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# THE RE-EMERGENCE OF RUSSIAN MILITARY POWER AS A TOOL OF STATE POLICY

The political imperative to cut defence spending in the UK and other Western countries has made it difficult to acknowledge that classic kinetic warfare is still important, even if its relative utility has changed. New forms of power ('hybrid warfare') have not rendered it obsolete. Indeed, in some parts of the world, such as in the Indian sub-continent, it still retains much of its 20th Century significance. In Europe, it is a key, and increasing, element in Russia's development of multi-dimensional warfare, which includes the use of nuclear weapons.

As European countries have reduced their forces and defence cost inflation has cut their size even further (making equipment and manpower unaffordable on a large scale), and as our societies are ever more unwilling to suffer losses in lives, finance and lifestyle, our own ability to fight classic warfare and our ability to mount a credible, effective deterrence to Russia's use of classic 'hard power' are in doubt.

## Russia's strategic challenge

It is not a budding crisis we face with Russia, it is a strategic challenge. It cannot be dealt with by crisis management, however cleverly and skilfully it is applied. It needs a strategic response based on strategic thinking, backed up by operational capability and capacity.

The extent to which Russia's strategic challenge to the West can be laid at Putin's door can be debated. But there can be no doubt that, in defining Russia as different from the West, as not needing the West, and as morally superior to the West, Putin has set Russia's course for the foreseeable future. His information and influence campaign has been highly successful in Russia itself. As evidenced by the now vituperative rhetoric coming out of Moscow, Putin has let the genie out of the bottle. He has successfully made an enemy of the West in the eyes of many of his people and in the eyes of virtually all of Russia's defence and security establishment – the 'power ministries' – army, interior troops, emergency troops, intelligence and security services. Their sense of affront and resentment of the West today is palpable. Any successor to Putin would find it difficult to change this, even if he wanted to.

The West is therefore seen as hostile and out to get Russia; Russia will be secure only when it controls its neighbours; a zero-sum gain is the determining feature of relations with the West. With this as the dominant narrative in Russia, the last two years have seen a rapid evolution of thinking, attitude and now action in Russia. The Army is back on the scene as an important player in Russian foreign policy.

## The revival of the military's role in Russian grand strategy

When Putin came to power 15 years ago, he laid much of the blame for the collapse of the Soviet Union on the uncontrolled drain on the economy made by the military.

Russia maintained a military which was large in comparison to its immediate neighbours and could still intimidate them, but it was only a fraction of the size of the Soviet Army and did not have the latter's massive mobilisation capacity. Not surprisingly, it maintained much of the Soviet doctrinal thinking and, crucially, the Soviet concepts and design bureaux for weapons acquisition – a valuable heritage. But it lost much of its former sense of purpose and political influence. Putin preferred to conduct his strategic challenge to the West by developing and learning to use the weapons of hyper-competition – arguably the main KGB heritage. Putin's attitudes betray his Soviet origins. He recognises that, just as in Soviet times, the West is vastly stronger than Russia overall; in economic terms; in technology and cyber; in the health and robustness of its societies and its political systems. Moreover, the gap is getting wider. He also recognises the



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West's weaknesses and divisions, and has played his poor hand of cards very well in order to exploit these. But as a good student of Marx, he knows that when the chips are down, then in any conflict with the West in which the West has time to mobilise and operationalise its many advantages, Russia will lose. EU officials protest in vain that the EU has no military arm. To Putin, that is exactly the role NATO plays at the grand strategic level.

The last Russian ruler to try to improve Russia's competitiveness was Gorbachev. He attempted internal reform and it cost him his job. Putin will not make this mistake. He is trying to improve Russia's competitiveness by changing the environment, the ecosystem in which Russia and the West both exist. He is breaking the rules of the post-war world in order to remake them in Russia's interest. He is out to break the European Security System which he, and now most of Russia, sees as "encircling, suffocating and trying to dismember" Russia, just as was the case in Soviet times. Russia's domestic

ailments and foreign policy reverses, such as the 2014 Maidan events in Ukraine, the coloured revolutions, the Arab Spring, the drop in the oil price etc. are portrayed not as being result of Russia's own incompetence or as the incidental effects of globalisation, but as a direct result of Western hostility. Conspiracy theory wins every time.

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Furthermore, as we noted above, the Western order is itself looking shaky. Western interventions to impose a Western order (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria) have resulted in disorder. Putin is offering a new kind of order. Some countries prefer his model (Argentinian former President Kirchner, for example). In Russia, this manifests itself as traditional xenophobia and extreme nationalism, and in the strategic challenge we have been describing. It is into this framework of thinking that the Russian military have inserted themselves; they have seen a benefit in strengthening and promoting this narrative and, in doing so, have found a new sense of purpose.

