



## THE MILITARIZATION OF RUSSIAN POLICY

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Bosch Public Policy Fellow

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Cover photo: President Vladimir Putin at the opening ceremony of the international military-technical forum ARMY-2015 in a military park in June 2015.

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# THE MILITARIZATION OF RUSSIAN POLICY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Over the past ten years, Russia has displayed an impressive degree of political-military integration in pursuit of its state objectives. Far from being improvised or opportunistic, the expansion of Russia's military power is a coherent and purpose-driven activity designed to challenge Western dominance of an international order that Russia's state leadership perceives as harmful to its interests and intrinsically vulnerable. Despite Russia's annexation of Crimea and its intervention in eastern Ukraine, its aim is to alter political rather than physical borders in Europe. Nevertheless, Russia's political and military establishments believe that a potential for war is inherent in the conflict of interests and "systems" that now exists. It will continue to use military and non-military instruments to force material changes upon the West as long as it believes that it has the capacity to do so.

If the West is to meet this challenge, it must accept the existential nature of it. Deeper engagement will not persuade Russia to perceive the West as it wishes to be perceived. "Grand bargains" in current conditions will not make Europe safer. In the absence of a serious military strategy, Russia's economic difficulties will not solve our problems for us. Deterrence only becomes a strategy if it addresses the threat to be deterred. Russia's wartime aims will be to shatter the cohesion of NATO, destroy its forces in the immediate theater of operations, and force it to concede defeat at the earliest possible moment. The aim of NATO's deterrence must be to convince Moscow that even a short war will have harrowing costs and lead to the long war that Russia fears and is bound to lose. To do this, the priority for Western military establishments should not be to outmatch the Russians where they are naturally strong, but to

invest in the antidotes to these strengths. This is not beyond us. Time does not naturally favor Russia. If it is used with resolve and wisdom, Russia will be obliged to conclude, as it did under Gorbachev, that the use of force to resolve political problems is no longer feasible.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

In early 2014, Russia not only launched a military assault upon Ukraine, it embarked upon a new, active phase of a strategic counter-offensive designed to overturn the legal and political regime that defined the post-Cold War security order. That security order rested on Western orthodoxy and Western illusion in equal measure. Not least of these illusions was the belief that military force had ceased to be an instrument of policy in Europe. For the better part of 20 years, Russia had manipulated and stretched the rules of the Helsinki Final Act-based system that it also accused others of transgressing. The tools by which it expressed its opposition were largely non-military, its attack upon Georgia being the most dramatic exception. As the Obama “reset” gathered pace, that exception came to be perceived as an isolated occurrence prompted by exceptional local circumstances, rather than the prelude to a more militarized and ambitious policy.

When Russia annexed Crimea and mobilized its military forces against eastern Ukraine, the illusion that Russia would not resolve disputes by military means collapsed.<sup>1</sup> Although Moscow vehemently disputes charges of aggressive intent, it does not conceal its ambition to transform a European and global system that its president calls “weakened, fragmented, and deformed.”<sup>2</sup> Russia is now an avowedly revisionist power.

Accompanying this revisionism is a revival of Russian military power unprecedented since the time of Brezhnev.

Despite widespread acknowledgement inside NATO of Russia’s ambitions and militarization, misunderstandings about the strategic realities confronting the West and the dynamics of Russia’s policy persist. First, there is a widespread tendency to exaggerate what is new in Russian military thinking (as exemplified by current preoccupation with “hybrid war,” a term that migrated into the Russian lexicon from Western usage). Second, there is a failure to understand the sense of vulnerability that lies behind even the most offensive and menacing actions that Russia undertakes. Third, at a more systemic level, most in the West mistakenly believe that the Cold War was both worse and more dangerous than the unsettling challenges we face today.

*The priority for Western military establishments should not be to outmatch the Russians where they are naturally strong, but to invest in the antidotes to these strengths.*

<sup>1</sup> At its Newport summit in September 2014, NATO declared that “Russia’s aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace.” [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm)

<sup>2</sup> President Putin, Speech to 9th Session of the Valdai Club, October 24, 2014 and Foreign Minister Lavrov’s March 2015 annual statement, where he emphasized the dangerous contradiction between an increasingly “polycentric” world and “persistent attempts by the “historical” West to preserve global leadership at all costs.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>.

## 2 NEW DANGERS

*The West has every possibility of defending its interests despite the challenges that Russia poses. But this requires nerve, a long-term approach, and a willingness to understand Russia in its own terms.*

The Cold War was indeed worse: a global, militarized, and intensely ideological confrontation between two strictly demarcated systems, neither of them dependent upon the other. But the current matrix of aims, deployments, and capabilities is arguably more dangerous. There are at least five reasons for saying so.

The USSR's signing of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act signified its broad acceptance of the European status quo, at least as it interpreted it. Today, the Russian Federation is an openly dissatisfied power committed to replacing Helsinki principles with a new Yalta system, based on spheres of influence and the limited sovereignty of smaller states. In February 2015, one of Vladimir Putin's closest associates, State Duma Chairman Sergey Naryshkin, warned that the West should either "relearn the lessons of Yalta or risk war."<sup>3</sup>

From the time of Brezhnev onward, the Cold War system was a system of rules and disciplines, as much as threat and confrontation. The USSR had an existential respect for nuclear weapons and did not lightly threaten their use. Alongside the United States and NATO, it put enormous effort into constructing an increasingly dense arms control regime, now eroding; some of it violated (e.g. the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty), some of it repudiated (the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe).

A third reason is heightened uncertainty. Cold War protagonists had a reasonably sound understanding of their adversary's capabilities

and their own. Today Russian and Western assessments of their respective capabilities (not to say intentions) are deeply at odds and fraught with uncertainty. Even in the past, evaluating the "correlation of forces" — including the opponent's social, economic, political, and military dimensions — was not a child's exercise. Today, intangible factors — will, force of belief, social cohesion, pain thresholds, risk averseness, "strategic patience" — are at least as important than they were, but no easier to calculate.

"Non-linear," "network," and "new generation" (i.e. "hybrid") war, as pursued by Russia, is designed to blur the thresholds between internal and interstate conflict and between peace and war. As demonstrated in Ukraine, it is possible today to achieve strategic objectives before the adversary realizes that war has begun. This Russian preoccupation with the "initial period of war" is not new. But for much of the Cold War it was obscured by the apparent stability imposed by the "balance of terror."

A fifth danger is proximity. The Cold War line of demarcation was not only far from the Russian border, but the Soviet border. Today it is on the Russian border or in close proximity to it. This, combined with the deliberately ambiguous character of Russian threats presents not only a risk of escalation, but a risk of inadvertent escalation and loss of control.

What is more, many remain unaware of the distinctive premises that govern the thinking of Russia's military establishment. As Stephen Covington has noted, the "strategic organizational culture" of the General Staff has withstood political upheaval and economic

<sup>3</sup> "Dialogue rather than War: Sergey Naryshkin calls upon Western leaders to study the 'lessons of Yalta.'" [*Dialog a ne vojna: Sergey Naryshkin prizval liderov Zapada učit' "uroki Yalti"*] *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, February 4, 2015.

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collapse.<sup>4</sup> After 25 years of incongruity and tension, Vladimir Putin has brought the military (and security service) perspective into close alignment with the political objectives of the state. There is now an uncommon degree of political-military integration in pursuit of Russia's state objectives, its commitment to state and national mobilization, and its approach to peace, crisis, and war. Many critical matters such as information policy, widely perceived in the West to fall outside the domain of war, are now rigorously incorporated into Russian military science. Concepts of geopolitical security long associated with Russian military thinking now underpin state policy. By no means should it be assumed that war is the aim of the state or its military leadership. But both establishments seek to preserve the capacity to advance state objectives in conditions of *protivoborstvo* — confrontation — and believe that a potential for war is inherent in the conflict of interests and “systems” that is now in play.

The West has every possibility of defending its interests despite the challenges that Russia poses. But this requires nerve, a long-term approach, and a willingness to understand Russia in its own terms.

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen R Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare*, October 2016, Belfer Center, Harvard, p. 39.

# 3 THE CULTURE OF SECURITY AND DEFENSE

*The Russians treat regions and regional problems as interlinked and believe that confrontation in one region in Russia's vicinity can swiftly expand to others.*

## Political-Military Aspects

Russians are conscious of their country's strategic uniqueness, and they have reason to be. That uniqueness is why Russia's security "needs" often seem to be out of kilter with other European powers. A malign amalgam of factors has put Russia at odds with mainstream European perspectives on security. First, Russia has tended to resolve its geopolitical indeterminacy — the multinational demographic of the state and absence of natural frontiers — by creating client states and widening defense perimeters. Moscow also cultivates civilizational distinctiveness (as it cultivated ideological distinctiveness in the past), and it relies for regime stability on a political and economic structure that lags behind that of advanced European rivals. For all of these reasons borders have been a source of power as well as vulnerability for Russia, and the delineation between internal and external affairs often has been problematic.

Hence, in contrast to those in Western military establishments who define threat in terms of capability and intention, Russia's political-military leadership emphasises proximity. Security is connected to the control of space (irrespective of the views of those who inhabit it), spheres of influence, and buffer zones other powers recognize. (In fact Aleksandr Mikhailovich Gorchakov, Foreign Minister of the Russian Empire from 1856-82, may have coined the term "spheres of influence.") The emergence of intercontinental missiles and "global strike weapons" has only slightly diminished this focus, emphatically resurrected in post-Soviet Russia's draft military doctrine (1992) and in subsequent revisions. The Russians treat regions and regional problems as interlinked and believe that confrontation in

one region in Russia's vicinity can swiftly expand to others. The fact that borders of the former USSR continue to define vicinity enlarges the threat perceived. (During the Kosovo conflict, it was customary to refer to Yugoslavia as a country "in the vicinity of Russia's borders," despite the fact that the nearest Russian city, Novorossiysk, was 1,000 km away).

The importance now assigned to the "civilizational factor" has given an additional animus to Russia's understanding of *geopolitika*, which encompasses not only the spatial but ethno-national, confessional (and latterly, values-based) dimensions of geopolitical rivalry. Historical lines of demarcation (or Russia's interpretation of these) determine political legitimacy in Europe. Russia divides Europe into *Russkiy Mir* (the "Russian world," i.e. those countries and nations that Russia has historically influenced), the "historical West" (i.e. loosely speaking, the territories west of the Oder-Neisse line, along with Scandinavia) and a "grey zone" between them. The first zone transcends the Russian border and even, in Putin's words, the Russian "ethnos."<sup>5</sup> Putin's characterization is telling:

*The choice of the Russian people has been confirmed again and again, not by plebiscites or referendums, but by blood ... [as opposed to] the notorious principle of national self-determination.<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Putin, Speech at Congress of Compatriots [Vystuplenie na otkrytiy Kongressa sootchestvennikov], October 11, 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21359>.

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Russia: The National Question" [Rossiya: natsional'nyy vopros], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 23, 2012. At the Valdai Club in 2008, Dmitry Medvedev used similar terms to demarcate the "near abroad," "shared common history," and "the affinity of our souls."



In his appeal to the Federal Assembly to “incorporate” (*prisoedinit*) Crimea into the Russian Federation, Putin enjoined others to accept this way of thinking:

*Our nation ... unequivocally supported the sincere, unstoppable desire of the Germans for national unity ... I expect that the citizens of Germany will also support the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, to restore unity.*<sup>7</sup>

On the one hand, NATO is faulted for perpetuating a “civilizational schism in Europe.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the NATO/non-NATO demarcation line is deemed an artificial divide. The emergence of a “political West” beyond the frontiers of the “historical West” is a reality that Russia has so far lived with but does not consider fully legitimate.

### Operational Aspects

*State Mobilization.* Not only did the USSR possess a mobilization system. It was a mobilization system. Mobilization — the “complex of state measures for activating the resources, strength, and capabilities for the achievement of military-political aims” — has once again become a central priority of the state.<sup>9</sup> This is an overtly centralized and hierarchical activity. It reflects the long-standing Russian deficit of (and distrust in) “voluntarism.” The civic responsiveness that forms the lynchpin of many effective mobilization systems elsewhere

(Israel; Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland in the Cold War; and to varying degrees, the Baltic states today) is in Russia both weak and discouraged.

Yet, in noteworthy respects contemporary Russian state mobilization differs from the Soviet model. As conceived and pursued, war for the USSR was an exhaustive activity undertaken by massive armies on strategic (continental and inter-continental) scales and with all available administrative, economic, and military resources (which in the Cold War included nuclear weapons). Russia’s contemporary military leadership believes that the current technological and “psychological-informational” environment affords a possibility of ensuring, in the words of Chief of the General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov, “the destruction of military forces and key state assets in several hours” *without* the employment of massive armies or nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup> Deterring and repelling such threats must be a holistic, all-of-government activity consolidating the military, financial, industrial, societal, and informational organizations of the state, which must facilitate rapid transition from peacetime or crisis to war. Today, not even the Central Bank of Russia is spared “snap inspections” for wartime readiness.

*Multi-variate Warfare* Russian military culture traditionally has been predisposed to “combined-arms” combat and is deeply distrustful of the cult of “absolute weapons.” It is only in combination that weapons systems and arms of service prevail, each reinforcing

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<sup>7</sup> Address by President of the Russian Federation, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

<sup>8</sup> Major General Vladimir Dvorkin, cited in Lilia Shevtsova, *Lonely Power [Odinokhaya Derzhava]*, Moscow Carnegie Centre, 2010, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> As cited in Andrew Monaghan, “Russian State Mobilization: Moving the Country onto a War Footing,” Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Program Research Paper, May 2016, p 9.

<sup>10</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, “Considerations on the Experience of Syria” [*Po opytu Sirii*], in *Military-Industrial Courier [Voenno-promyshlenniy Kur'er]*, March 9, 2016, <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/29579>

When conventional force must be used, mobility, shock, striking power, and speed matter as much they did in the past. The mix of tools chosen in each case is designed to compel the opponent to wage war by Russia's rules.

the strengths and offsetting the weaknesses of the other. Today, combined-arms has been expanded to what Covington calls an "all domain" concept, encompassing ground, air and space components, psychological-informational resources, special purpose forces, and notionally non-state entities. This concept, even more than its predecessor, is biased toward achieving decisive results in the initial period of war.

Yet that is only part of the change that has taken place. War between NATO and the Warsaw Pact was approached in highly standardized terms with only templated variations. Today, non-standardized threats and the need for flexibility lie at the heart of Russian military thinking. Hybrid war (including war by stealth) only acquires synergy and lasting effect when the attacker possesses potent combat forces and escalation dominance. When conventional force must be used, mobility, shock, striking power, and speed matter as much they did in the past. The mix of tools chosen in each case is designed to compel the opponent to wage war by Russia's rules. Thus, when Russian-backed Donbas militias were on the point of collapse in summer 2014, Russia committed its adjacent battle groups to the conflict and transformed its character. The same exercise was repeated in January 2015. These offensives not only preserved the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk republics, they advanced wider political objectives (Minsk-I and Minsk-II). As Gerasimov concludes:

*It is the combination of traditional and hybrid methods that is now the characteristic feature of global armed conflict. If the latter can be used*

*without the open employment of military forces, classical military activity without hybrid war no longer exists.*<sup>11</sup>

*Division and Deception.* To the Bolsheviks and their successors, it was axiomatic that a more powerful opponent or coalition could not be defeated without the aid of internal division. In the wake of the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks assiduously cultivated "conditional allies" in the enemy camp. In the all-arms offensives of the Great Patriotic War, Russian operational commanders sought to move forces deep into the enemy rear and encircle opposing force groupings as quickly as possible. In today's environment of hybrid peace and hybrid war, enormous effort is invested in creating alternative narratives, supporting lobbying structures and providing financial, informational, and intelligence support to movements critical of liberal-democratic orthodoxy and Western policy.

For hundreds of years, war on the periphery of the Russian Empire was prosecuted by informal networks as much as top-down military structures; it was untidy and adaptable, covert and vicious, and it invariably blurred the frontier between civil and interstate conflict. In similar fashion, the participants in today's Donbas war are not only serving officers of the Russian armed forces, but retired servicemen and deserters, the private security forces of Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs, Cossacks, Chechen fighters, adventurers, and criminals.

Other means of disorienting the enemy also have Soviet and Tsarist roots. *Maskirovka*, the complex of measures devised to confuse the

<sup>11</sup> Gerasimov, *Op.Cit.*

enemy regarding the “presence and disposition of forces, their condition, readiness, actions and plans,” has been an object of military-academic study in Russia since 1904. Since 1917, Sun Tzu has had as much of an influence on the military-academic curriculum as Carl von Clausewitz. Over the past century, the discipline of “military cunning” (established by the revered 18th Century general, Aleksandr Suvorov) has been elaborated in related disciplines and practices: “reflexive control,” “diversion,” “reconnaissance by combat.”<sup>12</sup> Today, information warfare is integral not only to war but peacetime and crisis. In its 2011 treatise on the information space, Russia’s Ministry of Defence states that information war is a form of “confrontation/antagonism [*protivoborstvo*] between two or more states” that encompasses:

*undermining the political, economic, and social system, and massive indoctrination of the population for destabilising the society and the state, and also forcing the state to make decisions in the interests of the opposing party.*<sup>13</sup>

From this definition, it follows that neither the means nor the ends of this “war” are exclusively military. It encompasses much of what the KGB traditionally termed “active measures” — efforts aimed at “discrediting and weakening governmental opponents ... and distort[ing] the target’s perceptions of reality.”

<sup>12</sup>For a more detailed discussion, see James Sherr, “Ukraine and the Black Sea Region: The Russian Military Perspective,” in Stephen Blank, ed. *The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective*, 2017 (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College). Forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup>“Conceptual Views Regarding the Activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Information Space” [*Kontseptual’nye vzglyady na deyatelnost’ Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii v informatsionnom prostranstve*], RF Ministry of Defence, 2011, p 5.

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# 4 THE THREAT PERCEIVED

*Russian threat perceptions are not only narrowly deterministic; they impute a singularity of purpose to the United States that almost no American policymaker would recognize.*

A convention of Russian official writing is to disguise discussion of Russian plans as analyses of threats posed to Russia by others. In fact, Western military policy is perceived through a distorting prism that reveals less about the West than about the way Russia would utilize the military, technological, civic, and organizational attributes that the West has (or is presumed to have) at its disposal. This prism reveals the psychology of threat that now pervades the political-military system.

The belief that Russia is under Western geopolitical and civilizational encroachment is now unchallengeable. It did not originate with Vladimir Putin. Two months after NATO established the Partnership for Peace, Boris Yeltsin told high-level officers of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR): “There are forces abroad that would like to keep Russia in a state of controllable paralysis ... Ideological conflicts are being replaced by a struggle for spheres of influence in geopolitics.”<sup>14</sup> Though articulated in 1994, this belief only acquired canonical status after NATO’s intervention in the 1999 Kosovo conflict. In the 1999 words of the Russian military newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda*, “today, they are bombing Yugoslavia, but aiming at Russia.”<sup>15</sup> By the time of Ukraine’s 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity, NATO/EU enlargement, democracy promotion, “color revolutions,” regime change, and Western military intervention had been integrated into one overarching threat assessment. In his otherwise reflective article of March 2016, Gerasimov

states that “in essence, ‘color revolution’ is a state coup *organized from abroad*.” To an American, the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine are decidedly different, as is U.S. policy with respect to the two. But to the Russian General Staff, the conflicts and their “internationalization” follow similar dynamics. Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu regards the “crushing” of Assad’s opposition as a reversal for color revolutions everywhere else.<sup>16</sup>

Russian threat perceptions are not only narrowly deterministic; they impute a singularity of purpose to the United States that almost no American policymaker would recognize. At one level, this reductionism reflects elite claustrophobia, the refocusing of the regime in an illiberal direction after 2012 and the diminution of other centers of influence (liberal economists, members of the Yeltsin “family”) that once were inside the tent. At the same time, the West has contributed to this hardening of perceptions. NATO’s intervention in Kosovo might have been necessary, but it also removed the halo that adorned NATO as a “purely defensive alliance.” Partnership for Peace might have been designed as an alternative to NATO membership, as a number of allies hoped, but it turned out to be the preparatory school for it, exactly as Russia forecast. The “humanitarian intervention” in Libya might have been intended as nothing more than that, but it led to regime change regardless. The EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) might have started out as a project to enhance European defense identity, but it ended up bringing the EU

<sup>14</sup> ITAR-TASS April 26, cited by BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, April 27, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> *Krasnaya Zvezda* [Red Star], March 27, 1999. Along similar lines, Lieutenant General Leonid Ivashov told NTV, “it the world community swallows this large-scale aggression, this barbarity, then it is today difficult to say who will be next. But there will be a state that is going to be next in line without fail.”

<sup>16</sup> Pavel Felgengauer, “Defense Minister Shoigu Promotes Russian Cyber Warfare Troops and Declares Victory in Syria,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 23 February 2017, Vol 14, Issue 23 (Jamestown Foundation, Washington).

and NATO closer together. The West might have intended Russia no harm in any of these cases, but in Moscow good intentions are not admissible evidence. The result today is that attributions of Western malevolence no longer require detailed justification.

For Russia's military leadership, the NATO "civilizational" threat to Russia is first and foremost a military threat. "Distinctive partners" (Ukraine) and "enhanced partners" (Georgia) are regarded as prospective members, and the risk is that "enhanced opportunity partners" (Sweden and Finland) will move in the same direction. Military and naval bases in these territories are seen as prospective NATO bases earmarked for the deployment of NATO infrastructure and troops. Hence the 2015 assessment of Lieutenant General Leonid Reshetnikov, then director of the presidential administration's analytical centre:

*From Luhansk or Kharkiv, tactical cruise missiles can reach beyond the Urals, where our primary nuclear deterrent is located. And with 100 percent certainty they can destroy silo or mobile-based ballistic missiles in their flight trajectory ... At present, this region is inaccessible to them from Poland, Turkey, or Southeast Asia.<sup>17</sup>*

Notwithstanding the admission regarding NATO ballistic missile defenses in Poland, it is assumed that even these systems (as well as those located in Romania) are precursors rather than final products.

<sup>17</sup> SVR Lt. Gen. (retired) Reshetnikov was director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI) (April 2009-January 2017), described as the "leading scientific-analytical centre of the President's Administration." Interview in *Argumentiy Nedeli*, No. 12 (453), April 2, 2015, <http://argumenti.ru/toptheme/n481/394395>.

At the same time, Russian military pronouncements reveal apprehension about advanced technology systems deployed well to the rear of these forward zones. At present, the technological level of currently deployed NATO forces is not uniformly unfavorable to Russia and in some areas inferior to it. But the gap in potentials is the significant factor for Moscow, and the fear is that it will prove decisive if NATO makes the effort. Five capabilities, extant and foreseeable, arouse particular concern:

- Strategic non-nuclear precision-guided weapons systems (e.g. U.S. Prompt Global Strike);<sup>18</sup>
- Ballistic missile defense with dual purpose (offensive) capability (e.g. Aegis missile launchers with the alleged capacity to launch Tomahawk cruise missiles);
- Weapons based on new physical principles (e.g. electromagnetic projectile devices and "kinetic," ultra-high velocity weapons capable of devastating targets without explosive charges);
- The militarization of outer space (which, in the case of space-based kinetic systems, would not violate either the Outer Space Treaty of 1967 or the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972, from which the United States withdrew in 2001);
- ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) complexes and EW (electronic warfare);

<sup>18</sup> On Russia's need to expand development of such systems and shift the balance from nuclear to conventional deterrence, see Roger McDermott, "Moscow Pursues Enhanced Precision-Strike Capability," *Jamestown*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, January 17, 2017.

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The U.S. Tomahawk Block IV cruise missile used to strike the Syrian base at Al-Shayrat on April 6, 2017 is a state-of-the-art upgrade of a 1970s weapon design. Despite its air-defense “bubble” over Syria, Russia’s only warning came from the United States. As noted above, the Russians believe that BMD launchers cited in Romania can also launch Tomahawks, and it is scarcely irrelevant that U.S. naval platforms could launch them against military installations in Kaliningrad oblast as well.<sup>19</sup>

Alongside Russia’s technological limitations are two others of long-standing: the gross discrepancy in economic power and mobilization potentials of the two sides and, as noted above, the proverbial “human factor.” Today, Russia’s system of state mobilization is taut, but it is also stretched. The armed forces suffer from a marked deficit in officers and trained pilots, now being addressed, but at the expense of quality.<sup>20</sup> Trends in the military demographic (notably the proportion of potentially unreliable Muslim conscripts) are unsettling.<sup>21</sup> As noted in a 2015 Polish assessment, the state can rely on potent nuclear forces and proficient elite units, but it remains

“ashamed of what is in the middle,” and “the vast majority of its conventional forces consistently fall short in exercises.”<sup>22</sup>

In Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, and Syria in 2015-17, Russia employed its military power to telling effect, but in highly permissive environments. The decisiveness of these campaigns and the disorientation they caused have masked their judiciousness (well captured in Michael Kofman’s maxim: “measure twice, invade once”).<sup>23</sup> Russia’s intervention in Donbas has been less judicious, and its returns thus far are debateable. Today the balance between Russian vulnerability and self-confidence is both complex and fraught. But the confidence is considerable and soundly based.

<sup>19</sup> Gerasimov claims that such systems would be able to target “all strategic assets in European Russia.” Speech of the Chief of General Staff Armed Forces RF Army General Valeriy Gerasimov, MCIS April 26-27, 2017, [Vystuplenie nachal’nika Genshtaba VS RF generala armii Valeriya Gerasimova na konferentsiya MCIS 2017], <http://mil.ru/mcis/news/more.htm?id=12120704@cmsArticle>.

<sup>20</sup> Aleksandr Golts, “The Russian Army Suffers Deficit in Officers,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 27, 2017, Vol. 14, Issue 25 (Jamestown Foundation, February 27, 2017) (hereafter, Jamestown).

<sup>21</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “How Islam Will Change Russia,” *Russia in Decline*, Jamestown, September 13, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/marlene-laruelle-how-islam-will-change-russia/>.

<sup>22</sup> Jacek Durkalec, *Nuclear-Backed Little Green Men: Nuclear Messaging in the Ukraine Crisis*, PISM, Warsaw, July 2015. See also Igor Sutyagin, *Russian Forces in Ukraine* (RUSI Briefing Paper, March 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Kofman, “A Comparative Guide to Russia’s Use of Force: Measure Twice, Invade Once,” *War on the Rocks*, February 16, 2017.

# 5 THE THREAT POSED

According to the criteria set out in Russian military doctrine, NATO has every reason to consider Russia both a “military danger” to NATO and a “military threat.” The former describes a political-military relationship that has the potential to evolve into a direct threat.<sup>24</sup> From a NATO perspective, the danger arises because Russia’s scheme of security can be realized only at the expense of other countries. These include NATO Allies and partners. The danger is political, because the difference between the “historical West,” whose legitimacy Russia accepts, and the present-day political West that encroaches upon the “Russian world” is the key source of interstate tension in Europe. But there is also a military danger because Russia’s oft-declared need for strategic depth places its defense perimeters well beyond its borders and those of its allies. In order to align its own policy with Russia’s presumptive security needs, NATO would be obliged to:

- withdraw its infrastructure, missile defense units, and forward-based forces from Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states (in effect, establishing a two-tier NATO);
- agree to statutory limitations on the development of prompt global strike and other “destabilizing” systems;
- strictly observe the non-alignment of Sweden and Finland (irrespective of the wishes of these two states), reversing

recent trends toward NATO-EU security cooperation and the integrated defense of the Nordic-Baltic region;<sup>25</sup>

- observe the “rights” of Russia’s citizens abroad and, pace Medvedev, respect Russia’s “unquestioned priority ... to defend the rights and dignity of our citizens wherever they live”<sup>26</sup> [See annex];
- agree to binding, “non-bloc” status for Ukraine and the withdrawal of NATO’s “presence” (training and advisory teams, liaison, and information offices); agree to annul the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and Ukraine’s “federalization” (autonomy for the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics and their right of veto on Ukraine’s foreign and defense policies);
- transform the NATO-Russia Council into an effective working organ, operating on the basis of “equality” (which implies Russian access to NATO policymaking and a right of veto on matters touching upon Russia’s security);

These conditions would be dead on arrival in most NATO capitals. In the absence of a deep and intrusive arms control regime on Russia’s territory (which the Russian Federation rules out), agreeing to the above would leave Russia’s war-fighting capability in its Western

*Alongside Russia’s technological limitations are two others of long-standing: the gross discrepancy in economic power and mobilization potentials of the two sides and the proverbial “human factor.” Today, Russia’s system of state mobilization is taut, but it is also stretched.*

<sup>24</sup> “Military danger is a condition of interstate or internal relations characterized by a combination of factors that in specified conditions can be transformed into a military threat.” *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2014* [Voen-naya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii (2014)], para 8b. Identical phrasing appears in the 2010 Military Doctrine (para 6b).

<sup>25</sup> On Russian pressure against Sweden, Martin Kragh and Sebastian Asberg, “Russia’s Strategy for Influence Through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: the Swedish Case,” Swedish Institute of International Affairs, January 5, 2017; on sharper relations with Finland, “Finland says it is nearing security deal with US amid concerns over Russia,” *The Guardian*, August 22, 2016. “Putin in Finland enraged by question on NATO” [Putin v Finlandii privel v yarost’ vopros o NATO], July 1, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Dmitry Medvedev interview to NTV, 31 August 2008.

*It would be unwise to underestimate Russian ingenuity in compensating for technological inferiority.*

and Southern military districts intact and legitimize differentiated levels of security and state sovereignty in Europe. Such a scheme of collective security would be neither collective nor secure.

Russian military doctrine defines “military threat” as “a condition of interstate or internal relations characterised by the real possibility of military conflict ... [and] a high degree of readiness of states and groups of states.”<sup>27</sup> Russia’s force posture in its Western and Southern military districts, based on permanent readiness, maneuver units, deployed in close proximity to potential theatres of operation now fulfils these prerequisites. Russia showcases this threat by transforming border regions into zones of pressure, through provocative military acts, and with nuclear blackmail. In hard capability terms, the threat is magnified by “snap” exercises, which both rehearse and demonstrate the capacity to strike with shock and without warning and wage high-intensity combat, “influencing the enemy simultaneously throughout the whole depth of its territory.”<sup>28</sup> These opposing, in-theater (NATO) forces are outmatched in several categories of armor, firepower, EW and infowar assets, air defense, ISR, and non-strategic nuclear systems. It is precisely Russia’s determination to avoid the long war with NATO it believes it would lose that dictates the force posture it has put in place. In other words, Russia’s perceived weaknesses have become inseparable from the threat that it poses.

<sup>27</sup> Military Doctrine 2014, *Op Cit.*, para. 8v and Military Doctrine 2010, para 6v.

<sup>28</sup> Word-for-word reiteration of Marshal Tukhachevskiy’s 1933 definition in 2014 Military Doctrine.

Given the type of war Russia believes it can fight successfully, British expert Keir Giles might well be correct in his judgement that the manpower deficiencies already cited “may not matter.” Similarly, U.S. superiority in other categories is offset “by the simple fact that [Russian systems] are present where needed.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it would be unwise to underestimate Russian ingenuity in compensating for technological inferiority. Today, this takes place on three levels. The most straightforward compensations are technical and organizational: incremental enhancements to the performance of weapons based on current technologies (e.g. artillery pieces that outrange NATO’s counter-battery fire) and qualitative improvements derived by novel synergies between current generation systems (e.g. incorporating an EW subunit in every maneuver unit, and an unmanned aerial vehicle company in every maneuver brigade).<sup>30</sup>

The second level is operational: devising a mode of warfare that renders the opponent’s strengths irrelevant and his weaknesses decisive. There is an equally effective counter: experience of fighting. For Gerasimov and Shoygu, the wars in Ukraine and Syria are not merely wars, but training opportunities, which in part explains the rapid rotation of troops in these two theaters. Officers who have performed well in these conflict zones have been promoted to higher command positions (notably, Colonel General Aleksandr Dvornikov, Commander of the Group of Russian Forces in Syria, promoted in September 2016 to Commander

<sup>29</sup> Keir Giles, “Assessing Russia’s Reorganized and Rearmed Military,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 3, 2017, pp 4, 8. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/03/assessing-russia-s-reorganized-and-rearmed-military-pub-69853>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p 6.



of the Southern Military District). Moreover, senior officers have been placed on a rigorous work-study regime, punctuated by conferences designed to analyze lessons learned from operational experience. Training by fighting is considered to be cheaper than training by training.

The third level is asymmetrical conflict. The deciding factor in military conflict is not GDP ratios but the ability to convert national attributes into useable power. Today the biggest asymmetry between NATO and Russia is political and in Russia's distinct lexicon, "moral." In cognitive terms, the EU and Russia might as well reside on different planets. Russia regards the former as a post-bellucist entity governed by consensual, risk-averse, and business-minded elites. In the description of one Russian friend on the fast track, Europe is a "shopping superpower," whereas Russia is psychologically mobilized for war. Vladimir Putin has revived Russia's traditional *passionar'nost'* — respect for sacrifice, along with the conviction that moral vigor and force of will stand to prevail over "decadent" powers whose only strengths are material. Serious military powers are expected to assume costs and risks commensurate with the interests at stake. As a senior Russian diplomat put it in private conversation, "Russia's advantage is not its military power, but its willingness to use it." From this perspective, the weaker party is not the one with the most to lose but the one that is most afraid of losses.

Needless to say, since the summits in Wales (2014) and Warsaw (2016), NATO has not been idle. Aspects of Operation Atlantic Resolve (launched in 2014) and the Enhanced Forward Presence program (launched at the 2016 Warsaw summit) appear to have unsettled

Russia, notably the participation of European Allies (especially Germany) and the revival of "total defense" concepts in the Baltic states (the precursors to which, were shelved during the NATO accession process).<sup>31</sup> But the rhythm and intensity of defense transformation that Russia deems mandatory surpasses what even an "America First" administration might consider politically possible. Although there is a good dosage of boastful lying in published Russian assessments, no one should confuse Russia's efforts with peacetime rearmament. Three years after Crimea's annexation, the armed forces and much of the state system are still being overhauled under a near-crisis regimen.

Unless we actually fight a war, the balance between Russian strengths and weaknesses will be a matter of debate and judgement. Strengths and weakness are fluctuating variables whose meaning depends on circumstance, geographical vantage points, and the objectives of the protagonists. U.S. expert Michael Kofman's work on the importance of the southwestern direction is an important corrective to the Baltic myopia that afflicts much of the NATO establishment.<sup>32</sup> But the centrality of this "direction," duly emphasized by Shoygu and Gerasimov, is situational. A revolution in Belarus could change matters entirely. The Russians do not know where a war would begin,

*"Russia's advantage is not its military power, but its willingness to use it."*

<sup>31</sup> Olevs Nikers, "Latvia Pursues 'Total Defense' Concept, Rejects Conscription," Jamestown, Vol 14, Issue 58, May 2, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Kofman, "Putin's Military is Playing the Long Game in Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, August 31, 2016 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/31/dont-look-now-but-russias-got-ukraine-surrounded-crimea/> And in support of his thesis, 'Southwestern 'strategic direction' remains Russian military's priority — General Staff' <http://tass.com/defense/899774>; "The Army of the RF is targeted on the southwest" [*Armiya RF natselilas' na yugo-zapad*] <http://www.ytro.ru/articles/2016/09/14/1297332.shtml>.

Coercion is engrained in the Russian concept of deterrence, which is not based on force balances, margins of uncertainty, and “mutual assured destruction,” but imbalance, pressure, and escalation dominance .

and they know that they do not know, which is why they have devised a theater architecture to establish “an ‘arc of pressure’ stretching from the Baltic to the Black Seas.”<sup>33</sup> The intention is to secure maximum flexibility across the spectrum from peace to crisis to war.

The key issue is the strategic perspective that informs Russian military policy. There is much truth in the British expert Mark Galeotti’s judgement at the Institute of International Relations Prague:

*Russia has mounted an extensive, aggressive, and multi-platform attempt to use its military and the threat of force as instruments of coercive diplomacy, intended to divide, distract, and deter Europe from challenging Russia’s activities in its immediate neighborhood.*<sup>34</sup>

This is a serious problem in itself because “challenging Russia’s activities in its immediate neighbourhood” (if by non-military means) is established Western policy. It stands to reason that we will lack the confidence to assist Ukraine or other former Soviet states effectively if we ourselves are insecure or deterred from helping them.

But the larger truth is that “Russia’s military behavior in peacetime is not saber rattling solely for political effect or narrative.” What the West calls “coercive diplomacy” can be a prelude to war (e.g., NATO in Kosovo) or, as Galeotti acknowledges, a means of deterring

it. Coercion is engrained in the Russian concept of deterrence, which unlike Robert McNamara’s analogue, is not based on force balances, margins of uncertainty, and “mutual assured destruction,” but imbalance, pressure, and escalation dominance. This scheme of deterrence is the product of “a unique Russian approach to managing the contradiction ... between avoiding war and preparing for short wars.”<sup>35</sup> Alongside other policy tools, it challenges Western stability and is intended to do so.

<sup>33</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, “Counter-Containment: Russia Deploys S-400 Complexes to Crimea,” Jamestown, Vol 14, Issue 2, January 18, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> “Heavy Metal Diplomacy: Russia’s Political Use of its Military in Europe since 2014,” ECFR, December 2016, p 1. [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Heavy\\_Metal\\_Diplomacy\\_Final\\_2.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Heavy_Metal_Diplomacy_Final_2.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Covington, *Op. Cit.*, p 5, 34.

# 6 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Since February 2014, NATO Allies have become increasingly aware of Russia's determination to disrupt the cohesion of the West as we have come to define it. However, doubts persist about the degree of strategic thinking that motivates its policy. The picture we have presented not only outlines a strategic framework. It delineates, even by Russian standards, an unusual degree of integration between the political objectives of the state and the expansion of its military power. That expansion is not a Brownian motion. It is a coherent and purpose-driven activity designed to challenge Western dominance of an international order that Russia's state leadership perceives as harmful to its interests and intrinsically vulnerable.

For understandable reasons, many in the West are also addressing the critical question of how our own policy tools might be used to change Russian mindsets and perceptions. But the underlying challenge, much as Putin has aggravated it, is not Russian perceptions, but its interests. And, where European security is concerned, Moscow's interests can be expected to diverge from ours in significant respects even if Putin is replaced by a successor with different priorities.

The more immediate challenge is to change Western mindsets rather than Russian ones. Our *homo economicus*, business school metrics do not explain very much about Putin's Russia. State mobilization might impose serious diseconomies on an already overburdened resource base. But as long as it continues, it continues and produces consequences that NATO needs to confront and counter. Those who believe that compromise, vigorous dialogue, or neorealist grand bargains will resolve our differences have been neither

watching nor listening. Dialogue will never be more effective than the policy underpinning it. Angela Merkel's exhaustive discussions with Vladimir Putin have provided useful reinforcement to a moderately tough policy. John Kerry's indefatigable dialogue with Sergey Lavrov over Syria only amplified weakness. The Kremlin is willing to match us in talking as well as fighting. Its curt and pre-emptive rejection of a grand bargain with the United States at the start of the Trump administration is telling in itself. Russia expects material changes to the structure of international relations and is determined to press its perceived advantages until concessions are forced upon us. The only way to diminish the threats Russia poses is to diminish these advantages.

Once that imperative is accepted, we will find that the news is not all that bad. Time does not favor Russia. True enough, Russia has defied repeated Western forecasts about the unsustainability of its economic model. Low oil prices and Western sanctions have brought its proverbial coping mechanisms and organizational ingenuity to the fore. Nevertheless, Russia's economy is in decline, its technological base is stagnant, and the mobilization reflex merely postpones the day when its structural problems are either addressed or wreak vengeance. Thus, the West has good grounds for strategic patience. However, time is not a strategic actor. It has to be used. For strategic patience to bear fruit, there must be a strategy as well as patience.

Deterrence is only a strategy if it addresses the threat to be deterred. As serious students of Russian strategy have noted, war with Russia means war with all of Russia. Yet the war Russia is preparing to fight has limited objectives: to shatter the cohesion of NATO, destroy its forces

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in the operational theater, and force it to concede defeat at the earliest possible moment. Without confidence in these outcomes, Russia will not go to war. The aim of NATO's deterrence must be to convince Russia that any war against NATO means war with all of NATO, wherever its forces are based. To this end, the priority for Western military establishments is not to outmatch the Russians where they are naturally strong, but to invest in the antidotes to these strengths.

The Alliance confronted a similar challenge at the height of the Brezhnev era. Its "dual track" decision of 1979 forced the Soviets to contend with mobile, high-readiness, theater-based nuclear systems that could have been used to devastating effect at the outset of conflict. Coupled with the exploitation of then revolutionary "smart" non-nuclear U.S. Army weapons and war-fighting concepts (AirLand Battle), the West effectively threatened to annul ten years of Soviet investment in a "strategic offensive operation" against NATO. NATO undertook this task in the teeth of unprecedented internal opposition to its policy (focused on the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) and an intense Soviet active measures campaign in Europe. The result of the new NATO policy was not an apocalyptic confrontation, but a change of course for the USSR and a process of mutual de-escalation of military threats and political tensions in Europe.

Today's conditions are in one respect more promising than those that confronted NATO 35 to 40 years ago. Gerasimov's anxiety, "the destruction of military forces and key state assets in several hours," derives from "prompt global strike" and shorter range non-nuclear systems against which Russia might only be able to threaten nuclear retaliation. Strategically,

they have the potential to threaten assets critical to war-waging and state management without producing nuclear devastation. Operationally, they might cut several of Russia's pathways to escalation dominance that presently exist. From a Russian perspective, this new generation of weapons is destabilizing; from a Western perspective, the opposite.

Investment in these systems will not absolve NATO of the need to maintain a coherent nuclear posture. But when combined with other means of enhancing the West's robustness and resilience, it will constrain Russia's ability to fight war on its terms. If it cannot do so, it is most unlikely to fight at all. The observation of Finland's leading expert on Russian military policy is worth citing:

*In the Georgian and Ukrainian crises and Syrian air operations, Russia has demonstrated its high readiness for limited military operations to secure and promote its national interests in situations when, according to its estimation, success is easily gained and risk of unfavourable escalation is low.<sup>36</sup>*

In these respects, Vladimir Putin is a good steward of Russian tradition. Only two conditions have provoked Russia during his tenure: weaknesses (Ukraine in conditions of state collapse and Syria after a geopolitical vacuum had been created by the United States) and bluff (NATO's ill-judged 2008 promise that Georgia and Ukraine "will become members of NATO"). No example can be found of Russia

<sup>36</sup> LtCol (General Staff) PhD Petteri Lulu, "On war and perception of war in Russian thinking," (Finnish Defence Research Agency, Research Bulletin 3-2016)

attacking a stronger opponent that understood its own strength. A strong opponent afraid of its own strength is only asking for trouble.

The simple and most basic object of deterrence is to persuade would-be opponents that force is not the solution to their problems. But it is not simple to achieve. In 1987 the Soviet Union concluded that “the application of military means to resolve any dispute is inadmissible under current conditions.”<sup>37</sup> It is not beyond our means to bring Russia to the same conclusion.

*The simple and most basic object of deterrence is to persuade would-be opponents that force is not the solution to their problems.*

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<sup>37</sup> *Pravda*, 30 May 1987, cited in Jacob W Kipp, *Western Threat Perception and the Military Doctrine of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation*, (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Soviet Armies Studies Office), April 1990, p 1.

# 7 ANNEX: RUSSIAN POLICY REGARDING THE DEFENSE OF CITIZENS AND COMPATRIOTS ABROAD

Russia's first (draft) Military Doctrine (1992), categorized "violation of the rights of citizens and people in former Soviet republics who identify themselves, ethnically or culturally with Russia" as a "military danger." Its first Foreign Policy Concept, approved by President Putin (28 June 2000), emphasized the need to "uphold in every possible way the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad."<sup>38</sup>

More recent versions of Military Doctrine stipulate the "legitimate employment of Armed Forces and other forces ... to guarantee the defence of Russia's citizens situated beyond the borders of the Russian Federation."<sup>39</sup> It is clear from this formulation that over the years, the "rightful" (*pravomernoe*) employment of armed forces has expanded (beyond the former USSR) as well as contracted (the defense of "citizens"). This change in emphasis probably reflects: 1) the intention, especially pronounced in 2010 and 2014, to align the language of military doctrine more closely to prevailing norms of international law (which recognizes "citizen" but not "compatriots" as a legal category);<sup>40</sup> 2) the permissive granting of Russian passports to compatriots who request them; 3) continued reliance on other state documents mandating the defense of the interests of compatriots abroad (e.g. Foreign Policy Review of the Russian Federation, 27 March 2007, which also states that they can expect "comprehensive

assistance").<sup>41</sup> To the extent it is acknowledged at all, Russia's military intervention in Ukraine is routinely justified by reference to the violation of the rights of the "Russian speaking" population by the 'Kyiv junta'.

Thus, despite the appearance of precision and moderation in the 2014 Military Doctrine, state policy and the "normative acts" underpinning it remain highly permissive with respect to whose rights will be defended abroad, how they might be defended and what these rights (and "legitimate interests") might be.

<sup>38</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts: Former Soviet Union* (hereafter, *SWB*), 7 July 2000.

<sup>39</sup> *Military Doctrine 2014*, para 22.

<sup>40</sup> In Putin's artful formulation, "compatriot" is not just a legal category. Vladimir Putin, "Speech to the Congress of Compatriots Residing Abroad", October 11-12, 2001. [*Vystuplenie V V Putina na Kongress sootchestvennikov prozhivayuyushchikh za rubezhom*] <mosds.ru>.

<sup>41</sup> *Obzor vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, kremlin.ru, p 431.



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