Russian Threat Perceptions and Security Policies: Soviet Shadows and Contemporary Challenges

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For better or worse, Russia inherited from the former Soviet Union a rich tapestry of military thought. This body of political and military thinking was grounded in Soviet historical experience and connected to the ideological prism through which the Communist Party of the Soviet Union saw the world. Among the more important taskings for the Soviet military from the end of the Second World War until the collapse of Lenin’s experiment in 1991 was the avoidance of a decisive surprise attack in the first phase or “initial period” of war. A repeat of the disastrous Soviet experience against the German Wehrmacht in the early stages of Operation Barbarossa, Hitler’s invasion of Russia in June, 1941, could not be tolerated. Soviet military theorists also wrestled later with the problem of avoiding defeat and ensuring victory in the initial period of war under Cold War conditions: bipolarity, and the availability of nuclear weapons to the U.S., NATO and Soviet militaries.

Russia now faces a NATO coalition that has pushed its former Cold War borders eastward by a thousand miles, creating buffer zones between NATO and Russia and facing a declining post-Soviet military. NATO avers that all of this is nonthreatening to Russia and invites Russia to the table of cooperative security in post-Cold War Europe. Despite an improved post-Cold War political climate for Russian – American and NATO – Russian relations, Russia’s conventional military weakness encourages it to plan for an initial period of war with first or early nuclear use – if not in Europe, then perhaps elsewhere. Russia’s problem of controlling nuclear escalation in the initial period of war is no less a serious matter now than it was for the late Cold War Soviets, but with the important difference that Russia, not NATO, is now nuclear dependent and NATO benefits from high technology conventional superiority. Further, the possible use of information weapons by Russia or its opponents in the early stages of a war or even during a crisis could speed up
time pressures and accelerate psychological stresses for policy makers and their military advisors.

The Great Patriotic War

Russian military historians have carefully studied the period of time from the commencement of hostilities until friendly forces are within grasp of their initial operational and strategic military objectives. Military historians refer to this expanse of time as the “initial period of war”\(^3\). The authoritative study by General of the Army S. P. Ivanov on this subject published in 1974 was part of a broader interest within the Soviet military establishment in the problem of threat assessment and the avoidance of surprise attack\(^5\). Having turned away from the one variant war model of the Khrushchev years, Soviet military planners reviewed their World War II experience with regard to strategic operations conducted by several fronts in a continental theater of operations on a strategic scale\(^4\). Those studies revealed the strengths and the weaknesses of the Soviet conduct of campaigns at the operational and operational-strategic levels in the early period of the war and subsequently. Future Soviet commanders would have to apply those lessons to a different technology and policy context after World War II Special account would have to be taken of the "revolution in military affairs" that had been brought about by the development and deployment of nuclear weapons\(^5\).

According to Lieutenant General M. M. Kir’ian, the initial period of war is “the time during which the belligerents fought with previously deployed groupings of armed forces to achieve the immediate tactical goals or to create advantageous conditions for committing the main forces to battle and for conducting subsequent operations”\(^4\). Major General M. Cherednichenko noted in a 1961 article that prior to the Second World War, the initial period of war was defined in Soviet military theory according to World War I experience. This meant, according to Cherednichenko, the period from the official declaration of war and the start of social mobilization to the beginning of main battle force engagements\(^7\). Soviet planners, following this model, assumed that covering forces deployed in the border military districts were to fight the first phases of the defensive battle. Their mission was to cause attrition to enemy forces and to delay the enemy advance until the Soviet second echelon forces counterattacked. However, during the interwar years the widespread introduction into the armed forces of tanks, aviation and other means of armed conflict “revealed a strong possibility of surprise offensives and the achievement of decisive aims at the beginning of war”\(^8\).

Kir’yan's article in the June 1988 *Military-Historical Journal* notes that Soviet military theory during the 1930s taught that a surprise attack with premobilized forces could ‘give the expected results only against a small state’ and that, for an offensive against the Soviet Union, a definite time of mobilization, concentration and deployment of the German main forces would be required\(^5\). Soviet military analysts have charged the political and armed forces leadership on the eve of war with errors in addition to theoretical ones. Failures in the assessment of warning intelligence and the reluctance of the political leadership even to take sensible preparatory measures in the western border districts of the USSR allowed Soviet defenders to fall below adequate standards for readiness. This indictment of the Soviet armed forces High Command and of Stalin personally was offered by A. M. Nekrich in his classic 1941 *22 iunia (22 June 1941)*\(^10\).
Studies by Western specialists on the Soviet armed forces have supported much of Nekrich's verdict, if not all of his analysis in detail. John Erickson has noted the effects on the proficiency of Soviet command, in the early stages of World War II, of Stalin's purges of the armed forces' leadership from 1937-1939. Much of the prewar theory of deep operations and mechanized-motorized warfare which had been pioneered in Soviet professional military writing of the 1920s and 1930s was forgotten in the aftermath of the military purges and had to be relearned in the hasty reorganization of Soviet defenses after 22 June 1941. Misinterpretation of the experience of the Spanish Civil War by the Soviet post-purge armed forces leadership created a hiatus with regard to the development of theory and force structure for large-scale offensive and defensive operations. Only after bitter disappointments in their war against Finland, and after having observed the successes of the Germans against Poland and France, did the Soviet High Command turn to the practical re-equipping and retraining of the armed forces for large-scale, mobile offensive and defensive operations. Unfortunately for the Soviets, they were caught in the midst of reorganization and re-equipment, and their concepts of the strategic defensive had not been carefully thought out.

Another aspect of Soviet preparedness for war was how well the General Staff of the Soviet armed forces understood the operational doctrines of potential opponents. Intelligence must not only convey adequate "order of battle" data and indications of hostile intent. It must also establish how the opponent is going to fight if it comes to that. As Richard K. Betts and other experts on intelligence have pointed out, there is a great deal of difference between adequacy of warning and effectiveness of response. In between warning and response is the psychologically based but intelligence driven 'threat perception', which is highly subjective. Part of this threat perception is the military operational doctrine according to which war plans will be carried out. For example, it makes a great deal of difference to potential defenders whether the opponent's strategy is one of Blitzkrieg or of a slow war of attrition. Or, in nuclear strategy, it may matter whether selective and limited attacks are planned in the initial phases of a superpower conflict, and regardless of whether the actual outcome of such a war is judged to be "winnable" by either side. Deterrence may be affected by the expectations held by American or Soviet leaders about the willingness of either state to respond to limited attacks by selective rather than general retaliation.

As Michael I. Handel has noted, a critical issue for students of surprise attack is the time lag between the adequacy of attacker preparations for surprise assault and defender preparations to meet the attack. The difference between attacker and defender preparedness for war is more complicated than the comparatively simpler issue of warning time. Warning may be given but response, in the form of timely mobilization by the defender, may be delayed or postponed entirely. Since surprise is rarely complete and total, defenders have usually begun some process of mobilization and response. The more precise question then becomes: how much mobilization, and how timely? Handel refers to the gap between the victim's (of surprise) preparations for war and the attacker's preparations as the readiness gap. The ratio between the 'readiness gap' and the defender's actual mobilization is therefore posited by him as a valid conceptual indicator of the effectiveness of a surprise attack. Two exceptions to this rule deserve special note. First, a defender, having obtained irrefutable information of a forthcoming attack, decides to pre-empt although its forces have not yet been fully mobilized. A second exception, which may occur during an extended crisis, occurs when one side has...
won the race to mobilize fully but delays its attack, allowing the opponent time and opportunity to improve its own preparations. An example of the first kind of exception might be the Israeli attack on Egypt in 1967; of the second exception, one may find several examples during the July crisis of 1914\textsuperscript{19}.

Colonel General M. A. Gareev, Deputy Chief of the Soviet General Staff, wrote in 1985 that Soviet military theory and operational plans on the eve of World War II gave insufficient attention to the proper conduct of the operational and strategic defensive. He noted that the “idea of the continuous shifting of war at its very outset to enemy territory (and the idea was unsound both scientifically and backed up neither by an analysis of the actual situation or by operational calculations) had so beguiled certain leading military workers that the possibility of conducting military operations on our own territory was virtually excluded”\textsuperscript{20}. This same assessment is offered by Andrei Kokoshin and Valentin Larionov in their discussion of the Battle of Kursk as a model for the implementation of the doctrine of defensive sufficiency\textsuperscript{21}. The authors do not dwell on the fact that Kursk was an example of very active defense nor that it was based on the acquisition of very precise intelligence about the opponent's intentions. Kursk was also a case of an operational counteroffensive planned and conducted after war had been declared and fought for several years. Thus it provided little in the way of guidance for harried Soviet planners who might be tasked to defend expansive borders on the basis of force posture and military doctrine that excluded pre-emption or even defensive activeness as an option.

The Soviet experience with Barbarossa taught two things which were not necessarily contradictory, but which had the potential to create significant trade-offs in commitments of intelligence and planning assets. The first lesson, openly acknowledged by Soviet commentators for many years, was that operational defeats on a large scale could be inflicted by the side that pre-mobilized sufficient forces and means and successfully executed a deception plan. The second lesson was that operational surprise, even on a large scale, did not necessarily equate to strategic victory. Soviet experience with Hitler's surprise offensive taught that wars can also be protracted, and that attackers whose operative constructs are based on victory in the initial period can overreach. The judgment of some Soviet military theorists of the 1920s and 1930s, of skepticism that wars could be won in their initial period against territorially large and well-armed defenders, was not totally disproved by the events of World War II. Hitler's Blitzkrieg defeated the Poles and French, but not the Soviet Union. However, the French cannot be counted among the smaller and weaker adversaries of Hitler, regardless of the degree to which Poland was outmatched against the Wehrmacht (and politically scissored by the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact). Therefore, under the right conditions surprise, combined with effective weight of blow, can prove strategically, as well as operationally and tactically, decisive\textsuperscript{22}.

It therefore seemed prudent to assume, on the basis of these lessons, that in future wars the initial period could be decisive. Nuclear weapons made the potential decisiveness of the initial period of war even more of a two-sided die than it was before the nuclear era. Larger losses could be inflicted by a surprise attacker against an unprepared defender. However, if both sides were armed with nuclear weapons, then the defender might retaliate against the attacker, imposing unacceptable losses. Further, this two-sided problem, of greater attacker and defender vulnerabilities, could be posed by modern, high-technology conventional weapons. Thus, from the perspective of Soviet intelligence estimators and military planners, NATO modernization plans of the latter 1970s and 1980s
presented an initial period of war in which the temptation of opportunity for surprise attack had to be traded off against the possibility of catastrophic failure. In the present century, an enlarged NATO, supported by an enhanced information-based capability for long range precision strike and network-centric warfare, poses for conservative Russian military planners the necessity for nuclear first use to avoid otherwise inevitable defeat in the initial period of a large scale war fought near or in Russia’s western territory.

**Russia, the Revolution in Military Affairs, and Future Security**

12 Russian President Vladimir Putin moved quickly to improve relations with the United States in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Russia offered its intelligence support for American military operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al-Qaeda and raised no objection to U.S. military deployments in several former Soviet Central Asian states. Putin sought to use improved security cooperation with the U.S. to expedite a zapadpolitik or western policy of greater economic and security cooperation with the European Union. This western policy of Putin’s also included giving Russia a higher profile in NATO’s consultative machinery, although not a veto over NATO decisions. Putin’s western policy was controversial within Russian policy making circles: some military elites distrusted the concept of a new security regime between Washington and Moscow. Bush’s decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, announced in December, 2001 created additional skepticism among Russians opposed to further U.S.-Russian security cooperation, as did the beginning of U.S. national missile defense deployments in 2004. But Putin and Bush agreed to further reductions in offensive nuclear weapons under the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) of May, 2002.

13 Russian military planners in the early decades of the twenty-first century, like their professional colleagues in other countries, are required to plan for the possible as well as for the likely. A net assessment of Russia’s geostrategic position in the prevailing international environment could not have been entirely reassuring to its General Staff and main force commanders at the dawn of the present century. NATO anticipated and followed through on further enlargement of its membership. China was engaged in a large scale military buildup. India and Pakistan are now acknowledged members of the nuclear club. The George W. Bush administration followed its rapid campaign to oust the Taliban from power in Afghanistan in 2001 with the use of its shock and awe machine to depose Saddam Hussein and his regime in 2003. And U.S. military deployments for combat actions, combat service support or military advice against terrorism were taking place in former Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Barack Obama administration sought to reset relations with Russia during that U.S. President’s first term in office, leading to the accomplishment of the New START agreement on strategic nuclear arms reductions in 2010 (taking effect in February, 2011). However, subsequent U.S.-Russian and NATO-Russian disputes over the Obama plan for deploying missile defenses in Europe created obstacles to further progress on nuclear arms limitation, on nonproliferation and on a revived Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) more acceptable to Russia than the defunct Cold War original version23.

14 Faced with this alignment of political and military forces, Russia maintained an underfunded and poorly trained military that was fully engaged in trying to suppress the
rebellion in Chechnya. President Putin was more resolute in pushing this battle to an extremity of destruction after 1999 than his predecessor Boris Yeltsin had been from 1994-1996. In addition, Russia’s military performance in Chechnya after 1999 benefited from its mistakes in the earlier war: the Russian General Staff committed many more troops with improved training and coordination among various arms of service. Nevertheless, Chechen resistance remained active through 2002, although it was mostly contained in redoubts in the southern and more mountainous portion of the rebellious province. Since it had no military clout to spare from its cash starved conventional forces, Russia was forced to rely upon its nuclear deterrent to cover threats of large scale conventional war or military aggression into Russia or against neighboring states and posing a strategic threat to Russia.

In addition to an expanding NATO, encirclement by troubled or ambitious regional partners, and a deficient conventional military establishment, early twenty-first century Russia faced the inevitable need to adjust to postmodern warfare and the impact of advanced technology, conventional weapons and command-control systems. Even if Russia could rebuild the Soviet ground forces of the 1980s it would not suffice to ensure against future threats based on newer weapons and the strategies made possible by postindustrial technology. Postindustrial or third wave warfare created a new military cyberspace in which the capability for systems integration across the parts of a knowledge-based strategy would prove to be decisive. The various parts included: command, control, communications, and computers (C4); intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); long range, precision strike; and stealth technology.

With a military-industrial complex more reliable than the one that Russia now has, (openly lamented by Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov), Russia would still lag in smart technology on account of its underdeveloped private sector economy. Russian economic performance improved in the first decade of the twenty-first century relative to the miserable disaster of the 1990s, mostly due to oil prices but also on account of a widespread perception of stronger state leadership. However, it was a longer slog to convert this or other economic boomlets into permanent improvements in Russia’s hollowed-out and cash-strapped conventional forces. As for the reforms undertaken by Serdyukov, they were ambitious but lacked a clear objective and adequate resources, and in addition, were met with resistance at almost every turn. For example, the Russian ground forces as of April, 2012 supposedly included 83 newly created brigades staffed at “permanent readiness” for combat deployment without requiring additional mobilization of reserves. However, leaked Ministry of Defense figures show that the total number of active servicemen was 667,000 instead of the official target of one million, including all branches of the armed forces (and not counting some additional 130,000 service members in the Defense Ministry who are not combat personnel). This meant that many of the “permanent readiness” brigades would be undermanned and not capable of combat deployment with their full complement of personnel. Further, most of the troops are conscripts serving one year terms and called up twice each year: at any given time, half of them have been in uniform less than six months and lack adequate training for battle. Shortcomings in the ground forces are not the end of the story. According to expert analyst and commentator Pavel Felgenhauer:

Serdyukov’s military reform has been radical, but it lacked a clear strategic objective or a define doctrine. The United States and NATO continued to be the presumed main enemy; and the Defense Ministry made massive investments into new strategic nuclear weapons and air defenses. At the same time, attempts to meet
all other possible threats resulted in thinly spreading out limited resources. Major military reform decisions have never been openly discussed in parliament or in the expert community. The cloak of almost total secrecy has led to costly mistakes and massive criminal misappropriations of resources.

Improved economic performance is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for a Russian army that can cope with third wave, postindustrial warfare. Smart soldiers and innovative commanders who can think "out of the box" are as important as technology as the nature of warfare shifts from massive battles of attrition to flexible and small scale military operations. In addition, future warfare will take place in at least five dimensions: land; sea; air; space; and cyberspace. These multiple environments for future warfighting make the challenges posed by the "initial period of war" especially problematical for technically backward militaries. The possibility of strategic losses within minutes or seconds in the opening phase of war, including a possible cyberwar that would create chaos with exclusively electronic casualties, is now within the reach of feasible or foreseeable military art. As Dale R. Herspring has warned, notwithstanding the progress already made in reform and the seriousness of Serdyukov and former Russian president Dmitri Medvedev:

"The key question is whether the Kremlin can successfully deal with four major problems confronting it: Russia must overcome its technological inferiority, learn how to delegate authority, find a way to eliminate the ever-present corruption, and find a way to make the military attractive to young Russian men. If it does not deal with these issues, Russia will face the probability of repeating its horrible performance in the 2008 war with Georgia. Only the next time, the consequences could be far worse."

Russia's national security concepts and evolving expressions of military doctrine show its fears of surprise attack in the face of NATO conventional military superiority, notwithstanding NATO's declaratory policy of nonhostility toward Russia. This concern became especially acute in the period immediately following NATO's 1999 war against Yugoslavia, coincident with the official enlargement of NATO to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. NATO's operation Allied Force forced an historic Russian ally to capitulate to the alliance's demands for repatriation of Albanian Kosovars by means of an air war alone, without the necessity for a ground invasion. Russia rushed in at the endgame to make a dramatic gesture of deploying its share of the peacekeeping force into Kosovo.

But NATO's willingness to go to war for the first time in its history and in the face of Russian objections, bypassing the United Nations Security Council, advertised Russia's post-Cold War military backwardness in technologies related to the "Revolution in Military Affairs". Russia's draft military doctrine of 1999 and its national security concept of 2000 therefore opened the door to the possible use of nuclear weapons not only for deterrence but also for war fighting. The security concept stated that the use of nuclear weapons by Russia would become possible "in the event or need to repulse armed aggression, if all other measures of resolving the crisis situation have been exhausted and proven ineffective." Russia's more recent doctrinal expressions and policy statements have not revoked the expressed prerogative for nuclear first use in the face of a lost or losing conventional conflict with the potential for an otherwise catastrophic military defeat for Russia.

The estimation of the wartime environment from the peacetime one was difficult enough before the age of automation and 'electronization'. In the future additional complexity
will be added to efforts to extrapolate from peacetime to wartime by the higher degree of uncertainty about wartime command and control, and by the higher degree of interdependency among command, communications-control, and intelligence functions. Three immediate implications for Russian military planners suggest themselves. First, the battle for control over the electromagnetic spectrum will become more intense in the future, compared to the past: electronic countermeasures and counter-counter measures (ECM and ECCM, respectively) will figure more prominently in procurement and exercises for all modern armies, navies and air forces.

Second, the pressure to get additional combat power from a reduced or restructured force, albeit one postured defensively, means that command must be pushed downward as far as possible. Tactical flexibility will be a necessary condition for the accomplishment of battlefield objectives that would otherwise remain at risk. Soviet operations in the Great Patriotic War were designed for a command and control system that maximized the flexibility of operational and strategic commanders, at the expense of very restrictive guidelines for tactical commanders (in the Soviet ground forces, division or lower). Third, offensive and defensive information warfare, including both information-supported military operations and information-based psychological warfare against enemy societies, moves to the head of the lecture circuit among topics in the armed forces general staff syllabus. Russia has now seen the United States fight four wars or multinational peace operations based more or less on information superiority: Operation Desert Storm in 1991; Kosovo in 1999; Afghanistan in 2001; and Iraq, in 2003.

Defensive military doctrine and electronization of the battlefield will create stronger pressures for the decentralization of decision-making authority, along with more widely distributed information technology needed by commanders to perform traditional tasks faster. Although armed forces are frequently studied from the perspectives of their military doctrine or combat tactics, they are less frequently analyzed as holistic institutions subject to periods of institutional steadiness or stress. Institutions are norm-driven organizations that attempt to adapt to the unexpected by retracing their steps through familiar repertoires of memory, information and procedure. Beyond a certain point, incremental adaptation to a radically different environment is no longer possible: the organization must change its institutional ethos or cease to function with the same set of role perceptions. It can continue as an organization but not as the same institution it once was.

One can apply this analysis to the changes now buffeting the Russian military as it attempts to transition from a mostly conscript to a contract service force, and from the Soviet inheritance of a manpower-intensive force to a postmodern force capable of exploiting advanced technology for rapid reaction and contingency operations. In the judgment of some leading post-Soviet Russian commanders, Russia had no option but to adapt to this information-based military template:

"The massive use of aviation and long-range precision weapons; electronic countermeasures; and integrated use of space information assets - all these approaches have become a firm part of U.S. military threats beginning with Operation Desert Storm against Iraq in 1991. Moreover, the primary targets in the course of the conflict were clearly specified: key installations of the economic infrastructure, elements of the state and military command and control system, and lines of transportation. NATO’s eastward enlargement not only radically altered the force ratio in theatres of military operations, but also permitted a number of kinds of tactical and operational-tactical weapons to perform strategic..."
missions previously set aside for Pershing II missile complexes and cruise missiles.”

24 A micro-electronic revolution in military affairs, following the macro-electronic one, has just begun to be appreciated by Russian military planners. The diffusion of the appropriate portable and desktop workstations and information bases throughout the Russian armed forces chain of command must certainly affect everything else that armed forces do. Further, a “smarter” Russian command and control system becomes a potential liability or a possible asset. There is a curvilinear relationship between the ability of communications and electronics technology to augment combat effectiveness and the eventual and additional vulnerability that this technology establishes, once forces have become dependent on it. A particular concern for the Russian armed forces would be the danger of having tactical units isolated and cut off from one another. Such an outcome is not inconceivable to Soviet military planners; it happened to them in the week following 22 June 194133.

25 In addition to an increasingly important struggle to control the electronic spectrum and to technological and other pressures to push effective command and control downward, another aspect of the electronic and automated battlefield is noteworthy. The U.S. war in Afghanistan in 2001 showed that highly integrated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems (ISR), combined with long range precision strike and advanced control systems, can support the innovative use of operations and tactics that overpower an adversary in the initial period of war, and with minimum numbers of operationally deployed American military forces34. The first side to lose its command, control and communications may also lose its combat stability and thus, its ability to fight a war with small unit cohesion and combat system interdependence. If, for example, the tactical air or air defense component of a modern ground force can be electronically isolated from the remainder of the force, then the remnants of that force can be swallowed up at the discretion of the opponent. Future generations of war-winning strategies below the threshold of nuclear escalation may have to rely on the 'implosion' of the opponent's command and control system and the subsequent collapse of the opponent's ability to coordinate the use of formations of various sizes and composition.

Conclusions

26 Russia’s evolving political and military relationship with the United States and NATO, with or without the Obama “reset,” offers many opportunities and issues for convergence and cooperative security: including on issues such as Afghanistan exit strategies, counterterrorism, nuclear nonproliferation, and involvement of Russia in the World Trade Organization under a U.S.-approved PNTR (permanent normal trade relations) status. A “Barbarossa complex” is neither a necessary nor a desirable condition for present day Russia to avoid wars or to prevail in war if necessary. However, Russian military planners might reasonably assume that the initial period of war can be one of great danger. What seems politically absurd in a day and age of U.S.-Russian “reset” and post-post-Cold War Europe is not necessarily impossible from the standpoint of Russian military planners and analysts. Russian and Soviet historical experience so dictates. As the authoritative strategic assessment group Stratfor noted in April, 2012:

“The rest of the world knows that an invasion of Russia is inconceivable. The Russians can conceive of it. They remember that Germany in 1932 was crippled. By
1938 it was overwhelmingly powerful. Six years is not very long, and while such an evolution is unlikely now, from the Russian point of view, it must be taken seriously in the long run – planning for the worst and hoping for the best.”

From the perspective of risk-averse Russian military planners, Russian forces drawn back to the western border districts of the current Federation will be in very much the same position as those which faced the onslaught of “Barbarossa” in 1941. Russian intelligence will place equally high importance on the detection of enemy political decision to attack (strategic warning) as on the acquisition of order-of-battle data and other information essential for response to tactical warning. Therefore NATO would be well advised to continue its program of political and military collaboration with Russia and to encourage improvements in Russia’s early warning and control systems so that they are less susceptible to self generated default.

In addition, NATO enlargement should deemphasize the alliance’s nuclear guaranty as a last resort. In this regard, the U.S. and Russia would also be well advised to: (1), continue pursuit of strategic nuclear arms reductions beyond the limits agreed in the New START treaty, signed in 2010 and entered into force in 2011; (2), undertake NATO – Russian negotiations on the reduction and-or elimination of non-strategic nuclear weapons deployed in Europe; and, (3), further pursue Russian – NATO cooperation on European missile defenses as adumbrated in the Madrid discussions between Russian and NATO leaders in 2010. Reaching agreement on the reduction or elimination of European non-strategic nuclear weapons may present both domestic and foreign policy difficulties. As Nikolai Sokov has noted with respect to Russia’s perspective on NSNW:

“A solution to the paradox of TNW (theater nuclear weapons) – assets that Russia apparently does not need, but continues to hold on to – can be found in domestic politics rather than in strategic planning. The Russian government attitude toward TNW appears to represent a complex mix of domestic and bureaucratic politics, (mis)perceptions, and idiosyncrasies.”

In addition, the U.S. and Russia have an objective community of interest in raising the nuclear threshold by improving the quality of Russia’s conventional forces (to a point) relative to its nuclear ones, so that Russia’s nuclear employment policies and declaratory doctrines are less forward-leaning with respect to nuclear first or early use in a conventional war.

Indeed, a more favorable climate for U.S. – Russian and NATO – Russian cooperation on nuclear arms limitation should also contribute to more realistic threat assessments in Moscow with respect to the prevention or conduct of conventional warfare. Russia is threatened neither primarily nor immediately by NATO. Instead, the threat of regional or smaller wars on Russia’s periphery or terrorism and insurgent wars within Russia and other post-Soviet states must now take pride of place in General Staff and Ministry of Defense contingency planning. Preparedness for these contingencies of limited and local wars, regular and irregular, will require a smaller, more professional and more mobile military than post-Soviet Russia has fielded hitherto. As well, Russia’s armed forces, together with the General Staff and Ministry of Defense, must be made accountable to its political leadership as an institutional, not a personal, matter. Unless these political and military building blocks are put into place, Russia’s armed forces and military doctrine will be maladapted for the security challenges of the twenty-first century.

In forecasting Russian security priorities in the twenty-first century, U.S. and allied leaders must maintain awareness of the connection between the domestic political
priorities of Russia’s leaders and its foreign and security policies. As Lilia Shevtsova has explained, the primary objective of the Russian system domestically is to preserve the monopoly of power held by the ruling elite. Thus, the requirements for Russia’s foreign and security policies include: to guarantee a favorable international environment for the Russian system and its legitimacy; to obtain sufficient economic resources to support the system; and to “deliver additional drivers for society’s consolidation around the authorities”39. As she explains, Russian foreign and security policies have to pursue apparently contradictory paths:

“For the outside, these policies have to create the image of Russia as a modern and responsible European state. For the inside, foreign policy has to supply constant justification for the “Besieged Fortress” mentality and secure rejection of the Western standards by the Russian society. This “driving two horses in opposite directions” is actually the agenda of Russian foreign and security policies that the Kremlin has been pursuing with great skill during the last 10 years.”40

Russia’s oscillations, between favorable and unfavorable readings of the auguries for “resets” with the West, are not necessarily driven by events in the international system, although those events (such as missile defenses, NATO enlargement or U.S.-Russian disagreements about Syria in 2012) can be used to justify Russia’s diplomatic demarches taken for other reasons. According to Shevtsova, it is reasonable to conclude that Kremlin security and foreign policy “are more influenced by domestic needs than by the logic of international relations”41. Of course, whether domestic or international influences act as independent or interdependent variables is highly situational.

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NOTES


4. According to Soviet historical analysis of the Great Patriotic War, during its early and middle stages Soviet forces were forced to fight on the strategic defensive or to limit their strategic offensive operations to counterattacks on the main sectors. In the third period of the war (essentially 1944-45), when Soviet forces had the initiative and necessary force groupings, an offensive began with several strategic operations conducted successively on different sectors. The scale of strategic operations increased accordingly. See B. V. Panov, V. N. Kiselev, I. I. Kartavtsev, et. al., Istoriia voennogo iskusstva, Moscow: Voyenizdat, 1984, Chapter 10 and Col. David M. Glantz, Deep Attack: The Soviet Conduct of Operational Maneuver, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army Studies Office, April 1987.

5. Levels of military art (strategy, operational art and tactics) are defined according to the type of campaign, battle or engagement in which forces are used; according to the level of command responsibility for the military action; and, according to the military geographical level at which the fighting takes place. For a discussion, see Ch. Donnelly, Red Banner: The Soviet Military System in Peace and War, Coulsdon, Surrey: Jane's Information Group, 1988, pp. 213-14. On the impact of nuclear weapons on Soviet military thought, see D. Holloway, The Soviet Union and the Arms Race, New Haven, CT., Yale University Press, 1983, Ch. 2-3.


8. Ibid., p. 29.


13. The importance of this is stressed in Erickson, “Threat Identification.”


15. See J. J. Mearsheimer, Conventional Deterrence, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1983, Ch. 2. Pertinent in Soviet military theory following the First World War is A. A. Svechin, Strategia,


17. Handel, War, Strategy and Intelligence, op. cit., p. 238. For other cases and theory, see Klaus Knorr and Patrick M. Morgan (Eds.), Strategic Military Surprise, New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Books, 1983.


19. Ibid., p. 239. See also Richard Ned Lebow, Between Peace and War: The Nature of Brinkmanship Crises, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, on the nature of brinkmanship crises. Lebow finds significant number of historical cases in which a state's commitment was challenged by another on the assumption that the first state would yield, an assumption which flew in the face of a great deal of information to the contrary.


23. For pertinent perspective and background, see Stephen J., Arms Control and Proliferation Challenges to the Reset Policy, Carlisle, Pa., U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, November 2011.

24. Background and perspective on this are provided in Dale R. Herspring, “Is Military Reform in Russia for “Real”? Yes, But,” Ch. 2 in S. J. Blank and R. Weitz, (Eds.), The Russian Military Today and Tomorrow: Essays in Memory of Mary Fitzgerald, Carlisle, Pa., U.S. Army War College, July 2010), pp. 151-191.


26. Ibid.


30. I am grateful to Timothy Thomas for this point. He is not responsible for its application here.


37. There are some indications that this shift in threat assessment is taking place within the Russian military and defense establishments, although as Mark Galeotti has warned, Russia “will also have to develop a credible and forward-looking doctrine and operational art matching a realistic set of threats and potential missions.” See Galeotti, “Reform of the Russian Military and Security Apparatus: An Investigator’s Perspective,” Ch. 3 in S. J. Blank, (Ed.), Can Russia Reform? Economic, Political, and Military Perspectives, Carlisle, Pa., Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, June 2012, pp. 61-105.


40. Ibid.


RÉSUMÉS

The relationship between military reform in Russia and Russian threat perceptions is influenced by the Soviet past, by Russian domestic politics, and by the character of current U.S.-Russian and NATO-Russian relations. Prospective Russian military reform is endangered by continuing threat perceptions that exaggerate Russian military weakness and by domestic forces that play against a rational assessment of Russia’s geostrategic requirements.
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