RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE AND WORLDVIEW
Policy Implications for UK and its Allies

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1. Introduction

It has been apparent since 2014, if not before, that Russia's current leadership views the world in terms that are very different to those familiar to us in the Euro-Atlantic more than twenty-five years after the end of the Soviet Union. Seen from the Kremlin, the post-Cold War international system is illegitimate and unfair, and has been forced on the world by the West.[1] This view was articulated most clearly in Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007,[2] and has only been reinforced by events since then.

Russia's rejection of the post-Cold War international system is based in large part on a belief that the West, led by the United States, denies Moscow its rightful place in global affairs. Russia's leaders believe that their country is a 'great power', or one of the most important countries globally. Proceeding from this self-perception, they believe that Russia has more rights than other countries, including the right to a 'buffer zone' along its borders and the right to have a say over global events. While these views are held by Russia's current leadership, they are not specific to them. Instead, these views have been consistently held -- to a greater or lesser extent -- by Russia's rulers over centuries.[3]

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, including the annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine, was a shock to many in the Euro-Atlantic region; so too has Russia's subversion and destabilisation of Euro-Atlantic countries and institutions in the years since dismayed many. However, when considered in the context of Russia's worldview its actions should be no surprise. This paper offers an overview of the key

[1] Igor Ivanov, "Russia's post-election foreign policy: new challenges, new horizons", *Russia in Global Affairs,* 28 March 2018, available at: http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Russias-Post-Election-Foreign-Policy-New-Challenges-New-Horizons-19458
[2] Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy", *The Kremlin,* 10 February 2007, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034
[3] Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019); Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (May/June 2016), pp. 2–9, available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/russias-perpetual-geopolitics; Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013); Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 20 February 2019, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/20/russia-s-global-ambitions-in-perspective-pub-78067; and Sergey Lavrov, "Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective," *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 2 (April/June 2016), available at: http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Russias-Foreign-Policy-in-a-Historical-Perspective-18067

components of Russian strategic culture as it relates to Russia's worldview, and assesses their policy implications for the UK and its allies.

2. Components of Russia's Strategic Culture

Scholars broadly agree that a country's worldview is the product of its strategic culture. Yet there is not the same consensus about what constitutes strategic culture itself; within the field of international relations, for example, there are multiple definitions of strategic culture, none of which is universally accepted by scholars and policy practitioners.[4] However, most definitions recognise that strategic culture is, in the words of Alastair Iain Johnston, Professor in the Department of Government at Harvard University, a product of a country's "deeply rooted historical experience, political culture, and geography."[5] When taken together, and when combined with other components, these shape the collective identity of the national security establishment and inform its decisions about security issues.[6]

To focus only on these three components of a country's strategic culture -- geography, history, and political culture -- may seem like a deliberate oversimplification that masks enormous complexity, in part because it is. Nevertheless, these components are central to a series of beliefs and imperatives which have been consistent over centuries and which help explain why the Russian state -- in its various guises, whether Tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet -- behaves in the way that it does. This is not to suggest that there is no role for the agency of individual leaders and their actions, but instead that leaders' actions are shaped by the country's strategic culture.[7]

2.1 Geography

The foreign policy of the Russian state was shaped over centuries by the absence of natural barriers (such as mountains, rivers, and oceans) over vast stretches of territory. As a result, Russia expanded into this territory and this expansion was guided, at least in part, by a desire for secure borders against external threats. This desire was driven by a belief that Russia's neighbours (including to the east and south, but particularly to the west) were hostile and intent on invasion, and gave rise to a perception of Russia as a 'besieged fortress'.[8]

This belief proved to be correct on two occasions that are particularly well-known in the West; the invasion of Russia by Napoleon in 1812, and the attack by Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union in 1941. From the Russian perspective, however, these are part of a much broader and longer experience that includes: the Mogol invasion of Kievan Rus', in 1223; the Ottoman invasion of Russia, in 1571; the occupation of Moscow by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1610; Sweden's unsuccessful invasion, in 1707; Japan's invasion

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[4] Edward Lock, "Strategic Culture Theory: What, Why, and How", *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Politics* (2017), available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.320

[5] Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking About Strategic Culture", *International Security* (Vol. 19, No. 4, 1995), pp. 32–64, available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/2539119

[6] See, for example, Jack L Snyder, "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Options", RAND Corporation, September 1977, available at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2005/R2154.pdf

[7] On the role of the individual in determining Russian foreign policy, see Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy", *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Fall 2020), pp. 95–139, available at: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00390

[8] See, for example, Gregory Carleton, *Russia: The Story of War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017)

of the island of Sakhalin, in 1905; and countless other occasions, from at least three directions, going back almost a millennia.

Successive Russian rulers, over centuries, appear to have determined that the best -- indeed, the *only* way -- to secure their territory was to acquire more territory, which itself then had to be secured. This self-fulfilling prophecy was described by Stephen Kotkin, Professor in History and International Affairs at Princeton University, thus:

> Whatever the original causes behind early Russian expansionism -- much of which was unplanned -- many in the country's political class came to believe over time that only further expansion could secure the earlier acquisitions. Russian security has thus traditionally been partly predicated on moving outward, in the name of preempting external attack. [9]

Throughout the history of the modern Russian state -- which is frequently dated to the middle of the sixteenth century, as it was in 1547 that Grand Duke Ivan IV of Moscow declared himself the first Tsar of Russia, taking the moniker "Ivan the Terrible" in the process -- it has pursued territorial expansion. As Richard Pipes, the late Harvard University historian explained, "between the middle of the sixteenth century and the end of the seventeenth, Moscow acquired on average 35,000 square kilometers -- an area equivalent to modern Holland -- *every year* for 150 consecutive years."[10]

This territorial expansion took place to the north in the Arctic, to the east in Siberia, to the south in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and to the west in Europe. Indeed, its expansion was only halted in two directions because it ran out of contiguous territory to conquer; in the north with the Arctic Ocean, and in the east, with the seas of Japan and Okhotsk, and the Pacific Ocean. In a third direction, to the south, Russia expanded until it came up against various mountain ranges, including the Caucasus, Pamir, and Tien-Shan.

To the west, there are no such barriers and this has been a preoccupation for Russia's rulers over centuries. Writing in 2020, Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace's Russia and Eurasia Program argue:

> At the risk of oversimplification, one can easily conclude that the entire history of Russian foreign policy has been a struggle for control of the geographic space between the western frontier of Russia and the eastern border of Germany.[11]

The antithesis of this desire by Russia's rulers to gain territory in order to feel more secure is that the loss of territory has resulted in a profound sense of insecurity. Russia experienced two such dislocations in the twentieth century: the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of 1918, as a result of which Russia renounced all territorial claims to Finland, the three Baltic States, parts of Poland, most of Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine; and, the

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[9] Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (May/June 2016), available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/russias-perpetual-geopolitics.

[10] Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1974), pg. 83

[11] Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, "Etched in Stone: Russian Strategic Culture and the Future of Transatlantic Security", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 8 September 2020, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Russian_Strategic_Culture_Rumer_Sokolsky.pdf

fragmentation of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the three Baltic states, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine gained their independence along with the three states of the South Caucasus and five of Central Asia.

Both of these dislocations led to a renewed quest, by Moscow, to regain strategic depth once the country had recovered a measure of strength.[12] In the case of 1918, Moscow was able to regain this by the mid-1920s and then extend it in 1945, when it occupied territory conquered from Nazi Germany in Central and Eastern Europe, as a result of which the USSR began to resemble the Russian Empire. In the case of 1991, regaining strategic depth became the principal task of Russian foreign policy in the 1990s, with a focus on the newly independent states -- or the "near abroad".[13] At this time, Russia's leaders spoke of the country's "special role" in the post-Soviet space, suggesting that it would be "primus inter pares" -- the first among equals.[14]

During this decade, Russia exerted influence in the post-Soviet space by taking advantage of conflicts, including in Armenia/Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, to support (directly or indirectly) a breakaway region, and by creating new regional structures centred on Moscow, including the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Both of these trends were amplified after 2000.[15] The extent of Russia's belief in its possession of greater rights than other countries in the region was demonstrated by president Dmitry Medvedev's declaration in 2008, in the aftermath of the war with Georgia, of a "sphere of privileged interests"[16]. It is precisely because Russia believes it enjoys such a "sphere", and because it believed its "privileged interests" were at risk, that Putin justified Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine in 2014.[17]

2.2 History

From at least the time of Peter the Great (1672-1725), the Russian state -- whether Tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet -- has followed a cycle of transformation, breakdown, consolidation, and stagnation. Circumstances have changed, but the rhythm has been remarkably consistent. Successive Russia's leaders have, over centuries, laid claim to this legacy, determining that the history of their country is unbroken. Putin appears to be one of them. In his 2012 presidential address to the Federal Assembly, he emphasised that in order to understand the country's historical development it was necessary to recognise that, "Russia did not begin in

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[12] Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 20 February 2019, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/20/russia-s-global-ambitions-in-perspective-pub-78067

[13] Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2009), pp: 3-22, and Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)

[14] 'Address by H.E. Lennart Meri, President of the Republic of Estonia, at a Matthiae-Supper in Hamburg on February 25, 1994', Speeches of the President of the Republic of Estonia, available at: https://vp1992-2001.president.ee/eng/k6ned/K6ne.asp?ID=9401

[15] Alexander Cooley, "Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 30 June 2017, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/30/whose-rules-whose-sphere-russian-governance-and-influence-in-post-soviet-states-pub-71403

[16] 'President Dmitry Medvedev, interview by Russian TV channels (Channel One, Rossia, and NTV)', *The Kremlin*, 31 August 2008, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/48301

[17] 'Address by President of the Russian Federation', *The Kremlin*, 18 March 2014,, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603

1917, or even in 1991, but rather, that we have a common, continuous history spanning over one thousand years."[18]

This sense of historical continuity means that the national identity of contemporary Russia includes, for example, Moscow's claim, first made in the early sixteenth century, to be the 'third Rome', or the centre of Orthodox Christianity, which followed the fall of Byzantium to the Ottomans in the mid-fifteenth century.[19] It also includes claims Moscow has made over centuries to be the leader of the Slavic world, of global communism, and of the post-liberal world order.[20] Additionally, it includes the special role in Europe that Russia believes it occupies as a result of its involvement in various European conflicts over several centuries, such as the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), Seven Years War (1756-1763), and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). Explaining the significance of Russia's role in the latter of these, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov wrote:

> … it was Russia that saved the system of international relations which was based on the balance of forces and mutual respect for national interests, and which excluded total dominance of any one state on the European continent. [21]

This sense of continuity, combined with a belief in its own importance, means that Russia believes its historical experience is globally significant. In contemporary Russia, however, a key component of this belief is the legacy of the Great Patriotic War, as World War II was known during the Soviet period and is commonly referred to in Russia, and the critical role the Soviet Union -- and thus Russia, as the USSR's legal successor -- played in the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Putin, who is a child of the Soviet Union's "greatest generation" that fought and won the War, has taken it upon himself to ensure the 'correct' historical record of the war and defend it against attempts at 'falsification'. In 2014, he signed a law that criminalised the "dissemination of deliberately false information on the activities of the Soviet Union during the Second World War."[22] In 2020 he even authored a lengthy article in *The National Interest*, a US policy journal, whose main purpose, it appeared, was to highlight the Soviet Union's contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany.[23] "It is essential", he wrote, "to pass on to future generations the memory of the fact that the Nazis were defeated first and foremost by the Soviet people". Putin also reiterated his belief in the West's historic animosity toward Moscow which, he argued, is manifest in "information attacks against our country, trying to make us provide excuses and feel guilty" for the Soviet Union's conduct during the war. For Putin,

> We will firmly uphold the truth based on documented historical facts. We will continue to be honest and impartial about the events of World War II.

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[18] 'Address to the Federal Assembly', *The Kremlin*, 12 December 2012, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118

[19] Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

[20] Peter Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism, and After* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000).

[21] Sergey Lavrov, 'Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20 March 2018, available at: https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russias-foreign-policy-in-a-historical-perspective-2/

[22] 'Putin Signs Law Criminalizing Denial Of Nazi War Crimes', *RFE/RL*, 5 May 2014, available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-criminalizes-nazi-denial/25373990.html

[23] Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II," *National Interest*, 18 June 2020, available at: https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982

What constitutes the 'truth' about the Great Patriotic War for Russia's current leaders, however, would not necessarily be accepted as being 'true' in the West. The Molotov-Ribbentop Pact, the secret protocol agreed in August 1939 that divided Eastern European between Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, is a case in point. For the West, the pact is an act of aggression that stands as the beginning of two years' of Nazi and Soviet collaboration in Eastern Europe, including the joint invasion of Poland and all of the succeeding tragedies it brought.[24] For Putin, speaking in 2014, the pact was a "non-aggression agreement" and the Soviet Union's invasion of Eastern Europe was a far-sighted defensive move, which gave Moscow much-needed strategic depth, in anticipation of a Nazi attack. [25]

That Russia's leaders see their history as bound up with world history means that the Kremlin holds, in the words of the distinguished British analyst of Russian foreign policy Keir Giles, an "... unshakable belief that Russia matters and is relevant -- everywhere, at all times, and under all circumstances. The actual condition or strength of Russia at any given time does not have any bearing on this sense of entitlement. "[26] This has important implications for how Russia conducts itself as a state. So too does the fact that Russia's leaders understand their country's history in ways that are markedly different from what is commonly believed in other countries (or, on occasions, from what is established fact).

A case in point is the Great Patriotic War. For Putin, the Soviet Union's victory in World War II means the country bears unique responsibility for the legacy of the war, including the international system that exists today. As a founding member of the United Nations, with its permanent seat on the Security Council, Russia believes it has a special role in upholding the post-World War II international system. In Putin's own words,

> The creation of the modern system of international relations is one of the major outcomes of the Second World War… It is a duty of ours – all those who take political responsibility and primarily representatives of the victorious powers in the Second World War – to guarantee that this system is maintained and improved.[27]

2.3 Political Culture

Russia has, throughout the majority of its history, been ruled by autocracy. It is only since the end of the Soviet Union that this pattern of rule has been modified. The election of Dmitry Medvedev as president in 2008 was the first time in the entire history of the Russian state -- since the formation of Rus' in Novgorod, by the Varangian (Viking) chieftain Ryurik, around 862 -- that power had been voluntarily transferred from one leader to another. Even then, however, there was less-than-meets-the-eye to this transfer, as Putin remained the ultimate arbiter and returned to the presidency in 2012.

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[24] Timothy Snyder, 'Putin's New Nostalgia', *The New York Review of Books*, 10 November 2014, available at: https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/11/10/putin-nostalgia-stalin-hitler/

[25] 'Meeting with young academics and history teachers', *The Kremlin*, 5 November 2014, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46951

[26] Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West,* pg. 16

[27] Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II," *National Interest*, 18 June 2020, available at: https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982

The modern Russian state that emerged in the middle of the sixteenth century was the result of several legacies, including the Mongol beliefs in absolutism and unqualified submission to the state, and the Muscovite principle of legitimacy, which held -- crudely put -- that the ruler could exercise power as s/he wished. It also inherited a messianic belief in itself as the 'third Rome', or as the global center of traditional Christian values. Taken together, these aspects of the country's character -- Eastern Christianity, a dominant state, and communal values -- became enmeshed in the ideological triad of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality", a slogan adopted in the nineteenth century during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I.[28]

From its beginnings, thus, Russia's political system differed fundamentally from that of Western Europe. Moreover, it continued to differ -- and *continues* to differ -- not because it failed to develop over time, but instead because it developed different forms of autocracy rather than different systems of government. According to Andrei Tsygankov, Professor of Political Science and International Relations at San Francisco State University, one manifestation of Russia's distinctive history when compared to that of the West is its tradition of a strong, centralised state organised around a single autocrat. Throughout history, he writes,

> autocracy in Russia was defended by diverse political currents and found support among liberals, Slavophiles, populists, socialists, and Eurasianists alike. These currents disagreed in their vision of the country's identity, state–society relations, and ties with the outside world, yet they often shared an appreciation for autocracy as the requirement for Russia's survival and development. [29]

Autocracy, thus, is a central component of Russia's political history. While the autocracy was at times weaker and at times stronger, the tradition nevertheless survived through centuries -- including the twentieth century, during which the Tsarist state was replaced by the Communist Party and Orthodox Christianity by Marxist-Leninism. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, both Boris Yeltsin and Putin sought to construct a strong, centralised state in Russia. Yeltsin's progress in this regard was impeded by the situation the country faced in the 1990s, but Putin began the process of consolidating power as soon as conditions allowed him to. On the eve of becoming acting president in 2000, Putin gave a speech in which he argued:

> Our state and its institutions have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country and its people. For Russians a strong state is not an anomaly that should be gotten rid of. Quite the contrary, they see it as a source and guarantor of order and the initiator and main driving force of any change.[30]

With his words, Putin touched upon the central political debate in Russia's history -- how strong the centralised state should be, rather than whether the state should be centralised or strong at all. For Putin, the answer is that the centralised state should be as strong as possible, with power concentrated in the office of the president (or the prime minister, while he served in that role between 2008 and 2012). In order to ensure that decisions made centrally are implemented, Putin has followed a well-established practice of appointing to positions of power individuals whom he personally knows and who are, first and foremost, loyal to him. This

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[28] Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, "'Nationality" in the State Ideology during the Reign of Nicholas I', *The Russian Review*, Vol. 19, No, 1 (1960), pp. 38-46. See also, Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia 1825 - 1855* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1959).
[29] Andrei P. Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia: Development and Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pg. 7
[30] Vladimir Putin, "Rossiya na rubezhe tysyacheletiy [Russia at the turn of the millennium]" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 31 December 1999, available at: https://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm

tendency to rely on personalised relationships has implications for how Putin enacts foreign, as well as domestic, policy. [31]

The belief in the importance of a powerful, centralised state has had, and continues to have, implications for those individuals who live within the state. During the Tsarist period, the subordination of the interests of the individual to those of the state are best explained by the notion of the 'Russian Idea', a phrase coined by the author Fyodor Dostoevsky in 1861. In the words of the American author and long-time Russian analyst David Satter, this notion describes how:

> In Russia, the regime is less a government than a religious crusade crystallized in the institutions of a state. Its preferred field of action is the whole world. The regime does not guarantee the welfare of its citizens because it does not aspire to. It exists for a "higher" purpose and does not recognize moral limits on the pursuit of its goals.[32]

This mentality survived the end of the Tsarist autocracy and was adopted by the communist regime, which radically intensified some of its more repressive features. While Tsarist Russia deported and murdered its own citizens, for example, the Soviet Union did this on an industrial scale. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the new Russian state continued this autocratic tradition, by prioritising the goals of the state over the rights of the individual. For Putin, this tradition is entirely natural. As he explained in a speech in April 2008:

> maintaining the governance of a vast territory, preserving a unique commonwealth of peoples while occupying a major place in world affairs, calls … for enormous sacrifices and privations on the part of our people. Such has been Russia's thousand-year history. Such is the way that in which it has retained its place as a mighty nation. We do not have the right to forget this.[33]

3. The World Seen From Moscow

These three components of Russia's strategic culture help to explain why the country's leaders have behaved with remarkable consistency over centuries. The lack of natural geographical barriers to its west, combined with a belief that its neighbours are hostile, explains Russia's desire for a buffer zone around its perimeter, or a 'sphere of privileged interests'. Russia's belief in itself as the 'third Rome' together with the roles played by Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century's Napoleonic Wars and the Soviet Union in the Allies' victory in World War Two explain why Russia believes it has a voice that carries globally. The country's tradition of autocracy sheds light on why it attaches such importance to the state.

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[31] Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr Putin: Operative in The Kremlin* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015)

[32] David Satter, 'The Character of Russia', Hudson Institute, 30 January 2012, available at: https://www.hudson.org/research/8696-the-character-of-russia

[33] As quoted in David Satter, *It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist Past* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012), pg. 6

Taken together, these components (as well as others) constitute a worldview that, in the words of the Moscow-born political analyst Maria Lipman, is "intuitively understood and accepted by the majority [of Russians] rather than rationally learned."[34] Lipman writes that:

> Russia is a great power, and the West is hostile to it; the supreme leader is the only source of authority and the pillar of the right state order; the state is omnipotent, and its citizens depend on it; "might makes right" is a legitimate concept, and injustice is an inevitable part of life which is taken for granted; Russia has a special path...[35]

A key feature – perhaps *the* key feature – of this worldview is the belief that Russia is not a 'normal country' but instead is a 'great power' and, it follows, should be recognised as such by the international community.

3.1 Russia is a 'Great Power'

Putin's original presidential manifesto, posted online in late 1999, declared that, "Russia was and will remain a great power." [36] During his time in power, he has variously argued that Russia is a great power because: of its vast energy supplies; of its geographical size; of its economic potential; of its military; of its possession of nuclear weapons; of its value system; it is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council; and even because it hosts "large international events".[37] However it has been narrated, and whatever the objective reality might suggest, Putin has been consistent in his belief that Russia is a great power.

He is not alone. The belief in 'great power-ness' (*derzhavnost*) was one of the most popular foreign policy ideologies of Yeltsin's time as president[38]. Speaking in 1996, for example, Foreign Minister Yeveny Primakov declared, "Despite the present difficulties, Russia was and is a great power and its foreign policy should correspond with that."[39] This unerring belief drew on imperial attitudes that Russia possessed at the turn of the twentieth century and which were preserved during the Soviet period. Eugene Rumer, a former national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at the U.S. National Intelligence Council and currently the director of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace's Russia and Eurasia Program, described in 2019 how, "Contemporary Russian foreign policy displays the unmistakable presence of three centuries-old drivers of Moscow's posture on the world stage."[40]

This 'great power' belief has been written into various strategic documents, most obviously the Foreign Policy Concept. Russia's first post-Soviet Foreign Policy Concept, adopted in 1993, declared that one of the

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[34] Maria Lipman, "Putin's 'Besieged Fortress' and Its Ideological Aims" in *The State of Russia: What Comes Next?*, edited by Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pg. 111
[35] Maria Lipman, "Putin's 'Besieged Fortress' and Its Ideological Aims", pg. 111
[36] Stephen Kotkin, 'The Resistible Rise of Vladimir Putin', *Foreign Affairs*, March / April 2015, available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/resistible-rise-vladimir-putin
[37] Vladimir Putin, 'Rossiya i menyayushchiyskaya mir [Russia and the Changing World]', *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 27 February 2012, available at: https://rg.ru/2012/02/27/putin-politika.html
[38] Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (Lanham, Maryland; Rowman & Littlefield, 2019)
[39] Ron Laurenzo, "Russia's Primakov Outlines Policy Aims," United Press International, 12 January 1996, available at: https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/01/12/Russias-Primakov-outlines-policy-aims/1346821422800/
[40] Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective",

country's foreign policy priorities was to ensure its active role on the world stage as a "great power." [41] When the Concept was updated in 2000, following Putin's coming to power, it described Russia as a "great power, as one of the most influential centers of the modern world".[42] Each iteration of the Concept since then -- and there have been three, in 2008[43], 2013[44], and 2016[45] -- has used similar language.

A result of Russia's belief in its own 'great power-ness' is a tendency to see the world through the prism of great power competition. Russia is often said to be "living with a 19th-century vision of foreign policy",[46] in the words of Stephen Walt, Professor of International Relations at Harvard University, in which the world is divided into 'spheres of influence' and larger countries dictate the external (and, often, internal) relations of smaller ones. Lavrov has openly praised Russia's role in the nineteenth century 'Concert of Europe', while Putin has spoken warmly about the Yalta Agreement, which was struck after World War II and divided the continent between capitalism and communism.[47] Putin even called for a 'New Yalta' in 2014 as a way to resolve the Ukraine Crisis.[48]

A related vital facet of Russia's viewing the world through the prism of great power competition is the belief that there is a finite amount of security to go around. This 'zero-sum' approach to international affairs is evident in Lavrov's complaint in 2013 that the West has sought to strengthen its own security "at the expense of the security of others."[49] This outlook also means that Russia believes other countries inherently harbour hostile intent towards it, since it is only through weakening Russia that those countries can be strong. This is clear in a number of statements by the Russian leadership, not least in Nikolay Patruschev's, the former Director of the FSB and now long-term Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, lament in 2019 that the West was waging "hybrid wars" against Russia in an attempt to undermine the country's "constitutional order, sovereignty and territorial integrity".[50]

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[41] 'Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii 1992 goda [1992 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation]', available at: http://fmp.msu.ru/center-for-security-and-development-studies/anthology/document-inventory/countries/item/1619-kontseptsiya-vneshnej-politiki-rossijskoj-federatsii-1992-goda.

[42] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation,'The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation', 28 June 2000, available at: https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm

[43] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'The Foreign Policy Concept Of The Russian Federation', 12 January 2008, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116

[44] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation', 12 February 2013, available at: http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D

[45] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation', 30 November 2016 , available at: http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248

[46] Stephen M. Walt, 'Back to the Future: World Politics Edition', *Foreign Policy*, 8 July 2015, available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/08/back-to-the-future-world-politics-edition-russia-isis-europe-china/

[47] 'Address at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly', *The Kremlin*, 28 September 2015, available at: http://en.special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385

[48] Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr Putin: Operative in The Kremlin*, pg. 393

[49] 'Statement by Mr. Sergey Lavrov, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the Twentieth Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council', *OSCE*, 5 December 2013, available at: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/f/109306.pdf

[50] Nikolay Patrushev, 'Videt' tsel" [See the goal], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 11 November 2019, available at: https://rg.ru/2019/11/11/patrushev-ssha-stremiatsia-izbavitsia-ot-mezhdunarodno-pravovyh-ramok.html?mc_cid=c50b5bb139&mc_eid=[4b516b0c01]

For Russia's current leadership, this threat perception was deeply influenced by the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003, as well as the so-called 'colour revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005, which the Kremlin blamed on the US and, by extension, the broader West. For Russia's political and security elite, the Arab Spring, beginning in 2011, was also a series of Western-inspired 'colour revolutions', so too Ukraine's 'Revolution of Dignity' in 2014. Believing that all of these separate events cannot have been spontaneous but instead are part of a single trajectory, Russia's elite see 'colour revolutions' as "the West's main geopolitical tool" and believe it is inevitable that the West will seek to destabilise the country and force regime change.[51] Patrushev explained in 2007 that Western intelligence agencies were "nurturing plans aimed at dismembering Russia".[52]

In many respects, Russia's leaders believe their country is a great power because Russia's leaders have believed their country is a great power for centuries. Nevertheless, it is a belief that the current leadership appears either unwilling or unable to relinquish. It is also something that is intimately connected to the country's destiny, in the most existential of ways. This is encapsulated in the famous slogan "Russia will either be great, or she will not be at all", which is often repeated as having been said by Putin but was allegedly attributed to Putin by the right-wing political thinker Aleksandr Dugin. [53]

3.2 'Great Power' in Practice

Russia understands that its 'great power' status bestows upon it a special role in the international system. And with this special role, it believes, comes the possession of greater rights than others. This understanding has implications for how Russia conducts itself as a state in a number of ways; three of which are outlined below.

3.2.1 Russia's Relevance

A result of the belief that Russia is a great power are the assumptions that Russia features prominently in the thinking of all other countries and that all other countries will consult Russia on major decisions. From the perspective of this superiority complex, when Russia is consulted it is due recognition of the country as a great power and, as such, Russia is not required to make any concessions. Conversely, when Russia is not consulted then it is understood as a disrespectful (and potentially dangerous) act toward a great power. In the words of Stephen Kotkin, Professor in History and International Affairs at Princeton University:

> The sense of having a special mission … furnishes Russia's people and leaders with pride, but it also fuels resentment toward the West for supposedly underappreciating Russia's uniqueness and importance. [54]

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[51] Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington, D.C.; Georgetown University Press, 2019), pg. 6

[52] 'Kontrrazvedka: Shpionov segodnya lovyat tak…' [Counterintelligence: This is how you catch spies today…], *Argumenty i Fakty*, 9 October 2007, available at: https://aif.ru/society/330

[53] Emil Pain, 'The imperial syndrome and its influence on Russian nationalism' in P. Kolstø, P. and H. Blakkisrud (eds) *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015* (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2016). pp. 46-74

[54] Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 95, No. 3 (May/June 2016), available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/russias-perpetual-geopolitics.

A case in point is the US' plan to build a missile defence system in eastern Europe, which was announced in 2002 by President George W. Bush and cancelled by President Barack Obama in 2009. [55] Bush's beginning of talks with Poland and other European countries without consulting Russia highlighted the extent to which, for the US, Russia had been downgraded as a foreign policy priority since the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, when Obama announced his decision and explained that it was motivated by advances in missile technology, Russia's political and security elite rejected this explanation. For them, Obama's decision was due to "Russia's uncompromising position on the issue", in the words of Mikhail Margelov, chairman of the State Duma's Foreign Affairs Committee. [56]

The downgrading of Russia as a foreign policy priority after 1991 by the US is, in itself, something which Russia's political and security elite have struggled to come to terms with. For them, Russia was and is a great power, and it should be recognised as such by the countries which it perceives to be its peers -- primarily the US, but possibly also China.[57] The extent to which Russia failed to grasp precisely how far it had fallen in the US' priorities is evident in Putin's visceral response to Obama's characterisation in 2014 of Russia as a "regional power".[58] One reason for this is that the end of the Cold War did not result in a similar downgrading of the US as a Russian foreign policy priority. As the Jeffrey Mankoff, a leading American analyst of Russian foreign policy, puts it:

> The continued centrality of the United States to Russian foreign policy thinking can make it difficult for Russians to understand that the United States no longer makes policy decisions solely on the basis of Moscow's reaction.[59]

This has, of course, changed since 2014 and is evident, for example, in the US's 2018 National Defense Strategy. [60]

3.2.2 The Cooperation Illusion

Proceeding from its belief that all countries are motivated by self-interest, Russia assesses that cooperation for the sake of cooperation is unnatural. This is amplified by the view that countries are only able to increase their own security through decreasing the security of others, and thus that 'win-win' situations are impossible. In his famous "Long Telegram" of 1946, the US diplomat George Kennan observed that throughout history

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[55] Luke Harding and Ian Traynor, 'Obama abandons missile defence shield in Europe', *The Guardian*, 17 September 2009, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/17/missile-defence-shield-barack-obama

[56] Moritz Gathmann, 'Euphoria over Obama's Decision To Shelve Missile Shield', *Der Spiegel*, 17 September 2009, available at: https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/sense-of-triumph-in-moscow-euphoria-over-obama-s-decision-to-shelve-missile-shield-a-649732.html

[57]Duncan Allan, 'Brexit Makes It Even More Difficult for the UK to Deal With Russia', *Chatham House*, 13 December 2017, available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/12/brexit-makes-it-even-more-difficult-uk-deal-russia

[58] Steve Holland and Jeff Mason, 'Obama, in dig at Putin, calls Russia 'regional power', *Reuters*, 25 March 2014, available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-weakness-idUSBREA2O19J20140325

[59] Jeffrey Mankoff, 'Generational Change and the Future of U.S.-Russian Relations', *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2010), pp. 1-17, pg. 3

[60] 'Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America', *Department of Defense*, available at: https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf

Russia's leaders "learned to seek security only in patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power, never in compacts and compromises with it."[61]

Russia's twin beliefs that countries are motivated by self-interest and that the West is inherently hostile towards it is one reason why the Kremlin sees offers of cooperation, which do not directly further the leadership's interests, as a trap, usually arranged by the West and part of an effort to weaken Russia. For example, the imposition of sanctions by the EU and US in 2014 was understood by Russia not as a tool to bring it to the negotiating table but instead as something quite different. As Lavrov argued, "the West is making clear it does not want to force Russia to change policy but wants to secure regime change."[62]

This is not to suggest that Russia is intrinsically against cooperation. On the contrary, Russia sees cooperation as an opportunity to further its self-interests in at least two ways.

Since the end of the Cold War, Moscow has frequently sought 'cooperation' with Euro-Atlantic countries and structures. The precondition for this has been, in the words of Lavrov, "a universal feeling of equal and equally guaranteed security"[63] -- or, to put it differently, the recognition of Russia not just as another 'country' but instead as an 'equal' partner of the US, EU, or NATO. Russia, thus, sees 'cooperation' as a way to gain outsized recognition of its authority, role, and status and to bolster its claims to be a 'great power'.

At the same time, Russia has seen cooperation as an opportunity to exploit its interlocutor. As James Nixey, Head of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, explains: "the Kremlin understands 'cooperation' simply as a means to extract compromise and concession... There are ample illustrations of how, when the West weakens or concedes, Moscow entrenches, reinforces tactical gains, and pushes further."[64] One reason why Russia habitually views the West's offers of cooperation as a trap, thus, is that Russia uses its own offers of cooperation as an opportunity for entrapment.

As a result, in the words of the distinguished British scholar of Russian foreign policy Keir Giles:

> Reaching international agreement through compromise and cooperation that goes beyond direct self-interest is not in the spirit of Russian public diplomacy, and apparently not in President Putin's nature.[65]

3.2.3 Continuous Warfare

Because Russia aspires to 'great power' status, it has a tendency to see the world through the prism of 'great power rivalry'. Combined with Russia's desire for a different international settlement, this prompts Russia to attempt to weaken countries that uphold – or, worse still from its perspective, bolster – the existing US-led

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[61] "George Kennan's 'Long Telegram'," 22 February 1946, available at: https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116178.pdf

[62] Polina Devitt, 'Lavrov accuses West of seeking 'regime change' in Russia', *Reuters*, 22 November 2014, available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-idUSKCN0J609G20141122

[63] Sergey Lavrov, "The Euro-Atlantic Region: Equal Security," Russia in Global Affairs, No. 2 (April/ June 2010), available at: https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-euro-atlantic-region-equal-security-for-all/

[64] James Nixey, 'Expert Comment: Address Russian Rule-breaking', *Chatham House*, 12 June 2019, available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/06/address-russian-rule-breaking

[65] Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West,* Pg. 23

international order. Over the last decade or two, Russia's international behaviour has been driven by an effort to weaken Euro-Atlantic institutions in general and US power in particular. At the same time, because Russia believes that there is only a finite amount of security in the world it follows that weakening these entities makes Russia stronger in relative terms.

Russia's disinformation campaign during and after the 2016 US presidential election touched nearly every top social media platform as it sought to incite -- or exacerbate -- divisions between American voters. A report commissioned by the Senate Committee on Intelligence highlighted the extent to which Russia posted content not only on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, but also Instagram, Reddit, Tumblr and Pinterest.[66] The report cited research which found that Russia's operations included over 10 million tweets, over 1,000 YouTube videos, roughly 116,000 Instagram posts and more than 60,000 unique Facebook posts. This report echoed the conclusions of special counsel Robert Mueller's team that the Internet Research Agency (IRA) sought to play on political and social divisions across the ideological spectrum, including identity politics, gun rights, and immigration.[67]

Engaging in destabilisation and subversion does not necessarily only fulfill the goal of weakening Russia's adversaries. It also has the potential to lead to the recognition of Russia as a globally-relevant actor, which it desperately craves. When this has occurred, Russia has used this recognition as leverage in seeking the US and major European countries to participate in Yalta-style discussions, regardless of whether the reason for the discussions is actually to hold Russia to account for its misbehaviour.

Russia's actions in Ukraine since 2014 are a case in point. In annexing Crimea and invading eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin presented a *fait accomplis* on the post-Cold War structure of European security, which it had long argued was illegitimate because it ignored Russia's security interests and failed to recognise Russia as a key player in European security, alongside major countries like France and Germany. When Russia agreed to participate in discussions to halt the war in the Donbass, it did so through the so-called Normandy Format, in which Russia was recognised both as a key player alongside France and Germany, and as an observer to the conflict rather than as a participant.

4. Conclusion

Russia's standoff with the West is due to a clash of two fundamentally different visions of the post-Cold War international system, and in particular an unequivocal rejection by the West of Russia's claim to be a 'great power' and thus to possess a special status within the system. Russia is, of course, far from unique in believing that it is a country with special rights. Yet, from the Western perspective, Russia's belief appears to lack any basis in reality when it is considered in the context of most commonly used metrics.

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[66] '(U)REPORT OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE UNITED STATES SENATE ON RUSSIAN ACTIVE MEASURE;S CAMPAIGNS AND INTERFERENCE IN THE 2016 U.S. ELECTION ' VOLUME 2: RUSSIA'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA WITH ADDITIONAL VIEWS', available at: https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf

[67] 'Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election Volume I of II Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, III', *Department of Justice*, March 2019, available at: https://www.justice.gov/archives/sco/file/1373816/download

Writing in 2020, Zach Cooper, co-director of the Alliance for Security Democracy, which is supported by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, summed up this perspective when he wrote:

> ... Moscow no longer qualifies as a "great power." Russia is the world's 9th most populous country — with fewer people than Bangladesh — and a declining population. Russia also has the world's 12th largest economy and a GDP per capita that ranks 74th globally. [68]

Cooper is correct by the metrics he uses, but these are not necessarily the same metrics used by the Russian leadership, including Putin himself, to determine their country's great power-ness. Besides, whether Russia is or is not a 'great power' based on an assessment of datasets is largely irrelevant; the belief is accepted as fact by Russia's leaders and drives the formation of policy accordingly.

The belief stems from Russia's strategic culture, which is a product of a number of components, including the country's geography, history, and political culture. These three things, amongst many others, have influenced Russia's leaders to act with remarkable consistency over centuries. This suggests that Russia's current differences with the West are not that *current* and are unlikely to be reconciled in the near term. It also suggests that Russia's assumptions about the international system and its role within are present even during periods when it and the West enjoy less confrontational relations, such as during the 1990s.

Because of this, Russia's posture is unlikely to change. This is in spite of sociological polls suggesting that the criterion used by the Russian people to measure 'great-ness' has shifted over recent years. Writing in 2020, the Russian political analysts Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov argued that up-to-date polling data,

> revealed that Russians wanted their government to shift its focus from foreign to domestic policy. As Russia had already become "great again" thanks to Putin's perceived foreign policy successes, respondents indicated that it was time to concentrate on the domestic economy and social issues. [69]

If Russia's posture is unlikely to change, then what has changed, particularly over the last decade, is Russia's ability to act on its worldview. Russia now pursues what two veteren US Russia-watchers call "foreign policy opportunism and calculated risk-taking".[70] This behaviour, in the words of the Integrated Review of Defence, Foreign, and Development Policy which was published in March 2021, currently constitutes "the most acute" threat to the security of the UK and the Euro-Atlantic area.[71]

There are a number of policy implications that follow from this:

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[68] Zach Cooper, 'Bad Idea: "Great Power Competition" Terminology', *Defense360*, 1 December 2020, available at: https://defense360.csis.org/bad-idea-great-power-competition-terminology/

[69] Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov, 'Russians' Growing Appetite for Change', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 2020, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2020_01_Kolesnikov_Volkov_Change.pdf

[70] Eugene Rumer and Andrew S. Weiss, 'Back to Basics on Russia Policy', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 9 March 2021, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/09/back-to-basics-on-russia-policy-pub-84016

[71] 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', Cabinet Office, 16 March 2021, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy

- Russia's leaders reject the post-Cold War international order. They believe that this order denies Moscow its rightful place in global affairs and is slanted in the West's favour. Proceeding from this belief, Russia pursues a revisionist approach to foreign policy.

- Russia's leaders accept as fact that their country is a 'great power'. This entitles Russia, they believe, to a 'buffer zone' along its borders (or 'sphere of privileged interests') and the right to have a say over global events (in essence, a 'veto').

- Russia's leaders assume that, because their country is a great power, they will be consulted on major global decisions. They also assume that Russia features prominently in the thinking of all other countries.

- Russia's leaders tend to only negotiate seriously either when they perceive their country can gain from the interaction or when their interlocutor has an advantage and is willing to act on it.

- Russia's leaders have a tendency to see the world through the prism of 'great power rivalry', this prompts them to attempt to weaken the US as well as Euro-Atlantic institutions and those countries that underpin them or aspire to be part of them.

Taken together, the above reveal a deep-seated incompatibility between how Russia views the world and how the Euro-Atlantic views the world. Addressing this requires a recognition that Euro-Atlantic values and interests are not reconcilable with those of Russia, and means that the Euro-Atlantic must both accept confrontation with Russia and be willing to invest, for the long term, in prevailing.

About the Author

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