

Transformation of Russian Strategic Culture

Impacts From Local Wars and Global Confrontation



Pavel BAEV

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Abstract

Russian strategic culture is evolving fast, despite the consolidation of the ruling regime, which is maturing into a more rigid autocracy, whereby its ideological outlook becomes increasingly conservative. The Russian leadership's strong propensity to glorify the past and emphasize victories inevitably distorts the content of internalized experiences and reduces the capacity to learn from mistakes. This assertive conservatism fits well with interpreting the new confrontation with the West as a return to the Cold War pattern of relations, despite the obvious vast differences in the geographic and power parameters of the conflict. At the same time, the pressure of actual engagements in military conflicts and fast-evolving technologies induce and drive changes in the strategic culture, which has become more fluid than the Russian political and military elites have been used to.

The Armed Forces are directly exposed to the challenges of unfamiliar battlefields and unprecedented threats, so the top brass, while being firmly committed to conservative mindsets and values, are compelled to act as innovators and reformers of the strategic culture. The input from the General Staff and other structures of military command, which now include many "warriors" with first-hand experience in various armed conflicts and engagements, particularly the Syrian intervention, has been more productive in new fields such as cyber-operations than in the more politically sensitive matters pertaining, for instance, to the threat of revolutions. The problem with the transformation of the strategic culture initiated by the military elite is the strongly implied and clearly stated imperative to increase the allocation of resources to build up the Armed Forces. In a situation of protracted economic stagnation, this demand creates an unusual degree of tension between the ambition to withstand, and even prevail, in the confrontation with the West, and the reality of contracting resource allocation, which is further trimmed by rampant corruption.

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Introduction

In the middle of the past decade, Russia succeeded three times in catching the West by surprise, of the highest strategic kind: by executing the amphibious/special forces' operation resulting in the annexation of Crimea; by launching the military/airforce intervention in the Syrian war, and by attempting complex cyber-interference in the US presidential elections. By the end of the decade, Russia's behavior had become more cautious, but it was still able to deliver surprises of various kinds; for instance, by prevailing over US attempts to stop the deal on delivering the S-400 surface-to-air missiles to Turkey, or by refusing to make any compromise to save the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The continuation of this carefully moderated course in the new decade cannot be taken for granted, as Russia's capacity to produce strategic surprises is undiminished. The West, therefore, needs a better way to respond than just to scramble a combination of *ad hoc* counter-measures. The next Russian move is almost impossible to predict, because the behavior of a mature authoritarian regime struggling for survival in the environment of protracted economic stagnation and deepening public discontent could be erratic and prone to over-reacting to sudden and even imaginary challenges.

One way to prepare for the surprising swings in Russia's behavior is to research the ongoing transformation of its strategic culture, following the tradition established by Jack Snyder at the start of his academic career and reinforced by Colin Gray, a major thinker in geopolitics.¹ They focused primarily on the nuclear brinkmanship practiced by the USSR in the 1970s, and in the post-Cold War era. Alastair Iain Johnson and Jeffrey Lantis, inter alia, proposed useful elaborations of the concept of Strategic culture.²

Centuries-long and richly diverse experience in building and projecting military power constitutes the "data base" for the current perceptions in the Russian elites regarding the Clausewitzian domain of using military force as an instrument of policy. Therefore, it can be safely

1. J. Snyder, "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations", *RAND Report*, R-2154-AF, 1977, and C. S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context", *Review of International Studies*, January 1999, pp. 49-69.

2. A. Iain Johnston, "Thinking About Strategic Culture", *International Security*, Spring 1995, pp. 32-64 ; J. S. Lantis, "Strategic Culture and National Security Policy", *International Studies Review*, Autumn 2002, pp. 87-113.

asserted that Russian strategic culture is significantly different from others, including, for that matter, the Chinese one, which is influenced by Communist ideology and the Soviet model.³ The Russian leadership's strong propensity to glorify the past and emphasize victories inevitably distorts the content of internalized experiences and reduces the capacity to learn from mistakes. The preoccupation with preserving the "Great Power" status achieved by the Soviet Union makes Russian strategic culture conservative in nature, and President Vladimir Putin embraces this conservative trend, lashing out against liberalism.⁴ This assertive conservatism fits well with interpreting the new confrontation with the West as a return to the Cold War pattern of relations, despite the obvious vast differences in the geographic and power parameters of the conflict. At the same time, the pressure of actual engagements in military conflicts and fast-evolving technologies induce and drive changes in the strategic culture, which has become more fluid than the Russian political and military elites has been used to. The Armed Forces are directly exposed to the challenges of unfamiliar battlefields and unprecedented threats, so the top brass, while being firmly committed to conservative mindsets and values, are compelled to act as innovators and reformers of the strategic culture.

This analysis cannot aspire to examine the whole depth and spread of Russian strategic culture. It focuses on several recent alterations in its various traits. One driver of these changes is the evolving contradiction between high ambitions and limited capabilities; another is the strong impact of the military leadership, which acts both as a custodian and as a reformer of the strategic culture.

3. One useful investigation is C. A. Ford, "Realpolitik with Chinese Characteristics: Chinese Strategic Culture and the Modern Communist Party-State", *Strategic Asia 2016-17: Understanding Strategic Cultures*, Washington DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017, pp. 29-62.

4. A sharp response to that stance is C. Moore, "To Prove Putin Wrong, Liberalism Needs to Rediscover Its Conservative Roots", *The Telegraph*, 12 July 2019, available at: www.telegraph.co.uk.

New Parameters of Contradiction Between Ambition and Capacity

The gap between high political ambitions and limited military capabilities is certainly not new in the evolution of Russian strategic culture. In recent history, this discrepancy twice acquired a catastrophic character, contributing to the collapse of the Russian empire in the final stage of WWI and to the breakdown of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. Currently, this gap does not appear to be that severe, but it has developed a new quality, which is shaped by the divergence between aims and means, using nuclear weapons as instruments of policy, exploiting the new cyber-domain, and upgrading the strategic partnership with China, as well as by the debilitating impact of corruption.

Ambivalent renuclearization

Russia's claim to "Great Power" status in the envisaged brutally competitive multipolar world can to all intents and purposes be underpinned by only one strength: possession of the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons. Modernization of strategic armaments was already established as the top priority in the State Armament Program (SAP) to 2020, approved in 2011. In 2018, President Putin further reinforced this priority, presenting in his address to the Federal Assembly a set of new weapon systems, which were duly incorporated in the SAP to 2027, which was approved belatedly in December 2017.⁵ This show of strength had great resonance in the media, but the Kremlin is left with the problem of turning the virtual weapons (only a few are deployed, and most would probably never be), which are constantly advertised by propaganda, into useful assets for foreign policy.

One dire consequence of this build-up is the breakdown of the traditional arms control system triggered by US President Donald Trump's announcement in October 2018 of his intention to withdraw from the INF Treaty. Technical details of Russian violations of the ban on ground-based

5. My in-depth examination of this priority can be found in P. K. Baev, "Russian Nuclear Modernization and Putin's Wonder-Missiles", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 115, Ifri, August 2019.

missiles deployment were invoked as the reason for this decision, but more important is the irrelevance of INF provisions in the context of the appearance of new Russian weapon systems. The prolongation of the New START Treaty (2011), which is due to expire in February 2021, does not make much sense in this context either, so the US-Russian talks on strategic stability matters in Geneva have yielded little fruit. Russia used to gain much prestige from arms control arrangements, which codified its parity with the USA, but now has to compensate for the loss of this status by experimenting with new ways of asserting its readiness to use nuclear means for vague political purposes.⁶ China disapproves of the dismantlement of arms control treaties but resolutely refuses to partake in any disarmament talks, while investing heavily in modernization of its nuclear arsenal, accepting only symbolic contributions from Russia, for instance in developing an early-warning system.⁷

The fast expansion of political discourse on nuclear weapons creates tensions in Russian strategic culture, in which nuclear matters used to be isolated from the mainstream and confined to esoteric departments loaded with top-secret dossiers pertaining to deterrence, diplomacy and technologies. The basic tenets of deterrence remain under-developed, so that the proposition on retaliation for a nuclear strike is over-established, while the vague notions about first use lack credibility. Even in the high command, most members and their respective entourage are not familiar with nuclear problems, and tend to see the prioritization of nuclear modernization as an infringement of their vested interests. The military are not training for operations on nuclear battlefields; the top brass is much more interested in boosting capabilities for conventional deterrence than in entertaining propositions such as “escalate to de-escalate”.⁸

The tacit resistance to renuclearization in Russian strategic culture, which evolves simultaneously in various directions, can weaken, providing the political demand for greater reliance on nuclear instruments remains strong. But this preference for non-nuclear means to feasible ends can also be reinforced by the imperative to deliver military responses to direct challenges to Russia’s security, in which nuclear assets are demonstrably useless.

6. See A. Arbatov, “Mad Momentum Redux? The Rise and Fall of Nuclear Arms Control”, *Survival*, June-July 2019, pp. 7-38.

7. Putin announced this contribution as a major achievement in upgrading the partnership; see G. Gressel, “The Authoritarian Entente: Sino-Russian Security Cooperation”, *Commentary*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 17 October 2019, available at: www.ecfr.eu.

8. This dubious proposition is scrutinized by US experts but barely exists in Russian discourse; see Kevin Ryan, “Is ‘Escalate to Deescalate’ Part of Russia’s Nuclear Toolbox?” *Russia Matters*, Harvard Kennedy School, 8 January 2020, available at: www.russiamatters.org.

The expanding cyber-domain

The fast-developing cyber-dimension in Russian strategic culture contrasts starkly with the more traditional nuclear dimension. In the latter, Russia has a massive arsenal and invests heavily in its modernization, while struggling to make it politically useful. In the former, the posture is the opposite. Russia cannot claim the status of a “Great Cyber-Power”; it is in fact a laggard in producing hardware and developing software in the dynamic and profitable ICT industry. Nevertheless, Russia’s readiness to deploy the available cyber-capabilities in offensive operations and to take high risks by breaking the norms of acceptable behavior in the poorly regulated cyber-domain of international relations has made it a major source of threat for the EU and USA.

Characteristically, it is the military intelligence (GRU), subordinated to the General Staff, that has been involved most actively in high-profile cyber-operations, from interference in the 2016 US presidential elections to the attempted attack on the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).⁹ This recklessness in offending powerful adversaries goes beyond the pattern of experimenting with new forms of warfare that the high command has been developing and introducing as a key new feature of the strategic culture. Quite probably, this “boldness” is encouraged and facilitated by ignorance, perpetuated by President Putin’s stubborn refusal to become personally familiar with modern technologies and social networks.¹⁰ This astonishing lack of understanding of the cyber-universe’s complexity by the ultimate “decider” makes sustained efforts at establishing control over the Russian segment of the Internet pitifully ineffectual.¹¹ It is entirely possible that the General Staff is also lagging far behind in terms of cutting-edge knowledge in cyber-warfare, and grants the GRU a *carte blanche* to employ hackers without evaluating the risks entailed by their actions.¹²

9. “Reckless Campaign of Cyber Attacks by Russian Military Intelligence Service Exposed”, UK National Cyber Security Center, 3 October 2018, available at: www.ncsc.gov.uk.

10. Putin’s prescription to replace Wikipedia with an officially approved encyclopedia has revealed yet again his lack of understanding of the workings of the Internet; see interview with A. Kozlyuk, “Budut nakazyvat’ pol’zovatelej za poseshhenie zapreshhennyh sajtov” [Users will be punished for visiting banned sites], *Znak.ru*, 8 November 2019, available at: www.znak.com.

11. On the under-resourcing of these efforts, see V. Polovinko, A. Khachaturov, D. Kozlova, “Protokoly ‘suverennogo runeta’” [Protocols of ‘Sovereign Runet’], *Novaia gazeta*, 1 November 2019, available at: <https://novavagazeta.ru>.

12. One perceptive view is M. Galeotti, “Footprints of the Russian Military Intelligence Agency GRU Are Everywhere”, *Raamop Rusland*, 20 July 2018, available at: www.raamoprusland.nl.

This experimentation goes hand in hand with the aggressive expansion of propaganda, which produces an unprecedented volume of fake news and disinformation, and shapes the information warfare that Russia feels empowered to wage against the West. At the top levels of political management of this war, the desire to attack the presumed vulnerabilities in Western institutions and societies combines with the urge to establish firm control over the Russian information space. The former is increasingly frustrated by efforts in many European and US agencies aimed at building a system of cyber-deterrence.¹³ The latter also remains ineffectual due to continuing reliance on old instruments, first of all TV, and due to the inability to control and censor the fast-expanding social networks. The resulting development of cyber-dimension in Russian strategic culture is weakened by the persistent ignorance at the top level of High Command and distorted by bureaucratic compartmentalization, which isolates the centers of expertise from one another. It is also compromised by several failures and scandals, resulting in direct sanctions, and slowed down by underfunding caused by the preference in the leadership for digitalization on the cheap.

Non-pivot to China

China's impact on the transformation of Russian strategic culture is ambivalent and incoherent. The progressive upgrade of the strategic partnership with China is officially presented as a key direction in Russia's security policy, underpinned by the cultivation of personal friendship between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. This declared "pivot" implies a fast expansion of economic ties, a boost in development of the Far East, and an upgrade of military proto-alliance. Very little of that is actually happening.¹⁴ The Russian Far East gains scant profits from cross-border exchanges and keeps losing population. Economic ties, particularly oil and gas export, are not insignificant in terms of inducing shifts in the strategic culture, but it is the security interface that matters most.

Russia's main strength in this interface is its nuclear arsenal, while China enjoys a huge lead in cyber-capabilities. This asymmetry is aggravated by these countries' dissimilar policies in exploiting their own strengths and compensating for their weaknesses. China is, for that matter,

13. M. Taddeo, "How to Deter in Cyber-Space", *Strategic Analysis*, The European CoE for Countering Hybrid Threats, Helsinki, June-July 2018, available at: www.hybridcoe.fi.

14. Mainstream pundits now warn about China's propensity to ignore Russia's interests and possible inclination to execute a tougher policy toward Russia. See S. Karaganov, "Kuda idti i s kem idti" [Where to go and with whom], *Rossijskaia gazeta*, 26 December 2019, available at: <https://rg.ru>.

worried about Russia's nuclear behavior, relies entirely on its own technologies to modernize its weapon systems, and refuses to join any new arms control frameworks.¹⁵ Moscow is impressed by China's ability to control the Internet but cannot replicate this achievement, and Beijing benefits from the Western preoccupation with Russian cyber-threats, which make its own behavior appear measured and responsible.

The Russia-China security partnership is long on symbolism—like the joint naval exercises or air patrols—but short on real substance. Putin's announcement that Russia will help to build its system of strategic early warning is also primarily a matter of public relations.¹⁶ The most urgent security problem in East Asia is centered on the North Korean nuclear and missile programs. China prefers to proceed with the complex maneuvering that connects this problem with its trade troubles with the USA in a bilateral format, and sees no need to cut Russia in. Looking for ways to reconstitute the arms control system, Moscow considers that for Washington the inclusion of China is the main goal—but can find no way to persuade Beijing to get involved.¹⁷ President Putin tried to increase his options in the region by engaging in bargaining with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, but failed to offer a meaningful compromise in the long-deadlocked dispute about the South Kuril islands.

These islands are the only place in the vast Eastern Military District where there is a significant strengthening of Russian garrisons, while the general decay of military infrastructure continues, with few exceptions like the base of strategic submarines in Vilyuchinsk, Kamchatka. The Pacific Fleet is hard pressed to show flag in various troubled waters in the region, but its combat order is shrinking, particularly as the plan for strengthening it with Mistral-class amphibious assault ships was cancelled. Russia has *de facto* accepted the position of military inferiority in the Far East, while persisting with demonstrations of air and naval power.¹⁸

15. The lack of knowledge in Russia on this modernization is reflected in I. Kramnik, "K novomu dogovoru o SNV SShA i Rossii pridetsâ idti vdvoem" [USA and Russia have to go alone to the new START treaty], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 22 December 2019, available at: www.ng.ru.

16. A competent Russian assessment is V. Kashin, "Kak sotrudnichestvo Rossii i Kitaia v sozdanii SPRN povliiaet na strategicheskij balans v mire" [How Russian-Chinese cooperation in building strategic early warning system will impact on global strategic balance], *Profil*, 15 October 2019, available at: <https://profil.ru>.

17. V. Muhin, "Jadernyj potencial Kitaia ugrozhaet ne tol'ko SShA, no i Rossii" [China's nuclear capabilities threaten not only USA but Russia as well], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 16 July 2019, available at: www.ng.ru.

18. One sober analysis is A. Khramchihin, "Dal'nij i bezzashchitnyj vostok" [Defenseless Far East], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 30 November 2018, available at: <http://nvo.ng.ru>.

In the Russian strategic culture, this vulnerability is internalized as an unfortunate consequence of the need to concentrate the bulk of resources and attention on the pivotal Western direction.¹⁹ This disconnection between the political attention given to Asia-Pacific dynamics and the military neglect of security needs in the Far East is the only way to avoid a severe overstretch of available resources. The Russian top brass has little trust in the strategic partnership with China and cannot believe that political “friendship” can compensate for military weakness. They assume that China would not help Russia in a confrontation with the USA, but that Moscow may be compelled to side with Beijing if the US-China struggle for global dominance escalates to a sequence of direct clashes. These worries are exacerbated by poor understanding in the Russian high command of the goals and guidelines of the swift-proceeding Chinese military reform.

The culture of corruption

The phenomenon of Russian corruption has become notorious in international media, and its “export” is recognized as a *bona fide* security challenge to Europe and a potent instrument in Russia’s policy of undermining EU cohesion. It has attracted much research attention (besides the growing number of investigations), but what makes it relevant for this analysis is the growing impact not only on political and business cultures, but also on the strategic culture.²⁰ The massive inflow of petro-revenues has created a new quality of Russian corruption, which goes way beyond the usual bribery and embezzlement, and serves as a constitutive element in Putin’s system of governance. In that, Russia is remarkably different from China, which is by no means corruption-free, but President Xi Jinping executes severe anti-corruption campaigns to purge disloyal elite clans, including the high military command, and to assert his leadership.²¹ In Russia, anti-corruption investigations target primarily over-greedy mid-level officials, while the amassing of fortunes by the members of Putin’s high elites, including, incidentally, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, is seen as a mean to secure their loyalty.²²

19. My more elaborate examination of this concentration is in P. Baev, “The Military Dimension of Russia’s Connection with Europe”, *European Security*, Winter 2018, pp. 82-97.

20. Corruption is, for instance, examined in R. Cohen, A. Radin, “Russia’s Hostile Measures in Europe: Understanding the Threat”, RAND Report RR-1793-A, 2019, available at: www.rand.org.

21. On the recent twists in this campaign, see N. Taplin, “China’s Corruption Paradox”, *Wall Street Journal*, 1 November 2019, available at: www.wsj.com.

22. Alexei Navalny, the champion of the anti-corruption struggle in Russia, published an investigation of Shoigu’s life style back in 2015; see “Pagody na Rubliovke” [Pagodas on Rublevka], 27 October 2015, available at: <https://navalny.com>. Some more recent details are in S. Ezhov, “Stiuardessa special’nogo naznachenia” [Special purpose stewardess], *The Insider*, 31 July 2019, available at: <https://theins.ru>.

This blossoming corruption, among the key “guardians” of the strategic culture, translates into a propensity to advance grandiose strategic mega-projects (like the hugely over-priced Kerch bridge) and aggravates the discrepancy between inflated ambitions and under-resourced capabilities.²³ Corruption connects many various traits in strategic culture by ensuring compatibility between the mindsets of bureaucrats and “warriors”, but it also makes the competition for the diminishing “pie” of resources furiously personal. The omnipotent Federal Security Service (FSB) has privileged access to many financial flows, but it is suffering badly from infighting, resulting in several high-profile investigations, and Putin was not able to perform the usual role of arbiter in these embarrassing exposures.²⁴

The military are no less corrupt than the FSB or the Rosgvardiia, which claims an increasing share of resources, and there are increasing signs of tensions in the ranks because of the “conspicuous consumption” by the top brass. The massive misuse of budget funding results in demands for more intense exploitation of available and often worn-out assets, while the claims for more rewards are routinely turned down.²⁵ Corruption thus brings about a culture of over-stretch, which inevitably involves a growing number of technical accidents and human errors. One area where the corruption has produced strikingly debilitating results is the space program: Dmitri Rogozin, the head of Roscosmos, is prone to make expansive promises, but the frequency of accidents has sky-rocketed.²⁶ Characteristically, the Ministry of Defense seeks to use these failures to wrest control over the Vostochny cosmodrome from Roscosmos.²⁷

Corruption has become a major flaw in Russian strategic culture, making it unable to cope with the trend of shrinking budget expenditures, while predatory appetites do not.

23. On the costs of the Kerch bridge, see Richard Lourie, “Putin’s Bridge Over Troubled Waters”, *Globe and Mail*, 26 October 2018, available at: www.theglobeandmail.com.

24. On Putin’s role, see M. Galeotti, “The West thinks Putin is Russia’s spymaster. But are the spies controlling him?” *The Guardian*, 20 June 2019, available at: www.theguardian.com.

25. On rejected claims for bonuses for deployment in Syria, see I. Zhilin, “Deneg net, no vy srazhajtes” [There is no money, but keep fighting], *Novavaia gazeta*, 24 April 2019, available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru>.

26. One critical evaluation is A. Borisov, “Kak Roskosmos unichtozhaet rossijskuiu kosmonavtiku” [How Roscosmos destroys Russian space program], *Lenta.ru*, 14 March 2019, available at: <https://lenta.ru>.

27. See on this I. Safronov, “Zemnaia problema kosmodroma ‘Vostochnyj’” [Earthly problem of the Vostochny cosmodrome], *Vedomosti*, 11 November 2019, available at: www.vedomosti.ru.

Military Custodians of Strategic Culture Become its Reformers

The military establishment is typically one of the most conservative parts of the national elite, and so the top brass usually claims the role of custodians of the strategic culture. As Putin's regime matures into an authoritarian autocracy, preoccupied with own survival, its ideological outlook becomes more conservative and hostile towards liberalism and modernization. The military, which have to perform many different efforts to project forces, become by necessity more open to internalizing new experiences and therefore less conservative, but certainly no less anti-liberal. They bring new features and perceptions into Russian strategic culture and assume the difficult role of its reformers.

Unusual unity of high command

In principle, the cohesion and discipline of the command hierarchy is supposed to be a key characteristic of military organizations. In the post-Soviet practice of the Russian Armed Forces up to the early 2010s, however, this was definitely not the case. Split authority between the Defense Ministry and the General Staff produced constant quarrels, which aggravated tensions between branches and services, and disagreements with the military-industrial complex. Sergei Shoigu, appointed as Defense Minister in November 2012, deserves credit for radically reducing this discord.²⁸ He had no military background and did not belong to Putin's "inner circle", but he has managed to gain trust from the professional top brass, and respect from the rank and file. He has become the second most influential politician in Russia, preserving a degree of independence in Putin's court.

While placing high value on personal loyalty, Shoigu has opted from the very start to promote "warriors" to the high levels of the military hierarchy—officers with real combat experience driven by the purpose to build combat-worthy forces. Their collective input has made the strategic

28. For Shoigu's background and profile, see in A. Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia*, Washington DC, Jamestown Foundation, 2018, pp. 179-186.

culture more pro-active and more attentive to new features of modern wars and means of projecting power. Shoigu has never pretended to be a theorist or a strategic thinker, leaving the work on conceptualizing the evolving character of application of military force to the General Staff, so that the name of its capable chief, Valery Gerasimov, has been freely attached to various doctrinal propositions.²⁹ Being the most experienced survivor in the Russian political arena, which he entered in 1991, Shoigu has not only cultivated personal connections with Putin, but has also impressed upon the top brass the importance of demonstrating total loyalty to the Commander-in-Chief. This loyalty doesn't necessarily include readiness to suppress domestic unrest, so the top brass reluctantly supported in 2016 the creation of the National Guard (Rosgvardiia) by merging the Interior Troops with police special forces. This new player among the armed bureaucracies keeps building its strength and claims an increasing share of resources—and it makes a particular contribution to the strategic culture, which becomes more focused on ensuring the survival of the ruling regime and suppressing opposition.³⁰ Gerasimov understands the need to adjust military thinking accordingly and advances the proposition that the US strategy of confronting Russia (which he calls “Trojan Horse”) combines capabilities for high-precision strikes and measures aimed at undermining social order: neutralizing the former is the task for the Armed Forces, and the latter—for Rosgvardiia.³¹

What ensures the pivotal role of the military in this tightening competition for influence is the multiple connections with the industries involved in producing armaments and equipment, even if the integrity of the military-industrial complex is far lower than it was in Soviet times. Shoigu has managed to build good relations with the bosses of the defense industry, and the large increase in funding procurement in the mid-2010s helped to overcome old disagreements. The curtailment of funds in the 2027 State Armament program forced delays and reductions in many programs. For instance, the Army drastically reduced its orders for the much-advertised T-14 Armata main battle tank.³² The High Command,

29. One noteworthy confession is M. Galeotti, “I Am Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’”, *Foreign Policy*, 5 March 2018, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

30. The disappointment in the military about the budget redistribution in favor of Rosgvardiia is spelled out in M. Kisliakov, L. Panchenko, “General Shamanov raskritikoval proekt voennogo biudzheta” [General Shamanov is critical of the draft military budget], *Moskovskij komsomolets*, 10 October 2019, available at: <https://www.mk.ru>.

31. One expert assessment of this proposition is R. McDermott, “Gerasimov unveils Russia’s strategy of Limited Actions”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6 March 2019, available at: <https://jamestown.org>.

32. B. Howard, “Russia’s Futuristic T-14 Tank Was Designed to Defeat Western Armies, but They Are Too Expensive for Russia”, *Business Insider*, 31 July 2018, available at: www.businessinsider.com.

nevertheless, maintains perfectly cordial ties with such key business figures as Sergei Chemezov, who steadily expands the control of the Rostec corporation over various defense enterprises.³³ This interplay ensures a strong emphasis on translating technical innovations into military advantages and gaining political opportunities from the achieved position of strength in the updated strategic culture.

Ukraine's debacle

The protracted violent conflict with Ukraine has produced the most profound impact on the transformation of Russian strategic culture, propelling it in several poorly compatible directions and aggravating its incoherence. Resolute denials by the Kremlin of the plain fact of aggression have turned from useful political camouflage into an obstacle for strategic analysis of this conflict. The discourse on “brotherly” relations between the peoples of Russia and Ukraine reflects deep-rooted perceptions in Russian society, but it clashes with the fierce propaganda campaign against the Ukrainian revolution and reforms. Reassurances about readiness to normalize relations are incompatible with sustained support for separatists in the Donbass region. The vision of incorporating Ukraine into the Eurasian Economic Union contradicts the costly efforts to terminate the gas transit by constructing two circumventing pipelines. Condescending criticism of political processes in Ukraine cannot hide fears in the Kremlin about their corrosive influence on the stability of Putin’s regime in Russia.³⁴

These contradictions add up to profound geopolitical confusion regarding the dilemma of pulling Ukraine back into Russia’s “sphere of influence” or cordoning it off as an inherently unstable “black hole”. In strategic terms, this confusion translates into the lack of clarity about Ukraine’s position in Russia’s confrontation with the West. It is treated both as NATO’s ally in the wider Western theatre and as an isolated war zone, in which Russia has clear military superiority. The Russian General Staff needs to plan and prepare for large-scale operations in Eastern Ukraine but cannot channel the necessary resources into these

33. Useful research into the workings of this corporation is P. Luzin, “The Inner Workings of Rostec, Russia’s Military-Industrial Behemoth”, *The Russia File*, Kennan Institute, 1 April 2019, available at: www.wilsoncenter.org.

34. Insightful analysis of these incompatible aims can be found in G. Pavlovsky, “Russia and Ukraine: A Lethal Co-Dependency”, *Commentary*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 14 February 2019, available at: <https://carnegie.ru>.

preparations because political guidelines deny any such plans.³⁵ The hostilities remain deadlocked by the Minsk agreements, which neither side is prepared to implement beyond observing the tentative ceasefire.³⁶ *De facto* occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions adds to the burden of this conflict and does not constitute any sort of political gain for Russia.

Time is not on Russia's side in this suspended conflict as Ukraine moves ahead with political reforms and builds up its military, while NATO prepares for various possible escalations in the Black Sea theatre and spill-overs of hostilities from the barely stabilized Donbass war zone. Russian strategic culture has evolved in the direction of creating and operating in "grey zones" of unconventional armed conflicts, but it is unable to formulate sound guidelines for achieving a meaningful victory in these open-ended engagements.

Syrian influences

Military intervention in Syria is unique in Russia's records of projecting power, not only because of its geographic reach, but also because of its rather unorthodox character. The most obvious difference from other "small wars" is the heavy reliance on air power, which goes against the accepted wisdom in Russian strategy that only massive deployment of ground forces can secure success for any operation aimed at establishing control over hostile territory. The war with Georgia in August 2008 delivered another proof for that old proposition, and the incursion into Eastern Ukraine in summer-autumn 2014 was in fact executed without any air support. A sustained and successful bombing campaign augmented by occasional strikes by long-distance cruise missiles launched from naval and air platforms has underpinned the new conclusion that Russia is now able to replicate the US pattern of projecting power from afar and with minimal casualties.³⁷ This amounts to a significant modification of the strategic culture in the direction of greater emphasis on modern air power and innovative technologies. Unlike the strictly classified experiences from the conflict with Ukraine, lessons from the Syrian intervention (which might actually be a *sui generis* operation) are incorporated in various theoretical

35. For more detailed evaluation of this posture, see P. Baev, "New Perspectives on the Black Sea Theater in Russian Strategic Culture", *Security Insights*, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, September 2019, available at: www.marshallcenter.org.

36. On the scant results of the Paris summit in the "Normandy format", see O. Oliker, "Could Peace in Eastern Ukraine Finally Be at Hand?", *The Guardian*, 12 December, available at: www.theguardian.com.

37. This conclusion is in A. Tsiganok, "Vojna rasstavliaet vse tochki nad i" [War puts all the dots on i], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 19 July 2019, available at: <http://nvo.ng.ru>.

generalizations and practical instructions, and thus have a disproportional impact on the development of professional military culture.³⁸ Most Aerospace Forces and Army senior officers have gained the experience of short-term rotation into the Syrian theatre, and are encouraged to show the usefulness of this combat training.

Another unusual feature in the execution of the Syrian intervention is the employment of private military contractors, organized more efficiently than the bands of volunteers in the Donbass war zone. Moscow invested much effort in strengthening the al-Assad army, but discovered that the newly-build 4th and 5th Assault Army Corps performed poorly in offensive operations; Russian commanders also encountered difficulties in competing with Iran in recruiting and training local forces.³⁹ This irreducible weakness on the ground prompted the experiment of organizing and deploying troops of mercenaries, which acquired the odd moniker of the “Wagner group”, to perform combat tasks.⁴⁰ The experience in controlling these troops is rather mixed, and the devastating defeat in the attempted attack on the US position to the east of Deir ez-Zor in February 2018 proved the risk of their initiatives—and the benefit of deniability. The Russian top brass may harbor more reservations about the use of maverick “Wagners” than the political leadership and other parties interested in external adventures, in exotic places like the Central African Republic or Mozambique, so this new feature of the strategic culture remains ambivalent. The recent troubles in executing a limited and deniable intervention in Libya may add to these reservations.

What the high command has discovered in Syria is the technical feasibility of tight control over tactical situations in far-away theatres from the Moscow headquarters (National Defense Control Center).⁴¹ This relatively advanced command and control system reinforces the tendency of strict centralization and discouragement of initiative typical in Russian strategic culture. Its modernization proceeds in the “top-down” pattern, with the heavy propaganda spin delivered by the newly established Main Military-Political Directorate, led by General Andrei Kartapolov, a former commander of the grouping of forces in Syria.

38. For a thoughtful assessment of this impact, see D. Adamsky, “Moscow’s Syria Campaign: Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy”, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 109, Ifri, July 2018, available at: www.ifri.org.

39. For a useful reflection on these problems, see A. Khlebnikov, “Development of Syrian Armed Forces: Trends and Problems”, Russian International Affairs Council, 6 December 2018, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

40. K. Marten, “Russia’s Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, March 2019, pp. 181-204.

41. This feature is noted in T. Ripley, “Russia Learns Military Lessons in Syria”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 2017, available at: www.janes.com.

The special case of the Navy

The Navy has always constituted a particular element in Russian military organization, with its own professional ethos, command structure and ties with a separate (shipbuilding) part of the defense-industrial complex. Admirals have persistently sought to make a special contribution to Russian strategic culture, centered on the idea that Russia can only assert its claim for “Great Power” status by building a powerful ocean-going Navy. The guideline on building “the second most combat-capable Navy in the world” is now established in official doctrine—but cannot possibly be implemented.⁴² Presiding over the July 2019 naval parade, President Putin promised to build a fleet of “unique capabilities”, but the gap between this grand vision and the reality of over-stretched and shrinking naval squadrons is perhaps the most obvious in the overall Russian military posture.⁴³

Proponents of naval power advance all sorts of arguments in favor of investing in shipbuilding, from reminders about the unique value of major surface combatants as means of “showing flag” to warning about China’s reinforced priority of strengthening naval capabilities. The Russian Navy is indeed facing a severe shortage of capacity for amphibious operations and is seriously over-stretched with the tasks in support of the Syrian intervention.⁴⁴ The neglected and under-strength Pacific Fleet is hard-pressed to demonstrate a presence in the troubled waters of East Asia, and new tasks in the Arctic theatre require an increase in the Northern Fleet’s ice-resistant capabilities. Despite all these acute needs, the Navy has come out as the designated loser in SAP 2027, even accounting for massive funding channeled to constructing nuclear submarines.⁴⁵ This outcome of the struggle between dozens of lobby groups is rooted in and reinforces the continuing belittling of naval power in Russian strategic culture.

Putin’s delight in diving in cute submersibles or presiding over naval parades is not enough to overrule the perceptions and assumptions, among most of the decision-making elites, of the excessive costs and limited benefits in prioritizing the plans for strengthening the Navy. Projects for

42. A sound analysis of this doctrine is R. Connolly, “Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Activities for the Period Until 2030”, *Document Review*, NATO Defense College, 22 January 2019, available at: www.ndc.nato.int.

43. A. Golts, “Paradnaia storona sluzhby na vidu, no mozhet li Rossia gordit’sia sostoianiem VMF” [The parade is picture-perfect, but can Russia take pride in the Navy?], *Open Media*, 30 July 2019, available at: <https://openmedia.io>.

44. My more detailed examination of this overstretch is in P. Baev, “La stratégie maritime de la Russie”, *Ramses 2020*, Paris, Ifri/Dunod, pp. 72-77.

45. One sharp Russian analysis is P. Luzhin, “A Fragmented Fleet”, *Riddle*, 13 August 2019, available at: www.ridl.io.

constructing a nuclear aircraft carrier, or at least a series of helicopter-carriers (comparable with the Mistral-class amphibious assault ships), are postponed into the indefinite future, and even Arctic-related projects, such as the construction of nuclear icebreaker Arktika (the first in the three-ship series), progress with long delays. Instead of going along with inflated ambitions, modernizers of the strategic culture (primarily in the General Staff) aim at curtailing the Navy to squadrons of smaller platforms, which can still carry high-tech weapon systems, including hypersonic missiles.

Conclusion

The Russian strategic culture is evolving remarkably fast, despite the relatively high stability of the personal composition of both the high command and Putin's "inner circle" of courtiers, which have expanded their respective key roles in shaping the features of this amalgam of vague perceptions, esoteric norms and unspoken rules. As the ruling regime matures into a more rigid autocracy, its ideological outlook becomes increasingly conservative, which hampers the modernization of the strategic culture. This attitude, nevertheless, has been overcome by the inescapable need to internalize new experiences and to prepare for new challenges. It is the top brass that feels this need most directly, and thus takes the lead in updating and modernizing the strategic culture.

The input from the General Staff and other structures of the military command, which now include many "warriors" with first-hand experience in various armed conflicts and engagements, particularly the Syrian intervention, has been more productive in new fields such as cyber-operations than in the more politically sensitive matters pertaining for instance to the threat of revolutions. In the former, the military leadership has apparently decided that the high risk of failure and exposure is more than compensated by rewards from establishing primacy in the cyber-domain—not comparing with adversaries, but with other agencies (particularly the FSB and the SVR). In the latter, attempts by the General Staff to define the "color revolutions" as a new form of warfare have been rather (perhaps deliberately) shallow, not least due to the reluctance to deal with the threat of domestic unrest, which has become the primary task of the newly created National Guard. An important emphasis in strategic culture changes initiated by the military is on the fast incorporation of modern technologies, from hypersonic missiles to electronic disruption of communications, into the means and methods of projecting power, which is expected to grant Russia the advantage of initiative in the evolving confrontation with the West.

The problem with the transformation of the strategic culture initiated by the military elite is the strongly implied and clearly stated imperative to increase the allocation of resources to build up the Armed Forces. This urgent pressure goes beyond the traditional demand for more funding than the state budget can allocate. In a situation of protracted economic stagnation, it creates an unusual degree of tension between the ambition to

withstand, and even prevail, in the confrontation with the West, and the reality of contracting resource allocation, which is further trimmed by rampant corruption. The acutely felt political challenge from Ukraine, where the new leadership is committed to structural reforms, cannot be answered by stability in Russia's development, which is in fact disappearing, as the reshuffle of the government and revisions of the Constitution initiated by President Putin in January 2019 demonstrate. The deepening political uncertainty determines swings in foreign policy from cautious temporizing to proactive forceful moves that combine applications of military and "hybrid" means. Russian strategic culture becomes therefore more fluid and less calculated. One of the most striking shifts is the increased acceptance of nuclear weapons as useful and effective instruments of policy, which alters the traditional parameters of deterrence. The intention to reinforce Russia's main source of strength justifies the massive investment in modernizing the nuclear arsenal, and the availability of new weapon systems reinforces the desire to harvest dividends from this effort.

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