

Strategic Culture, Elite Structure and the Formation of Russian Foreign Policy

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Introduction

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Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many projected that the physical, political and psychological boundaries dividing East and West would disappear

for good. Thus, Boris Yeltsin's presidency in Russia, which began with a pro-Western Atlanticist foreign policy putting cooperation with the West at its centre, was taken as a solid indication of the accuracy of these wishful predictions. Nearly three decades later, following Russia's invasion of Georgia and Crimea's annexation, one can easily observe the shift in Russia's foreign policy and, ultimately, the incoherence of the analyses from the 1990s. But why? What caused Russia to follow an aggressive foreign policy? Is it President Putin himself or a much larger phenomenon?

This discussion paper examines the strategic culture and the elite structure of the Russian Federation as determining internal dynamics that have contributed to the shifts in Russia's foreign policy. Russia's strategic culture, which can be traced back to the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, is prone to a competitive aggressive foreign policy. Moreover, members of the security apparatuses, known as the 'Siloviki', have become the determining group in shaping Moscow's foreign and security policy and this high level of consensus and cohesion among the elite have contributed to an aggressive path as their specific background leads them to resort to the old playbook embedded in the country's strategic culture.

Russian Foreign Policy Since the Dissolution of the Soviet Union

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union 30 years ago, Russia's foreign policy can broadly be examined in two periods. First, the 1990s under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin and secondly, the 2000s under the leadership of Vladimir Putin.

The sudden fall of the Soviet Union led to the near-collapse of the political, economic and military system in Russia. On the political front, although Boris Yeltsin held on to power until the end of 1999, his tense relations with his predecessor Mikhail Gorbachev, and later on the parliament, destabilised the political spectrum of the newly formed Russian Federation. On the

other hand, the transformation to a liberal economy led to the unemployment of millions as most state-owned enterprises were privatised. State apparatuses did not have the stabilisation tools needed to control this change from a state-controlled economy to a liberal one. Thus, hyperinflation and unemployment left Russia in disarray (Gerando & Juilo, 2005). Heavily affected from the collapse of the Soviet Union, constant budget cuts, corruption and political uncertainty made the military a large but ineffective power stretched through most of the former Soviet region (Haas & Solheim, 2011). Thus, Russia's inability to suppress the

separatist Chechens during the First Chechen War of 1994-1996 showed the limits of its political, economic and military capabilities during this time.

In such an atmosphere, Russia's foreign policy was shaped by these dynamics and was far away from its predecessor's bold and ambitious foreign policy that challenged the West on every front. The Yeltsin administration followed an Atlanticist foreign policy, putting rapprochement with the West, especially the United States, at the top of their foreign policy agenda (Grossman, 2005). In the first half of the decade, Western support was in many ways vital for Yeltsin as Russia was dealing with instability and constant economic shocks. In another aspect, Western support ensured safety for Yeltsin and his administration against its internal political foes (Cohen, 1994).

It is in this context that Moscow supported the US-led sanctions on Iraq and the Western position against the Serbs in the Bosnian War. In Bosnia, Moscow mostly went along with Western initiatives to end the war and stood silent on NATO intervention against the Serb positions. However, by the second half of the 1990s, nationalist-Eurasianist rhetoric also started to gain support in Russian politics and foreign policy. Advocates of the Eurasianism's main argument was that Russia's interests were different from the West's and conflicted with Western interest in many instances (Surovell, 2012). NATO intervention in the Kosovo War against the Serbs is regarded as the beginning of the end for the Atlanticism in Russian foreign policy. Thereafter, Moscow returned to its strategic competition with the US and Europe (German, 2019). Another factor contributing towards the end of Atlanticism during these years was the enlargement of NATO and the EU towards Russian borders. It added to fears in Moscow that the West still regarded Russia as a rival rather than an equal counterpart.

Vladimir Putin's rise to power marked the triumph of the nationalist-Eurasianist groups in Russian decision-making bodies against the Atlanticists. This was encouraged by economic and institutional recovery of the state in the 2000s. Re-nationalisation of the oil

industry and high oil prices finally allowed Russia to recover from the economic crises of the 1990s and facilitated an active foreign policy to restate its great power status in the international arena (Rutland, 2008; Trenin, 2006).

However, there was not a bold rupture in Russia's foreign policy with Putin. The Kremlin continued its transition efforts to build its own agenda independent of the US and Europe rather than following a purely Western-oriented foreign policy. Therefore, Moscow supported the 2001 Afghanistan intervention of the United States and presented itself as a responsible international actor in the fight against global terror.

Moscow was, however, one of the most vocal countries against the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. With Germany and France, Russia stood against American attempts to build international legitimacy for its effort as it had done in the case of Afghanistan. During these years, the Kremlin also ended its relative silence regarding NATO and EU enlargement towards Eastern Europe and former Soviet-bloc countries. The 2008 Russian intervention in Georgia arguably signalled a red line for Russia's tolerance against the pro-Western 'coloured revolutions'. On the Kosovo issue, Russia continued to stand by Serbia and hindered efforts to grant independence to Kosovo at the UN Security Council. To date, Russia continues to be the biggest supporter of Serbian claims over Kosovo and also the biggest obstacle in front of Western-led normalisation attempts (Kesvelioglu, 2019).

With the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas insurrection in 2014 as well as its 2015 intervention in the Syrian war on the side of the Assad regime, Russian assertiveness in the international arena has reached a peak point. Although low oil prices and economic sanctions put into effect by the US and the EU after the Crimean annexation has impacted the Russian economy, the worsening economic situation has not affected Russia's aggressive foreign policy choices. If anything, it seems to have bolstered them by causing cohesion in the domestic scene against the West.

While continuing its involvement in Ukraine and Syria, Russia has also become an active player in Libya, other parts of Africa, as well as in its more traditional spheres of influence such as the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Perhaps the most striking manifestation of Russian assertiveness in the last decade for the West has been Russia's alleged hybrid operations in seeking to manipulate the political process in the US and Europe (Abrams, 2019), the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (Ellehuus & Donatienne, 2020) and the name change referendum in North Macedonia (Tisdall, 2018).

Bearing in mind these developments, it is likely that Russia will continue to be one of the most important actors in international politics with regards to its involvement in, and production of, crises abroad. In an era, which is increasingly defined by a new great power rivalry between the US, China and Russia, examining the dynamics that define a country's foreign policy is important in order to make inferences about its future moves in the international arena. In the following sections, this paper will focus on the effect of strategic culture and elite structure on Moscow's foreign policy.

Russian Strategic Culture: The Past Informs the Future

Strategic culture can be defined as the role of traditions, values, behavioural patterns, habits, achievements, choices and preferences over a country's policy-making process (Booth, 1990). According to Gray (Gray, 1986), cultural elements of strategic culture are defined as the "modes of thought and action with respect to force, which derives from the perception of the national historical experience, from aspirations for self-characterisation, and many distinctive" national experiences. Therefore, strategic culture not only shapes the definition of interests but also constitutes actors and their identities, thereby affecting collective expectations and perceptions (Katzenstein, 1996). More importantly, it gives meaning to material factors, thereby shaping which strategy is appropriate in certain circumstances. Hence, by shaping threat and interest perceptions and strategies to achieve political objectives, strategic culture has a paramount effect on a country's foreign policy agenda.

As the pioneer of the term "strategic culture", Jack Snyder's 1977 study on Soviet strategic culture and its implications on Moscow's nuclear strategy represents the first attempt to reveal Russian strategic culture (Snyder, 1977). Snyder contended that the different

organisational, historical, and political contexts of the Soviets led Soviet nuclear strategy to evolve differently from that of the US. Thus, Snyder argued that the embedded authoritarian character of Russian culture and the sense of insecurity in Russian society due to geography would direct Russian policymakers to use nuclear weapons for pre-emptive offensive use. In similar vein, Wohlforth (Wohlforth, 1993) contends that throughout the Cold War, Soviet strategy was to keep up with the US in the nuclear race and establish more influence in the international arena.

As noted above, for a brief period during the Yeltsin era Moscow gravitated towards a pro-Western foreign policy. However, Moscow's disappointment with the West in taking into account its security concerns after NATO's and the EU's enlargement towards the former Soviet geography has turned Russia back to its traditional strategy of balancing against the West. Thus, Kanet (Kanet, 2019) argues that contemporary Russian strategic culture is based on confronting the West and increasing Russia's influence in the international arena at the expense of the US and Europe.

Russian intervention in Georgia and Ukraine can be

regarded as a solid indicator of Moscow's return to its traditional security-oriented strategy dating back to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Throughout history, Russia's main aim has been securing its heartland, which lacks natural boundaries, through expanding its borders. Wide swaths of territory under Russian authority in Eastern Europe has historically been the

most significant protector of the Russian heartland during the 1812 invasion by Napoleon and by the Nazis in World War II. Therefore, for Moscow, Western expansion towards Georgia and Ukraine was perceived as a direct threat rather than merely a weakening of its hegemony in the former Soviet geography.

The Siloviki

During the Soviet era, members of the security apparatuses, including intelligence agencies and different branches of the military, played pivotal roles in the decision-making process of the state. Most of the critical positions were filled by senior members of these organisations, leaving little space for civilians.

Although a civilianisation process was put into place during the short liberal period of Boris Yeltsin, the Chechen Wars lead to an increase in securitisation policies within the state and the Siloviki, security and military officials, once again began to increase their influence (Szaszdi, 2008). Vladimir Putin, a former KGB official, before becoming President in 1999, served as the Director of the FSB, the Federal Security Service, the successor of the KGB.

In 2003, Kryshstanovskaya and White wrote about the growing influence of the Siloviki in Russia's top decision bodies with Putin's rise to power. The two scholars underlined the risk of growing authoritarian tendencies in Russia as a cause of these changes in the state apparatuses. They pointed out that authoritarian methods that are germane to the military can be transferred to the society thus causing the loss of limited liberal achievements made during the 1990s (Kryshstanovskaya & White, 2003).

Illarionov points out that currently in Russia power is centred around not one person, party or ideology but the security apparatuses or, in short, the Siloviki. Illarionov argues that for the Siloviki to continue its reign

without any internal challenges, it must resort to internal and external conflicts to distract public opinion from the democratic political process and form a base psychological need for security that is best answered by the current regime (Illarionov, 2009).

Bateman contends that the security apparatuses are among the most influential in forming Russia's foreign policy and that it is directly linked to the domestic security situation. As Bateman underlines the contribution of Siloviki to authoritarianism in Russia, it can be observed that an aspect of foreign policy decision making for the Siloviki relates to its need to control the domestic scene (Bateman, 2014). Thus, Moscow's bold attitude towards the 2014 Maidan protests in Ukraine can be understood as intimidation towards such movements within Russia.

The influence of the Siloviki in Russian decision-making leads to elite consensus and cohesion in Russian strategic thinking. The fact that most of the elites share a common background in education, occupation and ideology increase the likelihood of balancing behaviour in a country's foreign policy (Schweller, 2006). In the Russian case, where these elites have security and military backgrounds, it is plausible to argue that likelihood of balancing behaviour is even higher. Thus, the elite structure of the Russian Federation provides insight into Russia's aggressive foreign policy that revolves around projecting power beyond its borders as a means of coercive signalling to its rivals.

However, the Siloviki should not necessarily be considered as a unified group. Brope notes that there have been conflicts of interests among different factions of the Siloviki. However, foreign policy is one of the domains least likely to be affected by these internal rivalries and actually has the potential to play a unifying

role among the elites. Thus, as news of such conflicts over the foreign policy course of the country has not made headlines, it could well be argued that the internal rivalries do not undermine the elite cohesion and consensus apparent in Russia's foreign policy-making process (Brope, 2013).

Concluding Remarks

For nearly two decades, following a short period of Atlanticism in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia has turned back to its traditional strategic competition with the West. Today, Russian foreign and security policy revolves around a proactive policy centred on an understanding that "the best defence is a good offence". Moscow continues to follow an aggressive policy towards the West as well as other regional powers.

Russia's military exercises and the remarks of Russian policymakers are causing distress amongst former members of the Warsaw Pact who now form the frontlines of NATO in Eastern Europe (Pézarid et al., 2017). Although the Balkans, like Eastern Europe, has largely turned toward the West, Moscow has sought to enhance its relations with nationalist and anti-European groups (Kesveliloglu, 2020a). Unlike in Eastern Europe, Russian hegemony in the Caucasus and Central Asia has never really been challenged. The cases of Georgia and Ukraine represent as clear of a definition as there as to what Russia considers to be its red lines.

Nonetheless, Moscow continues its efforts to enhance its visibility in the international arena. In the last decade, Russia has engaged in civil wars in Syria and Libya and increased its visibility in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kyzy, 2019). Moreover, with its utilisation of soft power, the Kremlin has been trying to form a source of attraction for segments of American and European societies. Thus, for its soft power efforts, using the legacy of the Soviet past and common opposition against the liberal order, Moscow is deepening its relations with far-left

movements in Europe. On the other hand, for far-right European movements, Russia and President Putin are presented as the protectors of the European-Christian heritage (Aktürk, 2019). Although these far-left and far-right movements have fundamental differences, they hold anti-establishment and Euro-sceptic attitudes in common, making them useful for the Kremlin in advancing its aim of fomenting divisions in Europe's strategy towards Russia (Kesveliloglu, 2020b).

This paper sheds light on the strategic culture of the Russian Federation and its elite structure as the domestic sources of Russia's assertive foreign policy. As discussed above, since the days of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, Moscow has tended towards expansion and aggressiveness as the best tools for keeping the enemy away from its heartland. Thus, following the West's unilateral attitude during the Kosovo War and NATO enlargement in Eastern and Central Europe, Moscow has resorted to its traditional foreign policy approach embedded in its strategic culture. Beginning with the First Chechen War, members of the security apparatus, intelligence and military, fortified and increased their positions within Russian decision-making circles against largely pro-Western Atlanticist civilian groups. Hence, members of the security apparatus, also known as the Siloviki, have been the primary drivers of Russian foreign policy towards its traditional path of strategic competition with the West.

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