

Russia's Power and Strategic Alternatives

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Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine raises the question of Russia's strategic alternatives and future developments. The paper briefly introduces Russia's three historically formed traditions of thinking about strategy and relations with the West, situates Putin's thinking within these traditions, and addresses prospects of Russia's strategy. I argue that two of these traditions have failed after the Cold War, which leaves Russia with the third one that stresses concentration on internal development and regional security. Whether or not this strategy is adopted depends on the outcomes of the Russia-Ukraine war, the lessons the Kremlin learns from it, and the position of China and other non-Western powers.

Three Strategic Traditions

Russian geopolitical thinking or realism is similar and different from the West. Russian thinkers share with their Western counterparts the conviction that in the world of international anarchy, the primer objective of the state is the nation's survival and security from external threats. Still, Russian realists must be conscious of the country's distinct geopolitical conditions. These conditions include economic and financial dependence on Western nations, the military budget that is times smaller than that of the United States, let alone Western and NATO countries combined, stagnant demographic development, and the relative weakness of the state administrative capacity.

These historical conditions have turned Russia into a principally defensive power that must address domestic and international tasks simultaneously. At home, the Russian state has historically tried to develop a resource-extracting capacity and population mobilization to meet the state-defined goals. Abroad, the state has had to be resourceful, calculative, and asymmetric in addressing international threats and preventing the encroachment of great powers. The notion of *Derzhava* (literally, holder of power) helps capture these domestic and international priorities of Russian realists. Different historical eras produced distinct constructs of *Derzhava*, but in all cases, its main component – strong state and great power – were present, reinforcing each other.

Russian thinkers, however, are not uniform in how they conceptualize the identity of Russia and the challenges/threats presented by the outside world. One can identify at least three different schools of thought – Global Balancers, Realist Westernizers, and Eurasian Regionalists.¹ Balancers support global opposition to the West and are currently the dominant group in no part because their views are reminiscent of those of Vladimir Putin. Westernizers argue the priority of security cooperation with the West in addressing fundamental threats to Russia. At the same time, Eurasianists want to see the revival of Russia as a powerful Eurasian state not engaged in building global alliances with or against the West.

Which of these schools or traditions prevails and becomes a state policy depends on at least two conditions – the openness of the West to cooperating with Russia and the relative confidence of the political class in the country's internal strength and the ability to meet strategic

challenges. These variables should be assessed in terms of their perception by the Russian leadership rather than objectively drawn indicators.

Following the Cold War, Russia has shifted from pro-Western policies in the 1990s-early 2000s to assertiveness and global balancing since the mid-2000s. This strategic shift occurred in response to the West's lack of attention to Russia's security concerns and the Kremlin's perception of the country's growing strength and the ability to assert its national interests unilaterally, with no regard for potential Western opposition.

Putin as a Global Balancer

The drivers of Russia's strategy are, therefore, both structure and personality-dependent. Structurally, Russia has had to respond to the post-Cold War conditions of insecurity. These conditions included instability and the vacuum of power in post-Soviet Eurasia, Russia's limited ability to influence the expansion of NATO and Western military infrastructure in Europe, and the rise of non-Western powers in Asia and the Middle East.

Putin's thinking about strategy is the second primary variable in how Russia has designed its foreign policy. While recognizing structural imperatives, he has greatly influenced the policy by adding his style to conducting foreign policy. The point can be illustrated by comparing Putin to another Global Balancer, Russia's second Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov. Both have opposed the West's global domination in the form of the so-called "liberal" world order. Primakov was better known for practicing traditional diplomacy, while Putin's style became associated with asymmetric and covert actions and interference in the Western political and media space.

Individual beliefs also go a long way in forming and making strategic decisions. A case in point is Putin's recent military intervention in Ukraine. He has acted on at least three erroneous beliefs: the idea of a Russophone Ukraine waiting to be liberated from the "Nazi government", the assumption of a divided and progressively weakening West, and the expectation of Russia's overwhelming military capacity relative to that of Ukraine.

Overall, since the mid-2000s, Putin has acted on the West's non-recognition of Russia's growing security concerns and perception of Russia's internal strength. In the Kremlin's perception, the latter resulted from the successful modernization of Russia's military since the conflict with Georgia in August 2008 and the country's political consolidation since Putin's return to the Presidency in 2012. In his analysis, the key segments of the country's elites and society have been behind the Kremlin's policies.

The global power transition greatly accelerated by the election of Donald Trump as the U.S. President has served to strengthen Putin's sense of confidence. Following the failure to engage the U.S. under Trump, Russia was temporarily put on the defensive. Putin now advocated a strategic dialogue with the country's new President Joe Biden. Still, the Kremlin also assumed the sufficient ability to challenge the position of the United States by resorting to cyber capabilities and undermining America's global power in Europe, Eurasia, and other regions.

In this context, Putin put forward his security proposals on December 17, 2021, and, two months later, invaded Ukraine. The Kremlin hoped to contain the eastern expansion of NATO and Western military infrastructure but remained unsatisfied with the response by the alliance and the United States. He demanded that the West provide security guarantees to Russia, and do so "immediately, right now, instead of talking about it for decades." Having amassed many troops on the border with Ukraine and threatening to resort to military and "military-technical" measures, should Russia's proposals not be accepted, Putin left himself a limited space for a maneuver.

Future of Russia's Strategy

Russia's future strategy will result from the war with Ukraine and the lessons learned by the Kremlin. While it remains to be seen if the Kremlin reassesses the wisdom of Global Balancing, the approach is questionable under the contemporary realities. Structurally, Russia's weakened economic position, limited demographic capabilities, flawed political system, and increased dependence on China constrain Moscow's ability to have a globally focused foreign policy, much less the one that aims at globally containing the West. Putin's style and character have exacerbated the problem, making it challenging for Russia to preserve its major power status in the world.

The pro-Western strategic alternative is also neither possible nor sustainable. The post-Cold War years have demonstrated that the West is prepared to accept Russia only if it follows Western strategic direction and domestic institution-building. This reality is not likely to change within the foreseeable future. Furthermore, Russia's relations with the West are deeply poisoned by sanctions and the almost two-decades-long period of mutual accusations in the political and media space. Too many in Russia's political circles are now convinced that Western nations will be relentless in their drive to regime change and deprive Russia of its sovereign decision-making power.

These developments seem to favor the strategic option of Eurasian Regionalism with its focus on regional security and recovering domestic economic and political strength. The relative economic and demographic weakness and the stress on flexibility in relations with foreign countries make the Regionalist option compelling. Russia has resorted to this option under similar conditions of relative weakness and a non-cooperative West – from Muscovy's isolation from the Catholic West to recovery periods following *Smuta*, the lost Crimean War, and the Bolshevik Revolution.

Whether Regionalists will build on the momentum remains to be seen. Even within that alternative, multiple possibilities are currently being discussed in Russia. They include the option of the greater Eurasia on predominantly Chinese terms, the neo-Soviet regional autarchy, and the new NEP (New Economic Policy). Bolsheviks followed the latter following the failure of the World Revolution idea. The NEP was based on peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West and restoration of the market economy while preserving the state's ability to formulate strategic directions due to control over banking, foreign trade, and heavy industry. Today, the idea would also imply a greater openness of the region to foreign influences from Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

Furthermore, depending on how far the Russia-China relations develop and how successful Russia is in strengthening relations with other non-Western powers, there may be another opportunity for Putin and the Global Balancers. First time in history, Russia is not alone in confronting the West and may continue to oppose the West's effort to preserve the "liberal" world order by acting in concert with China and others within the non-Western world.

¹ Andrei P Tsygankov, *Russian Realism: Defending Derzhava in International Relations* (Routledge, 2022).