
RUSSIAN STRATEGY: MOBILISING FOR A 21ST CENTURY OF INSTABILITY

After nearly 25 years in which it barely featured in Western strategic thinking about security, Russia suddenly returned to prominence with the eruption of war in Ukraine in 2014. The war has stimulated much discussion in NATO and its member state capitals of Russian anti-Western aggression, and about a 'return to the Cold War' and the emergence of a new 'Russian style' of 'hybrid' warfare. But this has often thrown more light on Western interests and problems than Russian strategy and Moscow's intentions and priorities. Indeed, it has often highlighted how poorly Russian strategy and intentions are understood in the West – largely because of the significant differences in how Moscow sees international affairs.

Two initial points should be made about Russian strategy. First, there is an important long-term dimension in Russian thinking, a broad continuity in purpose for over a decade that seeks to frame an outlook to 2020 and beyond. Since 2000, the Russian authorities have led a deliberate and consistent effort to reorganise Russian strategic planning and strategy making. As a result, Moscow has published a series of national strategies, concepts and doctrines in which it has outlined an agenda framed in the May Decrees of 2012 that is both complex and ambitious, asserting Russia's position as a sovereign international power.

Strategy is not merely the formulation of plans, however, but the creation of power through the coordination of resources to achieve their implementation, and this leads to the second point, which is that the Russian leadership has found strategy

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which Moscow views developments in international affairs. Throughout the last decade, Moscow has often stated its concerns about trends in international affairs, its concerns about the failure of the international architecture, both in

difficult. While Moscow has framed a political agenda, they have struggled to implement it. This is partly because of what might be called the 'opposition of events', which derails plans. It is also because the Russian state system is often dysfunctional, only working when the authorities micro-manage it. Infrastructure remains limited (and in places decrepit), resources are inefficiently distributed, ministries and agencies often do not coordinate well, and problems such as corruption beset the political and economic landscape. This means that power is created only unevenly and adaptability is limited.

This context is important for understanding Russia because it frames the concern with

the Euro-Atlantic area and beyond, and growing instability and competition for resources and values, particularly since the so-called 'Arab Spring'. Vladimir Putin has suggested, for instance, that "new hotspots are appearing across the world", and that there is a "deficit of security", combined with an increasing intensity of conflict and military, economic, political and informational competition. He suggested in 2014 that "today we see a sharp increase in the likelihood of a whole set of violent conflicts with either direct or indirect participation by the world's major powers".

The view from Moscow, therefore, is of an arc of crisis around Russia's borders and a range of wider challenges, from an arms race involving the leading powers, to a competition for resources, one which senior military figures suggest may lead to an attack on Russia. Moscow is specifically concerned about the destabilising role of the West, particularly the USA, both in international affairs more broadly, and more directly regarding Russia.

Indeed, perhaps the main concern of the Russian leadership is Western, particularly US-organised intervention in the internal affairs of states, advancing a regime change agenda (known in Russia as an agenda of 'colour revolution').

Aware that war is a test of society, and that Russia is not ready for such tests, the Russian authorities are executing a range of measures to address problems. In effect, this is piecemeal and preparatory mobilisation, moving Russia onto a war footing to meet what is seen to be a 21st Century of instability.

This mobilisation has two main features. First, given the looming two-year election period starting next year, it seeks to 'colour revolution proof' Russia. Para-institutional organisations such as the All-Russian Popular Front have been established to create a direct link between the authorities and society and monitor the bureaucracy's implementation of orders. The authorities have also invested in the Interior Ministry and security, and conducted major exercises to prepare to counter a 'colour revolution' scenario.

Concurrently, after years of under-investment, the Russian leadership is substantially investing in the modernisation of the armed forces, with transformative consequences. The stated intention is to ensure that the Russian armed forces have 70 per cent modern equipment and half-a-million men under contract by the end of the decade. Major exercises are being conducted to test responsiveness and deployability, and

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efforts to coordinate command and control are illustrated by the opening of a National Defence Centre.

There are undoubtedly ongoing problems. But results are already visible, both in how they have operated in the Ukrainian theatre, and how they have deployed to Syria, illustrated by the cruise missile strikes launched from the Caspian Sea and the large bomber raids.

The naval deployment to Australia at the time of the G20 in 2014 similarly demonstrates the intention to develop such capacities. This transformation of the armed forces reflects a modernisation of Russian military thinking, developing

the capacity for expeditionary warfare, while also seeking to deter military threats to Russia, including from the West.

Russian mobilisation is revealing, therefore, of a number of aspects about Russian strategy. First, it illustrates the balance between Russian strength and weakness, and the doubts and difficulties faced by Moscow. Second, it suggests that Russia is attempting to adapt to a 21st Century of instability, in which power projection is necessary to meet a host of military threats; effectively, Moscow seeks to be at the table, because if it is not, it will be on the menu. Third, it means that by the end of the decade, dealing with Russia will be a very different proposition for NATO and its member states.

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Picture: Sloniki