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Russia's National Security Narrative: All Quiet on the Eastern Front

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Summary

The two defining features of Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy have been an increasingly adversarial relationship with the West and an increasingly close partnership with China. These drivers have been the salient feature of official Russian national security documents for the past three decades.

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. national security community has viewed Russian strategic thinking as misguided because it failed to see China as the real threat to Russia.

This view ignores the Kremlin's preoccupation with Europe as the most important strategic theater where its interests are at stake, and where they are threatened by the West's superior capabilities and ambitions. This view also ignores how unimportant—relative to Europe—the Asia-Pacific is for Russia.

Russia's partnership with China is secured, however, by a set of coherent and complementary strategic rationales, which supersede frequent concerns in the Russian strategic community at large about China and its growing capabilities and intentions vis-à-vis Russia. Those concerns appear to have little impact on Russian policy.

Notwithstanding those concerns in Russia's unofficial national security discourse, China's footprint on its foundational national security and foreign policy documents is invisible—and China, as a source of military threat to Russia, does not appear to be part of the Kremlin's calculus. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has long been the pacing challenge of Russian military modernization, and the main contingency for which it has been preparing has been future conflict in the European theater.

For the Putin regime, there is no alternative to Russia's "no limits" partnership with China. Moreover, even if Putin were no longer on the scene, a successor regime would have powerful economic, geopolitical, demographic, and military-strategic incentives to maintain this partnership. An adversarial relationship with China would pit Russia against two superior powers in two widely separated geographic theaters.

The war in Ukraine has cemented the Russian-Chinese partnership for the foreseeable future.

Introduction

The two defining features of Russia's foreign policy under Vladimir Putin have been an increasingly adversarial relationship with the West and an increasingly close partnership with China. They have developed hand in hand and complemented each other. In a stark departure from the Cold War, during which the Soviet Union was engaged in two rivalries—with the United States and with China—simultaneously, Russian foreign policy today reflects Putin's focus on the West as the principal source of danger for his country and regime.

Putin's war against Ukraine, preceded by his demands for the United States and its NATO allies to fundamentally alter post-Cold War European security arrangements, has dispelled all doubts—to the extent that any remained—about the primacy of Europe as the principal theater where Russia's strategic interests reside, from where the principal threats to the country's security emanate, and where the principal efforts to defend it from those threats are concentrated. As a critical strategic theater, Asia pales in comparison with Europe. The attack on Ukraine demonstrates the dominance of Europe and the unimportance of Asia—beyond China—in Russian strategic thinking.

Prior to the war in Ukraine, the view that Russian strategic thinking was myopic and misguided was widespread in the U.S. national security community. According to this view, the real threat to Russia in the medium and long term would emerge from China rather than the West. Sooner or later, the Russian strategic community would realize that. And the sooner it could be disabused of its mistaken approach to China, the better for the United States, whose interests would be best served by preventing Russia from becoming an ally and force multiplier of China. U.S. policy, therefore, should de-emphasize rivalry with Russia and instead seek to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing. In other words, it was a policy prescription for a partnership with Russia on the basis of perceiving a shared threat from China.

That prescription is no longer viable. However, for many years before the invasion of Ukraine, Western analysts and policymakers ignored the basic fact that Russia's partnership with China is not a short-term marriage of convenience but grounded in a set of coherent, complementary, and well-thought-out strategic rationales. This should have been obvious to anyone who followed the strategic discourse in Russia, read its national security documents, and sought to understand the basics of its domestic politics, national security decisionmaking, and economy.

One striking aspect of the Russian national security discourse largely overlooked by many in the U.S. strategic community is its all-consuming preoccupation with perceived threats from the West. Insecurity vis-à-vis the West has been the defining feature of official security documents since the 1990s, when the United States and Europe considered the Cold War to be over. In Russia, by

contrast, the West's security policy has always been viewed as a continuation in one form or another of its Cold War policies, initially as a "Cold War light" version, but increasingly as a manifestation of the West's hostile intentions toward Russia.

Another striking aspect of Russian national security documents that has been overlooked is the absence in them of any references to China as a challenge, let alone a potential source of threats to Russia. As alarm about China and its growing ambitions on the world stage became louder in the United States, Russia's national security documents avoided any mention of the country other than as a partner, and instead increasingly concentrated on the West as the principal source of threats. These documents, however, reflect the actual thinking of the country's national security leadership and its strategic posture.

This paper first provides an overview of these documents, their evolution since the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the strategic backdrop to that evolution. It then focuses on the treatment of China in these documents and explores the reasons why they have ignored the country as a threat or a challenge to Russian national security. Next, the paper explores the unofficial Russian debate about China, considers the practical manifestations in Russian defense policy of its Euro-centric preoccupation, and concludes with implications for the United States.

It Is About Europe

The war in Ukraine is but the latest conflict in the long historic cycle of war and peace in the relationship between Russia and the rest of Europe. Virtually the entire history of Russia as a modern state is one of wars waged in the European theater—against Sweden, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Prussia, Great Britain, France, Turkey, Austria, Germany, and so on.

The history of Russia's relationship with Asia contains nothing similar. Compared to the major European wars, the conquest of Siberia was a series of skirmishes, few of which are recognized as milestones in Russian history. Two major military undertakings stand out—the lost Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905 and the August 1945 campaign against Japan in Manchuria, which is extolled in Russian historiography as the final chapter of the Second World War. The latter lasted just a few weeks and is generally considered a footnote to the main war effort in the European theater, where the victory is celebrated on May 9 as the end of the Great Patriotic War.

Since the emergence of post-Soviet Russia in 1991, the Kremlin's preoccupation with the insecurity of the country's western flank has manifested itself on multiple occasions, and in defiance of indisputable trends in European security since the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, Russian leaders

objected to NATO admitting new members from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Russia's president at the time, Boris Yeltsin, accused U.S. president Bill Clinton of trying to split the continent again.¹ Russia's military threatened prospective members of the alliance with nuclear weapons, its foreign intelligence service warned about military retaliation in general, and its diplomats charged that the "NATO-centrism" and "NATO-mania" of U.S. policy "cannot suit Russia."² All of these accusations became the major, persistent theme in Russian policy toward Europe, culminating in the demands to fundamentally revise European security arrangements presented to the United States and NATO in December 2021 as the prelude to the war against Ukraine.³

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia's objections to NATO's eastward expansion made little sense to an outside observer as the country's struggles and biggest challenges were domestic during that period—the bloody campaign to suppress the separatist guerilla movement in Chechnya, the instability in the wider North Caucasus region, the sputtering efforts to revive the economy, and the political chaos. The United States and its NATO allies had nothing to do with any of these, and they provided financial and technical assistance to the Russian government on a wide range of economic and societal reforms.

Moreover, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's breakup, the United States and its allies spent vast amounts of money on programs that were essential to Russian national security. They financed and in many other ways facilitated the removal to Russia and securing of the vast nuclear arsenal and other weapons of mass destruction scattered across several former Soviet republics. Although this Cooperative Threat Reduction program was one of the key U.S. national security priorities, its immediate beneficiary was Russia.⁴

As NATO's eastward expansion got underway, the United States, eager to collect the post-Cold War "peace dividend," drastically reduced its military presence in Europe.⁵ At the end of the Cold War, it had some 300,000 troops in the continent. By 1995, that number had decreased to just over 100,000, where it remained approximately for the next decade. By 2008, it dropped to about 65,000, where it has been ever since. By 2013—the last year before the annexation of Crimea by Russia—the United States had reduced the number of its tanks deployed in the European theater from 5,000 in 1989 to zero.⁶ Other NATO members had carried out equally drastic changes to reduce their defense spending and the size of their militaries.⁷

Thus, NATO's expansion was accompanied by a process of its demilitarization. In speeches by its leaders and in official statements, the alliance embraced as its purpose securing "a lasting peace in Europe, based on common values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law."⁸ That purpose at times seemed to overshadow its original mission of common defense, which was expected—or almost presumed—to become obsolete as common values would become the

foundation of European security. In two strategic concepts—in 1999 and 2010—NATO also declared achieving “partnership” with Russia as a goal.⁹ In some documents it already referred to its relationship with Russia as a “partnership.”¹⁰

Senior U.S. officials in speeches and testimonies throughout the pivotal 1990s stated that expansion would not involve greater deployments of U.S. troops to the territories of new members but would instead result in an overall reduction of the U.S. military presence on the continent, which would be transformed into an “area where wars simply do not happen.”¹¹ The alliance also pledged to Russia that it had

no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO’s nuclear posture or nuclear policy – and do not foresee any future need to do so.¹²

And, given their small size and military capabilities, none of the new members could pose individually or collectively a meaningful threat to Russia.

In addition to its three pillars of propagation of shared democratic values, reduction of NATO’s military forces, and eastward expansion, the revamped European security architecture was buttressed by two key treaties intended to enhance the stability and security of all European nations. The first was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty signed by the United States and the Soviet Union in 1987, which eliminated an entire class of weapons that Soviet leaders had found threatening to their heartland and destabilizing for international security.¹³ The other was the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty in 1990, which imposed limits on and regulated military deployments by all its signatories.¹⁴ In addition, Vienna Document 1999 provided for increased transparency of military activities to build mutual confidence and reduce the risk of inadvertent and accidental escalation.

In addition to these treaties and documents governing primarily European security matters, the United States and Russia signed several arms-control treaties that greatly reduced the numbers of strategic nuclear weapons and means of their delivery in their arsenals. The 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), and New START in 2010 were major contributions to both countries’ security.

When measured by such indicators as the presence of powerful hostile neighbors, the military footprint as well as the declarations and actions of its presumed principal adversary in the European theater, and the framework of legally binding treaties, Russia entered the twenty-first century with the security of its western flank assured as never before. That, however, was not enough for it.

It Is Official

These positive changes in European security were noted in a succession of Russian national security documents of the 1990s and the 2000s. However, these documents also expressed a clear unease about the eastward expansion of NATO. Beginning with the 1993 military doctrine, “the expansion of military blocs and alliances to the detriment of the interests of the Russian Federation’s military security” was noted as a “danger” that could become an actual threat in the event of “the introduction of foreign troops in the territory of neighboring states of the Russian Federation.”¹⁵ The expansion of NATO became a key theme in subsequent iterations of military doctrine and national security strategy, with growing apprehension that “military dangers to the Russian Federation [were] intensifying,” chief among them the “military infrastructure of NATO member countries” approaching Russia’s borders.¹⁶

The most notable official pronouncement in this regard was Putin’s speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference in which he issued a stern warning to the United States and its allies not to expand NATO further eastward.¹⁷ The Kremlin followed up on Putin’s warning by crushing the Georgian military in the brief 2008 war to make clear that it would not tolerate Tbilisi’s ambitions to join NATO.

The war was followed by the resumption of cooperative relations with the West.¹⁸ But the détente with the West during Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency did not diminish Russian opposition to NATO’s eastward expansion as a threat to its security interests.¹⁹

Russia’s balancing act between cooperation and competition with NATO ended following its 2014 annexation of Crimea and the start of its undeclared war in eastern Ukraine. NATO was officially and unequivocally declared the principal source of military danger to the country.²⁰ Russia’s most recent National Security Strategy, published in July 2021, describes the United States and NATO as developing options for nuclear and conventional strikes against the country.²¹

The war against Ukraine, launched by the Kremlin in response to the West’s refusal to accept its demands to fundamentally revise the post–Cold War security arrangements, has put an end to the few remaining hopes of managing the tense relationship through such channels as the NATO–Russia Council, the Normandy Format to resolve the stalemate in eastern Ukraine, and the U.S.–Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue.²² The post–Cold War chapter in relations has ended with a major war between Russia and Ukraine backed by NATO in effect with all measures just short of direct participation by alliance troops. The ongoing conflict underscores the primacy of the European theater for Russia and the role of the United States and NATO as the pacing challenge for its defense and national security policy.

China Missing

By contrast, China is virtually absent from the Russian official statements, national security documents, and narratives spanning the three post–Cold War decades. The most recent National Security Strategy contains two references to the country: one in the context of “developing a relationship of all-encompassing partnership and strategic cooperation,” and the other in the context of deepening cooperation with it in the context of the BRICS (Brazil-India-China-South Africa) counterpart to the U.S.-led G7 group of advanced democracies.²³ Earlier iterations similarly referred to China as a partner with whom Russia planned to sustain and expand cooperative relations.²⁴

Partnership with China has been the counterweight to Russia’s increasingly adversarial relations with the United States and NATO. The two have progressed in synch over the course of Putin’s leadership, and the war against Ukraine is the most recent manifestation of this dynamic. Just before the war, Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping jointly announced the “no limits” friendship and declared that there were “no ‘forbidden’ areas for cooperation” between their two countries. These statements confirmed that balancing against the West by aligning ever closer with China is at the heart of Russian policy.²⁵

From Russia’s perspective, the partnership with China rests on solid reasoning. This includes political complementarity between two authoritarian governments and economic complementarity between China’s manufacturing sector and Russia’s resource wealth. For Russia’s ruling elite, the relationship is particularly important for two reasons. First, unlike the United States and the European Union, China does not seek to impose its values or demand domestic political changes that would loosen its hold on power in exchange for partnership. Beijing would also probably look unfavorably at attempts by Moscow to liberalize domestic politics. Second, Russia’s ruling elite derives significant material benefits from controlling the commanding heights of the economy. It has little incentive to change the resource sector’s dominant role in the economy, which benefits from trade with China.

Beyond these ideological, political, and economic factors, Russia has sound strategic reasons for pursuing and strengthening its partnership with China. Their priorities complement rather than contradict each other. Since Russia’s primary theater is Europe and China’s is the Asia-Pacific, their strategic interests overlap only in Central Asia, a region that is of secondary importance for both and where they can deconflict their interests as long as no strategic competitor like the United States is present.

Russia and China share a common adversary in the United States, which has global capabilities and presence that they see as challenging their interests in their critical theaters. Both consider U.S. defense programs, such as missile defenses deployed in Europe and the Asia-Pacific or to protect the

homeland, as a threat to their security and an attempt by the United States to deny them the ability to deter and retaliate against it in the event of war. Russia and China also in effect function as a force multiplier for each other by tying up U.S. capabilities in their respective critical theaters and thus preventing it from focusing its efforts on one or the other.

Avoiding a Two-Theater Confrontation

For Russia, which during most of the Cold War faced a major confrontation in two strategic theaters—with the United States and NATO in Europe and with China in Asia—the repeat of that experience, which ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet economy and the breakup of the Soviet Union, is not an option. The Kremlin sees the West as by far the most serious threat, which must be prioritized while disagreements with China have to be managed and resolved through diplomacy.

A great deal has been written about the successful diplomatic maneuver that was the opening of U.S. relations with China during former president Richard Nixon's administration. For the Soviet Union, already facing a hostile China in its Far East since the early 1960s as a result of the Sino-Soviet split, the prospect of an alignment between Washington and Beijing translated into a major military and economic burden. At the height of the Cold War, it had to maintain as many as fifty divisions facing China along a border of 4,200 kilometers.²⁶ That was in addition to the sixty-five divisions in the western Soviet Union, twenty on its southern flank, and thirty in Eastern Europe.²⁷ If the West's victory in the Cold War is attributed to the inability of the Soviet economy to sustain the burden of competition with the United States and its allies, significant credit is owed to China as a force multiplier in that competition.

The imperative to avoid a two-theater confrontation with powerful adversaries is also a lesson of the Soviet experience during the Second World War. After the experience of tense relations in the 1930s, which culminated in a major battle in 1939 in Mongolia, the Soviet Union signed a neutrality pact with Japan in 1941.²⁸ Combined with intelligence that Japan would not launch an attack against its Far East, this secured the Soviet Union's strategic rear.²⁹ No longer threatened with a two-front war in Europe and in Asia, Moscow was able to concentrate its effort on the war with Germany. This is a lesson well remembered in Russia today.³⁰

The only major military campaign carried out by the Soviet army in the Pacific took place after the defeat of Germany. Launched against Japan in August 1945, when the outcome of the war in the Pacific was not in doubt, this lasted just a few weeks and was concluded in early September. Known as the Manchurian campaign, it resulted in the defeat of the Japanese Kwantung Army.³¹

In Soviet and Russian military literature, which relies heavily on historical experience to inform future concepts of operations, the Manchurian campaign has long been held up as a successful example of rapid offensive operations designed to bring about a quick defeat of the enemy as early as in the initial phase of the war.³² In preparation for it, in early 1945, the Soviet High Command undertook major troop redeployments to the Far East from Europe, where the outcome of the war with Germany was already certain. In April 1945, the Soviet Union renounced its nonaggression treaty with Japan.³³ It issued a declaration of war on August 8 and the following day launched its offensive—three days after the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The operation was concluded on September 2, when Japan surrendered. During the Cold War and the long period of tension with China, the Manchurian campaign was seen as the prototype for potential future operations against it.³⁴

However, more recent Russian historiography reflects a different understanding of the Manchurian campaign. Instead of offering lessons for the conduct of hypothetical future operations against China, it is used to correct what Russia sees as the false historical narrative propagated in the West that the campaign was of marginal impact on the defeat of Japan in the Second World War. On the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the campaign in 2015, the dean of Russian military scientists, Army General Mahmut Gareev, who as a young officer fought in the Second World War and participated in the campaign, published an article challenging the proposition that the U.S. atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had played the decisive role in the defeat of Japan, arguing instead that the Manchurian campaign was of the “greatest military-political significance.”³⁵ The campaign, he stated, had precipitated the capitulation of Japan.

Instead of the anti-China bias evident in Russian Cold War writings, more recent ones reflect a clear anti-Japan bias and emphasize the Japanese threat to the Soviet Union and China during the Second World War. Also on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the Manchurian campaign, the official Russian government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* charged that “Japanese aggression had for many years posed a serious threat to the vital interests of the Soviet and Chinese peoples, [and] millions of Chinese were enslaved by treacherous occupiers.”³⁶ Gareev wrote in his article that the defeat of the Japanese army in Manchuria “washed away the shame of [Russia’s] defeat” in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905, which had weighed as “a heavy memory in the conscience of our country.”

The shift in Russian official historiography from the Cold War preoccupation with China to the post-Cold War focus on Japan is consistent with changes in security policy. Russia’s ever-closer partnership with China has relegated the prospect of a military confrontation between them to the margins, whereas the deteriorating relationship with the United States has elevated the perception of threat from its treaty ally Japan.

Japan is also the only country—other than Ukraine, after the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia—that maintains active territorial claims against Russia. The Russian military doctrine published in 2003 highlights the threat of maritime landing operations in the Far East.³⁷ The potential culprit in such contingencies could only be Japan, possibly in coalition with the United States. The document also notes that inadequate transport links between central Russia and the Far East could have a “negative impact” on the course of military operations.³⁸ The combination of Japanese territorial claims and inferior Russian capabilities in this theater could in the event of a conflict leave Russia with few alternatives to resorting to nuclear strikes against the invaders.

Japan hosts U.S. troops on its territory and participates in joint military activities with the United States in the Asia-Pacific. Although it has canceled two previously planned sites for the U.S. Aegis Ashore missile system, it has decided to procure two Aegis-equipped ships and thus to contribute to what Russian officials perceive as the U.S.-led effort to build global missile defenses, which they consider to be a threat to Russia.³⁹ Russian analysts have also criticized Japan’s changes in its defense posture that entail, in their view, growing geographic ambitions, capabilities beyond self-defense, and participation in presumably U.S.-led coalition wars.⁴⁰

Overall, however, the Far East and the Asia-Pacific do not hold a special place as an independent theater of operations in Russian official military thinking. Rather, its importance reflects threat perceptions driven by adversarial relations with the United States and its NATO allies centered on Europe and the imperative of avoiding a simultaneous confrontation in two far-flung theaters.

Beyond Official Documents

Russia’s official national security documents mostly ignore China as a threat. They focus almost entirely on contingencies in and related to the European theater and on the adversarial relationship with the West, but its unofficial discourse reveals a great deal of unease about and hostility toward China. For example, in 2004, one of the most prolific Russian independent military analysts, Aleksandr Khramchikhin, co-authored an extensive critique of the 2003 military doctrine.⁴¹ This accused the defense establishment of failing to recognize that China was “the main threat” to Russia on the basis of the disparity between the two countries’ economic, military, and demographic potential, as well as Beijing’s claims on 1.5-million-square-kilometers of Russian territory in the Far East.⁴²

The threat from China has been a widespread topic in unofficial Russian media over the past two decades. The discussion has ranged from the overall challenge of the relationship with China and avoiding the fate of becoming its junior partner to the size and outlook for its nuclear arsenal, to its

expanding influence in Central Asia, to the shallow quality of Russian-Chinese cooperation, to China's territorial claims in the Far East, and to the army's inability to defend the region from the threat posed by China's superior military capabilities.⁴³

Against the backdrop of deteriorating relations with the West and ever-closer partnership with Beijing, concerns have been raised about the reported expansion of China's nuclear arsenal. For example, in 2021, Vassily Kashin, a leading expert on China, stated:

We are witnessing the birth of a third great nuclear power. . . . For Russia this process will have tangible geopolitical consequences—now it is the only power capable of speaking to the US as an equal in the nuclear sphere. But soon it will lose this exclusive status. It, of course, is unpleasant.⁴⁴

More tangible implications of China's nuclear buildup were discussed in a 2021 article by the dean of Russian strategic analysts, Alexey Arbatov.⁴⁵ According to him, should Beijing proceed with reported plans to expand its nuclear arsenal to match those of the United States and Russia, this would lead to a three-way arms race.⁴⁶ The strategic nuclear balance that currently exists would be “radically destabilized” as a result. Arbatov argued that Russia would not be able to stay out of a conflict between the United States and China.⁴⁷ In the event of a nuclear exchange between the two, it would be “fully” affected. Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles launched from silos that are currently being built would “fly over Russian territory.”⁴⁸ In its response to the Chinese buildup, Arbatov predicted, the United States would seek new, higher limits on its strategic nuclear systems, even if it does not need them, to maintain balance against Russia.⁴⁹ He concluded that the existing Russia-U.S. arms control framework would be unlikely to survive as a result.⁵⁰

Concern in the expert community about China and its growing capabilities and intentions vis-à-vis Russia appears to have little impact on official policy, however. Russia's policy of continuing the war in Ukraine and escalating tensions with the West mean it has no alternative to the “no limits” partnership with China.⁵¹ The intensity of the Kremlin's confrontation with the West apparently leaves it no room to risk even the slightest deterioration of relations with Beijing. The legacy of the two-theater confrontation during the Cold War runs deep in the Russian leadership.

It Is All About the West

There is little doubt that the pacing challenge motivating Russia's defense policy is in the West. The maintenance of its most important national security asset—its nuclear arsenal—is driven by the competitive relationship with the United States and regulated by their bilateral arms-control frame-

work. Strategic nuclear parity with the United States has been the critical preoccupation of national security leaders, most importantly of Putin. His multiple, repeated statements leave no doubt that parity with and the ability to credibly deter the United States— whose developing missile defenses could, according to long-standing concerns of military planners, threaten that ability—are primordial.⁵² The main characteristic of the new weapons systems touted by Putin is their ability to overcome U.S. missile defenses.

One of the most significant developments in Russia's defense policy in the post–Cold War era was its violation of the 1987 INF Treaty. While the decision to develop, test, and deploy the SSC-8 (Novator 9M729) ground-launched cruise missile in violation of the treaty may have been prompted in part by latent unease about China, the essence of Russian concerns about the treaty had more to do with the United States' deployment of missile defenses in Europe.⁵³ The decision to proceed with the SSC-8 was likely intended as an asymmetric response to U.S. missile defenses in Europe and as an additional capability for the military to expand the range of targets it could hold at risk in the European theater.

The perceived threat from the West was also the chief motivating factor behind the ambitious, expansive, and expensive program of military reform and modernization launched after the 2008 war with Georgia, which had put the spotlight on multiple shortcomings in the military's performance.⁵⁴ The political goal of the war was to draw a “red line” beyond which Russia would not tolerate the expansion of NATO into the former Soviet space. There is little doubt that the target of reform and modernization for the military has been NATO and the main contingency for which it has been preparing has been future conflict in Europe, and not with China in Asia.⁵⁵

Russian forces oriented toward the European theater include the Western and the Southern Military Districts and the Northern Fleet, which has been elevated to the status of a military district.⁵⁶ That is where the bulk of war-fighting capability is located. The Eastern Military District that faces China is home to much smaller conventional capabilities.⁵⁷ Russia's increasing focus on the Arctic, where it sees the United States and NATO as its principal adversaries, has resulted in more of the Eastern Military District's resources dedicated to its northern region.⁵⁸ According to Sweden's Defense Research Agency, the forces deployed in the Eastern Military District would probably suffice for a “defensive operation along Russia's land border and Pacific coast” in a “regional war . . . involving an enemy that is a military great power,” but this would probably escalate to a nuclear confrontation.⁵⁹ The army's ability to reinforce the Eastern Military District would be severely hampered by the limited transportation links between the Far East and the western parts of the country where the bulk of its military capabilities is deployed.

Russia's military posture in the Asia-Pacific theater reflects threat perceptions that have little to do with China. The focus is on the United States and its treaty allies in the Western Pacific. The missions of the Pacific fleet are centered on the protection of its strategic assets—ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) that ensure Russia's survivable second-strike capabilities.⁶⁰ These are critically important to the ability to maintain strategic nuclear balance with the United States. The delivery of two new SSBNs and the expected delivery of two more in the 2020s may at some point acquire greater relevance in the context of the Russian-Chinese strategic balance, but for the foreseeable future there can be little doubt that this is driven by the strategic competition with the United States.⁶¹

Russia's military and naval activities in the Asia-Pacific also point to the prominence of the United States and Japan, rather than China, in its threat perceptions in the region. One of its highest-profile naval deployments in recent years has taken place near Hawaii in 2021, a deliberate demonstration to the United States of the Russian Navy's reach. In 2017, an article in the state-controlled *Russia Beyond* noted that the "Pacific Fleet's resurgence sets off alarm bells in Washington."⁶²

Japan has been a frequent target of Russia's military and naval activities in the Pacific. Despite Japanese attempts to improve relations and arrive at a mutually acceptable resolution of their territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, Russian military activity aimed at the country has continued unabated.⁶³ Senior Russian officials have ostentatiously visited the islands and replied to Japanese protests with insulting comments.⁶⁴ Russia has been upgrading anti-ship and air defenses in the islands and staged high-profile weapons tests there.⁶⁵ Japan has also reported violations of its airspace by Russian aircraft.⁶⁶ In March 2022, a ten-ship Russian naval group was reported operating in the Sea of Japan.⁶⁷

In connection with its latest war, Russia has moved troops from the Eastern Military District to Belarus and Ukraine.⁶⁸ This is reminiscent of the redeployment of troops from Siberia to the defense of Moscow during the critical phase of the Second World War.⁶⁹ It sends a powerful signal that the Russian leadership feels assured that its strategic rear—the long land border with China and the Asia-Pacific more generally—is secure and that it can afford to concentrate its forces and efforts on the theater that matters the most.

Conclusions and Implications

Russia's official national security narrative and defense posture leave no doubt that it sees the main military threat as coming from the West and that it does not consider China a military threat. This has been its underlying security vision for most of the past three decades, and it has increasingly acquired saliency on Putin's watch. The war in Ukraine has only reinforced this, marking the decisive break between West and Putin's Russia—and for as long it remains Putin's Russia, this will be the guiding vision of its national security policy.

The current adversarial relationship with the West is not a new feature of Russian foreign and defense policy, however. It follows a long tradition of alternating conflicts and uneasy coexistence with the rest of Europe. The novelty of the situation is in the rise in Russia's strategic rear of a vastly more powerful China that could potentially threaten the country, its territorial integrity, and even its physical survival. While its official national security narrative does not acknowledge this, China's potential danger to Russia is recognized in the country's expert community in which a conversation is underway about China and the challenge its rise presents for Russia.

The gap between the official and unofficial narratives is striking. However, in the current domestic political context foreign policy, and especially relations with other major powers, is within the exclusive purview of Putin. For the foreseeable future, or as long as he remains at the helm, the unofficial view of China is likely to have little, if any impact on official policy. Should there be a change at the top, a shift in foreign policy is likely to occur, and a more carefully calibrated Russian posture could emerge.

Most, if not all, of the concerns about China raised by participants in the unofficial discourse can be resolved with adjustments rather than radical changes to Russia's defense and diplomatic posture. Such adjustments could entail a more diversified policy in the Asia-Pacific to include improved relations with Japan, as well as even lowering of tensions with the West, which would relieve Russia of a major military burden it currently carries—largely as a result of its own hostile posture toward NATO. Even the prospect of a dangerous three-way strategic nuclear arms race with China and the United States can be managed by resuming discussions about strategic stability and arms control, including China, whose participation may be encouraged by Russia.

Beyond Putin's vision of partnership there are sound economic, political, and military-strategic reasons for a strong partnership with China. It is true that, so far, Chinese assistance to Russia in its war against Ukraine has not demonstrated “a friendship with no limits.” The Chinese, most notably,

apparently have not provided military assistance in support of Russian operations in Ukraine, even though it was reportedly requested.⁷⁰ Beijing, while increasing energy purchases from Russia, has avoided economic and financial support that would risk Western imposition of trade and financial sanctions on the Chinese economy. Moscow might be disappointed with the level of Chinese material support for its war effort in Ukraine, and Russian and Chinese perspectives on some issues may often diverge. But the outlook for Russia is challenging, including the impact of the global energy transition, the demographic picture, and the cutoff from Western technology and markets.

An adversarial relationship with China in addition to hostility toward the West would amount to a perilous burden of a strategic competition unfolding in two geographic theaters against two superior powers. For the Kremlin, the current alignment appears to be rational. Putin's successor may deviate somewhat from the "no limits" friendship, but for the Russian president, in Russia's current predicament and cloudy outlook, there is not likely to be an alternative to sustaining a good-neighborly relationship with China. Should Russia's next leader take on the challenge of domestic reconstruction after decades of Putin mismanaging the economy and warping the country's political system, the last thing they would need is a confrontation with China.

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