

Russia's Strategic Calculus

THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND MILITARY DOCTRINE

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Russian foreign policy is driven by the political elites' search for a new basis for [national self-esteem](#) after the collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted old Soviet identities. The collapse did not discredit the Soviet Union's status as a great power, which has thus remained a core aspiration for Russian political elites. As a result of their perception of Russia's appropriate status in the world and in their region, they have also sought to maintain Russia's role as a guiding force among the newly independent states that formerly made up the Soviet Union. This combination of Russia as a global great power and regional hegemon is seen as providing the ruling elite with a source of legitimacy with their domestic constituency.

Most of Russia's immediate foreign policy goals are focused on its immediate neighborhood. These include maintaining friendly or at least compliant governments in neighboring states and, failing that, keeping unfriendly neighboring governments weak and off balance. All of this is placed in a global context because in addition to securing its periphery, these goals also serve to prevent encroachment by Western states in Russia's desired geographic sphere of influence.

Beyond these overarching goals, Russian leaders are focused on ensuring Russia's domestic stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty. These are primarily defensive goals that seek to ensure the survival of the state and its ruling elite in their current form, rather than aggressive goals that seek to expand Russia's territory or its sphere of influence. Most of Russia's military and security policies are designed to secure the state and its current territory against potential attacks and to counter the threats that Russian leaders see facing their country. Moreover, Russian leaders do not really have a well-developed strategy on how to achieve this in their immediate neighborhood. Instead,

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they have a toolkit of political and military tactics and are open to opportunities to use this toolkit.

Russia's Threat Perception

The main threats to Russian security, as identified by Russia's political and military leadership, are spelled out in the most recent edition of the country's military doctrine announced in December 2014 (see the [English translation](#) of the doctrine). According to these guidelines, the most serious military risk that Russia faces is the expansion of NATO. The potential of NATO enlargement to include former Soviet republics has been seen as a threat by Russian leaders for many years, with concern about Ukraine and Georgia resulting in Russian involvement in conflicts in both of those countries.

While this concern remains uppermost in Russian leaders' minds, in recent years they have also come to focus on the expansion of NATO military infrastructure in existing member states near Russia's borders. The doctrine accordingly identifies military risks associated with "bringing the military infrastructure of NATO member countries near the borders of the Russian Federation" and with the "deployment (build-up) of military contingents of foreign states (groups of states) on the territories of states contiguous with the Russian Federation and its allies, as well as in adjacent waters, including for exerting political and military pressure on the Russian Federation" (Russian Military Doctrine, 12a and 12c).

The 2014 military doctrine was the first official document to highlight the military threat posed to Russia by externally organized regime change. In recent years, this has been repeatedly mentioned as the most serious threat facing the Russian government, but it had not previously been portrayed as a military threat. By mentioning the "destabilization of the situation in individual states and regions and undermining of global and regional stability" and the "establishment of regimes whose policies threaten the interests of the Russian Federation in states contiguous with the Russian Federation, including by overthrowing legitimate state administration bodies" as external military risks, Russian leaders highlighted their perception that regime change originates in secret plans organized abroad, primarily by the United States and its allies (Doctrine, 12b and 12m).

These plans, Russian leaders argue, include a number of aspects. The establishment of hostile regimes in neighboring states through the destabilization of legitimate governments is seen as being part of a [campaign](#) to eliminate Russian influence over neighbors that are of vital importance to Russia's security. In addition, Russia's adversaries are willing to sow chaos in foreign states in order to create excuses to intervene and establish pro-Western governments there. Finally, even though these efforts mostly take place outside Russia itself, their ultimate goal is to weaken the Russian government in order to create an opportunity to replace the Putin regime with

one more amenable to Western dictates. In addition to military and political means to achieve these goals, Russian leaders are concerned about the use of information warfare to weaken Russian sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity (Doctrine, 12l). This is part of an overall emphasis on internal threats and the role of state policy in [countering](#) Western interference in Russian domestic affairs.

A third set of security risks faced by Russia concern threats to its nuclear deterrence capability. Missile defense remains at the top of this list, as Russian leaders [do not believe](#) that the United States can make a credible commitment to refrain from using such defenses against Russia's nuclear deterrent capability. They are convinced that if the United States were able to develop an effective and financially viable form of defense against ballistic missiles, domestic political pressure would result in it being expanded to counter Russian missiles, regardless of any promises that the leaders of the United States might make in the interim that missile defense is aimed only against rogue states such as Iran and North Korea.

Russian leaders' concerns about threats to Russian nuclear deterrence capabilities have in recent years moved beyond missile defense to include a variety of new technologies, such as the Prompt Global Strike concept for the development of conventional strategic precision-guided munitions and weapons fired from space. The 2014 military doctrine adds these weapons to the list of military risks faced by Russia (Doctrine, 12d). As with missile defense, the concern is that the United States might use such weapons to eliminate Russian nuclear deterrent capability, rendering it defenseless against a NATO or U.S. attack.

Finally, Russian leaders express a genuine concern about the threat posed to Russia by radical Islamist organizations. This concern is usually articulated through the discussion of global terrorism and extremism. The Russian military doctrine highlights the links between radical international armed groupings and inter-ethnic and inter-confessional tensions in the context of a lack of effective international anti-terrorist cooperation (Doctrine, 12j and 12k). The [significance of this concern](#) for Russian leaders is highlighted by its choice as the main theme of the 2016 Moscow Conference on International Security. Given Russia's recent history with Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus and terrorist acts committed throughout Russia by extremists over the last 20 years, Russian leaders recognize the potential for a renewed wave of attacks to destabilize the Russian state.

As is usually the case, the Russian military doctrine does not mention any threats posed by China. Ostensibly, this is because Russia considers China a strategic partner rather than a potential threat. Nevertheless, Russian experts regularly discuss the potential long-term risk of Chinese designs on Russian territory in the Far East and regularly contemplate the short-term danger of Russia becoming excessively dependent on China and being reduced to a Chinese junior partner and energy supplier. Furthermore, the

Russian military regularly conducts exercises that are designed to counter a land invasion by a major power in the Far East and Siberia. Although no country is mentioned as the target of these exercises, China is the only country that [could threaten](#) Russia with a land invasion from the east.

Overall, in recent years, Russian leaders have become more concerned about the threats they feel are emanating from NATO and the United States. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring and especially after the electoral protests that took place in Russia in 2011-12, they started to emphasize the danger to Russia posed by externally fomented domestic protests and regime change. These combined changes in Russian threat perceptions contributed to a serious deterioration in Russia's relations with the West even before the Ukraine conflict erupted in 2014.

Western planners need to keep in mind that Russian leaders see Russia as weaker than its adversaries and very much on the defensive. This does not preclude a concurrent belief that Russia needs to be proactive and to initiate conflict when critical state interests are threatened and opportunities to seize the initiative present themselves. As a result, Western observers often see Russia as having an aggressive and revanchist mindset, even as Russian leaders perceive their actions as aimed entirely at shoring up their vulnerable security position.

Regional Priorities

Russian foreign policy remains focused on Europe and the United States. Since the international system remains centered on Euro-Atlantic institutions, Russia's drive for respect in the international system and the geographic proximity of its main population centers to Europe means that Europe remains the primary geographic region of focus for Russian foreign policy. Russian interests in Europe are both economic and political. Economic interests are related primarily to energy sales, while politically Russia seeks to weaken European institutions in order to work bilaterally with individual states.

Russia's second area of concern is its vulnerable southern border. Russian policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus has in recent years been shaped by three divergent perspectives: 1) great power competition in the region, which leads Russian politicians to view the region's problems through a geopolitical and military lens; 2) energy, with a focus on securing exclusive rights for gas and oil transit from the region to Europe; and 3) concern about transnational security threats, such as radical Islamism, terrorism, and drug smuggling.

The internal tension among these perspectives has been the main source of inconsistency in Russian policies in the region. Depending on which perspective is in ascendance, Russian officials alternate between a) focusing on soft security threats, which are best dealt with through the development of cooperative mechanisms with states both in and

outside the region, and b) taking steps to limit the influence of outside states in the region as part of an effort to retain a monopoly on energy transit and to come out on top in its rivalry with the United States. In recent years, with the fading of U.S. involvement in Central Asia and the decline in energy prices, Russia has become more focused on ensuring that the region is ruled by friendly regimes and supporting their efforts to prevent internal uprisings and infiltration by Islamist extremists.

In recent years, the Middle East has become more important for Russian foreign policy. Russia's key goals in the region are to reduce instability while increasing its own influence and reducing that of the United States. Russian leaders see U.S. policies that promote democratization as being the main cause of chaos and instability throughout the region. At the same time, Moscow's interests in the Middle East have clearly benefited from overreach by the United States. Russia has worked to use local dissatisfaction with the conduct of the Iraq war and U.S. support for popular protests against local autocrats to restore some of the influence it lost in the Middle East after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Russian operation in Syria has done even more to this end, showing that Russia has the interest and resources to be a serious player in the region. The establishment of a permanent military presence in Syria over the last year has further increased Russian influence in the Middle East, to the extent that [some analysts argue](#) that Russia now has a commanding position in Syria and perhaps in the region as a whole.

Russia's involvement in the Middle East is fraught with risks as well. The de facto Shia alliance with Iran, Iraq, and Syria has led to tension with Gulf states and (in the recent past) with Turkey and also brings Russia into direct confrontation with ISIS, potentially exposing it to a higher risk of terrorist attacks against Russian interests and/or on Russian territory.

Finally, Russia's turn toward Asia has so far been expressed more in rhetoric than in actual policy. Russian elites are starting to realize that Asia matters in its own right, not just as an adjunct or counterbalance to the West. But so far they have been more adept at recognizing the importance of Asia than in developing effective strategies for engaging with it. In part, this is because old stereotypes of Asia as inferior still dominate. But mostly it is because it is hard to reconcile the pursuit of Russian security and economic interests in Asia with the Russian political elite's Western-centric worldview.

Even in Asia, U.S. behavior in large part determines how Russia responds, since containing and balancing the United States is one of the key missions of Russian foreign policy around the world. This stems in large part from Russian leaders' belief that Russia can be a global power only by limiting the influence of the United States. In Asia, it has tried to do so (with limited success) by building an anti-hegemonic consensus with China and India. At the same time, despite the currently positive relations with China,

Russian leaders remain concerned about China's increase in power and long-term intentions, particularly given China's efforts to develop the Silk Road project. They worry that China could replace Russia as the dominant "other" in U.S. foreign affairs, leaving Russia marginalized. For this reason, despite ongoing tension with the United States, Russian leaders are not averse to having the United States work to constrain Chinese ambitions in Asia and around the world. On the whole, Russian objectives in Asia are preventative in nature: containing the United States and China, maintaining Russian influence in the region, and eroding US-led alliances without destabilizing the region, all while staying out of local conflicts.

Conclusion

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States is unlikely to change Russia's strategic calculus. Russia will continue to seek to maximize its status in the world, possibly by proposing a deal where the United States recognizes its sphere of influence in its immediate neighborhood in exchange for a more cooperative relationship globally. Such a trade would legitimize Russia as a global great power while avoiding the need to expend scarce resources on a global fight for influence with the United States.

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