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Russia’s Strategy and Military Thinking: Evolving Discourse by 2025

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Executive Summary

- Russia’s military strategy remains tightly integrated with the Kremlin’s overarching political objectives, reflecting President Vladimir Putin’s directives. Other institutions primarily reinforce centralized decision-making, within an ideological framework that emphasizes confrontation with the West and legitimizes Kremlin policy choices.
- Key ideologues, such as Dmitry Medvedev and Nikolai Patrushev, frame NATO as an existential threat and advocate escalatory measures to undermine Western cohesion. Moderate strategists, however, caution against miscalculation and stress the importance of diversifying alliances beyond the Western bloc to build resilience against Western influence.
- The 2020 and 2024 updates to Russia’s nuclear doctrine mark a shift toward assertive deterrence, with advocates such as Sergey Karaganov emphasizing the strategic value of credible nuclear threats. These updates aim to reinforce Russia’s global standing and offset the limitations of its conventional military capabilities.
- Russian military practitioners align their perspectives with the Kremlin’s framing of the Ukraine conflict as part of a broader confrontation with NATO and U.S. dominance. They emphasize self-sufficiency in arms production and informational isolation to sustain political unity, while relying on strategic partnerships with countries such as Iran and China to address critical supply needs.

- Practitioners advocate modernized approaches to ground warfare, focusing on small, agile units supported by drones, precision artillery, and electronic warfare. However, significant challenges persist, particularly in adapting these tactics to urban warfare scenarios, where gaps in preparation and operational execution remain evident.
- Despite contributions from ideologues, public strategists, and practitioners, systemic obstacles—including structural inefficiencies, political constraints, and limited industrial capacity—hinder Russia’s ability to adapt to the demands of modern warfare. These challenges prevent the effective implementation of theoretical insights, leaving the armed forces inadequately prepared for contemporary strategic challenge.

Russia’s military strategy, as in most Western countries, is designed to ensure that the military accomplishes the tasks formulated by the political leadership—chiefly, the defense and pursuit of Russian interests in the context of an encompassing confrontation with a powerful and deeply adversarial Western coalition. Key entities involved in the process of formulating Russian strategy include: the Kremlin, as the core of political leadership; the Ministry of Defense (MoD), particularly the research centers under the General Staff; the Security Council (SC) and the whole Presidential Executive office that supports it; and select representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and prominent think tanks.[1]

We hypothesize that, rather than formulate independent strategic thought in keeping with their institutional perspectives as might be expected in the West, each of these actors develops their inputs as an expression of the perspectives set by the Russian president and his close allies. That said, we identify three distinct groups of contributors to Russia’s military strategy: ideologues, public strategists, and practitioners.

Ideologues

While the circle of individuals privy to formulating strategic decisions extends beyond designated institutions and offices, Russia’s SC is the principal platform for discussing and shaping these decisions.

Within this group of senior officials, a subset of ideologues is particularly vocal on matters of grand strategy. This subset includes Dmitry Medvedev, a former president (2008–12) and prime minister of Russia (2012–20), now serving as deputy chairman of the SC; Nikolai Patrushev, a Navy advisor to the president, former secretary of the SC (2008–24), and ex-director of the Federal Security Service (1999–2008); as well as less prominent figures such as First Deputy Secretary of the SC, Gen. Rashid Nurgaliev (who served as minister of internal affairs from 2003 to 2012), and Sergei Naryshkin, director of the Foreign Intelligence Service.

Patrushev’s worldview frames security as a zero-sum game, where enhancing one’s security necessarily increases the insecurity of others. He maintains a staunchly adversarial stance toward NATO and its expansion, emphasizing what he characterizes as its unjustified incursion into Eastern Europe and alleged plots to undermine Russia. Patrushev exemplifies the archetype of an anti-Western, hawkish security official within Putin’s high-profile inner circle.

Photo: Russian T-72 B3 main battle tanks drive during a rehearsal for the Victory Day parade, which marks the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two, in Red Square in central Moscow, Russia May 7, 2021. Credit: REUTERS/Evgenia Novozhenina

Medvedev has voiced some of the most extreme hawkish positions on

military strategy, particularly in the context of the war with Ukraine.[2] While the sincerity of his views is debatable, it is notable that he is permitted or incentivized to sustain this discourse by the Presidential Administration, which closely monitors public statements by high-ranking appointees and promptly suppresses any speech deemed politically inexpedient.

The views of figures like Patrushev and Medvedev are critical signals of Russia's ambitions and resolve, directed at both the West and domestic audiences. They also delineate a strategic line that other agencies and loyalist strategists must follow to remain influential within the Kremlin.

Public Strategists

Russia's nuclear strategy —which is the focal point of Russian defense and deterrence theory— has evolved since 2000, with major updates in 2020 and 2024 shaping current strategic debates. These two iterations of the doctrine shape the current strategic debate within Russia's expert community. Both documents were likely developed within the MoD, specifically within units under the General Staff, including the Center for Military-Strategic Studies. In August 2020, Maj.-Gen. Andrei Sterlin, later promoted to a three-star general, commented on the original Nuclear Doctrine in a piece for the MoD's official newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star).[3] In 2019, Sterlin had spoken at parliamentary hearings on NATO's "offensive preparations" near Russia's borders. These preparations included deploying air defense systems capable of intercepting ballistic missiles. The publication of the 2020 Nuclear Doctrine was part of a broader signaling strategy aimed at both domestic and international audiences. The 2024 iteration of the doctrine appears to reflect the influence of ideologues.

Meanwhile, broader and more publicly articulated strategic narratives are developed by military and foreign affairs think tanks, such as the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy (CFDP). Members of these think tanks are prominent pundits on foreign policy and strategy in state-controlled media. One such figure is Vyacheslav Nikonov (CFDP and Moscow State University), a

host of a geopolitical talk show on the major TV channel, Channel 1.

Politically, these strategists advance variations of hawkish, anti-Western rhetoric, ranging from relatively conciliatory tones to more aggressive stances. Theoretically, they have adopted the tenets of the realist school of international relations but have transformed them into an ideology rather than an analytical framework. The primary media outlet for this group of strategists is the online magazine *Russia in Global Affairs* (available in English).[4]

Photo: RS-24 Yars, a Russian MIRV-equipped thermonuclear armed intercontinental ballistic missile. The MIRV system permits a single missile to deliver multiple nuclear warheads to different targets. is seen in central Moscow during the general rehearsal of the Victory Day parade held on May 7, 2023. Credit: Vlad Karkov / SOPA Images/Sipa USA

A more extreme hawkish faction within this strategic community is epitomized by Sergey Karaganov (RIAC and CFDP), a professor at the Higher School of Economics (HSE). In the summer of 2023, Karaganov became one of the first "serious" commentators to advocate for nuclear strikes as a deterrence tool. In October 2024, one month before the release of the updated Nuclear Doctrine, Karaganov, along with Sergei Avakyants (former admiral and RIAC) and Dmitri Trenin (former officer and former director of Carnegie Moscow, RIAC, and HSE), published a

widely discussed report titled *From Containment to Deterrence*, which called for a more robust nuclear deterrence strategy.[5]

Karaganov and his co-authors advocate redefining the nuclear taboo, proposing a proactive deterrence strategy that frames the avoidance of nuclear weapon use as immoral. This strategy combines deterrence with coalition-building, primarily with China. Their thesis rests on the belief that a credible resolve to use nuclear weapons could prevent a more catastrophic nuclear conflict. In various publications, Karaganov and Trenin emphasize that proactive nuclear deterrence must be grounded in both the credibility and willingness to use such weapons.

The purpose is to reintroduce fear into adversaries' strategic calculations. Practically, this strategy follows the familiar theory of the ladder of escalation, outlining a sequence of actions preceding a mutually destructive nuclear conflict.[6] These steps include conventional strikes on a NATO country, demonstrative nuclear strikes away from NATO territory, and escalating strikes on overseas military bases.

Trenin underscores the importance of maintaining open and effective communication channels with Washington to ensure clear and timely messaging. He and his co-authors argue that this approach is not suicidal; instead, its credibility and clarity are designed to prevent conflicts on a larger scale. As Trenin put it, decision-makers in Washington must understand that "the nuclear bullet is in the revolver."[7]

Even hawkish strategists, such as those mentioned above, acknowledge Russia's inability to compete with the West on conventional terms due to the disparity in gross domestic product. The ongoing war in Ukraine further underscores that conventional conflicts can be costly and may unfold on the territory of a nuclear power, prompting a reassessment of the fundamental role of nuclear weapons.

A more proactive nuclear deterrence strategy is envisioned to reaffirm Russia's status as a great power, alongside others, in a multipolar world, where the United States would be one among several equals. To realize this objective, Karaganov and like-minded analysts argue that Russia

must prevail in its conflict with Ukraine and, by extension, Europe and the United States. A secondary objective is to undermine NATO, rolling back its infrastructure to the levels of 1997. Many strategists in this camp share the belief that NATO's Article 5, which establishes the principle of collective defense, would not hold under the pressure of Russian deterrence measures against European allies, rendering it effectively a myth.

In contrast, more moderate strategists are clustered around the RIAC, with some affiliated with the Moscow State Institute of International Affairs (MGIMO), Russia's premier diplomatic school. Exemplars of this group include Ivan Timofeev, RIAC director general and MGIMO professor, and Fyodor Lukyanov (RIAC and HSE).

Photo: Russian nuclear missiles. Credit: Andy Cat @akatyanin via Unsplash. https://unsplash.com/photos/PGEKTReynKk

While this moderate group agrees that the United States is waging a proxy war against Russia, they advocate adhering to the established rules of conventional conflicts and focusing on coalition-building. Lukyanov cautions against redefining the nuclear taboo, arguing that the trajectory of escalation is uncharted territory with dynamics that could spiral out of control. He suggests maintaining the current strategic posture and relying

on the moderate deterrence effect of nuclear weapons.[8]

Timofeev, meanwhile, warns aggressive revisionists about the risks of perception and misperception in foreign and military strategy. He argues that any tactical or demonstrative use of nuclear weapons could leave Russia in a precarious position. First, it would expose Russia to potential retaliatory strikes. Second, such an action could stem from a misjudgment of the adversary's mindset; instead of inciting fear, it might galvanize the West and strengthen its resolve. Third, nuclear weapons use would undermine coalition-building as a containment strategy, as allies may not offer the support Russia assumes. Such actions could transform Russia into an international pariah.

Consequently, the group advocates a less confrontational strategy, recommending Russia pivot away from the West and fully reorient toward the Global South.

Despite their differences, both hawkish and moderate groups of public pundits share a reactive approach to analysis. They use theoretical frameworks—often framed as geopolitical or realist analysis—to rationalize and legitimize decisions already articulated by the Kremlin. While their analytical value is limited, their ideological significance remains relevant to Russia's strategic discourse. The diverse networks of these pundits—spanning universities, think tanks, public forums, and events hosted by the MoD and MFA—facilitate the cross-pollination of ideas. This creates an ideological environment that can potentially become a self-fulfilling prophecy, shaping the contours of Russia's strategic thinking.

Practitioners

Russian military thinkers who provide regular analytic support to the MoD and the armed forces or are responsible for developing strategies for the use of military force in modern warfare can be defined as "practitioners." Their perspectives align closely with the Russian leadership's political ideology and strategic objectives.

These thinkers adhere to a political narrative that frames the war against Ukraine as part of a larger struggle against US global political and economic dominance. They perceive this conflict as an extension of Russia's resistance to NATO and, more broadly, to the transatlantic unity between the United States and Europe, with its values rooted in liberalism. Furthermore, they argue that the ongoing confrontation with the West is far more critical for Russia than the tensions of the Cold War era, as the strategic goal of the United States and its allies is seen as the elimination of Russia's statehood.

Photo: Russian service members take part in a rehearsal for the Victory Day parade, which marks the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two, in Saint Petersburg, Russia April 28, 2022. Credit: REUTERS/Anton Vaganov

Regardless of any foreseeable outcomes on the battlefield in Ukraine, these military thinkers assert that Russia will persist in its long-term campaign against the United States and NATO until the existing global order is dismantled. Beyond merely demonstrating political loyalty to the Russian leadership and disseminating anti-Western ideas among military personnel, this narrative significantly contributes to the long-term sustainability and persistence of Russia's aggressive behavior.[9]

Transformation of Russia's Military Sector

The "practitioners" also develop policy discourse related to the ongoing

strategic transformation of Russia’s military sector. One of the key themes in their discourse is the necessity of further self-isolation from the global community, at least at the informational level. This isolation is perceived as essential and inevitable for enabling Russia’s confrontation with the West and ensuring domestic political stability. To maintain this course, it is emphasized that Russia’s political and military establishments must remain politically mobilized and ideologically united over the long term. Sustaining this unity is seen as critical to Russia’s ability to endure prolonged strategic challenges.

Furthermore, military thinkers assert that Russia must achieve complete self-sufficiency in arms manufacturing, operating without any realistic expectation of sanctions being lifted or economic ties with Western countries being restored. They also struggle to identify any areas where Russia and the United States might establish sustainable and trustworthy cooperation. In contrast, they acknowledge greater potential for such cooperation between the United States and China.

Photo: Russian service personnel attend a service led for believers, including multi-child families, Russia’s soldiers involved in a military campaign in Ukraine and their relatives, at the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces near Moscow, Russia, January 15, 2023. Credit: REUTERS/Yulia Morozova TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY

At the same time, reliance (and even dependence) on "friendly countries" like Iran, North Korea, and China for the supply of conventional arms, components, and machine tools for domestic arms manufacturing is considered acceptable and potentially desirable for Russia's long-term military sustainability. This dependence is framed as compatible with the broader policy of self-sufficiency. Like the Soviet Union,

Russia is inclined toward trade and barter transactions rather than industrial cooperation and labor division, guided by the principle that "who pays the piper calls the tune."[10]

The "practitioners" are conceptualizing lessons from the war against Ukraine and modern warfare across all domains. While they avoid openly contradicting the official public discourse, they analyze the issues, challenges, and experiences of the Russian armed forces using veiled criticism.

Ground Domain

Russian military analysts posit that modern warfare in the ground domain should rely on small, agile units supported by drones, rockets, and precise artillery, replacing traditional manpower-heavy strategies.

Consequently, the structure of artillery and tank units is also becoming dispersed. A single maneuvering howitzer, supported by a reconnaissance drone unit and protected from adversary drones through electronic warfare, camouflage, and other measures, can outperform a traditional artillery battery stationed in a fixed position. Similarly, a single main battle tank, can be more effective than traditional tank units such as platoons or companies. However, single tanks are still effective in line-of-sight combat, but their effectiveness in blind-fire scenarios is greatly reduced.

Practitioners maintain that effectiveness of modern combat tactics is further illustrated by the preference for a series of localized, crushing attacks across multiple sectors of one or two combat zones simultaneously. This approach is more effective than the classic strategy

of one concentrated main attack with a secondary attack, even when the attacking force holds air and naval superiority or dominates in long-range precision weaponry. As a result, joint forces must consist of numerous simple, highly maneuverable combat units capable of acting autonomously in multiple directions, functioning as a network. This strategy prevents the adversary from concentrating its defensive efforts and can even transform an adversary’s concentration of forces into a vulnerability.

Photo: Russian servicemen arrive at a rehearsal for the Victory Day military parade in Moscow, Russia April 28, 2022. Credit: REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov

Achieving reconnaissance, information, and fire superiority on a local level can be highly effective against an adversary that is superior in manpower and conventional arms across the broader theater. However, establishing a highly centralized and efficient command structure for joint forces acting as a network proves nearly impossible. Consequently, the requirements for bottom-level (tactical-level) commanders and their intellectual and moral capabilities are increasing, as are the demands for reconnaissance, information, communication, and logistical support for such joint forces.

Military analysts concede that urban warfare, particularly in agglomerations, is another critical challenge for modern combat. Russia

is poorly prepared for this aspect of warfare, as its traditional approach—total destruction of cities followed by depopulation—often alienates civilian populations. This strategy transforms civilians into adversaries and destroys the economic and demographic foundations necessary for the restoration and functioning of these cities under Russian or allied control.

The understanding of what needs to be done, given Russia's objective organizational and material weaknesses (such as in arms systems, equipment, and command, control, and communication systems), does not align with the actual combat practices, adaptation efforts of the Russian armed forces, or the capabilities of the military-industrial complex.[11]

Air and Space Domains

In the air domain, Russian military experts acknowledge the poor performance of Russia's combat aviation in Ukraine, describing its use as a strategic deadlock. This situation highlights the paradox of Russia's continued air superiority paired with an inability to leverage that superiority on the battlefield effectively.

For decades, Russia has been trying to apply the US and NATO experiences of air warfare, learned in campaigns in Iraq and Yugoslavia, to Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria between 1991 and 2018. However, these approaches are now viewed as largely irrelevant to Russia's current needs and capabilities. Russia lacks the capacity to deploy hundreds of advanced aircraft armed with thousands of high-precision weapons and supported by extensive air- and space-based reconnaissance systems. Furthermore, the combat environment in Ukraine—saturated with advanced and highly effective air defense systems—presents challenges that Russia failed to account for in its military planning over several decades.

In response, Russia's military "practitioners" are pinning their hopes on the development of air combat systems equipped with artificial intelligence, which they believe could compensate for the technical

weaknesses of Russia's air forces. Another key challenge is improving Russian pilots' qualifications to meet the demands of modern air warfare.

Moving forward, Russia's air forces are expected to focus more on countering enemy air defenses, neutralizing air reconnaissance efforts, and defending their own air bases. The limited number of aircraft and the constrained capabilities of Russia's industrial base necessitate a shift toward multi-task combat missions. This approach involves individual aircraft performing reconnaissance, electronic warfare, and multi-domain fire tasks simultaneously. Consequently, Russia is likely to prioritize developing advanced air weapons tailored to its existing types and quantities of aircraft.[12]

Photo: An Orthodox priest conducts a blessing service in front of the Soyuz TMA-07M spacecraft at the Baikonur cosmodrome December 18, 2012. Soyuz with U.S. astronaut Thomas Marshburn, Russian cosmonaut Roman Romanenko and Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield is scheduled to fly to the International Space Station on December 19. Credit: REUTERS/Shamil Zhumatov (KAZAKHSTAN – Tags: SCIENCE TECHNOLOGY RELIGION)

In the space domain, Russian military thinkers view commercial multi-satellite space systems as a military threat on par with the military satellites of adversary nations. They recognize that space warfare is now a reality and anticipate its role will continue to grow in the coming years.

Consequently, developing a full range of countermeasures against these systems has become a key priority.

Russia's limited space reconnaissance and communication capabilities are identified as a critical challenge. To address this, Russia is exploring potential alternatives, including the use of stratospheric balloons and pseudo-satellites, as part of efforts to enhance its capabilities in this strategically vital domain.[13]

Naval Domain

In the naval domain, Russia's focus is expected to shift toward countering the US Navy and the navies of its allies rather than engaging in overseas power projection. Key strategic priorities include maintaining control over the Northern Sea Route and ensuring access to the Baltic Straits, both of which are considered core objectives.

Photo: File image of Russia Black Sea flagship Moskva (Moscow). Moskva, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, was being towed to port when "stormy seas" caused it to sink, according to a Russian Ministry of Defense statement on Friday April 15, 2022. Credit: Russia MOD/EYEPRESS.

Russia prioritizes small missile battleships and A2/AD zones over advanced naval assets, reflecting limited production capacity. Russia is also drawing lessons from various sources: Ukraine's naval forces in the Black Sea, which have successfully employed surface drones and

ground-based anti-ship missiles; the Houthis in the Red Sea, known for their use of anti-ship missiles; and China, with its experience in creating A2/AD zones in the South China Sea.

While the development of capabilities for landing assault operations will remain limited, experts still consider these operations are still considered vital to Russia's strategic planning.[14]

Conclusion

In brief, Russian military thinkers have realized that the current Russian armed forces are far from what they should be for modern warfare. This contradiction between theory and reality will define political discussions and the efforts of Russian political and military leadership toward adaptation and/or reform of the armed forces and military-industrial complex in the coming years. None of the players below the level of the Russian president, however, appear empowered to decide or even propose how the inevitable political and material tradeoffs necessary for a step-change in Russian military capability might be resolved.

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