single people.”¹⁷ Further, Putin argues that Russia and Ukraine are “not simply close neighbors but, as I have said many times already, we are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source.”¹⁸ In a long essay written in the summer of 2021, Putin went further, arguing that modern Ukraine is entirely a construct of the Soviet period, and blaming hostile external forces for an anti-Russian project that he (in the main incorrectly) posits the Ukrainian people themselves reject.¹⁹

Hence, while Ukraine can self-identify as a European country with ties to both eastern and western Europe, Russia sees Ukraine as an integral part of the Russian civilization that therefore cannot naturally belong in Europe, and any moves toward European integration must be the result of hostile external actors seeking to divide the “Russian World.” Russia cannot be seen as a completely different civilization, separate from (and indeed in a moral and spiritual sense superior to) the rest of Europe, if what it sees as a major part of the “Russian World” successfully integrates into Europe, and any wish of Ukraine to do so constitutes betrayal. Indeed, what the EU has presented as a normative project directed at stabilizing the region and promoting mutual security is seen as a threat to Russia’s unique and increasingly conservative national identity, which is threatened by the spread of EU values.²⁰

Ukraine, therefore, has been a contested part of the neighborhood wherein cultural, historical, normative, and economic links overlap and intersect in ways that make cooperation between the EU and Russia possible, but which in fact have encouraged conflict as economic, governance and cultural issues associated with integration were increasingly seen in Moscow as a zero-sum game.

The End of the ‘Two Ukraines’ Narrative

While Russia was motivated in part by identity issues to resolve the Ukraine question with decisive military action, they are unlikely to succeed over the long term for precisely the same reason. Although Putin argues that Ukraine is a construct, not a nation or even a proper state, and belongs firmly embedded in the Russian civilization, Ukrainians themselves reject this view decisively. While once it might have been possible to talk about “two Ukraines,” divided into a pro-Russian east and a pro-European west, since 2014 there has been significant consolidation around a civic national identity.²¹ The narrative on “two Ukraines” posits a Russian-speaking east against a Ukrainian-speaking west, with incompatible geo-political orientations divided by preferences for greater integration with Europe or with Russia. This division is one of the most frequently cited reasons why post-Soviet Ukraine has struggled to develop a unified national identity, and in fact has deep historical roots.²² Even as far back in history as Tsarist times there was a distinct eastern Ukrainian identity that was compatible with the Russian language and culture, and later exhibited acceptance of the Soviet system.²³ In post-Soviet Ukraine, this has made it complicated to agree upon a “national idea” that embraces diverse linguistic identities and different memories of the past.²⁴

While it is possible to imagine the Ukrainian nation to be ethnically and linguistically based, it is also possible to imagine a much more inclusive vision, one that centers on identification with the state, not on language or ethnicity.²⁵ Kyiv has, since independence, tried to both assert difference with Russia, while embracing Russian-speaking citizens as a legitimate part of the polity. This has required careful balancing, as it is particularly necessary to differentiate oneself from an “Other” who is ethnically, culturally, and linguistically close, and who refuses to fully accept that the two are indeed separate nationalities.²⁶ Yet, in order to both draw distinctions between Russia and Ukraine, and include Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens in the Ukrainian polity, efforts to construct Russia as the “Other” had to “tread carefully when differentiating between ‘our Russians’ and ‘those Russians’ living in the neighboring Russian Federation.”²⁷

On an official level, Ukraine has adopted a civic definition of the nation since independence, which theoretically opens the space for individuals to assert differing versions of Ukrainian identity. Yet, at the time when the Ukrainian Constitution was in the process of being developed, it was not clear whether the nation would be seen as the “cultural” or the “political” one.²⁸ Since independence, the embrace of an inclusive definition of a civic nation has co-existed with a nation-building process that promotes the Ukrainian language,

culture, and historical memory. Yet, since the *Maidan* revolution, Russian aggression in Crimea and subsequent outbreak of war in Donbas in 2014, ample survey data demonstrate that there has been growing consensus on many identity issues and a stronger connection to Ukraine, as well as shared values and political principles and a rejection of ethno-linguistic criteria for belonging to the nation.²⁹ Indeed, Russian-speakers in Ukraine's east and south participating in surveys and semi-structured interviews shared the same views on Russian aggression as the rest of the country did, pointing to national consensus, not an ethnic or linguistic divide.³⁰

Because Russian was the main language of social mobility and inter-ethnic communication for many years, the Russian language is prevalent in urban areas and among the cultural, economic and political elite, no matter one's ethnic background. Most Ukrainian citizens who mainly speak Russian possess, according to survey research, an increasingly salient Ukrainian identity, which could be viewed as a rejection of Moscow's claim to "protect" them and a sort of "refusal to identify with the enemy."³¹ Russian-speakers in Ukraine have primarily remained Russian-speaking, but language use does not appear to influence attachment to the Ukrainian state, despite the east-west linguistic divide.³² In fact, Russian-speaking Ukrainians have increasingly identified Ukrainian as their native language, even if they continue to speak primarily Russian and may not even speak Ukrainian well.³³ The result is that more people consider Ukrainian their native language than actually regularly speak it.³⁴ Identifying Ukrainian as one's native language, regardless of regular use or even proficiency might be a way to express national identity.³⁵ Yet, as they are becoming "more Ukrainian," they are also changing the meaning of what that means.³⁶

Conclusion

It is too early in this war to draw any meaningful conclusions about what the war means for the future of Ukraine, Ukrainian national identity, or relations with Russia. But a few observations can be made. First, scholars writing soon after the Soviet collapse expected that Russian-speaking populations would resist nationalizing moves by newly independent states, and perhaps even form a distinct identity in the post-Soviet space.³⁷ In Ukraine, however, as substantiated by the numerous survey studies and analyses cited above, we have seen that language usage among Russian-speakers has not significantly changed, but at the same time, identification with Ukraine as a homeland and with the Ukrainian language as a native tongue have both markedly increased. This trend intensified after the *Maidan* revolution and Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbas, so there is reason to expect that it will only grow stronger after the war ends, perhaps even resulting in greater regular usage of Ukrainian. While it is too early for significant scholarship to exist, emerging evidence suggests strong national unity and the erosion of regional differences. For example, while 65 percent of Ukrainians in February 2022 primarily identified as a citizen of Ukraine, rather than with their region, the number today is 85 percent.³⁸ Additionally, 98 percent of Ukrainians who lived before February 24, 2022 and live now in Ukrainian government-

controlled areas reject Russian narratives about the causes and justifications for the current war and instead agree with the Ukrainian government position. Further, 100 percent of those who fled Russian-controlled areas reject the Russian narrative in favor of the Ukrainian one, and 81 percent of those living under Russian occupation express the same pro-Ukrainian views.³⁹ Indeed, while before the war 54 percent of the primarily Russian-speaking south and 62 percent of the primarily Russian-speaking east favored friendly relations with Russia, without customs or visas, those numbers have diminished to 14 percent and 17 percent respectively.⁴⁰ In fact, 90 percent of Ukrainians in the south and 85 percent in the east, both Russian-speaking areas traditionally seen as more pro-Russian, now express a negative view toward Russia.⁴¹ Russian aggression seems to have achieved Ukrainian national unity rather than what Putin seems to have expected given his July 2021 article.

Second, given this evidence, it is extremely clear that the “Russian World” concept is a complete and total failure. It failed first as an effort at bolstering Russian soft power by attracting Russian speakers abroad, and now it is failing as an effort at hard power as Russian speaking cities fight off Russian aggression and assert their Ukrainian identity. As the emerging evidence above indicates, pro-Russian sentiment in the east and the south of the country that existed before 2014 has been weakened by eight years of war, and has severely deteriorated since February 2022, replaced by increased attachment to Ukraine and to strengthening Ukrainian identity, regardless of ethnicity or language use. It seems reasonable to infer that the current war will only further solidify these identity shifts, perhaps irreversibly.

Finally, whether or not it was ever appropriate to distinguish between “two Ukraines,” now it is imminently clear that there is one Ukraine. Previous regional differences in geo-political orientation and attachment to a national idea are disappearing. In the midst of Russian aggression, the nation is united from Kharkiv in the east to Lviv in the west. Russian-speaking cities are bearing the brunt of the military aggression and are proving their opposition to Putin’s “special military operation” and rejection of his “Russian World” thesis with bravery and fierce resistance. It seems clear that Putin has managed to unite not only the West, but also all of Ukraine, which can hardly have been his intention. Ukraine is a borderland no more.

Angela Kachuyevski is an associate professor of political science at Arcadia University in suburban Philadelphia. She specializes in conflict resolution, security studies, minority rights, and divided societies, with a particular focus on conflicts involving Russian speaking minorities in Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Moldova. She was a Fulbright Scholar in Ukraine in spring 2018, where she taught at Karazin National University and began field research in Kharkiv and Odesa.

Endnotes

1. Ammon Cheskin and Angela Kachuyevski, "The Russian-speaking Populations in the Post-Soviet Space: Language, Politics and Identity," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 1 (2019): 7; Marlene Laruelle, *The "Russian World": Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination* (Washington, DC: Center on Global Interests, 2015); Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 405-406.
2. European Union Neighborhood Policy, http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/index_en.htm.
3. European Union Eastern Partnership, <http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern>.
4. European Union Neighborhood Policy, http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/index_en.htm.
5. Igor Zevelev, "The Russian World Boundaries: Russia's National Identity Transformation and New Foreign Policy Doctrine," *Russia in Global Affairs* 7, no. 2 (2014): 5, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Russian-World-Boundaries-16707>.
6. Approximately 25 million Russians were living in the Soviet Union, but outside the borders of current day Russia, upon the collapse of the USSR.
7. Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, 405.
8. Laruelle, *Russian World*, 7.
9. Cheskin and Kachuyevski, "Russian-speaking Populations," 8.
10. Zevelev, "Russian World Boundaries," 5; and Laruelle, *Russian World*, 6.
11. Valentina Feklyunina, "Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the 'Russian World(s)'" *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2015): 11-12; Zevelev, "Russian World Boundaries," 5.
12. Feklyunina, "Soft Power," 12; Vladimir Putin, "Address By President of the Russian Federation," March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.
13. Vladimir Putin, "Remarks at Orthodox-Slavic Values: The Foundation of Ukraine's Civilisational Choice Conference," The President of the Russian Federation Official Website, July 27, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18961>.
14. Putin, "Remarks," 1.
15. Putin, "Remarks," 3.
16. Lila Shevtsova, "The Russia Factor," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 3 (2014): 76.
17. Putin, "Remarks," 1.
18. Putin, "Address."
19. Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," The President of the Russian Federation Official Website, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

20. Zevelev, "Russian World Boundaries," 5.
21. KIIS Survey, "Indicators of National-Civic Ukrainian Identity," July 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1131&page=1>.
22. Nadiia Bureiko and Teodor Lucian Moga, "The Ukrainian-Russian Linguistic Dyad and its Impact on National Identity in Ukraine," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 1 (2019): 140.
23. Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "The Myth of Two Ukraines," Eurozine, September 17, 2002, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-myth-of-two-ukraines>.
24. Zhurzhenko, "Myth," 3-5.
25. Olga Onuch and Henry E. Hale, "Capturing Ethnicity: The Case of Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 2-3 (2018): 100.
26. Taras Kuzio, "Identity and Nation-Building in Ukraine: Defining the 'Other,'" *Ethnicities* 1, no. 3 (2001): 344.
27. Kuzio, "Identity," 356.
28. Dominique Arel, "Interpreting 'Nationality' and 'Language' in the 2001 Ukrainian Census," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 18, no. 3 (2002): 217.
29. Volodymyr Kulyk, "Shedding Russianness, Recasting Ukrainianness: The Post-Euromaidan Dynamics of Ethnonational Identification in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 2-3 (2018): 119-138; Grigore Pop-Eleches and Graeme B. Robertson, "Identity and Political Preferences in Ukraine- Before and After the Euromaidan," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 2-3 (2018): 107; Bureiko and Moga, "Ukrainian-Russian Linguistic Dyad," 142, 146, 153; and Volodymyr Kulyk, "Identity in Transformation: Russian-speakers in Post-Soviet Ukraine," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 1 (2019): 170.
30. Kulyk, "Identity in Transformation," 157, 162; and Kulyk, "Shedding Russianness," 134.
31. Kulyk, "Identity in Transformation," 157, 162; and Kulyk, "Shedding Russianness," 134.
32. Bureiko and Moga, "Ukrainian-Russian Linguistic Dyad," 150.
33. Bureiko and Moga, 147; Kulyk, "Shedding Russianness," 133; and Kulyk, "Identity in Transformation," 162.
34. Bureiko and Moga, 149; Abel Polese and Anna Wylegala, "Odessa and Lvov or Odesa and Lviv: How important is a letter? Reflections on the 'other' in two Ukrainian cities," *Nationalities Papers* 36.5 (2008): 790.
35. Arel, "Interpreting 'Nationality,'" 217.
36. Kulyk, "Shedding Russianness," 119; Kulyk, "Identity in Transformation," 169; and Onuch and Hale, "Capturing Ethnicity."

37. See, for example, Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and David Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
38. KIIS Survey, “Indicators of National-Civic Ukrainian Identity,” July 2022. <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1131&page=1>.
39. KIIS Survey, “Perception Index of the Russian-Ukrainian War,” May 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1113&page=3>.
40. KIIS Survey, “How Ukrainians See Relations Between Ukraine and Russia,” July 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1127&page=1>.
41. KIIS Survey, “Dynamics of the Population’s Attitude to Russia and the Emotional Background Due to the War,” May 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1112&page=1>.

The Yugoslavia Civil War and the Allies in World War II

Caleb M. Reilly

Abstract: Allied support for the various factions within Yugoslavia waxed and waned throughout World War II. This essay examines who comprised those factions by providing an in-depth analysis of their goals and their leaders. The intra-factional fighting resulted in one of the highest rates of suffering of all nations during World War II, and a theretofore little-known communist in charge of the country until his death in 1980. Allied support changed throughout the war based on the evolving understanding, and undoubtedly fueled the fighting between groups, while preventing the Axis from fully concentrating on defeating Russia in Operation Barbarossa.

Keywords: Yugoslavia; civil war; Allies; Axis; World War II.

Introduction

While the entire world was engaged in total war between 1941 and 1945, Yugoslavia was viciously destroying itself in a civil war. Not only were Yugoslavians fighting external invaders, but internal fighting between two resistance groups—the Chetniks and the Partisans—and the Axis-backed puppet regime known as the Ustaše all occurred simultaneously. The amount of death and destruction wrought within Yugoslavia was great, and the Allied response and support waxed and waned, at times directly conflicting with other members of the alliance. The result is that little is understood generally of the Yugoslavia civil war, and even less is understood about the motivating factors, external supporters, and individual actors within each faction. This essay will provide background information on the seeds of war, describe the fighting and evolving alliances, and then will examine the changing external support provided by the Allies. Ultimately, ignoring individual politics of the Chetniks and Partisans and choosing the side inflicting more damage on the Germans, the Allies ceased supporting the Chetniks midway through the war in favor of supporting the seemingly more active Partisans. Although Allied leaders never gained a full appreciation for the groups' motivations for post-war Yugoslavia, the practical English prime minister, Winston Churchill, convinced the rest of the Allies to exclusively support the Partisans despite their strong communist ideology. This dual support to antagonist groups from the Allies undoubtedly contributed to the raging civil war.

Yugoslavia was strategically important. Axis interests centered on the need for resources, materiel, and manpower.¹ Führer Adolf Hitler desired shoring up the southern flank prior to beginning Operation Barbarossa so that German forces did not need to expend limited resources fighting a war in the Balkans while fighting in Russia. Additionally, since Germany did not possess the needed petroleum and mineral assets found in the Balkans, Hitler wanted the resources to fuel Barbarossa.² The Allies had their own intentions for the Balkans, of course. Russian Premier Josef Stalin desperately wanted the Allies to open a

second European front to ease some of the pressure off the Red Army. The British initially wanted to frustrate any German acquisition of laborers and/or material from the Balkans, while increasing its Balkan influence.³ At war's end, the British coordinated with the Soviet Union for spheres of influence.⁴ The US pragmatically supported both the Partisans and Chetniks to balance each's postwar influence on the country.⁵ The support provided to Yugoslavia resistance groups fueled the ferocity of the civil war, in a country which had experienced unrest since its inception at the end of World War I.

Yugoslavia's Origins and the Seeds of Discontent

Yugoslavia was a multi-ethnic, multi-religious state formed by the Treaty of Versailles. Originally "The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes," it was renamed "Yugoslavia" in 1929. It consisted of five distinct nations of Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Montenegrins, although the latter two were claimed by Serbs as Serbs.⁶ While sometimes under the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman Empires, the five nations had never been under a single monarch prior to the Treaty of Versailles. However, faced with external threats from Italy and Bolsheviks, the nations established a single state. The way the nations united proved calamitous in subsequent years due to their organization outside of federal principles.⁷ The system clearly favored the Serbs due to their victory over the formerly great Ottoman Empire during the Balkans War in 1913, and its subsequent valiant performance during the Great War. The short-term gains that strengthened the Serbs kept Yugoslavia in permanent crisis.⁸ One of the clear losers, the Croats, did not forget the reason for their tenuous standing within Yugoslavia as they eventually became the major ethnic group of the murderous Ustaše.

The Croats had good reason for disdain of their positioning. Possessing the second most populous ethnicity within Yugoslavia, they were not provided equal representation within the government. Rallying behind the leadership of Stjepan Radić and his party, Croats soon found themselves supportive of a party that frequently refused to participate with the interim parliament due to perceived slights in the new government.⁹ Radić gradually sought additional external support from the Communist International (Comintern) organization and was subsequently assassinated at parliament in June 1928, resulting in further distrust and anger with the Yugoslav parliament. Under King Alexander I's leadership, Yugoslavia transitioned to a royal dictatorship.¹⁰

Yugoslavia was poorly managed, and it shunned external support. Dysfunction and mismanagement defined Yugoslavia during the 1930s. As Europe inched toward war, Yugoslavia anxiously clung to neutrality.¹¹ Yugoslav Prince Paul visited Berlin in June 1939 in a failed German attempt to gain Yugoslavia's loyalty.¹² Yugoslavia was in a tenuous situation: economically weak and consisting of multiple competing factions, it was ripe for invasion. With the Allies on their heels and possessing little appetite to provide meaningful support, Paul reluctantly joined the Tripartite Pact on March 25, 1941. This agreement guarded the Axis' southern flank and gave them critical fuel resources, and Paul secured some provisos: Yugoslav sovereignty remained intact, there was no military commitment

required, no transit of German troops through Yugoslav territory was permitted (an agreement with questionable certainty), and there would be support for Salonika when the war was over.¹³ While generally a solid negotiation for the weak Yugoslavia, news of the agreement infuriated Yugoslavian citizens.

War Begins

Just two days after joining the Tripartite Pact, on March 27, 1941, various Yugoslav factions engaged in a coup to overthrow King Peter II. Anger with Peter II's regime simmered for years, and the pact was simply the final issue to push tempers over the edge. Spearheaded by Yugoslav nationalists, the revolutionaries attempted to maintain some semblance of continuity within the newly established government. However, having been reactively born, the resulting system was poorly organized and supported.¹⁴ While the newly established leadership attempted to portray itself as a continuation of the previous regime with respect to foreign policy, including the Tripartite Pact, Hitler quickly decided that Yugoslavia could not be left alone.

Hitler was enraged upon hearing of the Yugoslavia coup and immediately ordered his generals to attack Yugoslavia "with merciless brutality."¹⁵ Hitler was driven not only by deep-seated racism, but also by the need to delay Barbarossa to secure his southern flank. Hitler feared the Russian winter, a risk he sought to minimize by planning to begin Barbarossa on May 12, 1941.¹⁶ The Axis invaded Yugoslavia on April 6, 1941, and Hitler was forced to delay Barbarossa by more than a month. Yugoslavia's army was outmatched, and Germany accepted Yugoslavia's total capitulation on April 18, 1941.

Effective and brutal, the invasion of Yugoslavia was over within 12 days. Hitler originally attempted to empower the Croatian Peasant Party's leader, Vladko Maček, but Maček turned down the offer to lead an independent Croatian puppet state. Hitler then turned to the Ustaše and its leader, Ante Pavelić. Believing that the fascist Ustaše would be supportive of Nazism, the Wehrmacht exchanged effective invasion troops with less-proficient occupation troops.¹⁷ Believing their Yugoslavia question was answered, German planners turned their attention and resources east. Meanwhile, the Ustaše rapidly began their onslaught on non-Croats and non-Catholics. What followed from the Ustaše's reign, German occupation, and competing inter-factional fighting was upwards of 1.75 million Yugoslavians dead by war's end, and a little-known communist—Josip Broz, or "Tito"—in charge of a broken nation. Before examining how Tito's Partisans became victorious, it will first be necessary to examine the competing factions within Yugoslavia.

The Factions

The Ustaše

The first faction that will be examined is the Ustaše. Primarily Croat, the Ustaše were a disaffected group formed from both within and external to Yugoslavia. Their primary

goal was not to have a unified Yugoslavia; instead, their focus was to have an independent Croat state, with subordinate states under Croat rule.¹⁸ Inspired by Nazi and Italian flavors of fascism, the Ustaše dreamed that the independent Croat nation would be freed from the grasp of other, lesser races. One former Partisan official remembered that “both groups [Communist Partisans and Ustaše] believed that Yugoslavia should be broken up into its component parts. The [Ustaše] wanted a series of independent states” and Yugoslavia, “as an ‘artificial creation of the imperialist Versailles Peace Treaty,’ should and must disappear.”¹⁹ Despite being Slavic, the Ustaše claimed they were Eastern Goths in an attempt to appease the staunchly anti-Slavic Germans.²⁰ The only exception the ardently Croat Ustašes made was for the Bosniak Muslims, who they claimed were simply Croats Islamized by the Ottoman Empire.²¹

The Ustaše were led by Pavelić, a staunch fascist, Croat-nationalist fixed on returning the Croatian nation to a united, mono-ethnic country. As the second-best German option—after Maček turned down the offer—to lead the Independent Croatian Nation (NDH), Pavelić was emplaced as the leader because he was believed to be best-suited to gain and maintain order with a minimal amount of German troop investment.²² The Italians believed Pavelić was a good fit, as well, due to the assistance and safe haven they provided the Ustaše after they were expelled from Yugoslavia.²³ On April 15, 1941, with the Axis invasion nearing completion, Pavelić emplaced himself as Poglavnik (head, or chief) of the NDH, and was quickly recognized by the Axis. Immediately in charge of nearly 40 percent of Yugoslavia, the Axis felt confident that Pavelić would simply acquiesce to their wishes and be a valuable figurehead with widespread support from throughout the populace.²⁴ To their surprise, Pavelić felt no loyalty to the Axis and established his own version of a Croat state.

Once empowered, Pavelić immediately viciously pursued his government’s extreme priorities. Because the army swore allegiance to the Poglavnik, Pavelić had the muscle to push “ustashisation” throughout the NDH. Although needing to supply foodstuffs, raw materials, and critical materiel to the German war machine, Pavelić was given wide latitude in running the government. On April 17, 1941, he issued a decree that allowed the Ustaše to kill anybody they wanted removed.²⁵ That decree was simply the first step in establishing Pavelić’s ethnically cleansed Croatian state.

In the summer of 1941, the Ustaše began its ethnic cleansing processes, gradually developing systematic methods for mass murder. Historical conflicts between the Croats and other ethnic groups—especially the Serbs—drove this extermination policy which garnered wide support among the Ustaše members. At just over half of the NDH’s 6.5 million occupants, the Croat Ustaše sought to change the demographics through a brutal process of thirds: one third exported, one third forcibly converted to Catholicism, and one third exterminated.²⁶ Using terror tactics, the Ustaše preferred a terrible tool called a “srbosjek” which literally translates to “Serb killer.” The srbosjek was a knife that attached to the hand with a glove and which Ustaše killers particularly enjoyed using due to its

effectiveness and for the terror it inflicted upon its hapless victims.²⁷ This weapon suited the Ustaše because they wanted to both kill mass numbers of Serbs and inflict great amounts of horror. While roving bands killed other ethnicities throughout the countryside, the Ustaše also established concentration camps, the largest of which was called Jasenovac, to aid it in its more systematic extermination goals. A terrible combination of killing through manual means (the *srbosjek*), firing squads, and gas chambers combined to enable the killing of hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, and Roma at Jasenovac.²⁸

One of the main detractors of the Ustaše's hegemonic goals was that it did not possess widespread support from within the NDH. The Ustaše was a fringe group, unlike the Maček-led Croatian People's Party, and because of that fact believed that the only way it could control the countryside was through terror tactics.²⁹ The minimal amount of Axis occupation forces enabled the Ustaše to pursue its murderous agenda with impunity.³⁰ As long as the Ustaše continued supplying Germany, they were given wide latitude. This extreme Croatian-nationalism was directly opposed to another resistance group, the Chetniks, who desired a return to the original united-Yugoslavia government.

The Chetniks

The Chetniks were primarily a Serbian nationalist resistance group whose initial membership consisted of former Yugoslavian military officers. Riding a wave of high regard following their valiant performance during the Balkan Wars against the Ottoman Empire, and again in the Great War, the Chetniks were revered.³¹ During the interwar period, however, the Chetniks divided and squabbled amongst themselves about what their role in Yugoslavia should be. They devoted no time or effort to training for guerrilla-style warfare, nor did the leadership ever envision the Chetniks being used for guerrilla warfare.³² Upon Yugoslavia's capitulation to the Axis, it is of no surprise, then, that multiple organizations claiming to be Chetniks sprouted up throughout the country. This event was a major contributor to the subsequent confusing and conflicting Allied policy regarding support for the Chetniks. The main Allied-supported Chetnik group, however, was led by Draža Mihailović.

Upon the outset of hostilities, Colonel (later General) Draža Mihailović was serving as the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Yugoslav Second Army. Mihailović did not recognize Yugoslavia's capitulation as legal, and immediately made for a remote Serbian town called Ravna Gora where he assembled a group of former Yugoslav Army officers.³³ Not schooled in the art of guerrilla warfare, Mihailović's initial strategy was to build up forces, appeal to the Allies, and wait for an Allied invasion into the Balkans before taking any large actions.³⁴

A leading theory on guerrilla warfare, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, by Chinese communist Mao Zedong, was published in 1937 and could have potentially provided Mihailović with doctrinal knowledge for how to wage guerrilla warfare. There is, however, no evidence that Mihailović possessed any knowledge of this or any other guerrilla warfare theory. The

three stages of Mao's theory are: 1) strategic defensive phase, which is characterized by little violent action and establishing bases of support and training; 2) guerrilla warfare, which still involves expanding support networks but is also characterized by traditional "hit and run" guerrilla warfare skirmishes; and 3) war of movement, where the belligerents reach parity with the enemy and face him in open, traditional battle. This final stage demonstrates the legitimacy of the resistance movement. The stage of each warfare is fluid, however, and a resistance movement can quickly move forward—and backward—during the war, and even in different locations of the war.³⁵ For most of the war, Mihailović wavered between phases one and two, frustrating both Yugoslavians eager for action against their oppressors, and external supporters anxious for action against both the Axis and Ustaše.

One of the major reasons for Allied confusion on whom to support in the Yugoslavian theater stems directly from the multiple, often opposing factions of Chetnik militias throughout Yugoslavia. While Mihailović claimed widespread support, convincing followers to take up arms with the aim of restoring, essentially, the status quo at the end of the war was a difficult task.³⁶ Adding to the confusion, in the winter of 1941-1942, many Chetniks joined the ranks of German puppet elements controlled by Milan Nedić, placing them on the Axis payroll and enabling them to survive the winter. The upside was pay for the soldiers; the downsides were numerous. The downsides included more confusion over what side the Chetniks were on, what bands were legally approved by Nedić—and transitively by the Germans—and what Chetnik volunteers were available to Mihailović for employment.³⁷ Essentially a general without soldiers, Mihailović relied on his reputation, a flurry of memos demanding patience, and correspondence with the Allies to maintain his Army.³⁸

Linking up with the Partisans in the fall of 1941, Mihailović sought to join forces in a combined effort to defeat the fascist Ustaše and push Axis occupiers out of Yugoslavia. Apart from surface knowledge of the other organization—the Partisans knew the Chetniks were Serb, Yugoslav nationalists; the Chetniks knew the Partisans were communists, but little else—the factions understood very little of the motivations for resisting the Ustaše and Axis occupiers. At the meeting, it was clear to both Tito and Mihailović that their goals for a post-war Yugoslavia were incompatible. While the Partisans and Chetniks briefly cooperated following that meeting on September 19, 1941, by the end of October the Chetniks and Partisans were at war with each other, the Ustašes, and the Axis occupiers.³⁹ Being strongly pro-Serbian, pro-monarchy put Mihailović directly at odds with Tito's communist ideals for a pan-Yugoslavian communist state. For the rest of the war, Chetniks fought the Partisans, sometimes even alongside the Ustaše and Germans.

The Partisans

While originally disdainful of unified Yugoslavia, in 1935 the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) changed its guiding principle to be one of an ethnically inclusive Yugoslavia. This switch came at the behest of the Comintern.⁴⁰ The switch also put the Partisans and Ustaše fully at odds, because prior to that point their only agreed-upon

stance was that Yugoslavia needed to be split up into countries generally aligned with its ethnic majorities.⁴¹ At the beginning of the war, the KPJ advocated resisting the invaders, but were not supported by elements within the government distrustful of the communist Partisans or their intentions. Owing to the large amount of private land ownership throughout Yugoslavia, the Partisans were forced to downplay their traditional communist objectives. Instead, they appealed to nationalist, democratic, and federalist sentiments, while simultaneously relying on their appeals to pan-Slavism. Since the Axis was virulently anti-Slavic, portraying the war through a Slavic-Teuton lens proved effective in garnering support throughout the war.⁴²

It was this pan-Slavic stance that especially set the Partisans apart from both the Ustaše and the Chetniks. The Ustaše were strictly pro-Croat, pro-Catholic; the Chetniks were staunchly pro-Serb, pro-Orthodox; the Partisans were pro-Slavic, without a specific religious leaning, allowing them to appeal widely across Yugoslavia. This key difference enabled the smallish, initially weak Partisans to survive early disasters in the war, gain strength over time, and include the widest number of Yugoslavians. In addition to its potential for mass-appeal, their leadership behind Broz set them apart from the other groups.

Broz was an enigma to many within Yugoslavia. His nom-de-guerre, Tito, added to his shroud of mystery. In 1928 he was arrested for carrying a revolver illegally, as well as possessing WWI-era bombs and Marxist propaganda. Jailed for nearly six years, Tito was released in March 1934 and exiled in Austria.⁴³ Initially introduced to communism as a POW in Russia during WWI, Tito's time in prison further radicalized his beliefs, and one of his followers described him as "sincere but reserved, with a self-confident revolutionary hardness."⁴⁴ British envoy to Yugoslavia, Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean, described Tito as having "a very firm mouth and alert blue eyes ... he seemed perfectly sure of himself."⁴⁵ Communism was Tito's driving force; a united, communist Yugoslavia following World War II was his ultimate end-state. Tito and Mihailović shared their desire for a united Yugoslavia, but their ideological differences were too great. The Chetniks and Partisans thus became enemies.

Unlike Mihailović, who wished to remain in Mao's first or second phase of guerrilla warfare, Tito immediately and prematurely moved into phase three, "war of movement." During this phase, the resistance group is supposed to have reached parity with its foe and be able to fight in open battle with his enemy.⁴⁶ Tito's decision to establish "The Soviet Republic of Užice" early in the war nearly destroyed the Partisan movement. Tito undertook this operation at the behest of the Comintern wishing to relieve some pressure off the Soviet Union battling the Germans. As part of its retribution for Germans killed and wounded in battle, the Partisans lost over 1,000 soldiers in its failed defense of Užice.⁴⁷ Although the loss of Užice cost the Partisans dearly in the immediacy, it provided Tito with valuable battlefield experience from which he learned to better manage conducting operations while not provoking a large enemy counteraction. His war against the Chetniks

and Ustaše continued, and slowly grew larger, deadlier, and more confusing for external elements through the end of the war.

Allied Support

By the end of 1941, Yugoslavia was amid a maelstrom of violence that would continue for the succeeding three and a half years. The Axis backed the murderous Ustaše, whose main form of governance revolved around terror. The loosely organized Chetniks were more concerned with defeating the Partisans and preserving the monarchy than actively fighting the Axis invaders. The competently led Partisans added to the confusion and murderous tendencies of the Axis, Ustaše, and Chetniks by forcing fence-sitters to choose a side to support. Whereas Mihailović did not want to provoke retribution-killings, Tito used these killings to great effect to force citizens to choose a side to support.⁴⁸ While the Allies were generally aloof to the Yugoslav plight and were more concerned with its own survival early in the war, its leaders saw an opportunity to use the Yugoslavian struggle to further their own aims.

Initially, Mihailović was exactly the leader the Allies hoped to support to demonstrate progress in the Balkan theater. Much of Mihailović's positive reputation was not due to his or the Chetniks actions or battlefield acumen; rather, the reputation was due to the British responding to Soviet demands for a second front to alleviate some pressure on their beleaguered fighters. In fact, Mihailović did not do much active fighting but furiously sent multiple memorandums. He was a valued Allied figurehead whose support by the British-recognized legitimate Yugoslav government-in-exile allowed him to receive more recognition than he deserved.⁴⁹ The British were likewise amenable to Mihailović's lack of action, as they directed him to maintain a low profile until they were better able to support him and his forces.⁵⁰ During the bloody year of 1942, the Allies supported the Chetniks with little more than sporadic supplies and propaganda—the purpose of which was to convince Stalin the Allies were fighting along a second front as much as it was to motivate the Chetniks. Toward the end of 1942, British sentiment changed.

Following Allied success in 1942, British and American planners re-examined their Balkans strategy to see how they could adapt to the changing ground situation. Allied bombing was highly effective and prevented use of the main north-south railway by the Germans.⁵¹ Leading up to the effective bombing campaign, a single British Special Operations Executive (SOE) officer was embedded with Mihailović. The British officer noted Mihailović refused to fight and complained bitterly that his lack of action was due to a dearth of supplies provided by the British.⁵² Additionally, the few actions Mihailović undertook were often against the Partisans, thus not meeting the British intention for their sponsored resistance group in Yugoslavia.⁵³ This lack of activity prompted the SOE to embed with Tito to determine his actions and capacity for further operations.

Following months of prodding Mihailović to action to no avail, British planners sent

Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean to assess Tito's Partisans. In this enlightening encounter between Maclean and Tito, the British government gained an appreciation for how the civil war began and the deep-seated differences between Chetniks and Partisans.⁵⁴ Tito was a shameless, intransigent communist, and Maclean wondered whether through British support "his [Tito's] allegiance to Moscow [might] weaken?" Maclean also wondered that as time went on whether Tito might "become more of a nationalist, [and] less of a Communist?"⁵⁵ This naive wish eventually waned with increased Partisan brutality. In the meantime, the British were anxious to sponsor an active anti-Axis resistance movement inside Yugoslavia, and the Partisans had overtaken the Chetniks as their primary aid recipient.

Although not fully comprehending the intricacies of the various resistance movements, the British did grasp much of the challenging situation within Yugoslavia. While the US sought to install its own SOE-equivalent Office of Strategic Services (OSS) into Yugoslavia, Churchill bluntly stated that he did not believe OSS General William Donovan would have the knowledge or personnel available within Yugoslavia to fully comprehend the situation.⁵⁶ The US wanted to insert its own agents into Yugoslavia to understand the situation outside of the lens of the British intelligence apparatus.

Contrary to British wishes, the US sent fact-finding envoys to both Mihailović and Tito during 1943. A memorandum from Donovan to US President Franklin D. Roosevelt provided a holistic view of all the factions. In the memo, Donovan noted that the Partisans were "made up of men from every region of the country and they [were] engaged in hostilities in every part of the country."⁵⁷ Contrary to the breadth and depth of the Partisan resistance, Donovan informed Roosevelt that, of the Chetniks, "nearly all [of the fighting] units are east ... Their strength is customarily exaggerated ... [and] these men are nearly all Serbians."⁵⁸ The memo was remarkably accurate, except for not fully appreciating the extent of Tito's communist bent. Donovan ended the memo by informing Roosevelt that "most [Yugoslavs] desire a democratic Government ... [but] they are not definite on the means of accomplishing" that goal.⁵⁹ This understanding guided future US actions in the country. However, general fear of an increased communist presence within Yugoslavia drove the US to continue supporting the Chetniks to counterbalance Tito's postwar supremacy. The Americans also possessed a deep mistrust of British and Soviet post-war aims for the Balkans.

The Americans knew of British and Soviet intentions for establishing various "spheres of influence" within the Balkans, which conflicted with Roosevelt's anti-imperialist ideals. Convinced that Mihailović was too weak to effectively gain control over the country, and fearing a communist postwar Yugoslavia, the US developed the "Shepherd Project" which aimed to emplace a supposedly widely-regarded Croat nationalist—Ivan Šubašić—into King Peter's cabinet, in hopes that they would be able to counterbalance communist control and maintain influence. The Shepherd Project required King Peter to publicly cut ties with Mihailović and solely support Šubašić, and therefore the Partisans over the Chetniks.⁶⁰ Despite Tito's rhetoric claiming he would support democracy and an inclusive government, as soon as Šubašić arrived and the Soviets recaptured Belgrade in the fall of

1944, the Partisans threw any democratic-leaning pretense aside. Tito demonstrated his political acumen—and lack of qualms with blatantly lying—when he pushed aside all non-communists to gain tighter control over the government.⁶¹ As Maclean later lamented, “at this stage such a reorganization”—Šubašić and the Partisans coming to a mutual agreement—“was no longer a practical proposition. Two years earlier something of this kind might have been possible. Indeed, had action ... been taken soon enough, it might have been possible to weld Partisans and Chetniks into one unified resistance movement. Now Tito was in a position to dictate his terms.”⁶² While the move cut off Mihailović from most Allied support, the US still provided small amounts of support to him through the rest of the war.

While the Partisans controlled a large portion of the country near the end of 1944, Mihailović doggedly fought in Serbia. Šubašić noted, when summarizing the fighting in a September 1944 memo to Donovan, that Mihailović was “not of great importance” nor did he and the Chetniks “signify anything, because of the presence of Russian troops on the border of Yugoslavia.”⁶³ Šubašić ended his letter to Donovan imploring for additional US involvement within Yugoslavia following the war due to his belief that “no single nation in the Balkans is able to organize itself and to form a state without the help of the Great Powers, because their ambitions are conflicting with each other.”⁶⁴ Despite this, the Allies used the small area under Mihailović’s control to assist them with rescuing downed Allied pilots from throughout the Yugoslavian countryside which resulted in the rescue of hundreds of downed Allied pilots.⁶⁵ Any hope for continued Allied support was dashed, however, as the Partisans further increased their control on the country in the remaining months of the war.

Conclusion

At war’s end, Mihailović attempted to escape further into the mountains but was captured by Partisans in the spring of 1946. After a speedy trial in June, Mihailović was shot for his traitorous actions against the Partisans, on behalf of the Germans and Ustaše, during the civil war.⁶⁶ Pavelić was shot in an attempted assassination in 1957 in Argentina and eventually succumbed to his wounds in 1959. Tito’s Partisans were in complete control of Yugoslavia, and the communists remained in power with Tito at the helm until his death in 1980.⁶⁷

The Yugoslavian civil war resulted in one of the proportionally highest casualties counts of any country during the war. While certainly many deaths were attributed to the German invasion, many more came at the hands of Ustaše brutality and intra-resistance group violence. The various competing factions created a nightmare scenario for the Allies who had to rely on skewed versions of a few selected individuals, each with his own postwar visions of greatness. Allied support wavered between the Chetniks and Partisans, eventually providing most support to the Partisans. While they did not immediately reap the benefits of influence within Yugoslavia, once Tito split with Stalin in 1948, the Allied war efforts began paying off.⁶⁸

Yugoslavia devolved into another terrible civil war in the 1990s. Many of the same

themes from World War II were present: ethnic rivalries, religious differences, and jealousy of the “other” ethnic group drove vicious warfare. Some of the hatred undoubtedly derived from the Ustaše’s systematic killing of other ethnicities. While it is impossible to prove “what could have been,” upon reflection of the two Yugoslav civil wars, one cannot help but wonder how Yugoslavia’s future would have changed had Maček accepted control of the NDH. Maček undoubtedly acted honorably by refusing to acquiesce to the Axis war machine, but with his possessing greater support of ethnic Croats, he would not have needed to resort to terror for effective control over the country. The Croat People’s Party control of the NDH would have precluded the Ustaše’s murderous campaigns and could have saved hundreds of thousands of Serbian lives. Without that extra added killing, perhaps Yugoslavians could have found common ground following Tito’s death. Alas, much as Maclean lamented Allied failure to unite Chetniks and Partisans, Maček did refuse the post of running the NDH as an Axis puppet, and Pavelić was left to his murderous ways.

The resulting Yugoslavia civil wars were driven by ethnic hate, marked by relentless killing, and fueled by external support. The winners of the first civil war eventually lost control over the country, resulting in more fighting. Until its dissolution following its second civil war in less than half a century, Yugoslavia was a failed attempt to unite different nations under one state, resulting in significant unrest throughout the twentieth century amongst groups of people with no real incentive to unite. While uniting after World War I against mounting external pressure to create a stronger nation was driven by the best intentions, the resulting intra-communal conflict was a direct result of that failed experiment.

Caleb M. Reilly is a Special Forces officer and a graduate student in history at the University of Vermont. His academic interests include the history of Allied special operations during World War II and twentieth-century American foreign policy. He was published previously in *Special Warfare* detailing his experiences as a Special Forces Detachment Commander. He currently resides with his family outside of Burlington, Vermont.

Endnotes

1. Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Hitler’s New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 22.
2. Pavlovich, *Hitler’s New Disorder*, 9-11.
3. Mark C. Wheeler, *Britain and the War for Yugoslavia, 1940-1943* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 27, 46-47.
4. Pavlowitch, *Hitler’s New Disorder*, 251-252.
5. Andrew Buchanan, *American Grand Strategy in the Mediterranean during World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 253-256.

6. Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 1.
7. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia* , 9.
8. Tomasevich, 11.
9. Tomasevich, 11.
10. Tomasevich , 25.
11. Tomasevich, 22.
12. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 11-12.
13. Pavlowitch, 12.
14. Pavlowitch, 16.
15. Pavlowitch, 16.
16. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 36-37.
17. Ben Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans: German Armies and Partisan Warfare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 80.
18. Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation: The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941-1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 6.
19. Milovan Djilas, *Memoir of a Revolutionary*, translated by Drenka Willen (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanivich, Inc., 1973), 132.
20. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 25.
21. Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation*, 37-38.
22. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 78.
23. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 24.
24. Pavlowitch, 25.
25. Pavlowitch, 29.
26. Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth, and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 126.
27. David M. Crowe, *Crimes of State Past and Present: Government-Sponsored Atrocities and International Legal Responses* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2013), 71.

28. The actual number of individuals killed is still emotionally debated. Estimates range from 80,000 to as much as 1.7 million men, women, and children killed. The Partisans exaggerated these numbers following the war for war reparations. Regardless, the systematic murder the Ustaše undertook made it the only satellite Axis state to enact its own killing process—a dubious distinction. For more information, see: Yeomans, *Annihilation*, 18; Tomasevich, *Occupation and Collaboration*, 738; and Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 34.
29. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 78.
30. Shepherd, 79.
31. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 118.
32. Tomasevich, 121.
33. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 53-54.
34. Pavlowitch, 55.
35. Mao Zedong, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (Los Angeles, CA: U.S. Marine Corps, 1961), 20-22.
36. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 131-132.
37. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 66-67.
38. Pavlowitch, 63-64.
39. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 140.
40. Tomasevich, 96.
41. Tomasevich, 36.
42. Tomasevich, 97.
43. Jože Pirjevec, *Tito and His Comrades* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 16-17.
44. Djilas, *Memoir of a Revolutionary*, 262-263.
45. Fitzroy Maclean, *Eastern Approaches* (London: The Reprint Society, 1951), 238.
46. Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 20.
47. Pirjevec, *Tito and His Comrades*, 80. Hitler ordered mandatory killings of civilians: for every German soldier killed or wounded, 100 or 50, respectively, Yugoslav citizens would be killed. This order drove Tito to conduct additional attacks, while conversely it drove Mihailović to remain tepid.
48. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 146-148.
49. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 64.
50. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 143.

51. Elisabeth Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War* (London: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1976), 112-113.
52. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe*, 114.
53. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 111.
54. Maclean, *Eastern Approaches*, 238-247.
55. Maclean, 247.
56. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe*, 119.
57. "OSS Reports - William J. Donovan, 1941-1943," Office of Strategic Services, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY, <https://archive.org/details/OSSDonovanReports19411943/page/n19/mode/2up>.
58. "OSS Reports, 1941-1943."
59. "OSS Reports, 1941-1943."
60. Maclean, *Eastern Approaches*, 346.
61. Alex N. Dragnich, *Serbs and Croats: The Struggle in Yugoslavia* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1992), 111-112.
62. Maclean, *Eastern Approaches*, 347.
63. "OSS Reports - William J. Donovan, March 1944-April 1945," Office of Strategic Services, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY, <https://archive.org/details/OSSDonovanReportsMarch1944April1945/Office%20of%20Strategic%20Services%20-%20Reports%20-%20Donovan%2C%20William%20J.%2C%20March%2C%201944-September%20%2C%201944/page/n89/mode/2up?q=halyard>.
64. "OSS Reports, 1944-1945."
65. Douglas Waller, *Wild Bill Donovan: The Spymaster Who Created the OSS and Modern American Espionage* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 278-280.
66. Pirjevec, *Tito and His Comrades*, 164.
67. Pirjevec, 454.
68. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe*, 172.

Evaluating the Value of US Diplomacy Through Strategic Ambiguity

Ethan Owens

Abstract: Through the growth of Chinese economic, political, and military power, tensions between the notorious “strategic triangle” of China, Taiwan, and the United States are at the forefront of political discussions of the future. The long-held US policy of strategic ambiguity regarding matters of political sensitivity between China and Taiwan has been an enduring and seemingly successful one, deterring military conflict between Taipei and Beijing since its creation through the Taiwan-Relations Act (1979). However, an increase in perceived tension between the strategic triangle has led some scholars to shed doubt on the continued ability of strategic ambiguity to prevent military conflict. This article aims to outline the “success” of strategic ambiguity as it pertains to preventing war, as well as the evident “failure” of strategic ambiguity in preventing the growth of tension through examining periods before and after the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Keywords: Strategic ambiguity; Taiwan Strait Crisis; strategic triangle; Taiwan Relations Act; China; Taiwan.

Introduction

Since the Republic of China’s Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang) fled to Taiwan in 1949, tensions between mainland China and autonomous Taiwan have seen varying states of both stability and instability. This is largely due in part to the US’ stakes in the protection of Taiwan from China, preventing invasion and forceful unification under authoritarian rule. However, while the US has protected Taiwan from a Chinese invasion, it ended its formal alliance with Taiwan in 1972, as Washington began to ease tensions with Beijing in hopes of weakening the then-dangerous USSR. The US still sought to maintain democratic influence in the Pacific and saw Taiwan as an opportunity to further develop growing democratic values (which would solidify into democracy in the mid-1980s) and foster an opposing force in the face of a rising authoritarian China. Therefore, the US began a policy of strategic ambiguity through which it was able to utilize language and policy that ambiguously refrained from support or opposition toward either side to keep both China and Taiwan at bay and ultimately prevent conflict.

The majority of modern scholars agree that the use of strategic ambiguity regarding tensions between mainland China and Taiwan were invaluable in the protection of democracy and US assets in Taiwan, as well as preventing a large-scale military conflict with China. However, amid growing nationalism in Taiwan and increased militant/aggressive behavior between China and Taiwan in the past 20 years, many scholars have begun to shift their positions on the efficacy of utilizing strategic ambiguity in the face of a more

empowered modern China. This paper therefore serves to explore why the US policy of strategic ambiguity has been utilized to balance Taiwan-China relations since 1979, and to determine the extent to which it is still a viable option. This question will be explored by examining strategic ambiguity from 1979 until 1995 and then 1995 until 2013. Further analysis on post-2013 policy implication will also be highlighted. This will serve to examine the successes and failures of strategic ambiguity in correlation to the tensions arising between Beijing and Taipei in the modern era US involvement through ambiguous policy.

Strategic Ambiguity and Its Academic Value

Strategic ambiguity can be defined as any policy created by the US toward China and Taiwan that is purposefully ambiguous in its true intention of support or opposition to either a Chinese or Taiwanese agenda. The purpose of ambiguity as it pertains to Taiwan is preventing the Taiwanese government from declaring independence (and subsequently going to war with China), as well as to prevent China from an invasion and forceful integration of Taiwan into mainland China (this is also an act of war). Strategic ambiguity relating to US policy and attitudes toward Taiwan and China is therefore a constant variable that has seen success since 1979 due to the avoidance of direct military conflict it has produced. Along with the creation of the Taiwan Relations Act (1979), there has also been three Joint Communiques between the US and the People's Republic of China that are of significance. The 1972 Shanghai Communique, the 1978 Normalization Communique, and the 1982 Communique on United States Arms Sales to Taiwan. The Shanghai Communique set the foundational groundwork for the type of language and perspective the US would take in handling the issues of diplomatic tension. The communique included language such as "all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait," and "interest" in "peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves."¹ This ambiguous language is continued through the normalization communique, which contains language that claims "[n]either [China nor Taiwan] should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region," but also that "[t]he United States of America recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China," and that "...the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan."² This dynamic of appeasing both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) diplomatically would become the exact kind of policy that the US would continue to develop in the coming decades.

Ambiguous language allows the US to maintain flexibility and prevent Taiwan from pursuing independence and China from invasion, as both sides are unsure who the US will support. Without clear dialogue on the US stance, both sides remain stable and avoid conflict due to fear of US involvement. These three communiques outlined the fundamentals of American ambiguity toward China and Taiwan, and are hailed as some of the best in maintaining peaceful diplomatic relations between the strategic triangle. In its simplest form, the purpose of ambiguity is to prevent military conflict, and it has therefore continued to see success in this domain as military conflict has been successfully avoided since the creation of ambiguous policy in 1979.

Tension and Ambiguity Argument

Strategic ambiguity was a strategy that saw successful merit from 1979 until the late 1990s due to the weaker state of China under strengthening US hegemonic rule, but amid historically high increases in military activity in the Taiwan Strait, the US can no longer handle ambiguous diplomacy between China and Taiwan if the ultimate objective is to maintain stability between the two. Ambiguity will therefore be examined as a means of examining the rising and easing of tensions between Beijing and Taipei since US ambiguous involvement in 1979. The independent variable is the concept of strategic ambiguity, while the dependent variables are the variations of tension diffusion exhibited in blocks of time spanning 1979 to 2022. I argue that ambiguity was successfully implemented as a means of tension diffusion from 1979 until the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995, and the evident successes of this time period in preventing tension escalation will be utilized to explore potential rises of tension leading to the crisis and following it. Failure of ambiguity to curb rising tension following the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis will also be used in the concluding analysis to determine the current efficacy of US strategic ambiguity. The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis is utilized as the division that highlights the growth of tension that has arisen following the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and the lack thereof prior to the crisis. It should be noted that the purpose of strategic ambiguity in US policy making has been to prevent military conflict between the strategic triangle.

Although there has been no direct conflict, which other scholars would argue make strategic ambiguity as a success, I argue that the tensions within the 17-year period highlighted from 1979 through 1995 represents a period of peaceful growth between Taiwan and China, whereas the 17-year period between 1995 to 2013 represents a period of rising tension and political discourse. The significance of the two 17-year blocks is to match the 17-year period of strategic ambiguity without crisis or significant tension from 1979 to 1995, with a period of time following the crisis that can be measured to compare the two. Effects of post-2013 tension will also be examined in order to understand the modern implications of Taiwan-China tension in international policy making. The “success” of strategic ambiguity as it pertains to preventing war remains stable, but the “failure” of strategic ambiguity becomes evident in the growth of tension. This distinction between the two time periods can be utilized to analyze the value of strategic ambiguity as it pertains to global politics. Three factors examined in this paper that contribute to the understanding of tension are the level of military testing, military spending, and government communication/cooperation between Taiwan and China. Tension will be compared between the period of time prior to the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and afterwards in order to examine the value of strategic ambiguity as a means of preventing tension escalation. The three Taiwan Strait crises were separate events in which political discourse over China’s One-China policy resulted in a breaking point of tension that caused military operations such as missile testing and naval/aircraft movement in the strait. These crises are valuable due to the resulting threat of armed conflict and possible invasion that became more apparent following the crises’ resolution, most notably following the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis due to its occurrence in a political environment of already rising tension.

It should be noted that this paper will consider China, Taiwan, and the US as unitary actor states, but this does not discredit the fact that many regional and political aspects influence the decisions of these nations. This is particularly true regarding China's large size and ethnic makeup as well as the US' network of bureaucratic foreign relations structures which make the conclusions of this paper relative to the central perspective of states as unitary actors.³ This is an important distinction to be aware of when discussing the overall values of a nation within the strategic triangle, so as not to discredit the complexity of cultures and government frameworks that contribute to the decisions and viewpoints that will be discussed in this paper.

Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism

In examining the value and purpose of US involvement and strategic ambiguity in Taiwan, we must first explore the concept of Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism. Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism explains a facet for the US' initial involvement in Taiwan and poses an explanation for the continued strong utilization of strategic ambiguity with Taiwan from an ideological perspective. Political scientist Dean Chen cites the Wilsonian Open-Door policy of the 1950s as the fundamental framework of the US' commitment to preserving the Kuomintang power in Taiwan. In short, the Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism outlines the concept that the US sought to preserve liberal democracies around the world and grow them through economic and military aid in order to create a democratic new world order.⁴ This concept is strengthened by the democratic peace theory, which furthers the potential aims of the US to grow democracies in authoritarian states like China to minimize their threat as a polarizing power. While the Kuomintang was an authoritarian government until 1986, the US still utilized Taiwan as a guinea pig for attempting to foster democracy in the face of communist China, and it saw Taiwan as an opportunity to spread these ideals.

Chen argues that "the United States has socially created an American liberal identity and interests that differentiate from those who are aliens to them," contrasting the "American liberal self" with the "illiberal others" through Open-Door internationalism, which makes American involvement in balancing relations with both China and Taiwan a delicate issue based on an emotional and ideological structure.⁵ Chen believes that strategic ambiguity therefore began with President Woodrow Wilson, which is a unique position to make. He argues this because the loss of Taiwan to China would not directly impact US security and would immediately strengthen estranged relations with China, but Wilson maintained protection of Taiwan nonetheless.⁶ While this makes a concrete case for the growth of American ties to Taiwan and the prospect of spreading democracy, it does not properly illustrate the essence of strategic ambiguity which is the factor of ambiguity itself. US foreign policy in the 1950s toward Taiwan was clearly in favor of preserving Taiwan as an autonomous state with no real attempt at re-unification or diplomatic negotiations between the two governments. Nonetheless, the concept of American liberal identity through Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism helps strengthen the explanation for continued use of strategic ambiguity since 1979.

Deterrence and Arms Race

While the US remains attached to Taiwan ideologically through the lingering emotional beliefs of Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism, the security dilemma that arises from diplomacy between Taiwan and China is unavoidable and poses another explanation for the US' desire to utilize ambiguous policy. This subject can help emphasize the consequences surrounding strategic ambiguity regarding arms race and deterrence that express the need to avoid tension growth. Pan Zhongqi's article, "US Taiwan Policy of Strategic Ambiguity: A Dilemma of Deterrence," further underlines the challenges posed to the US by continuing to pursue strategic ambiguity. In his article, Zhongqi argues that the aims of strategic ambiguity are deterrence, and that deterrence does not see an ultimate resolution but rather stagnates and maintains the problem, which will ultimately lead to weakening US power in the long run.⁷ Ultimately, Zhongqi sees strategic ambiguity as an endless security dilemma cycle, where Taiwan feels threatened by China, prompting them to increase arms sales between the US and Taiwan. This makes China feel threatened, prompting them to increase military exercises in the Taiwan strait, repeating consistently and growing tensions.⁸ This is believed to be the root cause of a potential arms race between China and Taiwan, for which the US will be caught in the crossfires and forced to make dangerous decisions that are easier to make before tensions get too unstable as a result of ambiguity.

Through ambiguity the US creates paranoia within China and Taiwan that results in more unstable decisions, making strategic ambiguity a very dangerous policy to maintain going forward. Zhongqi's argument that "...Taiwan may further push its independence envelope if US arms sales give Taipei the perception that Washington would certainly come to its aid in a military conflict, no matter what the circumstances," and that "[i]t does not matter whether these kinds of perceptions are correct and reasonable or not"⁹ are very flawed, however, due to Taiwan's adverse relationship with independence. While nationalistic sentiments are consistently growing in Taiwan alongside Taiwanese identity, Taiwan realizes the dangers of independence and have sparsely pursued such policies in the past two decades.¹⁰

Taiwan Strait Crisis Hypothesis

Based upon the background scholarship of American ideology being rooted in US political culture through Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism as well as the cyclic nature of a potential arms race between Taiwan and China by security dilemma, my hypothesis is that strategic ambiguity is no longer an effective form of policy in handling Taiwan. I reaffirm my position that strategic ambiguity saw successful merit from 1979 until the late 1990s due to the weaker state of China under strengthening US hegemonic rule, but amid historically high increases in military activity in the Taiwan-Strait, the US can no longer handle ambiguous diplomacy between China and Taiwan if the ultimate objective is to maintain stability between the two. Comparison of the successful stability of Taiwan-China relations under the ambiguous

US policies following the Taiwan Relations Act, against the current exponentially growing tensions beginning in the 1990s, can help to understand the efficacy of strategic ambiguity as it pertains to the US' ability to maintain low-tension/peaceful relations. The premier case studies on concrete examples of explosive tensions between the diplomatic triangle can be found between the relative peace between the introduction of strategic ambiguity and the three Taiwan Strait crises, as well as tensions and military expansion going forward from the Third Strait Crisis into 2013. To clarify, I argue that the first and second Taiwan Strait crises were focused on more solidified defense of the ROC from PRC invasion following the US involvement in the Korean War (it had more to do with geopolitical behavior with China and Russia than with Taiwan itself) The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis will be utilized instead of the first and second as a factor in the dependent variable, as it occurred during the time of strategic ambiguity (while the other two occurred prior to the use of strategic ambiguity) and effectively highlights some of the successes and failures the US has seen in the policy of ambiguity in the face of fluctuating tension.

1979-1995 Tension

Following the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, the US solidified its dedication to strategic ambiguity and maintaining peace between Beijing and Taipei. The successes and failures of this can be seen in the combined level of tension between the creation of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979 until the end of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, which represents the clearest evidence of the development of tension. In this paper, tension is defined by the level of military testing, military spending, and government communication/cooperation conducted by both Beijing and Taipei. Evidence from numerous sources suggest that economic growth is typically followed by increases in military spending, something that is common and normal in modernizing/industrializing nations.¹¹ Therefore the slow growth of military funds in both China and Taiwan during the early 1980s is not valuable. However, in 1989 the Chinese military expenditure begins to rise drastically, increasing by 10-15 percent in less than 3 years. From 1985 to 1991, China saw an increase of 60.14 percent in military spending, while Taiwan saw an increase of 34.59 percent.¹² Prior to 1985, the rise of both nations was steadily in line with the growth of other Northeast Asian nations such as Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia which saw growing economic expansion tied with military growth. While post-1985 growth is an example of growing Chinese power, there is no direct correlation with tension as neither Taiwan nor China engages in behaviors that signify conflict. This further solidifies the argument that strategic ambiguity fostered peaceful relations between 1979 and 1995. It should be noted that military spending and expansion are not necessarily conducted with the express interest or understanding of tension creation among states. Military spending can increase for a variety of different means which do not all pertain to the issues with Taiwan specifically. For the purposes of this paper, however, an argument is made that these expenditures provide states with the ability to wage more effective war and thus consequently increase tension through security dilemma.

China's military exercises and testing regarding Taiwan are surprisingly minimal leading to the 1990s. In May of 1980, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) naval task force conducted ballistic missile testing in the South Pacific as a show of force and dominance as a rising global power, which sparked concerns from Japan, the US, and Taiwan, but not enough to deeply sour any of the strengthening relations that existed at the time.¹³ This continues to solidify the argument of minimal political tension between Beijing and Taipei from 1979 to 1995.

Communications and relations between Beijing and Taipei, while still not fully resolved, began to see cultural and economic easing of tensions from 1976 to 1989. Growing sentiments of unification were beginning to be seen in both China and Taiwan in what was often referred to as "mainland fever."¹⁴ On January 1, 1979, Beijing sent a New Year's Day message to Taipei entitled "Message to Compatriots in Taiwan," in which there was expression of desire for peaceful reunification. Among the soft and peaceful language included in the message, one section of particular significance read:

The Chinese Government has ordered the People's Liberation Army to stop the bombardment of Jinmen (Quemoy) and other islands as from today. A state of military confrontation between the two sides still exists along the Taiwan Straits. This can only breed man-made tension. We hold that first of all this military confrontation should be ended through discussion between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Taiwan authorities so as to create the necessary prerequisites and a secure environment for the two sides to make contacts and exchanges in whatever area.¹⁵

This physical action of peace sparked a new trend of communication, despite Taipei's "Three No's" (no contact, no negotiation, no compromise) policy, and by 1988, Kuomintang (KMT) senior statesman Chen Li-Fu began conversations with Beijing about a peaceful and culturally based unification.¹⁶ Tensions grew again in 1989 with the shocking discovery of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, which prompted ROC foreign minister Lien Ching to end animosity with Beijing, but as early as 1990 there was already a lifting of travel restrictions "permitting mainland cultural and athletic celebrities to visit Taiwan."¹⁷ The Tiananmen Square Massacre would continue to hinder Chinese-Taiwanese relations, however, and many scholars have attributed this to a rise of pro-independence parties and democracy in Taiwan throughout the 1990s. The statistical reality of this time period persists, however, considering that no direct conflict occurred between 1979 and 1995, and both Taiwan and China actively attempted to open borders, emphasize cultural ties, and work to maintain peaceful relations.

The historically low level of animosity and clear lack of military engagement following the Taiwan Relations Act represents not only a successful implementation of strategic ambiguity by the US, but strategic ambiguity's ability to ease tension during this

time period. By raising the stakes for declaring independence for Taiwan, and conversely raising the stakes for invasion to China, the US has been able to help the two governments foster a collective political and social culture of relative peace and stability. This was only possible due to China's subdued power as a world leader, maintaining the US as a hegemonic power. As China grows in power, the value of strategic ambiguity's ability to ease tension lowers. This is seen in the period from 1995 to 2013.

1995-2013 Tension

Since the resolution of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, there has been an unavoidable growth in ROC and PRC military spending and military exercises as well as a growing tensions and souring of cooperation. In 2005, the PRC defense budget was \$30 billion at a 12.6 percent increase,¹⁸ while a fearful 2013 Taiwan Defense Report claimed that by 2020 China would have the military strength to launch a full scale invasion of Taiwan.¹⁹ While the fears and paranoia of both China and Taiwan about military conflict present a colorful perspective on these statistics that may not necessarily correlate to a mongering preparation for war, the reality is that the numbers do not lie. The PRC's increase in military spending since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis is alarming. Since the late 1980s, the PLA began a campaign to modernize and expand their naval capabilities. One of the primary and explicitly stated goals of this campaign was the increase China's nuclear deterrence abilities, and to prevent Taiwanese independence.²⁰ The expansion of PLA naval military assets capable of crossing the Taiwan Strait from 1990 to 2010 can be seen in Table 1 below.²¹

Table 1: PLA Naval Capabilities Growth 1990-2010

Type	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Destroyers	19	18	21	21	25
Frigates	37	37	37	43	49
Amphibious Ships	58	50	60	43	55
Coastal Patrol (Missile)	215	217	100	51	85

The expansion of military power and modernization of PLA military capabilities within a decade is a direct threat to Taiwan and has fostered growing fears and an increase in Taiwanese defenses as well. Taiwan has actively begun developing missiles with long range interception capabilities to defend itself from Chinese attack, knowing well that China currently holds and overwhelming military advantage.²² These expansions are unprecedented and increasingly growing, particularly in comparison to the military growth of the PRC and ROC prior to the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. While the technology of the US military currently exceeds that of China in many respects, the fast expansion and competition in the past three decades is clear evidence of growing tension that many scholars fear may start an arms race between the strategic triangle. It should be noted

that many of the statistics gathered on Chinese military strength are formulated based on current US intelligence reports and are prone to minor inaccuracy due to the secretive and closed-off nature China expresses about its military regarding foreign inquiry.

Military exercises have also increased tremendously since 1995. The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis saw military exercises and missile testing in March of 1996 within the Taiwan strait, sparking the US to send aircraft carriers in defense of Taiwan. Ronald O'Rourke, a naval affairs specialist, states that "China's naval modernization effort ... has been underway for more than 25 years, since the early to mid-1990s, and has transformed China's navy into a much more modern and capable force. China's navy is a formidable military force within China's near-seas region, and it is conducting a growing number of operations in more-distant waters ..."²³ This information shows China's domestic push for modernization and military expansion during the mid-1990s, following the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Evidence has even surfaced that US Marines have been training Taiwanese soldiers on the island of Taiwan to fend off Chinese invasion since 2008, further developing a sense of tension and militaristic attitudes toward diplomacy, and angering China.²⁴ A possible explanation for increases in Chinese military spending and advancement is the humiliation of backing down from the US in the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, which evoked a strong desire by Chinese policy makers to become better prepared for possible conflict with the US. This still holds strategic ambiguity as the root problem, however, as China's humiliation and increase in military spending is in an attempt to sway the ambiguity in its own favor, making the US unsure of China's power and therefore allowing China to see more success in any future strait crises.

The growth in tension between a Beijing and Taipei cooperation standpoint is unavoidably evident in the democratization of Taiwan. In 1987, martial law was officially lifted in Taiwan, but Taiwan remained authoritarian in government structure until the first official election in 1991.²⁵ The first presidential election was held in 1996, at the concluding year of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. While there was no evident immediate backlash from China regarding the democratization of Taiwan, the relationships between the two have soured since then as relations with the US has grown around support of Taiwanese democratic domestic policy. The democratization of Taiwan also saw the emergence of an independence party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which in 2008 "not only promoted Taiwanese identity, a staple of election contests, but ... proposed a referendum on membership for Taiwan in the United Nations, which created concern in Beijing and Washington that it was moving to independence."²⁶ Conversely in 2008, Taiwanese President Ma Ying-ju delivered his inaugural address in which he presented a stance of "no unification, no independence, and no use of force," which assumed a maintenance of the "status quo" which would exclude extensive cooperation with China.²⁷ Prior to the democratization of Taiwan, the ROC's beliefs in independence did not express itself on an electoral stage where it could garner direct criticism and fear from China, whereas following Taiwan's democratization, the Taiwanese independence as a threat to China has seemingly grown.

2013-Present Tension

The present existence of tension between China and Taiwan since 2013 is undeniably real and growing. Today, the PLA numerically has “the largest navy in the world with an overall battle force of approximately 355 ships and submarines, including approximately more than 145 major surface combatants,” according to a 2021 US Department of Defense Report.²⁸ At its current pattern of expansion, the PRC’s Navy is estimated to reach 549 ships by 2030, totaling more than the US Navy’s 283 ships.²⁹ China constructed its first aircraft carrier in 2012, its second in 2019, and a third is projected for 2024, placing China in a position to rival the US in naval and air capabilities.³⁰ While Chinese military expansion can also be attributed to its rise to global prominence in the past few decades, its particular interest in naval modernization efforts point to a strong desire for China to control valuable regions of the Pacific, Taiwan included.

Furthermore, an example of China’s interest in raising tensions and pushing the boundaries with military exercises can be seen in early October of 2021 “[d]uring China’s National Day weekend ... China dispatched 149 military aircraft southwest of Taiwan in strike group formations, causing Taiwan to scramble aircraft and activate its air defense missile systems. Taiwan’s Defense Ministry said ... such tactics were aimed at wearing down the island’s defenses and degrading morale.”³¹ This military expansion, aggressive behavior, and competition with the US all points to the predicted arms race between the strategic triangle brought on by the inability of the US to curb tension with meaningful policy. Strategic ambiguity as a means of preventing conflict is therefore becoming weaker as China becomes stronger and the power harbored within an unknown future through ambiguity fades away. While strategic ambiguity saw success in easing tension and preventing conflict prior to 1996, the growth in tension from 1996 to 2013 is now evident in the looming and undeniable post-2013 tension.

Domestically, Taiwan has seen an interesting divergence of political opinion regarding cross-strait ties to Beijing and the prospect of reunification. A split between the DPP and KMT political parties has seen discussions centered largely on ways to mitigate potential for Chinese invasion while maintaining sovereignty. Both parties have ultimately come to an overarching conclusion that opposes unification and independence but recognizes that maintaining the current status quo is becoming an equally dangerous risk due to China’s increasing pressure of unification.³² Arguments of de-jure and de-facto independence or unification still remain the primary political discussion domestically and continue to remain an area of heightened Chinese and American interest and tension.³³

Policy Implications

As evident by the comparison of case study time periods prior to and following the 1995 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the strategy of Strategic Ambiguity has created a buildup of tension that can create an eventual conflict within the strategic triangle. Without properly voicing problems and solutions amongst policy makers of the triangle, ambiguity will continue to

foster instability and paranoia that elevates the probability of future armed conflict. While strategic ambiguity has succeeded as a means of preventing conflict from 1979 to 1995, the continued expedited growth of China as a global economic and military superpower as well as the growing arms race between Taiwan and China, the US needs to consider its value in maintaining ambiguous ties with Taiwan. The weight of Wilsonian democratic ideals compared to the weight of a devastating conflict between the US and China must be rebalanced without contributing to the problem further. Policy must therefore begin to end ambiguous language and side with both China and Taiwan through cultural ties. As evident during the period of 1979 to 1995, the strategic triangle saw peaceful growth and cultural exchanges, aspects of which helped to ease tensions and foster cooperation between the two nations. The paranoia and uncertainty of strategic ambiguity was successful during this period because the US remained a force to be reckoned with on both sides.

As previously addressed, China has risen to a level of power that it is now able to push back on American agendas that are not in line with PRC agendas, particularly in political friction points such as with Taiwan. Because of this, the peaceful growth of cooperation between China and Taiwan is at a standstill, and the paranoia created through strategic ambiguity will not pressure China to conform but rather will pressure China to act out against the US. Policy must therefore be developed in such a way that it moves away from the friction point created by ambiguity. The US must still denounce Taiwanese independence movements, while also preserving its value as an ideologically democratic nation posed by Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism. Policy that directly considers Taiwan to be part of mainland China but autonomous in government, as well as emphasizing cultural similarities and fostering better cooperation and communication between Beijing and Taipei through positive and negative economic reinforcement to both China and Taiwan is essential (using strategies such as tariffs to dissuade action and stronger economic relations to promote). The US must therefore promote policy which binds China and Taiwan to one another culturally and not politically, to a point where the US does not have to resort to defense of Taiwan without fears of Chinese invasion, and China does not have to fear of Taiwanese independence from Chinese cultural ties. This can be achieved by the US decreasing arms sales to Taiwan and encouraging China-Taiwan policy that focuses on joint cooperation by increasing social relations of both nations via eased transportation, political rhetoric, and tension easing events (unifying entertainment means such as sports matches, festivals, and film conducted in collaboration) between both states. The decrease in arms sale will remove many fears of US military escalation as a friction point, and a perspective of cooperation under a culturally unified China-Taiwan policy with political autonomy can allow for a gradual beginning for cultural unification much like the period of low tension from 1979 to 1995.

Conclusion

The lack of tension compared to the evident tension between China and Taiwan seen during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis stands as a division between a period of success

and failure of strategic ambiguity in relation to the development of tension. The subtle threat of the unknown constructed by the US in policy toward Beijing and Taipei helped maintain a status quo of stability and eased tensions. However, following a growth of the Chinese economy and military power, China now rivals the US and garners the ability to challenge the ambiguous nature of US policy. I argue in concurrence of both the Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism argument as well as the security dilemma/arms race argument previously presented by Dean Chen and Pan Zhongqi respectively. The US is currently caught in a difficult situation where the morality of defending a democratic state that has tunneled deep into the hearts of Americans since the time of President Wilson stands in grave juxtaposition to the growing reality of rapid Chinese military expansion and threat to Taiwan which compounds cyclically into an arms race. The tensions developed since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis are a result of China's resistance to ambiguity and their growing desire to make their destiny clearer. I argue that the growing tensions between China and Taiwan are due in part to the escalating arms race cycle, but also due to China's understanding of its own domestic military and economic growth that helps rival the US. This begins to erode ambiguity about US intervention against Taiwan, because as China grows stronger every day, the likelihood of American protection of Taiwan grows smaller.

The response of the US should therefore be hardline diplomacy to end the ambiguity. The growth of cultural and political diplomacy that grew between China and Taiwan in the 1980s and 1990s is a powerful symbol that stability can be achieved. While the US was able to maintain this stability for diplomacy through ambiguity, it is clear now that the era of ambiguity has ended, and China is too powerful to be left in the dark on discussions about the fate of Taiwan. While the nationalistic culture of Taiwan continues to leave Taiwanese citizens feeling more Taiwanese than Chinese, their recent history shows that diplomacy and stability can still peacefully exist across the strait. The US should therefore strive to recreate policy between Beijing and Taipei in a manner that stresses peaceful re-unification on a social and cultural level, allowing Taiwan to remain a politically autonomous state with Chinese values. This can be negotiated to allow the US to decrease arms sales to Taiwan (which is seen as a threat to China), while also helping to reinforce and support joint cultural policy between China and Taiwan to ease cultural tensions and reinforce unification while maintaining political autonomy. This would require that policy is made to strengthen US commitment to protection of Taiwan while subsequently decreasing the weapons sold to Taiwan, and engaging in active policy writing summits and conversations amongst the triangle. The anticipation is that the instability of an emboldened Taiwan armed with US weapons will not declare independence or act irrationally, while in the same sense, China will not threaten Taiwan for fear of US intervention. In the state of diminished ambiguity, constant and concrete dialogue between the US, China, and Taiwan is required to make effective change. The US must maintain the democratic values of Taiwan in the same urgent sense that China must seek to unify Taiwan, which stresses the importance of ending the worsening tensions created by ambiguous policy making.

Ethan Owens is a 2022 graduate of Norwich University, with a bachelor's degree in history and political science. He currently serves as a second lieutenant in the United States Army.

Endnotes

1. "Joint Communique between the United States and China," February 27, 1972, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Staff Member Office Files (SMOF), President's Personal Files (PPF), Box 73, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121325>.
2. "Joint Communique of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (Normalization Communique)," December 15, 1978, American Institute in Taiwan, <https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/policy-history/key-u-s-foreign-policy-documents-region/u-s-prc-joint-communique-1979/>.
3. Brantly Womack, "China between Region and World," *The China Journal*, no. 61 (January 2009): 1-20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20648043>.
4. Dean P. Chen, *US Taiwan Strait Policy: The Origins of Strategic Ambiguity* (Boulder, CO: FirstForumPress, 2012), 80.
5. Chen, "Origins of Strategic Ambiguity," 79.
6. Chen, 253.
7. Pan Zhongqi, "US Taiwan Policy of Strategic Ambiguity: A Dilemma of Deterrence," *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 35 (2013): 393, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1067056022000054678>.
8. Zhongqi, "Dilemma of Deterrence," 397.
9. Zhongqi, 398.
10. Chen, "Origins of Strategic Ambiguity," 2.
11. Michael D. Ward, David R. Davis, and Steve Chan, "Military Spending and Economic Growth in Taiwan," *Armed Forces & Society* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 535, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45346538>.
12. Michael T. Klare, "The Next Great Arms Race," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 139, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045628>.
13. Chong-Pin Lin, "Beijing and Taipei: Dialectics in Post-Tiananmen Interactions," *The China Quarterly*, no. 136 (December 1993): 812, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/655591>.
14. Lin, "Dialectics in Post-Tiananmen," 770.
15. "Message to Compatriots in Taiwan," January 1, 1979, Taiwan Speeches and Documents, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/taiwan/7943.htm>.
16. Lin, "Dialectics in Post-Tiananmen," 771.
17. Lin, 772.

18. Wu Guoguang, "The Peaceful Emergence of a Great Power?" *Social Research* 73, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 322, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971822>.
19. Alexander C. Tan, "Tipping the Scale: PRC's Military Modernization and Cross-Taiwan Straits Relations," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 1, no. 2 (August 2014): 128, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48601774>.
20. Craig Murray, Andrew Berglund, and Kimberly Hsu, "China's Naval Modernization and Implications for the United States," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Backgrounder, August 26, 2013, 3.
21. Murray et al., "China's Naval Modernization," 7.
22. Ralph Jennings, "Taiwan improves missiles to counter China military expansion," *Associated Press*, August 18, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/taipei-ap-top-news-international-news-taiwan-tsai-ing-wen-be60ca810d63406d87e410dd5103ab6b>.
23. Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service (CRS), March 8, 2022, 2, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>.
24. Jack Detsch and Zinya Salfiti, "The U.S. Is Getting Taiwan Ready to Fight on the Beaches," *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/08/us-taiwan-military-presence-china-biden-porcupine/>.
25. Hung-Mao Tien and Chyuan-Jeng Shiau, "Taiwan's Democratization: A Summary," *World Affairs* 155, no. 2 (1992): 58–61, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20672340>.
26. Richard C. Bush, "Taiwan's Democracy and the China Challenge," Brookings, December 13, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/taiwans-democracy-and-the-china-challenge/>
27. Chih-Chieh Chou, "Contending Notions of the Cross-Strait Status Quo in Taiwan and Across the Strait: Impacts on U.S.-Taiwan Relations," *China Review* 18, no. 3 (2018): 123, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26484535>.
28. "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021," Annual Report to Congress, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.
29. Oren Dorell, "How China's Military Expansion Threatens U.S. Interests," *USA Today*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/05/18/how-chinas-military-expansion-threatens-u-s-interests/621385002/>.
30. O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization," 17.
31. "Chinese Forces Exercise Near Taiwan in Response to U.S. Visit," NBC Universal News Group, November 11, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/chinese-forces-exercise-taiwan-response-us-visit-rcna5058>.
32. Chou, "Contending Notions of the Cross-Strait Status Quo," 124–125.
33. Chou, 125.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The journal accepts a manuscript on the understanding that its content is original and that it has not been accepted for publication or review elsewhere. All papers will undergo anonymous peer review. The reviewers, who are selected based on their expertise in the area of the submitted papers, will evaluate the manuscripts on the basis of creativity, quality of scholarship, and policy relevance. Once accepted for publication, copyright resides with the journal. Authors should submit their manuscripts via e-mail to peaceandwar@norwich.edu

The length of a research article should be between 5,000 and 7,000 words, including endnotes and references. Each article must include an abstract of less than 200 words and 5-6 keywords. All manuscripts should be submitted in Microsoft Word format, and text should be double-spaced, Times New Roman font point 12 (including references) and left justified.

SPELLING AND STYLE: Note that we conform to *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* and *The Chicago Manual of Style* in matters of spelling, abbreviation, punctuation, etc. On first use of an acronym or abbreviation in the manuscript, please spell it out in full.

FIGURES AND TABLES: All figures and tables should be professional in appearance. Provide figures as separate data files instead of as pictures embedded within the Word document. Location of illustrations should be indicated by a note in the text (e.g., "Table 1 about here").

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH: authors must include a brief biographical sketch, including institutional affiliation, primary publications, and relevant experience. Length should be 200 words or less.

REFERENCES: JPWS uses *The Chicago Manual of Style's* notes and bibliography system with endnotes. For further information on references, please consult *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition.

Books: Feldman, Lily Gardner, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 20-33

Book chapters: Terence Roehrig, "Stability or Instability? The US Response to North Korean Weapons," in *North Korea and Nuclear Weapons: Entering the New Era of Deterrence*, eds., Sung Chull Kim and Michael Cohen (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017), 129-56.

Journal articles: Friedberg, Aaron, "The Future U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security* 32, no. 2 (2005): 7-35.

Online sources: Bonenberger, Adrian, "The War No One Notices in Ukraine," *New York Times*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/20/opinion/ukraine-russia.html>.

For multiple notes referencing the same work, please use the following shortened note form after the first reference.

Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation*, 73-78.

Roehrig, "Stability or Instability?," 131.

CONTENTS

Russia's Grand Strategy toward the West

Thomas Graham.....1

The Domestic Foundations of Russian Foreign Policy

Peter Rutland.....16

Lessons From Syria: What We Can Learn About the Russian Way of War

Nikolas K. Gvosdev.....32

'Terrorist Recruiters' Versus 'Terrorist Slayers': Weaponizing Syria in Russian Information Warfare

Eszter Szenes and Mark W. Perry.....47

The Aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Appeasement of Russia and the War in Ukraine

Lasha Tchantouridzé.....77

The Russo-Chinese 'Strategic Partnership' Enters a New and Dynamic Phase

Lyle Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev.....95

Not Your Father's Disinformation: Emerging Technology, Social Media Advances, and the Growth of Smart Disinformation

Mary Manjikian.....130

Bosnia and Russia: The Implications for European Security and US Interests

Nadina Ronc.....148

Russian Information Operations: The Kremlin's Competitive Narratives and Arctic Influence Objectives

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Troy Bouffard, and Adam Lajeunesse.....161

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Vision of Ukrainian Nationhood

Jessica Pisano.....187

Borderland No More? Shifting Security Dynamics in Ukraine

Angela Kachuyevski.....199

STUDENT RESEARCH

The Yugoslavia Civil War and the Allies in World War II

Caleb M. Reilly.....211

Evaluating the Value of US Diplomacy Through Strategic Ambiguity

Ethan Owens.....225

