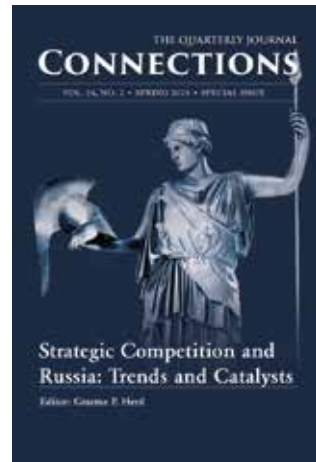


Know the Enemy: Understanding Russia's Global Political End-State

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The article was first published in the journal "Connections": the Quartely Journal, Issue 24 (2) (2025), Partnership for Peace Consortium. <https://connections-qj.org/previews-connections>



Abstract

This article argues that Russia's behavior toward NATO, Europe, and Ukraine is not reactive or episodic but reflects a coherent, long-term strategy aimed at restoring imperial power and reshaping the international order. It contends that Western policymakers often misinterpret Russia's actions, leading to delayed or insufficient responses. Drawing on geopolitical analysis, ideological frameworks, and official Russian doctrines, the article demonstrates that the Kremlin pursues a defined political end-state: reasserting dominance over the post-Soviet space, projecting influence across Europe, and promoting a multipolar system that constrains Western liberal dominance. Russia's war against Ukraine is examined as a central strategic instrument in this imperial restoration

project rather than as a standalone conflict. The analysis shows how military force, hybrid warfare, energy leverage, diplomacy, and ideological narratives are systematically employed to advance these objectives. Recognizing this strategic consistency is essential for effective Western deterrence and long-term security planning.

Keywords: *Russian foreign policy, imperial restoration, war against Ukraine, multipolar world order, Primakov Doctrine, “Russkiy Mir” (“Russian World”), hybrid warfare, European security, revisionist power.*

Introduction

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.

— Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Many Western politicians, security and defence experts, and intelligence services are vocal about the growing Russian threat to NATO and European countries. Yet, Russia's actions – such as in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria – are often mischaracterized as opportunistic or reactive. NATO countries have identified that “the Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area” [5]. The enemy has been named, but – referring to Sun Tzu's saying – do we know it?

Does this NATO consensusbased threat assessment truly and sufficiently reflect the Western political elite's actual understanding of the Kremlin's goals – especially considering the conflicting views, particularly from Washington, on the prospects for ending the war in Ukraine? An example, at the time of writing, might be the position of the President of the United States and its reflection in Senator Lindsey Graham's statements [48]. While the latter has advocated for sanctions on Russia and military aid to Ukraine, he has also

supported peace proposals that involve territorial concessions to Russia. Evaluating, in general, the U.S. president's initiative for peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, it appears that the White House perceives Russia's aggression as reactive or circumstantial, and therefore as a matter for negotiation rather than as part of a long-term strategic approach to the threat posed by Russia.

When viewed in a wider context, Western countries' insufficient and often delayed political, military, and economic support for Ukraine in its defense against Russian military aggression also illustrates a poor understanding of the Kremlin's ultimate political end-state. Understanding Russia's imperialist goals and its intended political end-state is essential because strategic clarity is the first condition for effective defense and deterrence.

This article is based on the thesis that Russia pursues a long-term political end-state rooted in restoring its imperial legacy, projecting influence over Europe, and restructuring the global system into a multipolar order. The strategy for implementing this ultimate end-state is consistent and backed by doctrine, policy, and strategic behavior.

After the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia experienced a dramatic shift in its global role – from a bipolar superpower rivalling the United States to a country in political and economic transition. The 1990s were marked by internal instability, economic hardship, and reduced influence on the global stage. During this period, Russia pursued closer ties with the West, including cooperation with NATO and the European Union.

However, beginning in the early 2000s under Vladimir Putin, Russia began reasserting itself as a great power. Encouraged by rising energy and mineral resource prices and by the consolidation of domestic control, the Kremlin adopted an aggressive foreign policy. Key developments included:

- Opposition to NATO and EU expansion, especially in former Soviet states;
- Wars and military interventions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria;

- The development of allied partnerships with countries such as China, Iran, North Korea, and others;
- Efforts to undermine the West through hybrid attacks, such as cyber operations, disinformation, political interference, as well as sabotage and assassinations;
- Expanding into Africa to gain political influence and access to minerals and natural resources.

Between 2000 and 2008, Russia began to position itself as a revisionist power, challenging the Western-led international order and advocating for a multipolar world, while simultaneously seeking to expand its power and influence over other countries, particularly in Europe and neighboring Eurasian states. Its war against Ukraine has solidified its antagonistic stance toward the West while deepening its reliance on non-Western alliances.

Russia's Political Vision

To understand the Kremlin's long-term objectives, it is first worth examining the range of methods and instruments Russia employs to advance its political ambitions. Based on research conducted by Graeme Herd, Russia pursues its strategic goals through a combination of geopolitical opportunism, flexible diplomacy, and asymmetrical tactics [24]. The Kremlin's strategy is pragmatic and, as Herd argues, often non-ideological, aiming to restore great-power status, secure influence over neighbouring states, and promote a multipolar world order that challenges Western dominance. This is achieved through hybrid warfare, the creation of buffer zones, manipulation of international norms, and partnerships with non-Western powers, all while exploiting regional vulnerabilities and projecting power beyond its economic weight.

The Kremlin has articulated and pursued clearly defined policy objectives, as evidenced by a series of official statements and speeches, most notably by Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, and by former President and current Deputy Head of the Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev. These include the restoration

of Russia's status as a global great power, the reassertion of influence over its neighboring countries and Europe, and the transformation of the international order into a multipolar system in which Western dominance is limited. This vision was articulated forcefully by Vladimir Putin when he rejected the post-Cold War order, declaring that "the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world," and condemning what he described as the concentration of power and decision-making in the hands of a single state [37]. These ambitions are expressed even more explicitly in Medvedev's assertion that "Ukraine is definitely Russia... [and that] historic parts of the country need to come home," [34] a statement that encapsulates the Kremlin's rejection of Ukraine's sovereignty and its broader revisionist goals. This desired future is not merely an aspiration, but a coherent set of ideas and policies developed over decades and based on both imperial nostalgia and contemporary geopolitical calculations.

A foundational framework for this policy direction was articulated by former Russian Foreign Minister (1996–1998) and Prime Minister (1998–1999) Yevgeny Primakov – a legacy often referred to as the Primakov Doctrine. Although there is no single official document titled the "Primakov Doctrine", the term is widely used to describe the core principles of Russian foreign policy developed during Primakov's tenure in the Russian government [17]. These principles were articulated through numerous speeches, writings, and interviews. The Primakov Doctrine laid the foundations for Russia's approach to foreign affairs, based on restoring its status as a great power and transforming the world order into a multipolar system that resists Western domination. According to Primakov, Russia should [38]:

- strive for a multipolar world governed by an agreement among major powers that can counterbalance the unilateral power of the United States;
- insist on its primacy in the post-Soviet space and lead integration in this region;
- oppose NATO enlargement;

- develop partnerships with China and India as a counter weight to U.S. influence.

The principles articulated by Yevgeny Primakov continue to shape Russia's contemporary foreign policy and are embedded in various legislative acts, strategic concepts, and doctrinal frameworks. Selected examples of these will be examined in the following analysis.

Another contemporary Russian foreign policy strategist and advisor to the Kremlin, and Director of the Foreign and Defence Policy Council of Russia, Sergey Karaganov, has extensively articulated his vision of Russia's role in the world and the ideological underpinnings influencing the Kremlin's strategic thinking. Karaganov envisions Russia as a "civilization of civilizations," asserting that the country is destined to play a central role in shaping a new world order [29]. He emphasizes that Russia is fighting not only for its sovereignty but also to liberate the world from Western political, cultural, and economic dominance [29].

It should be noted that Sergei Karaganov served as an advisor to the President in the Kremlin under both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. He is still considered close to President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov [28]. This Kremlin-friendly political scientist is particularly clear on both the ideology and the strategic vision of the Kremlin. In an interview with "*Le Grand Continent*" (in which he is presented as the architect of Putin's geopolitics), Karaganov describes the dynamics of the war with the West not as random, but as a force reflecting "deep civilizational values." He argues that the conflict with the West is not only a political and military clash, but also a civilizational and existential one: "La guerre est dans les gènes des Russes" ("The power of war is in the genes of the Russians") [26].

According to him, Russia must become the "hub of Eurasia," linking political and economic power from West to East, including through a partnership with China and by strengthening integration between the Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road Initiative [26].

In practice, one of the most significant manifestations of Russia's shift in foreign policy and the implementation of the principles associated with the Primakov Doctrine was Vladimir Putin's address at the Munich Security Conference on February 10, 2007. There, Putin delivered a landmark speech that is widely viewed as a turning point in Russia's post-Cold War relations with the West. In this address, he articulated a clear ideological and strategic vision that laid the foundation for Russia's increasingly confrontational approach toward NATO, the United States, and the liberal international order [37]. Over time, many of the themes expressed in the speech have been reflected in official Russian policies, helping to shape the doctrines and strategies that define the Kremlin's current foreign policy.

Russia's desired future envisions the restoration of its status as a global great power, the consolidation of influence over neighboring states, and the restructuring of the international order into a multipolar system that limits Western dominance. This strategic vision is rooted in longstanding geopolitical thinking, as reflected in the Primakov Doctrine, and in official rhetoric and actions – such as efforts to create spheres of influence, oppose NATO expansion, and deepen ties with non-Western powers.

Geopolitical and Ideological Foundations of Russia's Expansionist Strategy

To gain a comprehensive understanding of Russia's ultimate policy end-state and objectives, it is essential to examine such factors as geopolitics and history, upon which these end-states and objectives are formulated. Geopolitics and history often play a significant role in shaping the ideology of nations and states, as seen in the historical emergence of ideologies such as communism, fascism, and nazism. Geopolitical realities and historical experience provide insights into the factors that shape Russia's foreign policy and strategic behaviour. Russian strategic political culture and mindset have been influenced by historical legacies and long-term

geopolitical constraints.

These factors have significantly contributed to the emergence of the current Putin regime and continue to define the core tenets of Russia's contemporary foreign policy. As George Friedman observes, Russia faces a persistent geopolitical dilemma: vulnerability stemming from vast, exposed borders, limited access to global maritime trade routes, and chronic infrastructural underdevelopment [19]. In his analysis, Friedman argues that Russia's historical expansion – from the modest principality of Moscow to the world's largest land empire – was shaped primarily by geopolitical imperatives. From the Kremlin's perspective, persistent insecurity drove its rulers to establish buffer zones along Russia's vulnerable borders. These territories were not only absorbed into the expanding state but were also often subjected to processes of russification to consolidate control. Today, the Kremlin continues to view the reestablishment of a “defensible” sphere of influence as a strategic necessity. However, its expansionist ambitions remain consistently constrained by external resistance and internal structural weaknesses. According to Friedman, this enduring tension is rooted less in ideology than in geography, which continues to shape Russia's strategic behavior and its sense of national identity [19].

Yet one might ask: Does ideology really have no influence on the policies of the current Kremlin regime? After all, narratives of a “civilizational mission”, anti-Western policy, and neoimperial identity appear deeply embedded in both rhetoric and practice.

An examination of statements from Putin and his inner circle can help answer questions about the role ideology plays. A significant number of Vladimir Putin's speeches and official Kremlin statements contain ideological themes that echo, or reflect the influence of, Russian thinkers such as Ivan Ilyin and Alexander Dugin, as well as political technologists, including former KGB officer and current professor of politics Igor Panarin, and former Putin adviser and speechwriter Vladislav Surkov.

While Dugin presents a civilizational-geopolitical justification for Russia's global role [40], others, such as Surkov and Panarin,

influence policy more directly, especially in strategic and informational thinking. The common thread is the belief that [45]:

- Russia is a distinct country with a non-Western civilization, promoting the theory of Eurasianism;
- The liberal international order must be resisted (anti-Western narratives such as “moral decay” and unipolar dominance);
- Strategic sovereignty justifies assertive and aggressive actions.

Panarin promoted the idea of “Eurasian Rus” that can act as a global Russian development project – an integral national idea for the Russian and allied peoples of Eurasia. Russia should be the core of Eurasian integration and the guardian of its “traditional spiritual values” [35]

The current Russian political ideology has also been influenced by early twentieth-century Russian philosopher and nationalist thinker Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954), whose antiliberal vision and glorification of the Russian Empire and Orthodox values strongly echo ideological themes associated with fascism. He advocated for a spiritual, Orthodox-based Russian nationalism, believed in Russia’s messianic destiny and its role as a unique civilization, and argued against Western liberalism and socialism. “Italian fascism expressed, in its own Roman way, the things that Russia had for centuries been standing on,” he wrote in 1948 [44].

As Timothy Snyder has argued, Ivan Ilyin offered a metaphysical and moral foundation for political totalitarianism, articulating this through the practical elements of a fascist state [42]. Snyder further observes that Ilyin’s ideas have been revived and actively promoted by Vladimir Putin in contemporary Russia. “I believe in the spiritual forces of the Russian people. I believe in their spiritual uniqueness, in their spiritual gift, in the special way of their historical being. I believe in the spiritual mission of the Russian people,” Putin said, quoting Ivan Ilyin in a Federal Assembly speech in 2012 [44].

The policy of contemporary Russia is therefore reinforced by an ideological shell, often described as Russian fascism, or what is now commonly referred to as “ruscism” [43]. The ideology of fascism

is also reflected in the strengthening of the totalitarian regime in Russia during the war against Ukraine, and in the ideology fostered by the Kremlin's propaganda to strengthen Putin's power.

Analyzing the ideological foundations of Russia's expansionist strategy, it is necessary to take into account the concept of the "Russkiy Mir" ("Russian World"). One of its main creators and proponents is Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, who legitimizes and strengthens the Kremlin's efforts to re-establish and consolidate Russia's neo-imperial sphere of influence [18].

The concept of the "Russian World" is examined in Jeffrey Mankoff's *"Empires of Eurasia: How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security"* [33], in which the author analyzes the role of the "Russian World" in shaping Russia's neo-imperial ideology and informing its contemporary foreign policy. Mankoff explains that the "Russian World" (sometimes used alongside similar concepts such as "Compatriots" and "Holy Rus") is not merely a cultural or linguistic idea, but a civilizational narrative that seeks to define a broader spiritual, historical, and political unity encompassing all people who share the Russian language, Orthodox Christianity (especially under the Moscow Patriarchate), and a common historical memory of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union [33]. This ideological framework underpins Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine, Georgia, and other neighboring countries, challenging the post-Cold War international order. Through the media, religious institutions, and diaspora networks, the "Russian World" ideology also acts as a tool of soft power and cultural influence. Ultimately, Mankoff identifies this ideological concept as a key driver of regional instability and a fundamental challenge to contemporary international security norms [33].

In summary, Russia's imperial expansion is best explained by long-term geopolitical constraints and a deliberately constructed ideological system. According to George Friedman's arguments, geographical location and structural vulnerability remain the main factors influencing Russia's strategic behavior, forcing the state to seek buffer zones and external control as means of ensuring security.

These geopolitical necessities are more important than ideology and shape the main goals of Russia's foreign policy. However, ideology plays a decisive, though secondary, role in pursuing and achieving these goals. Ideology is not the primary motivation for expansion but acts primarily as a means: it justifies geopolitical actions, facilitates social mobilization, and contributes to regime stability. This model was evident during the Soviet period, when communism provided a uni-versal justification for imperial control, and it reappeared during Putin's rule as a state-promoted Russian chauvinistic and imperial worldview, often referred to as "ruscism."

The formulation of contemporary ideology has been shaped largely by Russian security agencies, particularly the KGB and its successor, the FSB, as well as by figures loyal to the regime, including security experts and academics, political technologists, and the Russian Orthodox Church. Its purpose is not primarily to guide policy based on genuine conviction, but to create ideological cohesion, justify expansionist policies, and facilitate internal mobilization in support of the regime.

It is difficult to assess unequivocally whether Russia's political leaders and elite truly believe in this ideology in a doctrinal sense. However, they actively use it as a tool of governance. In this sense, ideology functions not so much as a source of motivation but rather as the "glue" that holds the political system together. Geopolitics, together with historical heritage (including the Russian interpretation of history), largely determines Russia's strategic imperatives, while ideology provides the narrative framework that makes those imperatives politically sustainable. Without such an ideological construct, it would be difficult for the current Russian political system to maintain internal cohesion and long-term sustainability. This conclusion essentially coincides with and complements Marlène Laruelle's analysis. She argues that Russian nationalism functions as a complex, multi-layered ideological repertoire rooted in geography, history, and religion, and is primarily used as a constructed, instrumental narrative grounded in geopolitical goals rather than as a uniformly internalized belief system [32].

The War against Ukraine as a Strategic Instrument of the Russian Imperial Restoration

The war against Ukraine, initiated through hybrid methods in 2014 and escalated into a full-scale military invasion in 2022, represents a pivotal phase in Russia's broader strategy to re-establish its imperial influence. This war should not be viewed as an ultimate goal in itself, but rather as a strategic means toward a long-term objective: the restoration of Russia's status as a dominant imperial power, particularly within Eurasia and Europe. As Zbigniew Brzezinski aptly pointed out in 1994, "It cannot be stressed enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire" [14].

The justifications for the war against Ukraine given by the Russian dictator Putin provide the clearest insight into the Kremlin's strategic objectives and the ideological underpinnings discussed in the previous section. Three key moments illustrate this trajectory. First, Putin's July 2021 essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," argued that Ukraine is "not a genuine nation" and that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" [36]. It also claimed that modern Ukraine exists primarily due to "historical errors and Western interference," which must be corrected. This essay was widely interpreted as laying the ideological ground-work for renewed imperial expansion. Second, Putin's speech on February 21, 2022 – prior to the recognition of the "Donetsk and Luhansk Republics" [8] denied Ukrainian statehood and sovereignty, framed Ukraine as a "Western tool" aimed at undermining Russia, and set the rhetorical and political foundation for the subsequent military invasion. Third, the declaration of the so-called "special military operation" on February 24, 2022, framed the "militarization and denazification" of Ukraine and portrayed the invasion as a defensive necessity, although in practice it aimed to return Ukraine to Russia's sphere of influence and dismantle Ukrainian statehood.

In March 2025, as Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine

entered its fourth year, U.S. President Donald Trump launched a diplomatic initiative to start negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, aimed at achieving a peace agreement or at least a durable ceasefire. Although the Kremlin did not formally reject the initiative, Putin has delayed the initiation of substantive talks. This hesitancy appears to serve broader strategic objectives, including efforts to undermine transatlantic cohesion. At the same time, Moscow continues to uphold the set of ultimatum-style demands first issued in late 2021, reinforcing its persistent ambition to subjugate Ukraine and restore Russian regional hegemony [1]. The Kremlin's broader strategic posture suggests that negotiations are unlikely to yield sustainable peace unless they accommodate Russia's geopolitical ambitions. Given these ambitions, an end to the war outside the Putin regime's terms would amount to a retreat from its ultimate goal of expanding Russia's imperial power. With the Kremlin failing to achieve its political objectives in the war, the country's economy in decline, hundreds of thousands of young men lost on the front lines, and continued deterioration driven by emigration, sanctions, and isolation, tensions could emerge among various power centers, potentially leading to the collapse of the current regime [13]. Some sources emerging from heavily censored Russia indicate that, in behind-the-scenes conversations, the idea is being voiced that this war must be stopped before it is too late, in order to avoid catastrophic consequences for the Russian state [39].

However, Putin has repeatedly stated that any peace agreement with Ukraine must address what he calls the "root causes of the crisis." These include Ukraine's neutrality and renunciation of NATO membership, the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from Russian-claimed territories, official recognition of Russia's sovereignty over annexed regions, and the protection of Russian-speaking populations [30]. These demands reflect the Kremlin's broader goal of reasserting imperial influence over Ukraine and reshaping the regional order to Russia's advantage.

The Kremlin's desire to destroy Ukraine's sovereignty rests on imperial foundations – both ideological and geopolitical – which,

from the Kremlin's point of view, help to legitimize and reinforce its strategic objectives. The Kremlin's interpretation of history is also used to justify Russia's aggression against Ukraine. It is worth recalling Putin's 2009 remark, in which he described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" [2]. This statement reflects a broader narrative – that the post-Soviet order is viewed as a historical anomaly that must be undone. This vision is rooted in a conception of Russia's "historical mission" to reclaim its "rightful place as a great power" and to reassert influence over the territories of the former Soviet Union and the Tsarist Empire [2].

The Russian war in Ukraine is not only a military aggression against a sovereign state, but also a strategic tool in Russia's long-term imperial reconstruction project. It combines historical revisionism and geopolitical ambition to reshape the post-Cold War European order. Understanding the war through this imperial prism highlights the threat the Russian regime poses not only to Ukraine but also to wider European stability and the international order as a whole.

Strategic Doctrines and Official Sources: Stated Objectives

Having analyzed the strategic vision and the ideological and geopolitical factors formulated by the Russian regime, it is necessary to examine the main official documents defining the objectives of Russian foreign policy and the means to achieve them. These documents provide insight into Moscow's long-term ambitions and the means it uses to pursue them.

2023 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation

This document articulates a revisionist vision of the international order that reinforces the Kremlin's revanchist aspirations [10]. It frames Russia as a "distinctive state-civilization" with a historical mission against "Western hegemony." The document formalizes the

notion of a civilizational divide, positioning Russia as the “defender of traditional values” and a sovereign pole in a post-Western global system. It asserts Moscow’s right to lead integration efforts in the post-Soviet space and expands the concept of the “Russian World”, using historical and cultural ties to justify political influence. Marking a shift from reactive diplomacy to proactive ideological confrontation, the document underscores Russia’s intent to reshape the geopolitical architecture of Eurasia in line with its imperial legacy.

2021 National Security Strategy

This strategy represents a significant hardening of the Kremlin’s strategic worldview [4]. It emphasizes sovereignty, “spiritual and moral values,” and Russia’s “civilizational identity” as key pillars of national security. The West is portrayed as the principal source of cultural and political threat, reinforcing the image of Russia as a besieged fortress. The strategy prioritizes internal cohesion and the protection of “traditional Russian values” as strategic imperatives, thus elevating ideology and cultural security as tools of statecraft. The emphasis on defending the “Russian World” and ensuring influence over neighboring post-Soviet states signals an intent to reclaim regional dominance. The overarching narrative frames aggressive foreign policy as a form of defensive preservation, embedding expansionist goals within a doctrine of national survival.

2014 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation

This doctrine provides the operational framework to support Moscow’s geopolitical ambitions [11]. Although officially defensive in tone, it expands the concept of modern warfare to include hybrid tactics such as information warfare, cyber operations, psychological manipulation, and the use of proxy forces. NATO expansion and Western influence in the post-Soviet space are identified as primary

threats, thereby legitimizing preemptive and asymmetric measures. The doctrine also affirms Russia's right to use force abroad to protect its citizens and compatriots – an argument later used to justify interventions in Ukraine and Georgia. By blurring the boundaries between war and peace, and between domestic and external threats, the doctrine enables opportunistic military engagement aimed at restoring Moscow's influence in its “near abroad.”

The So-Called Medvedev Doctrine

Announced by President Dmitry Medvedev on August 31, 2008, in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian War, this doctrine outlines five core principles of Russian foreign policy [20]. Chief among them is the prioritization of protecting Russian citizens abroad and asserting “privileged interests” in certain regions. Although framed alongside commitments to international law and multipolarity, these statements are widely regarded as rhetorical justifications for assertive and re-visionist policies.

A new revision of the National Security Strategy is expected by the end of 2025, led by Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu [7]. Shoigu has emphasized the need to respond to what he termed the “unusually high dynamics” of global developments and increasing tensions with the West. The proposed update will likely reflect Russia's intention to adopt an even more assertive posture, adapting its strategic framework to evolving threats while advancing its long-term geopolitical objectives.

Collectively, these strategic documents reveal Moscow's consistent and intensifying efforts to reshape the post-World War II security architecture and strengthen its role in the international system. The clash of civilizations, so-called national sovereignty, and ideological confrontation identified in Russian strategic documents reflect a systematic reshaping of Russian policy aimed at consolidating imperial influence, challenging Western dominance, and strengthening Russia's power in Europe.

The Kremlin's Instruments of Influence

In pursuit of its revanchist objectives and the restoration of Russia as a dominant global and regional power, the Kremlin employs a multifaceted toolkit that blends traditional and non-traditional means of influence. These instruments are not merely tactical but are an integral part of Russia's long-term strategic vision, which aims to reshape the international order in line with Moscow's interests and ideology, as outlined above.

Military Power: Hard-Power Projection and Nuclear Power

The Russian military remains a cornerstone of the state's influence architecture. Its role encompasses not only defence, but also coercion, intimidation, and the sending of geopolitical signals. The invasions of Georgia in 2008, Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 exemplify how military force is used to reshape political realities, intimidate neighboring states, and expand Russia's influence within its so-called sphere of privileged interests. Central to this posture is Russia's nuclear doctrine, which allows for the use of nuclear weapons in response to conventional threats [3]. The strategic ambiguity surrounding Moscow's nuclear thresholds functions as a tool of coercive signalling, aimed at instilling uncertainty in Western decision-making and thereby expanding Russia's freedom of action [12].

Hybrid Warfare: From Disinformation Activities to Sabotage

Russia's approach to modern conflict integrates non-military tools within its strategic framework. Hybrid warfare tactics – ranging from cyberattacks and orchestrated disinformation campaigns to sabotage – are designed to destabilize societies, manipulate public opinion, and undermine democratic institutions [23]. By exploiting societal divisions and electoral processes in

Western states, the Kremlin aims to erode trust in governance and weaken transatlantic unity [47]. These operations are often conducted through a network of state-controlled media, intelligence services, and proxy actors, including criminal groups.

The application of hybrid (non-conventional) methods and means of warfare is given a near-prioritized role in the implementation of the Kremlin's strategic objectives. As early as 2013, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, identified "new forms and methods of conducting combat operations," presenting an integrated approach that combined military force with non-conventional (hybrid) means to achieve political goals [21]. This concept became known in the West as the "Gerasimov Doctrine of Hybrid Warfare." Russia put this doctrine into practice during the 2014 occupation of Ukraine's Crimea and in the subsequent continuation of its aggression in the Donbas region and against Ukraine as a whole.

It is also worth highlighting a 2024 publication issued by a Moscow-based publishing house, titled "*Ot Sderzhivaniya k Ustrasheniyu*" ("*From Deterrence to Intimidation*"), based on a report prepared for the Kremlin leadership [46]. The report proposes that, alongside conventional military forces (used for deterrence, from the Russian perspective) and nuclear capabilities (used for intimidation), the Russian political leadership should also adopt a strategy of geopolitical deterrence. The essence of this approach lies in exerting influence over Western societies, which is commonly referred to in the West as hybrid warfare. It emphasizes the simultaneous application of all three deterrence methods (including nuclear intimidation) and the active pursuit of geopolitical deterrence (i.e., the use of unconventional hybrid warfare measures) with the aim of creating a "security zone" around Russia [46]. According to the authors, Russia lost its influence in the "near abroad" in the 1990s because it failed to deploy sufficient geopolitical deterrence [46].

Energy Leverage: A Strategic Economic Tool

Energy resources, particularly natural gas and oil, have long been instrumental to Russia's foreign policy. Through state-owned firms such as Gazprom, the Kremlin cultivated European dependence on Russian gas, using energy contracts and pricing as tools of coercion and influence [22]. Although the European Union has diversified its energy sources following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow continues to leverage energy ties with other regions, especially China and India, as part of its global strategy [25]. At the same time, Russia maintains selective energy relations with certain EU member states such as Hungary and Slovakia providing favorable terms in exchange for more neutral or Kremlin-aligned positions within the European Union [9]. These arrangements function as a geopolitical wedge, undermining transatlantic unity and enabling Moscow to exert political pressure from within the European bloc.

Diplomatic Manoeuvring: Multilateralism as a Means of Division

Russia's diplomatic strategy seeks to counterbalance Western influence by cultivating alternative international partnerships. Deepening ties with China, strengthening BRICS, and increasing its presence in Africa and Latin America serve to promote a multipolar world order [10]. These diplomatic efforts reflect Moscow's ideological goal of delegitimizing Western norms and bolstering an "anti-hegemonic coalition."

In the proposals submitted by Trenin and his team to the Kremlin, emphasis was placed on the need for Russia to develop close partnership ties with China and coordinate actions in various regions, particularly in the Middle East and Central and East Asia [46]. Particular emphasis was placed on cooperation with China in the areas of military-strategic, military-technical, logistical, and cyber security.

In practical terms, Russia is using diplomacy not only to

challenge Western countries but also to unite a group of countries that oppose Western dominance. It does so by strengthening ties with authoritarian regimes, promoting alternative governance models, and engaging in multilateral forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Russia has forged closer partnerships with China and Iran, supported African governments with military aid and energy deals, and expanded its influence in Latin America through anti-Western narratives. These actions are intended to undermine the United States and other Western countries globally, presenting Russia as a key architect of a new, multi-polar international order [31].

Cultural and Historical Narratives: History as a Tool of Empire

As previously outlined in this article, the “*Ruskiy Mir*” (“Russian World”) ideology frames Russia as the “guardian of a broader civilizational realm” encompassing Russian speakers and Orthodox Christians across the post-Soviet space. This concept, promoted by the Russian state in close cooperation with the Moscow Orthodox Church, primarily functions as an instrumental narrative: it provides ideological legitimacy for geopolitical interventions abroad and supports internal mobilization, rather than constituting a deeply internalized belief system of the political elite.

Closely linked to this ideology is the politicization and rewriting of history, which the Kremlin uses to legitimize its territorial ambitions and deny the historical subjectivity of its neighbors, in particular Ukraine. A key element of this narrative is the revival of imperial titles such as “*Malorossia*” (“Little Russia”, as contrasted with Great Russia) and “*Novorossiya*” (“New Russia”), which portray Ukraine not as a sovereign nation but as a fragment of the greater Russian whole [36]. These reinterpretations of history reinforce the Kremlin’s claim that modern Ukraine is an artificial construct and that its lands historically “belong” to Russia.

The “Third Rome” doctrine adds a spiritual dimension to these territorial claims. Rooted in the post-Byzantine religious

tradition, the idea positions Moscow as “the rightful heir to Rome and Constantinople” – thus, the last citadel of true Orthodoxy and Christian civilization [16]. This vision is promoted by Church leaders such as Patriarch Kirill, and Russia’s military actions in Ukraine are framed as part of a larger metaphysical struggle between Western secularism and Russia’s “spiritual destiny.”

All of the narratives presented above are actively disseminated through state-controlled media, school textbooks, cultural institutions, and international information campaigns, reinforcing a revanchist worldview and preparing Russian society for long-term confrontation with the West and its neighbors [15].

Concluding Reflections

Russia’s strategic behaviour is not episodic or reactive, but part of a long-term, ideologically reinforced geopolitical vision aimed at restoring its imperial power and reshaping the international order.

Based on this assessment, the following conclusion can be drawn: all of the Kremlin’s available instruments are strategically aligned to achieve Russia’s ultimate political end state – *the reestablishment of dominance over the territories of the former Soviet Union and the Tsarist Empire*. To achieve this goal, the Kremlin seeks to consolidate a renewed imperial identity and to restructure the international order into a multipolar system that counters the influence of Western liberal democracies. This pursuit of dominance does not necessarily involve direct physical control of territories but rather aims to establish political control (Kremlin influence) in countries bordering Russia, primarily in Europe.

This ultimate political vision and end state are implemented through a coherent set of doctrines, policies, and hybrid instruments – military, ideological, and informational. The Russian war against Ukraine is symbolic of this broader project: it is not just a conflict over territory, but also a major step by Russia toward destroying the European security architecture that emerged after the Cold War and restoring its dominance in the former Soviet

Union and beyond. The Kremlin will aim to establish a certain “security zone” in the countries bordering Russia, from which it will strive to secure at least loyalty to the Moscow regime [46], if not absolute control. It should be emphasized that, both historically and today, under the pretext of perceived insecurity, whether justified as the need to ensure national security or to safeguard Moscow’s authority, territorial expansion has been pursued through conquest and subsequent annexation, often accompanied by the forced russification of populations in the occupied territories. Approximately 200 ethnic groups and nationalities live within the territory of the current Russian Federation [6]. Historically, there is probably not a single ethnic region that has voluntarily joined Moscow or the Russian state. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially since Vladimir Putin’s rise to power, Russia has systematically pursued the restoration and expansion of its dominance, initially within the former Soviet republics such as Belarus, Moldova, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and most notably Ukraine. Beyond this post-Soviet space, Moscow has also extended its influence into countries and regions such as the Middle East (Syria), the Balkans (Serbia), the Sahel and Central Africa (Mali, CAR, Sudan), and Latin America (Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua). Through a range of instruments, including economic leverage, financial influence, energy dependency, and other non-military tools, the Kremlin seeks to expand its geopolitical reach and sway over numerous other countries.

The ideological and strategic consistency of Russia’s actions, from opposing NATO expansion to forging closer partnerships with China, North Korea, and Iran, reflects a deliberate intent to undermine Western unity and the influence of liberal democracy, and to replace the rules-based international order with one grounded in power politics, regional spheres of influence, and authoritarian regime security, where liberal norms are no longer universal but subject to great-power negotiation.

Russia uses its imperial historical narrative and multipolar rhetoric not only to justify external aggression but also to maintain

internal regime cohesion.

However, many Western nations continue to treat Russia's behaviour as re-active or negotiable, failing to recognize its ambitions as structural and ideological. This misreading can result in delayed or insufficient policy responses. Understanding that Russia's actions are part of a long-term imperial and multipolar vision allows us to reassess the challenge: it is no longer a series of separate crises, but a systemic threat. The West must abandon the illusion of normalization and prepare for long-term strategic competition, recognizing that Russia's ultimate political goal is fundamentally incompatible with the liberal democratic order.

The West needs strategic clarity and must respond not only with short-term actions but also with a clear long-term strategy – by strengthening alliances, helping vulnerable countries, building resilience, and challenging Russia's ideological messaging.

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