



Executive Summary: Understanding Russian Strategic Behavior

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By Graeme P. Herd

Executive Summary

The “Understanding Russian Strategic Behavior” Workshop #3 brought together twenty-five academics and practitioners from the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, and Belarus to discuss strategic issues concerning Russian behavior and policy. This workshop is one in a series of semi-annual events that is hosted by the Marshall Center, funded by USEUCOM’s Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI) office, and is supported by RAND.

The workshop ran for two days and consisted of short presentations followed by more lengthy discussions. The international research team examined a variety of topics, including Russia’s strategic behavior in the Arctic as well as in the Nordic-Baltic region, Ukraine, and Syria; Russian engagement with Belarus, Turkey, and Afghanistan; sub-institutional cultures; the impact of U.S.-Chinese strategic competition on Russian strategic behavior; sanctions, and Putin’s relationship with Russia’s elite.

Selected Highlights and Outcomes

Russia’s Strategic Behavior in the Arctic

Russia is undertaking a dual process of military build-up with attempts to bracket the Arctic out of the general pattern of confrontation with the West. An uneasy coexistence of approaches gives way to greater militarized competitiveness as Russia’s leadership comes to the realization that cooperation does not provide Russia with its desired dividends (offshore oil and gas remains sanctioned). Russia blocks cooperation over the rights of indigenous people and joint environmental research. Asymmetries are more apparent:

- 1) The U.S. focuses on Arctic freedom of navigation assertion, builds new icebreakers, and develops a new Arctic strategy.
- 2) Russia’s military buildup slows as the surge has passed its peak.
- 3) China’s engagement as a “Near Arctic state” is slow, cautious, and non-military in nature.

Russia’s Strategic Behavior in the Baltic-Nordic Region

Russia is a prospect theory player in that it takes greater risk to avoid defeat and less risk to secure new opportunities. Russia seeks to maximize security (defense against external challenges) and maximize power (at the regional level) and Great Power status in the international system. Geography matters: control of Åland Islands, Bornholm, and Gotland allows military domination of the Baltic Sea. At the same time, non-aligned Finland and Sweden strengthen their militaries and would support NATO in any conflict.

Russia seeks to:

- 1) Maintain influence via media/propaganda/influence operations and energy;
 - 2) Prevent NATO enlargement through threatening military consequences and highlighting societal opposition;
 - 3) Neutralize Nordic militaries by threatening to target territory as well as these militaries.
- Russia has few assets in the North West, however, and lacks allies beyond Belarus (a “strategic balcony”).

Russia’s Strategic Behavior in Syria

Russia has adopted a holistic approach to expeditionary and coalitional warfare and seeks to attain global, regional, domestic, and organizational goals. Its strategic management style is characterized by rapid decision-making and execution as well as flexibility, with utility of force and political control exercised via the National Defense Management Center in Moscow (NDMC). This organization—just five years old—is considered the center of gravity for military operations. Operational control is exercised through a two-star Russian general in Syria and tactical commands, operating under a new culture of “mission command” (not “central command”). According to a March 2, 2019 speech by General Valery V. Gerasimov, the chief of the general staff, Russia has adopted a new conceptual approach or lexicon, understanding Syria in terms of a “limited strategic operation.” Three types of Russian forces are deployed to Syria: 1) organic troops; 2) military advisors embedded in the Syrian military chain of command; and 3) private military corporations integrated into the Syrian army.

Russian Engagement with Ukraine

Minsk I provided Putin peace on his terms. Since March 15, 2014, after a verbal exchange between Foreign Ministers Lavrov and Kerry, and in every other subsequent document, Russia has consistently sought a Ukraine political-strategic end state characterized by 1) federalization; 2) externally-guaranteed neutrality; and 3) strong economic ties to Russia. Russia has absolute confidence that it will achieve these long-term objectives; until then, Plan B is to keep the conflict simmering to prevent a “Western victory.” Russia’s military has been ordered NOT to achieve a military victory against a weaker adversary. This is partly a desire to achieve Plan A (the long-term objectives) and partly a realization that Russians would view large-scale war and consequent heavy casualties negatively. In Donbas, Russia is enabled by the most conducive operating environment in post-Soviet space, acceptable financial costs, and its ability to contain spillover effects. As Ukraine also believes it is winning (securing an EU Association Agreement), the stalemate continues (“geo-pathological dependency” / involuntary dyad).

Russia’s Strategic Behavior in Afghanistan

Russia seeks a stable buffer state in Afghanistan without a U.S. presence. To that end, Russia adopts a dual policy, underpinned by competing logics between means and ends. It engages the Taliban (negotiations, materiel, intelligence sharing) and opposition figures (the logic of fragmentation) in order to eradicate ISIS and fill the vacuum of power that will arise when the U.S. leaves with a pro-Russian counter-elite (the logic of integration). To that end, Russia hosted a November 2018 Moscow Format meeting with the Taliban present, followed by a February 2019 intra-Afghanistan political meeting with Taliban and opposition present, but excluding the Ghani government. Russia’s approach is a low risk policy that avoids military commitments and is status enhancing; Moscow projects itself as the indispensable security provider across the Eurasian space.

Institutional Sub-Cultures

- Although the **General Staff of the Russian Federation** remains the main staff organ of the Russian military, it is frequently uncertain how it relates to other entities. For example, the role of the NDMC and what it controls are unclear, as is how much influence the general staff has regarding the distribution of resources. Gerasimov, however, is clearly subordinate to Shoigu. The general staff's current creativity and centrality in Russia's strategic community is akin to the 1970s and 1930s, before it was purged.
- The **military industrial complex (VPK)** appears to have increasing influence but has become more of a "bazaar" than an industrial complex given a lack of coherence and a shortage of money. Projects are often determined by interpersonal lobbying (Chemezov and hypersonic missiles) rather than strategic planning (VPK will not enhance much-needed sealift capability). Moreover, the inability of Russia's mostly-conscript force to employ advanced systems (e.g. the Armata tank) limits the industry to what it can market abroad and handicaps its ability to achieve economies of scale.
- The **Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)** continues to maintain a role of influence, especially to its domestic audience, through media access and its status as a longstanding professional institutional structure. It is more than a passive implementation transmission belt. Its influence is highest when engaged in multilateral negotiations and highlighting issues in relation to the law. However, an increase in Putin's use of special representatives in key areas has the effect of taking these "political" issues (e.g. Donbas, Belarus, Turkey, Syria, and U.S. relations) out of the MFA's control.

Sanctions

Sanctions are viewed through the lens of the "strategic battlefield" and as an instrument in an ongoing war with the West. Crimean sanctions were considered very weak. The July 2014 set of sanctions were very well designed (hitting Russian balance of payments and resulting in the collapse of the ruble in December 2014). Unpredictability and risk in Russian markets dissuade external investment. Sanctions have no constructive effect on Russian strategic behavior, rather the opposite. Sanctions: 1) serve to solidify the fortress mentality (rally round the flag), 2) encourage de-offshorization and so consolidate Putin's ability to coerce the elite ("submarine in deep water" metaphor, locked in/hostages); 3) are a spur to resilience efforts, with Russia now able to guarantee banking card payments (in the event of SWIFT decoupling) via the Central Bank. Russia prices sanctions into the economy and politics and ceases to care about its international image in the West. Nordstream II is funded by Putin's personal money and he wants a return on his investment in terms of the fragmentation of western unity. Psychologically, Russia sees itself at war and pressures its neighbors to support it. Putin is not a chess player but judo master. In judo, you wait for the moment your opponent loses stability in movement and then launch an attack. Putin's judo approach to international relations leads to tactical decisions in which collateral damage is under-estimated.

Relationship between Russia and China

Russia and China are dissatisfied with their place in the international order but China represents a rising a status quo tidal power reliant on a stable international order to displace the U.S., while Russia is stagnating and more prepared to take action to halt its relative decline. Russia is a stalking horse for China, allowing China to free ride as Russia poses a direct threat to the United

States. Deteriorating U.S.-China relations increase Russian dependence on China for technology; better relations raise the specter of a G2 and Russian strategic irrelevance as China forges ahead with the One Belt One Road Initiative.

Putin's Russia / Russia's Putin

The current elites, with their privileged relationship to the state (“making Russia safe for kleptocracy”), derived power from de-institutionalization and re-institutionalization processes. They are very much Putin’s creation. Putin sought to acquire as much power as possible and ensure that his regime be as stable as possible but did so in a reactive tactical way, focused first and foremost on removing opposition rather than adhering to a strategic blueprint. Putin’s role as intra-elite arbiter and mediator of rent extraction allows him to legitimize the system as a whole.

This system lacks clear rules because:

- 1) Rules are informal and not codified;
- 2) Putin weaponizes ambiguity as a tool of power to keep the elite off-balance and disorientated (and so pliable);
- 3) Putin adopts a results-oriented mission-command approach: you can break the rules as long as you achieve the objectives.

The FSB is the guarantor of Russia identity. No one apart from Putin has control over the FSB and there is no contender from within the FSB who could potentially lead Russia after Putin. This suggests that a new combination of institutional interests will be dominant after Putin and/or that Putin uses the FSB in his post-presidency as a bulwark and means to secure his interests (immunity from prosecution; maintenance of mobility and consumption habits; and defense of or against his selected successor).

About the Author

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Russia Strategy Initiative (RSI): *This program of research, led by the Marshall Center and funded by USEUCOM as part of a larger U.S. Department of Defense effort to enhance understanding of the Russian way of war in order to inform strategy and planning, employs in-depth case studies to better understand Russian strategic behavior in order to mitigate miscalculation in relations.*

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