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Russia's Invasion of Ukraine A Political-Strategic Break?

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Abstract

On February 24, 2022, eight years after deploying an integrated military and non-military indirect strategy against Kiev, Vladimir Putin decided to initiate an open war against Ukraine. The launching of this war may have seemed paradoxical insofar as the Russian military-political elites have, for the past thirty years, conceptualized and promoted the bypassing of the interstate armed struggle in order to achieve political objectives considered vital. This raises the question: did Russia's president choose to start this war after careful consideration, or was it a snap decision? In any case, Russia's decision to invade Ukraine also questions the cognitive frameworks of the actors who devise and lead Moscow's strategies. With their radically hostile perception of the strategic environment, Russia's military-political elites are susceptible to acting in ways that are unpredictable, impulsive and, ultimately, counterproductive.

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Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin gave the order to invade Ukraine, eight years after implementing an integrated indirect strategy against the country, involving, most notably, special operations, the use of paramilitary forces, the concealed use of Russian military forces, and psychological-information and cyber operations. From Ukraine to Africa and the Euro-Atlantic region, for many years Moscow has favored the implementation of indirect confrontation in order to achieve its political and strategic objectives.¹ In October 2021, the Chief of the General Staff of the French Armed Forces, Army General Thierry Burkhard, claimed that the time of peace had passed and spoke about the importance of “winning the war before the war”², while the Minister of the Armed Forces, Florence Parly, said that the information weapon made it possible to “win without fighting”, if it was used well.³ Western awareness of such phenomena has come late, with Russia being several steps ahead: for 30 years now, Russian military theorists have been striving to conceive and promote a strategy of action that can bypass interstate armed struggle.⁴ In light of this, does Vladimir Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine constitute a strategic break from the body of doctrine built up over 30 years? Are we at a crossroads between the indirect strategy and the high-intensity new-generation war theorized by Russia? Another question arises: was the invasion premeditated or a spur-of-the-moment decision?

Translated from French into English by Frances Thomas.

1. D. Minic, “La guerre informationnelle psychologique dans la pensée militaire russe et ses applications en Ukraine et en Syrie” [Psychological-Information Warfare in Russian Military Thinking and its Applications in Ukraine and Syria], *Annuaire français des relations internationales*, Vol. XXII, 2021, pp. 523-533; Å. G. Østensen and T. Bukkvoll, “Private Military Companies—Russian Great Power Politics on the Cheap?”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, November 9, 2021, pp. 1-22. ; T. L. Thomas, “Russia’s Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric—and Putin-Led”, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, August 2015, pp. 445-461; M. Galeotti, “Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages its Political War in Europe”, *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, September 1, 2017, 17 p.

2. Speech by Army General Thierry Burkhard, Chief of the General Staff of the French Armed Forces, to the 29th year group of the École de Guerre, Paris, on October 14, 2021, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

3. Speech by Florence Parly, Minister of the Armed Forces, “Présentation de la doctrine militaire de lutte informatique d’influence”, October 20, 2021, Paris, p. 5, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

4. D. Minic, “Contourner la lutte armée : la pensée stratégique russe face à l’évolution de la guerre, 1993-2016” [Avoiding Armed Struggle: Russian Strategic Thought in the Face of the Evolution of War, 1993-2016], defended on December 15, 2021 at the Sorbonne University, 1 283 p. (not published).

Whether it was planned or impulsive, the invasion should be analyzed in light of the perception that the Russian military-political elites have of their strategic environment, since, if we are to believe the Kremlin, “the West” pushed Moscow to such an extreme. For the first time, the French president described the Kremlin’s discourse as “paranoid”.⁵

In reality, such shows of strength are nothing new in Russian strategic practice. The war in Afghanistan, in particular, was a decisive factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union. While the invasion of Ukraine and that of Afghanistan show clear differences, the analogies between these two conflicts are full of lessons, in terms of both understanding the sense of continuity within Russia’s political and strategic culture, and comprehending the evolution of the current war and of the Putin regime.

5. H. Vernet, “Paranoïa ? ”, *Le Parisien*, February 23, 2022, available at: www.leparisien.fr.

Choosing an Extreme Option

Over the last 30 years, Russian strategic thinking has undergone some significant developments. For various reasons—acknowledgement of political and economic weakness, observation of American strategies, analysis of the Cold War, taking into account the context of globalization, etc.—the theory of bypassing armed struggle in order to achieve decisive political objectives was the driving force behind these changes.⁶ Concepts, notions and tools were introduced or rethought by Russian strategists⁷, so that Moscow could act on the international scene and extend its influence without engaging in interstate armed struggle: use of non-military means (of information, economic, diplomatic, political, cyber and cultural types, etc.) and indirect military means (special and paramilitary forces, shows of force and offensive deterrence in particular). For Moscow, it was also a case of challenging Washington and the West on what it considered their terrain of choice (influence, soft power, subversive operations of all kinds). The humiliation of the USSR's collapse had to be washed away: the USSR had been, they believed, defeated without weapons, and the United States had secured “the most spectacular victory in the history of humanity”.⁸ Convinced that they were lagging behind the West in terms of indirect warfare⁹, and believing that they were simply catching up, the

6. D. Minic, “Contourner la lutte armée : la pensée stratégique russe face à l'évolution de la guerre, 1993-2016” [Avoiding Armed Struggle: Russian Strategic Thought in the Face of the Evolution of War, 1993-2016], *op. cit.*

7. By Russian strategists, we mean the military theorists involved in the production of intellectual content (periodicals, journals, dictionaries and encyclopaedias of the Ministry of Defense) and doctrine, but also the civilians, from the government or the world of academia, contributing to Russian military periodicals and journals. See *ibid.*

8. V. V. Čeban, “Duhovnyj faktor v vojnah budušego. Problemy i puti rečeniâ” [The Spiritual Factor in the Wars of the Future. Problems and How to Solve Them], *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2003, p. 60.

9. In Russia, this phenomenon of imitating the West—despite expressing a strong rejection of the latter—is not limited to this aspect of strategy; the military elites are also inspired by American military operations since the beginning of the 1990s, as seen in the works of General Vladimir Slipčenko: *Vojny šestogo pokoleniâ. Oružie i voennoe iskusstvo budušego* [Sixth-Generation Wars. Military Arms and Art of the Future], Moscow, Veče, 2002, 359 p.; *Vojny novogo pokoleniâ. Distancionnye i beskontaktnye* [New-Generation Wars. Remote and Contactless], Moscow, OLMA-PRESS, 2004, 400 p. See also a comparison by Élie Tenenbaum between the American strategy of the 1990s and 2000s and that of Moscow during the war in Ukraine (2022): “Guerre en Ukraine : Leçon de grammaire stratégique”, *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, February 24, 2022, 8 p. In reality, this phenomenon of imitation goes far beyond the domain of strategy: see A. Besançon, *Présent soviétique et passé russe*, Paris, Le Livre de poche, 1980, pp. 126-129.

Russian elites actually innovated much more than they thought, and their actions are considered models in this domain.¹⁰

Gripped by this mindset, members of the military elite lamented the war of 2008 against Georgia¹¹, whilst praising the Crimea operation and what followed.¹² Ukraine was a laboratory for all that the indirect strategy could achieve in terms of tools for influence, pressure and action, below the threshold of interstate armed struggle. The Minsk II agreement of 2015 marked the peak of the success of Russia's indirect strategy in Ukraine: on the one hand, its future implementation would guarantee Moscow a decisive influence over the country's political and strategic direction; on the other, the Kremlin was relying on Paris and Berlin to ensure that it was applied to a reticent Ukrainian leadership. Eight years later, however, Ukraine's situation has not resulted in the achievement of the Kremlin's objective: the return of Ukraine to Russia's fold.

On 24 February, Putin decided to settle the Ukrainian question by starting an open war.

Russian strategic thinking of the last 30 years is distinguished by its considerably intellectual flexibility. In particular, the idea of Soviet general Alexander Svechin—one of the most-quoted military theorists of post-Soviet Russian military literature—according to which a war should never be conducted based on the application of a model, has been widely disseminated.¹³ Over the last 30 years, theories about avoiding armed struggle

10. When mentioning these issues several months ago, Mr. Burkhard and Ms. Parly were partially basing their comments on Russian examples.

11. See, for example: M. A. Gareev, "Issues of Strategic Deterrence in Current Conditions", *Military Thought*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2009, p. 6; V. V. Serebrannikov, "Predotvrašenie vojn: teoriâ i praktika" [The Prevention of Wars: Theory and Practice], *Voennaâ Mysl'*, No. 12, 2008; O. P. Erukov, "Problemy mirotvorčestva Rossii v sovremennyh usloviâh" [The Problems of Maintaining Peace in Russia under Modern Conditions], *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2011, p. 81; S. G. Čekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, "Strategic Deterrence and Russia's National Security Today", *Military Thought*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2012, p. 26.

12. See, for example: M. A. Gareev, "Opyt Velikoj Otečestvennoj vojny i rabota Akademii voennyh nauk po dal'nejšemu razvitiû voennoj nauki" [The Experience of the Great Patriotic War and the work of the Academy of Military Sciences for the Ongoing Development of Military Science], *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2015, pp. 21-22.

13. See A. A. Svečin, *Strategiâ*, Moscow, Gosvoenizdat, 1926, 400 p. One of the leading Soviet military theorists of the 1920s and 1930s, this head of the history of military art and strategy departments of the Academy of the General Staff of the Red Army was executed during the Great Purge, in 1938. Once partially banned from Soviet military intellectual content and teaching, Svechin became a point of reference once again in the post-Soviet period, and is quoted particularly for his evolutionary vision of war (during the Soviet era, this one of Svechin's theories was less demonised than others thanks to its "dialectic" nature). See, for example: I. N. Vorob'ëv and V. A. Kiselëv, "Strategiâ neprâmyh dejstvij v novom oblike" [The Strategy of Indirect Actions in the New Physiognomy], *Voennaâ Mysl'*, No. 9, 2006; S. G. Čekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, "Vliânie asimmetričnyh dejstvij na sovremennuû voennuû bezopasnost' Rossii" [The Influence of Asymmetric Actions on Contemporary Russian Military Security], *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2010, p. 50; V. V. Gerasimov, "Osnovnye tendencii razvitiâ form i sposobov primeneniâ vooružennyh sil, aktual'nye zadači voennoj nauki po ih soveršenstvovaniû" [Fundamental Trends in the Evolution of Forms and Methods of Using Armed Forces, Current

have not immediately ruled out the theorization of armed struggle, as witnessed by the innovative and foundational work of General Vladimir Slipchenko;¹⁴ such theories simply considered that it was necessary to favor other means of achieving political objectives. We should therefore be talking not about a strategic break, but rather about an extreme option, whose application in Ukraine seems to have incorporated the theoretical work initiated by Slipchenko: on the one hand, domination of the information space and targeted use of high-precision weapons against the adversary's military, political and economic infrastructure, in order to paralyze it, and on the other, the introduction of a limited contingent of ground forces in order to rapidly capture the enemy's center of power, resulting in its capitulation. After a few days, the relative failure of these operations led Moscow to adopt an altered approach, which involved a gradual increase in its conventional effort and number of troops, as well as larger and less selective bombardments. It is difficult to say at this stage whether this extreme option was a premeditated choice or a spontaneous decision. There are arguments for both the premeditated and spontaneous cases.

The first can be supported by the following points:

- Exercises and deployments of Russian ground, aerial and maritime armed forces have multiplied since early 2021.¹⁵
- In December 2021, the Kremlin presented a series of proposals to revise Europe's security architecture to the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).¹⁶ Inseparable from each other and resembling an ultimatum, these proposals seemed so excessive to Westerners that it was suspected that they had been conceived precisely to confirm, in the eyes of the world and of the Russian people, the

Tasks of Military Science for Developing Them], *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2013, p. 29.

14. V. I. Slipčenko, *Vojny novogo pokoleniâ. Distancionnye i beskontaktnye, op. cit.* Based on observation of American military operations (Iraq, Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Afghanistan), Slipchenko began to theorise a new-generation war where conventional high-tech weapons, information confrontation and the remote destruction of the enemy's military and economic tools play an essential role. His theory would gradually be adopted by Russia's military theorists (not without some debate) and Ministry of Defense.

15. Military exercises on the Ukrainian border and in Crimea in April 2021, the Russian-Belarusian military exercises *Zapad (West) 2021* and *Soûznaâ rešimost' (Union Resolve) 2022* in September 2021 and February 2022 respectively. Massive deployments of Russian armed forces since October-November 2021 on Ukraine's borders, until February 24, 2022.

16. In particular, the cessation of the expansion of NATO's military activity in eastern Europe and in the countries of the former USSR. Specifically, Moscow demanded that NATO forces withdraw to their positions of May 27, 1997, *i.e.* a month and a half before the official integration of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. See: *Dogovor meždu Rossijskoj Federaciej i Soedinennymi Štatami Ameriki o garantiâh bezopasnosti* [Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the United States of America on Security Guarantees], December 17, 2021, available at: <https://mid.ru>; *Soglašenje o merah obespečeniâ bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii i gosudarstvu-členov Organizacii Severoatlantičeskogo dogovora* [Agreement on Measures to Guarantee the Security of the Russian Federation and the Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation], December 17, 2021, available at: <https://mid.ru>.

traditional discourse of the Russian military-political elites about the deliberate encirclement of Russia by Washington and its allies.

- In summer 2021, Putin published an allegedly historic article in which he denied the Ukrainian state the right to exist and presented Ukraine as the cradle of Russia¹⁷, which may have been a form of “psychological-information preparation”¹⁸ for the subsequent invasion.
- Moscow has amassed a considerable stock of foreign currency reserves (around 600 billion dollars) and regularly contributed to its Wellbeing Fund (around 200 billion dollars), possible signs that Russia was preparing to offset the consequences of Western sanctions following the invasion.
- It would appear that members of the Russian private military firm Wagner had been sent to Ukraine in January to assassinate Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky.¹⁹

While these arguments lead us to believe that an invasion had been clearly planned, others may also support the opposite hypothesis, that of a spontaneous decision to invade:

- Russian strategic thought and actions over the last 30 years have favored the use of an indirect strategy and relegated interstate armed struggle to an extreme option that should be avoided if at all possible.
- Russian leaders publicly committed, on several occasions, not to progress to a high-intensity conflict, right up until the last few weeks before the invasion. Announcements of the end of maneuvers and withdrawals of forces deployed in mid-February seemed to corroborate this idea, even as the United States, in the context of its deterrence strategy, repeated several times a week that war was “imminent”. Talks with the French president were held right up until the last minute.²⁰

17. “Stat’â Vladimira Putina ‘Ob istoričeskom edinstve russkih i ukraincev’” [Article by Vladimir Putin “On the Historic Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”], Kremlin, July 12, 2021, available at: <http://kremlin.ru>.

18. “Informacionno-psihologičeskaâ podgotovka” or “Informacionno-psihologičeskoe vozdejstvie” (Psychological-information impact). Such expressions have flourished in Russian military literature since the mid-1990s, in the context of the theorisation of the information war. This comprises a “technical-information” aspect (comparable to the cyber domain in the West) and a “psychological-information” aspect. This latter aspect was of such interest to members of the Russian military that they created the concept of “psychological-information confrontation”, whose content ended up far exceeding deception or disinformation. The doctrines and military dictionaries and encyclopaedias of the Russian Ministry of Defense echoed this theorisation. See, for example: *Voennaâ doktrina [Military Doctrine]*, 2010, Part 13. Approved by President Vladimir Putin on February 5, 2010; *Voennyj ènciklopedičeskij slovar’ [Encyclopaedic Military Dictionary]*, “Psychological-information confrontation”, available online at the Ministry of Defense website: <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru>.

19. M. Rana, “Volodymyr Zelensky: Russian Mercenaries Ordered to Kill Ukraine’s President”, *The Times*, February 28, 2022, available at: www.thetimes.co.uk.

20. We must bear in mind, however, that the negotiation was theorized as a form of “appeasement” of the information war and of reflexive control (*refleksivnoe upravlenie*). See, for example:

- In the first few days we witnessed an incoherent operation, notable on the one hand for coordination and logistical problems, and on the other for a less intense engagement than expected. That the Russian leaders had far underestimated the capacity for moral and physical resistance of Ukraine and its army is clear, but the fact that the operation that seemed to have been planned²¹ was so far from the strategic realities raises the question of how much preparation actually took place prior to this invasion. Abandoned convoys (without any technical problem having been identified), the presence of conscripts and captured Russian soldiers, who claim that they were not told they were going to invade Ukraine until the last minute, are also cause for confusion.²² The absence of any psychological-information preparation before the armed struggle—despite this having been recommended by Russian strategists and doctrines for the last 30 years—also raises questions. In this respect, we can see the same unpreparedness as during the Russian-Georgian war, which was equally rushed.
- The idea that Washington was on the edge of the abyss and that the Euro-Atlantic bloc was increasingly divided—due to various initiatives, such as the creation of AUKUS—probably motivated the Kremlin, which had become hardened and emboldened by what it interpreted as a sign of weakness to be exploited. Consequently, Moscow may have bet on the fact that NATO would give in to at least one key point of its ultimatum. The decision to launch an open military intervention in Ukraine may have been nothing more than the bitter conclusion of this error of judgment.
- The timeline is surprising: the recognition of the independence of the separatist regions of the Donbas on 21 February, which offered Moscow the possibility to exit the crisis while securing an additional pressure lever and leaving itself exposed to lesser sanctions, was rapidly followed by the invasion, without the Kremlin really having had time to convince people of the scenario it was putting in place (assisting Russian-speaking inhabitants of the Donbas subject to genocide by means of a ‘special military operation’).

S. A. Komov, “O sposobah i formah vedeniâ informacionnoj bor’by” [On the Methods and Forms of Conduct of the Information War], *Voennaâ Mysl’*, No. 4, 1997; V. L. Mahnin, “Reflexive Processes in Military Art: The Historico-Gnoseological Aspect”, *Military Thought*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2013, pp. 40-41.

21. To rapidly combine the forces arriving from the north and the east around Kiev in order to target and decapitate the Ukrainian leadership.

22. L. Harding, “Demoralised Russian Soldiers Tell of Anger at Being ‘Duped’ into War”, *The Guardian*, March 4, 2022, available at: www.theguardian.com. The Russian Ministry of Defense acknowledged the presence of conscripts, but claimed that this went against the orders given by Putin. “Minoborony RF soobšilo o zahvate rossijskih soldat-sročnikov na Ukraine” [The Russian Ministry of Defense Announces the Capture of Conscripts in Ukraine], *Interfax*, March 9, 2022, available at: www.interfax.ru.

There are therefore arguments to support both theories. For several months, researchers and experts spoke about the imminence, or otherwise, of an invasion. Stating that the invasion was imminent because American intelligence confirmed it and because Russian troops were massing on Ukraine's borders was not very convincing, for at least two reasons. Firstly, drawing on the experience of Russia's annexation of Crimea, the American administration had deployed a deterrence mechanism for several months to prevent the worst from happening. This was, above all, a strategy—removing the element of surprise from Russia and indirectly leading Moscow to believe that Washington wanted this war—rather than an unveiling of events that were destined to happen. Secondly, an analysis of Russian military literature and strategic doctrines shows us that the deployment and demonstration of force is an integral part of the concept of dual strategic deterrence (military and non-military) developed by Moscow 15 years ago in order to achieve its key political objectives. This concentration of troops could therefore have been a perfect simulation, aimed at obtaining the Kremlin's desired concessions from Ukraine or the West. Which is perhaps what it was, right up until the moment the Russian president took this crucial decision.

In any case, the Russian initiative can be seen in the context of a radically hostile perception of the strategic environment: Moscow believed it was facing an indirect, undeclared war on all fronts, with the exception of an interstate armed struggle that its enemies—the West—had not yet dared to launch against Russia.²³ As early as 1963, the marshal and former Chief of the General Staff of the Red Army (1952-1960), Vasily Sokolovsky, explained that the British military theorist Basil Liddell Hart, with his theory of the indirect approach—which is poorly understood within the Russian army, even today—, sought to mask the “horrors” of the nuclear war that the West was actively preparing against the USSR.²⁴ This representation (which was largely disconnected from reality) helped to rationalize Russia's indirect strategy (after this was strongly rejected during the Soviet era); however, at the same time, a vision so deeply rooted in unreality carries within it the seeds of passionate decision-making.

23. This belief is the most widespread among Russia's military-political elites (it is linked to the idea that the world is hostile to Russia). See, for example: S. B. Ivanov, Speech at the annual conference of the AVN, *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2003, p. 3. As perverse as it is, this perception gave rise to a genuine conceptualisation of indirect confrontation, in order to respond to the West's confrontation with the same weapons. For example, see E. G. Šalamberidze, “Nepřâmoe protivoborstvo v sfere voennoj bezopasnosti v usloviâh mirnogo vremeni” [Indirect Confrontation in the Sphere of Military Security in Peace Time], *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2011, pp. 20-30.

24. V. D. Sokolovskij (ed.), *Voennaâ strategiâ* [Military strategy], Moscow, Voenizdat (2nd ed.), 1963, p. 219.

In order to understand the open war that Russia launched against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and this “extreme option”—whether premeditated or not—chosen by President Putin, it is essential to examine the characteristics of this perception.

The Russian Perception of the Strategic Environment: A Source of Instability

The perception of Russia's military-political elites is fueled by two central beliefs: that the outside world is deeply hostile to Russia, and that the United States is omniscient and omnipotent.²⁵ All this arises from the idea that Russia is a great power and a unique actor, which its enemies want to subvert or destroy, for this precise reason. The ideological justification for this idea has been made through various arguments over different eras: Holy Rus and Moscow, Third Rome; the socialist motherland at the forefront of humanity; and, since the 1990s and the introduction of geopolitical theories in Russia, the main geopolitical rival of the United States, the *Heartland*, given Russia's geographical situation and immense natural reserves.²⁶ Despite all this, the idea that Russia is an indispensable great power is often counterbalanced by another belief, according to which this country is extremely weak, which leads to the same conclusion: its enemies intend to destroy it, but this time by taking advantage of its weakness. While the feeling of encirclement, the fear of the "fifth column", the difficulty of envisaging contingency, the denial of free will, and conspiracy theories are not new in Russia, and are not even limited to the Russian case²⁷, they take on particular forms in this country that we have to understand.

This hostile representation of the strategic environment, which was already present during the Soviet era, led to a tendency to perceive events as being interconnected, predetermined and often concealed. It intersects with the principles of conspiracy theories²⁸, and is linked to the difficulty

25. D. Minic, "Avoiding Armed Struggle: Russian Strategic Thought in the Face of the Evolution of War, 1993-2016", *op. cit.* By "military-political elites" we mean, on the one hand, the superior officers and generals of the Russian army (working for the leadership or teaching structures) and special services, and, on the other, leading political actors (the president, ministers, members of the Security Council and various representatives of the Kremlin).

26. Even prior to the publication of the famous work on geopolitics by Aleksandr Dugin: *Osnovy geopolitiki [The Foundations of Geopolitics]*, Moscow, Arktogea, 1997, 599 p., Russian military theorists subscribed to geopolitical theories. See, for example, I. S. Danilenko, "Geopolitičeskij podhod—ključ k rešeniu problem bezopasnosti" [The Geopolitical Approach is the Key to Solving Security Problems], *Voennaâ Mysl'*, 1993.

27. For evidence of this, see R. Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1986, pp. 35-61. The most famous examples from the last century include the Germany of Wilhelm II and that of Adolf Hitler.

28. P.-A. Taguieff, *L'imaginaire du complot mondial : aspects d'un mythe moderne*, Paris, Mille et une Nuits, 2006, Chapter 1, Part 3, 213 p.

that Russian military-political elites have conceived fate and individual autonomy. This leads them to believe that any event perceived as a threat to Russia is the result of malicious intent or a plot, often by the West. The imprint of Hegelian-Marxist thought and its magical dialectic method—in the sense that it is supposed to explain everything—is perceptible here. Without going so far as to believe that the Marxist-Leninist intellectual and ideological heritage is entirely responsible for this mindset among the Soviets²⁹, we can say that it made a considerable contribution.³⁰ While many members of the Russian military-political elite continue to refer to Marxist-Leninist ideology, they have, above all, integrated the way of thinking that arises from said ideology, regardless of the ideological content itself.³¹

The complexity of international relations tends to elude such elites. That is why Putin recently described the West as an “empire of lies”³²: from his point of view, democracy and Western values are merely a smokescreen for the imperialist and shamefully materialistic objectives of the West, based on the interpretation of the balance of power that he has and that he believes to be universal. This vision explains the misunderstandings between Moscow and Western capitals: Russia believes it is constantly under attack, from both within and outside, and therefore is entitled to react. An incalculable number of conspiracy theories, false documents and incorrect interpretations of speeches by Western leaders have circulated for decades in Russian political and military circles, and have come to confirm the central beliefs of the country’s leaders: the Dulles plan³³, the secret meeting between Clinton and his generals in 1995³⁴, the words of Madeleine Albright on the wealth of Siberia³⁵, the “Golden Billion”³⁶ and the Federal Reserve³⁷ conspiracy theories, to name but a few.

29. See A. Besançon, *Les origines intellectuelles du léninisme*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1977, 327 p.

30. See the profound developments of Jean Guilton on Hegelian-Marxist thought: *La Pensée et la guerre*, Desclée de Brouwer (Rééd.), Paris, 2017, pp. 176-188.

31. D. Minic, “Avoiding Armed Struggle: Russian Strategic Thought in the Face of the Evolution of War, 1993-2016”, *op. cit.*

32. “Putin zaâvil, što ves’ blok zapadnyh stran, sformirovannyj SŠA—imperiâ lži” [Putin has Declared that the Entire Bloc of Western Countries, Formed by the United States, is an Empire of Lies], *Tass*, February 24, 2022, available at: <https://tass.ru>.

33. For example, see the comments made by the head of the department of educational work of the Russian Ministry of Defense: A. A. Bašlakov, “Problemy duhovnoj bezopasnosti, utverždeniâ v obšestve idej zašity otečestva, povyšeniâ prestiža voennoj služby i puti ih rešeniâ v sovremennyh usloviâh” [Problems of Spiritual Security, of the Establishment Within Society of Ideas of the Defense of the Motherland, of the Increase in Prestige of the Military Service, and means to Resolve them in Contemporary Conditions], *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2008, p. 52.

34. For example, see the article by the former Russian Defense Minister: I. N. Rodionov, “Zona russkikh interesov” [The Zone of Russian Interests], *Zavtra*, Vol. 835, No. 47, November 18, 2009, available at: <https://zavtra.ru>.

35. For example, see the comments made by the Russian president: “Bol’šaâ press-konferenciâ Vladimira Putina” [Vladimir Putin’s Grand Press Conference], Kremlin, December 18, 2014, available at: <http://kremlin.ru>; and the interview given by Nikolaj Patrušev, the secretary of the

We are therefore talking not about real threat, but about the perception of threat. During the Soviet era, in 1946, the American diplomat George Kennan was already talking about “self-hypnotism”³⁸, and the KGB archives show that, at that point, the KGB was analyzing everything through the prism of conspiracy. For example, KGB agents were persuaded that a Western plot was underway in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Following an investigation, the evidence for a plot was much slimmer than that suggesting there was no plot. But despite all this, the KGB agents preferred to trust their instincts and went as far as to fabricate evidence of a plot, which they believed to be all too well prepared and hidden.³⁹

This vision of the strategic environment has extremely negative consequences for international relations. There are numerous examples from the post-Soviet period that illustrate this, such as the events of the 2008 NATO summit held in Bucharest: the final declaration committed to eventually accepting Ukraine and Georgia, but in reality, France and Germany had blocked the accession process.⁴⁰ Despite this dissent, which actually suited Moscow, the Kremlin only saw confirmation of its fears and re-established official relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁴¹ To give another example, the Kremlin's certainty that the new Ukrainian government of 2014 was the result of a coup led by Washington—in the context of its alleged strategy of “color revolutions” and “controlled chaos”—was largely shared by Russia's military-political elites. This led to the annexation of Crimea and triggered armed separatism in the Donbas. One final example illustrates this mindset among Russian leaders: while the transfer of Russia's strategic deterrence forces to a special regime of duty probably had a strategic interest on the ground in Ukraine⁴², it appears that the trigger was simply an interview given by Joe Biden. When Biden explained that the conflict with Russia would be resolved either through

Security Council of the Russian Federation, to Ivan Egorov in: “Vtoraâ ‘holodnaâ vojna’” [Second ‘Cold War’], *Rossiskaâ Gazeta*, October 15, 2014, available at: <https://rg.ru>.

36. For example, see the article by the head of the CVSI at the time, S. G. Ćekinov, and by the former head of the same centre, S. A. Bogdanov: “Strategy of Indirect Approach: Its Impact on Modern Warfare”, *Military Thought*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2011, p. 7.

37. For example, see the article by a then research director at the FSB border scientific research centre, V. A. Râbošapko, and a former researcher at the FPS, CVSI and FSO, A. N. Fomin: “Kruglaâ data” [A round date], *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2011, pp. 22-23.

38. See the secret report of George Kennan to the State Department at the end of his mission to Moscow, better known as the “Long Telegram”, on February 22, 1946, available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu>.

39. C. Andrew and O. Gordievsky, *Le KGB dans le monde, 1917-1990*, Paris, Fayard, 1990, p. 479.

40. Declaration of the Bucharest Summit, NATO, April 3, 2008, available at: www.nato.int.

41. M. Jégo, with A. Billette, N. Nougayrède, S. Shihab and P. Smolar, “Autopsie d'un conflit”, *Le Monde*, August 30, 2008, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

42. In cases of military conflict, the “deterrence” part of the doctrine aims to prevent the escalation of military actions and even to interrupt them, in conditions that are “acceptable” to Russia. See “Ob Osnovah gosudarstvennoj politiki Rossijskoj Federacii v oblasti âdernogo sderživaniâ” [On the Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Domain of Nuclear Deterrence], decree signed by Vladimir Putin on June 2, 2020, No. 355, Part I.4, available at: www.kremlin.ru.

sanctions (his preferred solution) or through World War 3, the Kremlin appears to have perceived a disguised threat of escalation.⁴³ We will also see, further on, how this perception of the strategic environment motivated Moscow to accelerate its settlement of the Ukrainian question.

Russian military-political literature is imbued with this representation of the world. The most worrying thing, however, is that it has been passed on to younger generations of military elites, who have little or no first-hand experience of the Cold War.⁴⁴ This is an age-old structural problem that we must take into consideration if we wish to assess, understand and anticipate Russia's actions, but also if we are to be aware of the limits of prospective analyses in Russia's case (particularly those that depart from history).

Thus, it is important not to see Putin as more cynical or pragmatic than he really is: he is imbued with beliefs and a culture that tend to disconnect him from reality and from an objective analysis of the balance of power. Barack Obama told in his memoirs of his first meeting with Putin, in 2009, during which Putin made a long speech full of reproach towards American policy, such as the war in Iraq, even though Obama himself was personally opposed to it and wanted to reset his country's relations with Russia.⁴⁵ The same false theories are continually rehashed and, worse still, even believed by Russia's president and its military-political elites: the Cold War was skillfully planned and carried out by Washington to bring about the downfall of the USSR; the USSR collapsed as a result of this war; Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin betrayed their camp; NATO promised not to expand eastwards; the case of Kosovo was similar to that of Crimea; Washington organized numerous "color revolutions" throughout the world for decades in order to expand its influence, from the Rose Revolution to the Arab Spring, and even the May 68 protests in France⁴⁶, etc.

43. Brigadier General Boris Solov'ev interviewed by Viktor Baranec: "Âdernyj čemodančik raskryt. Čto značit prikaz Putina perevesti Sily sderživaniâ v 'osobyj režim'" [The Nuclear Briefcase Revealed. What Putin's Order to Move the Deterrence Forces to a "Special Regime" Means], *Komsomol'skaâ Pravda*, March 1, 2022, available at: www.kp.ru. Sergei Lavrov confirmed this: Press conference, March 3, 2022, Replay France 24, min. 11, available at: www.youtube.com.

44. We must not forget that many of the Russian military theorists who write in the main publications of the Ministry of Defense head up or teach in departments (strategy, military art, history, etc.) at the leading military academies that train the country's superior officers and generals. D. Minic, "Avoiding Armed Struggle: Russian Strategic Thought in the Face of the Evolution of War, 1993-2016", *op. cit.*

45. B. Obama, *Une terre promise*, Paris, Fayard, 2020, pp. 575-576 (translated from English by P. Demarty, C. Recoursé and N. Richard).

46. Ū. E. Kulâšov, B. B. Žutdiev, D. A. Fedorov, "Obzor i analiz soderžaniâ psihologičeskikh operacij VS SŠA v vooružennyh konfliktah sovremennosti" [Examination and Analysis of the Psychological Operations of the United States Armed Forces in Modern Armed Conflicts], *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, Vol. 48, No. 3, 2014, p. 69. These three theorists are Belarusian, but have made comments in Russian military periodicals and journals on several occasions. We are referring to them here deliberately in order to demonstrate how the recent political rapprochement between Moscow and Minsk is founded, above all, on a relatively similar perception of international relations.

All this results in a biased assessment of the balance of power. This is, in fact, the main paradox of Russia's hostile perception of the strategic environment and international relations. On the one hand, it has continually fueled the theory of the indirect strategy for 30 years, based on a rational analysis of war and the balance of power, which is fairly compatible with Russia's strengths and weaknesses, with the architecture of international relations in the era of globalization, and with the presence of nuclear forces in the West. On the other hand, this vision is so unrealistic and anxiety-inducing that it can actually make it harder for the actor that subscribes to it to conduct a comprehensive, long-term assessment of the balance of power.

This results in actions that are counter-productive. Instead of re-establishing or establishing Russian influence in the “near abroad” and in the world, the invasion of Ukraine will have completely the opposite effect, which will, in turn, confirm the idea that the world is hostile to Russia: international isolation, the reawakening of the European Union (EU), the strengthening of the Euro-Atlantic bloc, a heightened NATO presence on Russia's borders, and increasingly imbalanced relations with China. In particular, this Russian show of force has, from now on, considerably reduced Moscow's margin for strategic maneuver in the West and in its “near abroad”. Everything Russia has tried to create and exploit, everything it has been allowed to grow, in the context of its indirect strategy designed and implemented over several decades—namely its information, economic, diplomatic, political, religious and cultural influence—has now been weakened, if not reduced to nothing. Thus, in recent days Russia has experienced, among other things: mass prohibitions on the broadcasting of its propaganda tools RT and Sputnik; cancellations or suspensions of large-scale economic and commercial projects and partnerships (such as the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline); exclusion from multiple major sporting competitions; Georgia's and Moldova's redoubled expression of their desire to join the EU⁴⁷; the rapprochement of neutral countries with NATO; and the personal discrediting of Putin as much among European leaders (and potential future leaders) who had originally been well-disposed and understanding of Russian arguments, as among his supporters in the West, who saw in him a pragmatic man who was simply reacting to Washington's “provocations”.

Why invade Ukraine, then? Overconfidence following the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, and an underestimation of the balance of power and of the determination of the United States and the EU, are possible answers. But that does not rule out the fact that a feeling of inferiority could have prompted Moscow to react. This type of unexpected

47. L. Da Silva, “Après l'Ukraine, la Moldavie et la Géorgie font leur demande d'adhésion à l'Union européenne”, *Toute l'Europe*, March 4, 2022, available at: www.touteurope.eu

show of force is not new in Russia: the blockade of Berlin organized by Stalin in 1948—when the USSR did not yet have nuclear weapons and knew it was inferior—in an attempt to drive out the Westerners not only failed, but also convinced the Western allies to create NATO. One of the most notable characteristics of the mentality of the Russian military-political elites is the fluctuation between these two extremes: great assurance and arrogant confidence; and, at the same time, the impression of great weakness and imminent collapse. These two sentiments give rise to instability and unpredictability, and force Russia's military-political elites to confront the outside world (albeit in different ways).

Afghanistan-Style Adventurism

Thanks to the perception of Russia's military-political elites and their relative denial of individual autonomy and spontaneous collective will, a distorted interpretation of the Cold War and of the collapse of the USSR, and the biased observation of the indirect strategies of a West seen as a master of subversion and disinformation, an interest in mental control and the psychological impact on individuals and groups of individuals—which was already central in the Soviet era—has really flourished in Russia. While the West is the preferred target of this psychological-information war conceptualized, or even fantasized, by Russia, the country's population and civil society cannot escape it either. On the contrary, the Russian information space is a bubble that is constantly being fueled by the beliefs of the military-political elites, some of which are anchored in a society that has traditionally seen its space absorbed by state power, ideological rigor and the incarceration, or even murder, of discordant voices associated closely or remotely with a foreign plot.⁴⁸ This neuters the spirit of criticism and the capacity for resistance. While discordant voices, sometimes even those hostile to the Kremlin, have long been tolerated (even among the military elites), the Kremlin has for several years now tightened its stance on the matter (assassination attempt on political opponent Alexei Navalny, dissolution of human rights defense organization Memorial), which seems to be accelerating with the invasion of Ukraine (banning of anti-establishment media outlets Dozhd and Echo of Moscow).

However, history has taught us that the Soviet population, which was also subject to constant propaganda, broke free from the dictatorship of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. While Gorbachev's reforms made it possible to open up spaces of freedom, the Red Army's stalemate in Afghanistan aggravated Russia's economic, social and identity-related difficulties, as well as discrediting the Soviet regime. Although there are significant differences between the Russian-Afghan war (1979-1989) and the Russian-Ukrainian war (2022)—a different identity connection, less well-established *a priori* support from the population, low risk of conflagration, a different physiognomy of conflict, at least initially—, the two conflicts share several points that are revealing of Russian strategic culture and may give rise to similar consequences.

48. See the thoughts of Alain Besançon on the absorption of civil society by the Soviet state. His analysis is full of lessons for understanding the Russia of today: *Présent soviétique et passé russe*, pp. 126-129, *op. cit.*

First of all, in 1979, Moscow did not speak of an armed invasion, but of a “limited contingent of Soviet forces”, in order to minimize the extent of its engagement in the eyes of national and global public opinion, and to support the theory of “assistance” requested by Kabul in order to “deter foreign aggression”.⁴⁹ The Kremlin repeated this tactic by describing the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a “special operation”—an expression that Russian media are forced to use—, and by arguing that the intervention was in response to a request by the self-proclaimed people’s republics of Luhansk and Donetsk. The initial Russian difficulties in Ukraine obliged Moscow to intensify its conventional efforts, just as the USSR had gradually increased the size of its contingent in Afghanistan. We should also recall that the objectives of the operation in Afghanistan were fairly vaguely defined, just like those set out by the Kremlin in Ukraine: “denazification” and “demilitarization”, which, incidentally, do not tally with the low-level engagement that the special operation Russia claims to be carrying out would involve.

Secondly, as of March 1979, the Politburo was initially reticent to intervene militarily and was well aware of the negative consequences that a military intervention would have, but the loss of Soviet influence in Afghanistan was a sort of red line in the mind of the Soviet leaders.⁵⁰ Russia has also long been reluctant to engage in direct armed struggle in Ukraine, as demonstrated by the annexation of Crimea and the use of paramilitary forces in the Donbas, among other things. Furthermore, the severity of the sanctions in place since 2014 and the threat of their substantial tightening made by the United States and its allies for several months clearly let Russia know the risk it was exposing itself to in the event of escalation. Nevertheless, the question of Russian influence over Ukraine remained a “red line”.

Thirdly, the Politburo underestimated the scale of the American reaction back then⁵¹, just as it seems that the Kremlin has miscalculated the consequences of its intervention in Ukraine, which have been unanimously condemned and sanctioned by Western countries, as well as Turkey, and little supported even by China. This fundamental error of judgment can be explained in part by the fact that the international condemnation was fueled by an emotional knock-on effect⁵² and a real wake-up call for European

49. P. Sidos, “1979, l’entrée des Soviétiques en Afghanistan : des hypothèses de planification contrariées”, *Stratégique*, 2016/3, No. 113, p. 69 (pp. 55-84).

50. *Ibid.*, p. 59-60, 73.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

52. The following is a non-exhaustive list of companies that have stopped or limited their activities in Russia: Apple, Google, Ford, BP, Shell, ExxonMobil, Equinor, Daimler Truck, Jaguar Land Rover, Volvo Group, Hermès, Ikea, Coca-Cola, Renault, Inditex (Zara), H&M, LEGO, Nike, Adidas, Boeing, Airbus, Volkswagen, BMW, Honda, Walt Disney Company, Warner Studios, Sony, Netflix and McDonald’s.

countries (especially Germany⁵³) about Russia's ambitions, the scale of which was hard to predict. It is possible that, just as the Politburo wished to take advantage of Washington's loss of Iran, which it interpreted as a sign of weakness, America's hurried withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 emboldened Russia.

Fourthly, the Kremlin began to become convinced, throughout 1979, that Afghanistan could be used as a substitute for Iran with regard to American influence in the region, with the installation of missiles and electronic intelligence systems. Fear that the Afghan president, Hafizullah Amin, could be backed by the United States, or even be an American agent, was rife and reminded the Politburo of the Egyptian precedent set by Anwar Sadat in 1972-1973.⁵⁴ In the same way, Russia today is convinced that Ukraine is a key element of the American mechanism for encircling the country, and is therefore certain that Volodymyr Zelensky and his government are working in Washington's interests against those of Moscow, in the context of an alleged "scenario" of color revolutions that has been tested for many years.

Fifthly, the Soviet leaders soaked up information about the situation in Afghanistan from KGB reports⁵⁵, which were, as research shows⁵⁶, alarmist and quick to see plots everywhere. With no tangible proof, they ended up convincing Leonid Brezhnev, at the insistence of Yuri Andropov, that an intervention was necessary in light of the risk that Afghanistan could fall into the hands of the Americans. As regards Vladimir Putin, experts have revealed that, since the start of his third term, he has considerably reduced the circle of people whose advice he listens to, whilst giving disproportionate credence to the reports of his intelligence services, which confirm his beliefs.⁵⁷ He is believed to have paid particular heed to Igor Sergun, the former head of the GRU (2011-2016)⁵⁸, who offered up an interpretation of the world that was just as hostile and conspiracy-laden as that of the Kremlin. The house arrest of the leaders of the FSB's Fifth Service, which had been tasked with providing a report on Ukraine, could

53. Paul Maurice interviewed by Romain David: "Ukraine : comment la guerre a poussé l'Allemagne à un revirement militaire et stratégique", *Public Sénat*, February 28, 2022, available at: www.publicsenat.fr

54. P. Sidos, "1979, l'entrée des Soviétiques en Afghanistan : des hypothèses de planification contrariées", pp. 63-64, 66-67, *op. cit.*

55. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

56. See C. Andrew, O. Gordievsky, *Le KGB dans le monde, 1917-1990*, *op. cit.* ; but also C. Andrew and V. Mitrokhine, *Le KGB contre l'Ouest : 1917-1991*, Paris, Fayard, 2000, 982 p.; as well as C. Andrew and V. Mitrokhine, *Le KGB à l'assaut du Tiers-monde : agression-corruption-subversion : 1945-1991*, Paris, Fayard, 2008, 625 p.

57. See M. Galeotti, "Vlasti Rossii ignorirûût dannye svoej vnešnej razvedki" [Russian Authorities Ignore Data from their Foreign Intelligence], interview with Igor' Krûčkov for *Gazeta.ru.*, May 16, 2016, available at: www.gazeta.ru; F. Thom, *Comprendre le poutinisme*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 2018, p. 176.

58. Sergun died in 2016, in unclear circumstances.

well confirm this age-old phenomenon.⁵⁹ Whether they were frightened or genuinely convinced, they provided Putin with what he wanted from them: a confirmation of his own beliefs.

Sixthly, the decision to intervene militarily in Afghanistan was taken on the day that NATO decided to deploy Pershing missiles in Europe, several months after America's presence in the Persian Gulf was misinterpreted by Moscow, which fueled the feeling of encirclement that was already very strong within the Politburo, and reinforced the idea of a military solution to the Afghan problem.⁶⁰ In the same way, since the beginning of 2021, a certain number of signals have been very negatively interpreted by Moscow, which saw confirmation that Washington was actively preparing a general show of force against Russia:

- The signing on 11 March by Volodymyr Zelensky of a decree stipulating that Kiev “reserves the right to make use of all means necessary to protect [...] its sovereignty and its territorial integrity”;⁶¹
- In early April, a change of policy by President Zelensky, who made joining NATO and the EU a priority;⁶²
- The military exercise Defender Europe 21 (May), organized by the United States and 26 European countries, seems to have made a deep impression on the Russians;⁶³
- Deliveries of weapons to Ukraine by the United States, the appointment of Ukrainian individuals who Moscow considers to be “fanatical Nazis” to important positions (A. Reznikov and D. Yarosh⁶⁴), and the use of Javelin missiles and the Bayraktar drones by Ukraine in the Donbas between October and November 2021;⁶⁵

59. A. Soldatov and I. Borogan, “Putin načal repressii protiv 5-j služby FSB. Imenno ona nakanune vojny obespečivala prezidenta Rossii dannymi o političeskoj situacii v Ukraine” [Putin has Begun a Crackdown against the Fifth Service of the FSB. On the Eve of War, it Was this Service that Provided the Russian President with Information about the Political Situation in Ukraine], *Medusa*, March 11, 2022, available at: <https://meduza.io>.

60. P. Sidos, “1979, l'entrée des Soviétiques en Afghanistan : des hypothèses de planification contrariées”, pp. 66-67, *op. cit.*

61. L. Lagneau, “Tensions avec la Russie : Washington affirme son ‘soutien indéfectible’ à l'intégrité territoriale de l'Ukraine”, April 3, 2021, available at: www.opex360.com

62. P. Smolar, “L'Ukraine rêve de nouveau à l'OTAN pour maintenir sa souveraineté vis-à-vis de la Russie”, *Le Monde*, April 10, 2021, available at: www.lemonde.fr

63. V. V. Selivanov and Ū. D. Il'in, “Konceptiâ voenno-tehničeskogo asimmetričnogo otveta po sderživaniû veroâtnogo protivnika ot razvâzyvaniâ voennyh konfliktov” [Concept of Asymmetric Technical-Military Response to Deter the Potential Adversary from Triggering Military Conflicts], *Voennaâ Mysl'*, No. 2, 2022, p. 35.

64. Oleksij Reznikov, the former minister for the reintegration of the “temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine”, was appointed Ukrainian Defense Minister on November 4. Dmitró Āroš, founder of the Ukrainian nationalist militia Praviy Sektor (“Right Sector”), was appointed to the position of Adviser to the Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

65. K. Sivkov, “Rossiâ v kol'ce konfliktov” [Russia in a Circle of Conflicts], *Voenno-promyšlennyj kur'er*, November 22, 2021, available at: <https://vpk-news.ru>.

- The various deployments and exercises around Russia over the course of a year seem to have greatly worried Moscow and were perceived as serious provocations: the presence of the American command ship *Mount Whitney* in the Black Sea at the end of October and deployments of F-16 fighter-bombers and F-22 fighters near Kamchatka between spring and October, as well as two groups of F-15E fighter-bombers in Romania and Bulgaria in October;⁶⁶
- The presence of American chemical and biological laboratories in Ukraine to allegedly prepare for a biological war against Russia was observed at least several weeks before the beginning of the “special military operation”.⁶⁷

The fact that Putin explained in 2015 that “real threats” justified the Soviet forces’ invasion of Afghanistan speaks volumes about the continuity of Russian strategic thought.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, we cannot rule out that, like Nikolai Ogarkov, the Soviet Chief of the General Staff on 10 December 1979⁶⁹, Valery Gerasimov, the Russian Chief of the General Staff, may have presented Sergei Shoigu or Vladimir Putin with a series of reasons not to intervene militarily in Ukraine. Gerasimov has done a great deal to promote Russia’s indirect strategy, to which Putin has largely subscribed. Beyond this potential disagreement, it is not impossible that getting bogged down in Ukraine, even after a military victory, could exacerbate any such dissent and bring back bad memories: unlike Putin and Shoigu, Generals Gerasimov and Sergei Rudskoy—Chief of Operations of the General Staff—were involved in the wars in Chechnya.

66. *Ibid.* The Russian president himself criticized this military activity on November 18. “Rassirennoe zasedanie kollegii MID” [Expanded Meeting of Staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs], Kremlin, November 18, 2021, available at: <http://kremlin.ru>. See also the alarmist declarations of the Russian Defense Minister: <https://apnews.com>.

67. V. V. Selivanov and Ū. D. Il’in, “Konceptiâ voenno-tehničeskogo asimmetričnogo otveta po sderživaniû veroâtnogo protivnika ot razvâzyvaniâ voennyh konfliktov”, p. 34, *op. cit.* This was also mentioned by Sergei Lavrov: Press conference, March 3, 2022, Replay *France 24*, min. 37, available at: www.youtube.com.

68. V. Putin, “Vstreča s predstavitelâmi veteranskih organizacij” [Meeting with Representatives of Veterans’ Organisations], February 15 2015. <http://kremlin.ru>.

69. P. Sidos, “1979, l’entr ee des Sovi tiques en Afghanistan : des hypoth eses de planification contrari ees”, p. 79, *op. cit.*

Conclusion

By engaging in interstate armed struggle against Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has put an end to the integrated indirect strategy carried out against that country for the last eight years. This initiative, however, does not mark a strategic break. It is an extreme option that Russia's military theorists certainly attempted to avoid as much as possible, but never ruled out. From this point of view, Moscow appears to have conceived its war in Ukraine whilst taking into consideration, at least in the first phase, the theories on armed struggle introduced by Vladimir Slipchenko. As early as the first week of its offensive, however, Russia had to revise the nature of its engagement in light of the difficulties it encountered. In fact, the indirect strategy was replaced with high-intensity armed struggle without any clear linkage: the failure of one strategy resulted in the implementation of another. It is difficult to pinpoint the moment when Vladimir Putin opted for this extreme choice: there are several arguments to support both the theory of advance preparation and that of a spontaneous decision. The fact that the deployments and demonstrations of force had been conceived by the Russian army as elements of strategic deterrence (intended to achieve the country's political objectives without resorting to armed struggle) further complicates this task.

Moreover, the decision to intervene in Ukraine speaks to a logic inherent to Russian political-strategic culture, whose roots date back to the Soviet, if not the imperial, era. The radically hostile view of the strategic environment held by Russia's military-political elites tends to make it harder for them to carry out an objective assessment of the balance of power. This represents a real source of instability in international relations in general, and for the West in particular. Thus, Putin is not the pragmatic "chess player" that has often been depicted in the West: like the military-political elites from which he emerged, his worldview is steeped in beliefs that shape his behavior. While this perception of the world, tinged with the principles of conspiracy beliefs, has paradoxically fueled rational reflection in Russia about the evolution of strategy and warfare in the era of globalization, it also carries the seeds of actions that are impulsive and, ultimately, counter-productive. Therefore, we should not be talking about a strategic break: on the contrary, Russia's military-political elites—led by Vladimir Putin—are, now more than ever, the heirs to the political-strategic culture of their country.

The invasion of Ukraine that Putin decided to launch has had the opposite effect to that desired by Moscow. Numerous efforts by Russia to increase its influence in the world have been severely weakened. Its margin

for strategic maneuver has been considerably and lastingly reduced, at least as long as Putin remains in power. This kind of counter-productive engagement is nothing new in Russian history, as demonstrated by the similarities between the decision-making processes behind the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and that of Ukraine in 2022.

More broadly, the Kremlin's adventurism and the multiplication of its foreign theatres of intervention are reminiscent of the Soviet Union. This policy of global influence has been criticized by Russian military elites⁷⁰ who have advocated "pragmatism" as a leitmotiv⁷¹ since the 1990s: they lamented that the USSR, driven by ideological and emotional considerations, got bogged down in an expansionist foreign policy with no way out. Putin has certainly not ignored this lesson. Perhaps he has even subscribed to it.⁷² But perhaps the Russian military elites did not want to see that this Soviet adventurism was less the fruit of Marxist-Leninist ideology than of a particular perception of the strategic environment and of Russia itself, and of a dogmatic and deterministic way of thinking, which are incompatible with the complexity of international relations. Thus, these elites transformed geopolitical theories considered to be "pragmatic" into a rigid interpretation of the world.⁷³

In order to understand and anticipate Russia's actions, it is therefore essential to pay attention to the cognitive frameworks of its military-political elites, including from a historical perspective, the effects of which can be seen in many key areas, from military thought to Moscow's domestic and foreign policies.

70. See, for example: V. V. Kirillov and Ū. L. Krŭčkov, "Vliânie vojn na razvitie i meždunarodnoe značenie Rossii v mire" [Influence of Wars on the Development and International Importance of Russia in the World], *Voennaâ Mysl'*, No. 2, 2008.

71. See, for example: A. V. Kvašnĭn, "Geostrategičeskoe položenie Rossii i eë nacional'nye interesy" [The Geostrategic Situation of Russia and its National Interests], *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 2003; Ū. N. Baluevskij, "O stroitel'stve Vooružennyh Sil Rossijskoj Federacii" [On the Construction of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation], *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2006; Ū. N. Baluevskij, "Teoretičeskie i metodologičeskie osnovy formirovaniâ voennoj doktriny Rossijskoj Federacii" [Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of the Formation of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation], *Voennaâ Mysl'*, No. 3, 2007.

72. He gave this explanation in his famous speech in Munich in 2007: "The system of international relations is just like mathematics. There are no personal dimensions." "Vystuplenie i diskussiiâ na Mŭnhenskoj konferencii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti" [Speech and discussion at the Munich conference on security policy issues], Kremlin, February 10, 2007, available at: <http://kremlin.ru>.

73. In relation as much to Russia's military elites as to its political elites, as demonstrated by the declaration of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Kozyrev, on January 21, 1992 to *Rossiskaâ Gazeta*: "By abandoning our messianic role, we have adopted a pragmatic point of view [...]. We have come to believe that geopolitics [...] is replacing ideology". Quoted in Z. Bzrezinski, *Le Grand échiquier*, Paris, Pluriel, 2011, p. 133. See also M. Laruelle, "Alexandre Dugin : esquisse d'un eurasisme d'extrême-droite en Russie post-soviétique", *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2001, pp. 88-89.

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