



# Strategic Assessment—Russia

## *Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy*

Ben Lombardi  
DRDC CORA

DRDC CORA TM 2009-016  
April 2009

**Defence R&D Canada**  
**Centre for Operational Research & Analysis**

Strategic Joint Staff (SJS)

# **Strategic Assessment - Russia**

## *Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy*

Ben Lombardi  
DRDC CORA

Information cut-off date: November 2008

The reported results, their interpretation, and any opinions expressed herein, remain those of the author and do not represent, or otherwise reflect, any official position of DND or the Government of Canada.

## **Defence R&D Canada – CORA**

Technical Memorandum  
DRDC CORA TM 2009-016  
April 2009

Principal Author

*Original signed by Ben Lombardi, PhD*

---

Ben Lombardi, PhD

Defence Scientist, Strategic Analysis Section

Approved by

*Original signed by Stephane Lefebvre*

---

Stephane Lefebvre

Section Head, Strategic Analysis

Approved for release by

*Original signed by Dale Reding*

---

Dale Reding

Chief Scientist

Defence R&D Canada – Centre for Operational Research and Analysis (CORA)

- © Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, as represented by the Minister of National Defence, 2009
- © Sa Majesté la Reine (en droit du Canada), telle que représentée par le ministre de la Défense nationale, 2009

## Abstract

---

This technical memorandum was prepared in October-November 2008 as the first of what is projected to be a series of rolling strategic estimates of Russia. The arguments and conclusions presented herein will be re-examined during the preparation of the next such estimate in light of newly available evidence and findings.

The Russo-Georgian conflict during summer 2008 has led many commentators to question the belief that has guided the West's foreign policy-making since the collapse of the Soviet Union, namely that Russia would become a progressively more integrated member of the Western community of states. The accompanying sense of disappointment has led to fears that a new Cold War is likely to ensue. This Technical Memorandum argues that the roots of contemporary Russian foreign policy are to be found in the country's strategic culture, within which the armed forces have always played an important role in the construction of Russian political identity. Today, that includes the current regime's agenda of building a strong state. The Russo-Georgian war does not, therefore, necessarily mark the onset of a new age of confrontation with the West. Moscow's objective in using military force against Tbilisi was almost certainly to put an end to any prospect of Georgia joining NATO, a development that Russian leaders have frequently identified as a challenge to core national interests. Foreign policy under Presidents Putin and Medvedev is primarily designed to create the most favourable conditions for Russia's political, social and economic modernization, while not permitting its international position to be weakened.

## Résumé

---

Première d'une série d'analyses stratégiques successives consacrées à la Russie, le présent rapport a été rédigé en octobre-novembre 2008. Les arguments et les conclusions présentés ci-dessous seront réexaminés lors de la préparation du prochain rapport, à la lumière des faits nouveaux et des constatations subséquentes.

Le conflit qui a opposé la Russie et la Géorgie au cours de l'été 2008 a amené plusieurs commentateurs à remettre en cause la conviction ayant guidé l'élaboration de la politique étrangère occidentale depuis l'effondrement de l'URSS, soit que la Russie s'intégrerait progressivement à la communauté des États occidentaux. La déception associée à cet événement a fait resurgir le spectre d'une nouvelle guerre froide. Selon les auteurs de cette analyse technique, la politique étrangère russe contemporaine est ancrée dans la culture stratégique du pays. Dans cette culture, les forces armées ont toujours joué un rôle important dans la construction de l'identité politique russe. Aujourd'hui, cela s'inscrit dans le plan du régime actuel de bâtir un État fort. En conséquence, le conflit russo-géorgien ne marque pas nécessairement le début d'une nouvelle ère d'affrontement avec l'Occident. En recourant à une intervention militaire contre Tbilisi, l'objectif de Moscou était sans doute de stopper toute velléité de la Géorgie d'adhérer à l'OTAN, une possibilité que les dirigeants russes ont fréquemment dénoncée comme une atteinte aux intérêts fondamentaux du pays. Sous la direction des présidents Poutine et Medvedev, la politique étrangère vise essentiellement à créer les conditions les plus favorables à la

modernisation politique, sociale et économique de la Russie, tout en ne permettant pas un affaiblissement de sa position sur la scène internationale.

## Executive summary

---

### Strategic Assessment - Russia: Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy

**Ben Lombardi; DRDC CORA TM 2009-016; Defence R&D Canada – CORA; April 2009.**

The Russo-Georgian conflict during summer 2008 has led many commentators to question the belief that has guided the West's foreign policy-making since the collapse of the Soviet Union, namely that Russia would become a progressively more integrated member of the Western community of states. The accompanying sense of disappointment has led to fears that a new Cold War is likely to ensue and to demands that Russia ought to be punished for what many Western governments have described as an aggressive and anachronistic policy toward its weaker, southern neighbour. The belief that the Russian actions in Georgia pose a severe challenge to the West, a view espoused by US and British leaders, might be correct. If so, the implications will be profoundly worrisome. However, it is far more likely that the conflict with Georgia—a crisis that was not initiated, but was certainly exploited by, Moscow—is a more measured exercise of military suasion and diplomatic signalling. Within this alternate explanation, Russia is a Great Power seeking to release itself from the post-Cold War settlement, that it was unable to oppose in the early-1990s due to its own weaknesses, of which elements have long been declared as incompatible with core national interests. As a result, the situation in the south Caucasus, where Western intentions often seem considerable but its real interests are minimal, was probably viewed as an opportunity not to be missed.

The Russo-Georgian war does not, therefore, necessarily mark the onset of a new age of confrontation with the West. Moscow's objective in using military force against Tbilisi was to put an end to any prospect of Georgia joining NATO, a development that Russian leaders have frequently identified as a challenge to core national interests. Foreign policy under Presidents Putin and Medvedev is primarily designed to create the most favourable conditions for Russia's political, social and economic modernization, while not permitting its international position to be weakened. Without engaging in a direct military confrontation with the US and its allies that might have led to an incalculable escalation of tensions, the Georgian operation was a very useful means of signalling Moscow's position that the European security architecture cannot be constructed in opposition to the declared interests of a key international player, namely Russia. "The Russian Federation," President Medvedev has stated, "is not happy with the current system. We are not happy with it because we see no place in it for Russia."

In seeking to advance its foreign policy objectives, Russian leaders are operating within a strategic culture markedly different from the value systems that predominate within the community of Western liberal-democracies. Due to its history and geography, the armed forces have always played a very prominent role in the construction of Russia's political identity. Today, in addition to the traditional tasks of maintaining order at home and security abroad, the armed forces have been assigned another duty, namely to assist in the policy of national recovery. The crisis of strategic identity and the loss of international status that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the loss of an empire to which many Russians are not yet reconciled, is to be overcome, in part, by the construction of a "strong state," of which a more assertive foreign

policy is part. Most Western liberal-democracies see the use of armed force as a last resort and diplomacy's fundamental purpose as the avoidance of crises. In Russia, however, the military option is alive and well in its arsenal of policy instruments and its diplomacy views crises as a useful mechanism to advance strategic goals. In that sense, Moscow's current foreign policy need not represent a break, but could instead be drawing upon Imperial Russia's foreign policy tradition, particularly in the mid-nineteenth century. (The situation is analogous, for after its decisive defeat in the Crimean War, Russia spent the next two decades seeking a means of regaining the power and prestige that it had lost; and, interestingly, Russian leaders have made frequent reference to Tsarist policy in that era.) There are two main reasons for the current leadership to look to that earlier age. First, as under the Tsars, being a partner of the West has never been viewed as implying that Russia's national interests somehow became permanently identical with those of the West. Therefore, alongside cooperation, competition and confrontation are to be expected, although always managed in a way to avoid dangerous military collisions with other Great Powers. There is evidence to support this interpretation. Although it has scaled back its ties with NATO in the wake of the Georgian crisis, Moscow has neither completely severed them nor has it revised ongoing cooperation in support of the Alliance's mission in Afghanistan. Moreover, recent statements by President Dmitri Medvedev regretting the suspension of negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Warsaw (11 September), clearly signal a desire to maintain ties with the West. A profound disagreement over Georgia's pro-Western policy and, by extension, NATO ambitions on Russia's borders, does not, therefore, immediately translate in Moscow's eyes into a necessary return to Cold War-type relations.

A second reason for looking beyond the Soviet era is that the current Russian leadership undoubtedly sees, just as their predecessors did in the nineteenth century, international affairs as inherently fluid and characterized by occasional fluctuations of power. Such an environment can be exploited to advance core interests. Russian policy today appears to be seeking any advantage it can find in a dynamic international environment and, as a weaker player, is trying to take advantage of real or perceived vulnerabilities of their stronger opponents to advance the goals contained within the *stability paradigm*. "I understand only one policy," Alexander III told his ministers in 1881: "To exact from every situation all that is needed by and is useful to Russia, to discard all other considerations, and to act in a straightforward and resolute manner. We can have no policy except one that is purely Russian and national: this is the only policy we can and must follow." One of the most effective options is to try to exploit opportunities (often by generating crises) to advance one's own interests. The May 2007 abrogation of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) by Vladimir Putin, in part due to opposition to the flank limitations that were viewed as humiliating and, more recently, Russia's disagreement with NATO over ballistic missile defence, accompanied by harsh and sometimes threatening rhetoric, are consistent with this approach. In both cases, Moscow's goal has been to weaken NATO cohesion and to persuade the NATO allies that their policies will increase tensions. In some cases, such as its very strident opposition to the Kosovo war (1999) and later that statelet's unilateral declaration of independence (2008), Moscow was unable to move its policy forward—but far from dampening Russian expectations, it only fuelled the belief that Russia needed to act more like a Great Power.

Despite its vast oil revenues and frequent evidence of a new self-confidence, the current Russian leadership nonetheless knows that their country is weak. It is confronting profound economic and demographic uncertainties, and does not want to endanger its economic relationship with Europe. It should not be assumed, therefore, that Russia is seeking to challenge the current international

system. In this sense, it must be set apart from revolutionary players, such as the USSR, that desired to fundamentally change the existing international order and replace it with an alternative one. Moscow recognizes that there is no feasible direct challenger to US preponderance. Nevertheless, difficulties in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and recent well-publicised trans-Atlantic disputes, have created the impression in Moscow that Washington's reach is increasingly constrained. This perceived ebbing of power represents an opportunity for various types of challenges to the post-Cold War system in Europe, but more precisely in areas long deemed (and publicly declared to be) of great importance to Russian interests.

Does that mean that Moscow intends to invade the Baltics and/or Ukraine, or orchestrate a popular uprising against Kiev's authority in Crimea? Such conclusions cannot be drawn from the events in Georgia last summer, for a challenge to NATO's Article V guarantees to its Baltic members and the West's geopolitical interests in Ukraine would certainly ramp up tensions to unmanageable and extremely dangerous levels. It is, however, probable that Moscow expects that its actions in Georgia will be interpreted as meaning that it can no longer be taken for granted in European security discussions, and that its new assertiveness has decreased the attractiveness of extending NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine – the latter a reasonable assumption, given that the Western Allies are not interested in a confrontation with Russia. And, in the meantime, when tensions gradually decrease, as they will, it seems likely that the Russian leadership will welcome efforts to bridge the divisions between the two sides that events in Georgia have brought to the fore of Europe's attention, and that Moscow has raised many times in the past.

For Russia, the construction of the strong state and the concomitant goal of Great Power status are ongoing—for many reasons, the country's strategic culture would seem to demand that both goals are always being pursued. Security for a state and society that have experienced so much insecurity in their past, both recent and more distant, is rather like walking toward the horizon—the goals, while legitimate, are forever unachievable, at least to a degree that is categorical. Sir Christopher Meyer, a former British ambassador to the United States, noted recently that “[t]he Russia that we are dealing with today, with its fear of encirclement, its suspicion of foreigners and natural appetite for autocracy, is as old as the hills, long pre-dating communism.” A criticism frequently directed at decision-makers is that they design their foreign policy for the world that they want, not to address the world as it is. Disappointment with the direction of Moscow's foreign policy is, in part, rooted in exaggerated expectations of the velocity by, and extent to, which Russia could become a member of the Western grouping of states. Given its historical experience and strategic culture, more modest ambitions are both logical and reasonable: in other words, accepting the country for what it is and working with it on that basis, instead of basing policy on how foreigners think *it ought to behave* and what interests *it ought to have*. The crisis created by the Russo-Georgian conflict was, in part, a product of the intersection of Western hopes and Russian realities. Moscow's invasion of Georgia was not intended to be the first shots of a new Cold War, nor even necessarily the onset of a new era of confrontation—and Russia's leaders have stated this many times in the weeks since the ceasefire took effect. It was, instead, an alarm bell that advised Western leaders that Russia can no longer be what its leaders have long suspected it has been in the West, the object of derision. Instead, the Russian leadership will define its own approaches to the questions that most concern its country, including those in the broader international arena. And, as a consequence, it expects to be treated with respect and to have its interests taken into account by other Powers, including the European states and most especially, the United States.

## Sommaire

---

### **Strategic Assessment - Russia: Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy**

**Ben Lombardi; DRDC CORA TM 2009-016; R & D pour la défense Canada – CORA; Avril 2009.**

Le conflit qui a opposé la Russie et la Géorgie au cours de l'été 2008 a amené plusieurs commentateurs à remettre en cause la conviction ayant guidé l'élaboration de la politique étrangère occidentale depuis l'effondrement de l'URSS, soit que la Russie s'intégrerait progressivement à la communauté des États occidentaux. La déception associée à cet événement a fait resurgir le spectre d'une nouvelle guerre froide, et des voix ont réclamé que la Russie soit punie pour ce que de nombreux gouvernements occidentaux ont qualifié de politique agressive et anachronique à l'égard de son voisin du sud, plus faible. La croyance que les actions de la Russie en Géorgie posent un sérieux défi à l'Occident—à laquelle souscrivent les dirigeants américains et britanniques—, est peut-être fondée. Si c'est le cas, ses répercussions seront des plus inquiétantes. Toutefois, il est beaucoup plus probable que le conflit avec la Géorgie—une crise dont le Kremlin n'était pas l'instigateur mais qu'il a certainement exploitée—était davantage un exercice relativement mesuré de persuasion militaire et un signal diplomatique. Dans la logique de cette autre explication, la Russie est une grande puissance qui cherche à s'affranchir de l'arrangement post-guerre froide, arrangement auquel elle n'a pas été en mesure de s'opposer au début des années 90 en raison de sa propre faiblesse, mais dont elle a déclaré depuis longtemps certains éléments incompatibles avec ses intérêts nationaux fondamentaux. Conséquemment, la situation dans le Sud du Caucase, où les intentions des pays occidentaux semblent souvent de grande envergure, mais où leurs intérêts réels sont minimes, a sans doute été perçue comme une occasion à ne pas rater.

En conséquence, le conflit russo-géorgien ne marque pas nécessairement le début d'une nouvelle ère d'affrontement avec l'Occident. En recourant à une intervention militaire contre Tbilisi, on peut sans doute affirmer que l'objectif de Moscou était de stopper toute velléité de la Géorgie d'adhérer à l'OTAN, une possibilité que les dirigeants russes ont fréquemment dénoncée comme une atteinte aux intérêts nationaux fondamentaux. Sous l'égide des présidents Poutine et Medvedev, la politique étrangère vise essentiellement à créer les conditions les plus favorables à la modernisation politique, sociale et économique de la Russie, tout en ne permettant pas un affaiblissement de sa position sur la scène internationale. Sans s'engager dans un affrontement militaire direct avec les États-Unis et ses alliés, qui aurait pu déboucher sur une escalade incalculable des tensions, l'opération géorgienne a été un moyen très utile de transmettre la position de Moscou : l'architecture de la sécurité européenne ne saurait être bâtie en opposition avec les intérêts déclarés d'un acteur international clé, nommément la Russie. À cet égard, le président Medvedev a déclaré : « la Fédération russe n'est pas satisfaite du système actuel. Nous ne sommes pas satisfaits parce que nous n'y voyons aucune place pour la Russie. »

En poursuivant leurs objectifs de politique étrangère, les dirigeants russes œuvrent à l'intérieur d'une culture stratégique profondément différente du système de valeurs qui prédomine dans la communauté des démocraties libérales occidentales. Pour des raisons historiques et géographiques, les forces armées ont toujours joué un rôle prépondérant dans l'édification de

l'identité politique russe. Aujourd'hui, outre les tâches traditionnelles du maintien de l'ordre au pays et de la sécurité internationale, on a confié aux forces armées une autre mission, soit appuyer la politique de reconstitution nationale. La crise de l'identité stratégique et la perte du statut international qui ont accompagné l'éclatement de l'Union soviétique, ainsi que la disparition d'un empire que de nombreux Russes n'ont pas encore acceptée, doivent être surmontés, en partie, par la construction d'un « État fort » ayant comme attribut une politique étrangère musclée. Les démocraties libérales occidentales voient l'intervention des forces armées comme un dernier recours et la prévention des crises comme la raison d'être de la diplomatie. En Russie, cependant, l'option militaire figure en bonne place dans l'arsenal des instruments politiques et la diplomatie russe considère les crises comme mécanisme utile pour faire progresser ses objectifs stratégiques. En ce sens, la politique étrangère actuelle de Moscou ne représente pas nécessairement une rupture; on pourrait plutôt considérer qu'elle s'inspire de la tradition politique étrangère de la Russie impériale, particulièrement au milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. (La situation est analogue, car, après l'écrasante défaite de la guerre de Crimée, la Russie a passé les deux décennies suivantes à chercher un moyen de regagner le pouvoir et le prestige perdus : et, chose intéressante, les dirigeants russes ont fréquemment fait référence à la politique tsariste de cette époque.) Deux grandes raisons justifient que les maîtres actuels du Kremlin se tournent vers cette période passée. Premièrement, comme sous les tsars, être un partenaire de l'Occident n'a jamais voulu dire que les intérêts nationaux de la Russie s'aligneraient en permanence sur ceux de l'Occident. Par conséquent, en parallèle avec la coopération, il faut s'attendre à la concurrence et à l'affrontement, quoique toujours gérés de façon à éviter des collisions militaires dangereuses avec les autres grandes puissances. Il y a des preuves à l'appui de cette interprétation. Bien qu'ayant réduit ses liens avec l'OTAN dans la foulée de la crise géorgienne, le Kremlin ne les a pas rompus complètement, pas plus qu'il n'est revenu sur sa coopération actuelle à la mission de l'Alliance en Afghanistan. De plus, les déclarations récentes du président Dimitri Medvedev déplorant l'interruption des négociations en vue d'un accord de partenariat et de coopération avec l'Union européenne et la visite du ministre des Affaires étrangères Sergei Lavrov à Varsovie le 11 septembre dernier expriment une volonté manifeste de conserver des liens avec l'Occident. En conséquence, un désaccord profond au sujet de la politique pro-occidentale de la Géorgie et, par extension, des ambitions de l'OTAN aux frontières de la Russie, ne signifie pas immédiatement, aux yeux de Moscou, un nécessaire retour à des relations de type guerre froide.

Il y a une seconde raison pour regarder au-delà de l'ère soviétique. À l'instar de leurs prédécesseurs du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, les leaders russes d'aujourd'hui voient que les affaires internationales sont intrinsèquement fluides et caractérisées par d'occasionnelles fluctuations de pouvoir. Un tel environnement peut être exploité pour promouvoir leurs intérêts fondamentaux. La politique russe contemporaine semble rechercher tous les avantages qu'elle peut trouver dans un environnement international dynamique et, en tant qu'acteur faible, Moscou tente de tirer parti des vulnérabilités réelles ou présumées de ses adversaires forts pour progresser vers la réalisation des objectifs contenus à l'intérieur du *paradigme de la stabilité*. « Je ne comprends qu'une seule politique », a dit Alexandre III à ses ministres en 1881, soit « tirer de chaque situation tout ce qui est nécessaire et utile à la Russie, écarter toutes autres considérations et agir franchement et résolument. Nous ne pouvons avoir aucune politique, sinon une politique qui soit purement russe et nationale : c'est l'unique politique que nous puissions et que nous devons suivre. » L'une des options les plus efficaces est de tenter d'exploiter les occasions (souvent en générant des crises) pour promouvoir ses propres intérêts. La suspension de l'application du Traité FCE par Vladimir Poutine, en mai 2007, en partie attribuable à l'opposition au régime restrictif des flancs, considéré comme humiliant, et, plus récemment, le désaccord entre la Russie et l'OTAN au sujet du

bouclier antimissile, accompagné par un durcissement du discours russe, parfois assorti de menaces, s'inscrivent dans cette approche. Dans les deux cas, l'objectif de Moscou était d'affaiblir la cohésion de l'OTAN et de persuader les membres de l'Alliance que leurs politiques auraient pour effet d'aviver les tensions. Dans certains dossiers, comme celui du Kosovo, après s'être opposé avec véhémence à la guerre du Kosovo (1999) et, ultérieurement à la déclaration unilatérale d'indépendance de ce petit État (2008), Moscou n'a pas réussi à imposer sa politique, mais, loin de refroidir les attentes russes, cet échec a uniquement alimenté la conviction que la Russie doit agir davantage comme une grande puissance.

En dépit de ses imposants revenus pétroliers et des fréquentes manifestations de sa nouvelle assurance, les dirigeants russes sont néanmoins conscients de la faiblesse de leur pays. La Russie est en proie à des incertitudes économiques et démographiques profondes et ne veut pas compromettre ses relations économiques avec l'Europe. Par conséquent, il ne faudrait pas présumer que la Russie souhaite contester le système international actuel. En ce sens, il convient de la distinguer des acteurs révolutionnaires, telle l'URSS, qui souhaitait transformer radicalement l'ordre international existant et le remplacer par un autre. Moscou reconnaît qu'il lui est impossible de défier directement la prépondérance des États-Unis. Néanmoins, les difficultés américaines, tant en Afghanistan qu'en Iraq, ainsi que les récents conflits transatlantiques fort médiatisés, ont créé l'impression à Moscou que la zone d'influence de Washington est de plus en plus restreinte. Cet affaiblissement apparent de la puissance américaine ouvre la voie à divers types de contestations du système post-guerre froide en Europe, mais plus précisément dans des domaines depuis longtemps considérés de la plus haute importance pour les intérêts russes—et déclarés publiquement tels.

Cela signifie-t-il que Moscou a l'intention d'envahir les pays baltes et/ou l'Ukraine, ou d'orchestrer un soulèvement populaire contre l'autorité de Kiev en Crimée? On ne saurait tirer de telles conclusions des événements survenus en Géorgie l'été dernier, car toute atteinte aux garanties accordées aux membres baltes de l'OTAN par l'article V et les intérêts géopolitiques de l'Occident en Ukraine propulseraient les tensions à un niveau ingérable et extrêmement dangereux. Cependant, Moscou s'attend probablement à ce que ses actions en Géorgie soient interprétées comme un signal qu'il ne faut plus traiter la Russie comme une quantité négligeable dans les discussions sur la sécurité européenne et à ce que sa nouvelle assurance ait rendu moins attrayante l'idée d'accueillir dans les rangs de l'OTAN la Géorgie et l'Ukraine—cette dernière hypothèse étant fort raisonnable puisque que les alliés occidentaux ne sont pas intéressés à un affrontement avec la Russie. Et, dans l'intervalle, avec la diminution graduelle et inévitable des tensions, il est probable que les dirigeants russes accueilleront favorablement les efforts visant à aplanir les dissensions entre les deux camps sur lesquelles les événements en Géorgie ont attiré l'attention de l'Europe, et que Moscou a soulevées à maintes reprises dans le passé.

Pour la Russie, le double objectif de l'édification d'un État fort et du retour au statut de grande puissance est permanent; pour de nombreuses raisons, la culture stratégique du pays semble exiger que ces deux objectifs soient constamment poursuivis. Pour un État et une société qui ont connu autant d'insécurité dans leur passé, tant récent que plus lointain, la sécurité s'apparente plutôt à marcher vers l'horizon—les objectifs, quoique légitimes, sont à jamais inatteignables, du moins de façon décisive. Sir Christopher Meyer, ancien ambassadeur britannique aux États-Unis, a observé récemment que « la Russie avec laquelle nous traitons aujourd'hui, avec sa peur de l'encerclement, sa méfiance à l'égard des étrangers et son appétit naturel pour l'autocratie, remonte à la nuit des temps, bien avant l'apparition du communisme. » Une grande erreur des

décideurs est souvent d'élaborer leur politique étrangère en fonction d'un monde idéal, et non du monde tel qu'il est. Les désaccords avec la politique étrangère poursuivie par la Russie sont, en partie, le résultat d'attentes exagérées de l'abilité et du vouloir de la Russie à se joindre au groupe des démocraties occidentales. Compte tenu de l'histoire et de la culture stratégique de la Russie, des attentes plus modestes seraient à la fois logiques et raisonnables : en d'autres mots, il serait plus avantageux pour nous d'accepter ce pays pour ce qu'il est et de travailler avec lui sur cette base que de façonner une politique en fonction de nos attentes quant à la manière dont elle *devrait se comporter* et les intérêts *qu'elle devrait avoir*. La crise engendrée par le conflit russo-géorgien était, en partie, le produit de l'intersection d'espoirs européens et des réalités russes. L'invasion de la Géorgie par la Russie ne se voulait certainement pas la première salve d'une nouvelle guerre froide, ni même nécessairement le début d'une nouvelle ère d'affrontement. Les dirigeants russes l'ont d'ailleurs répété à maintes reprises dans les semaines qui ont suivi l'entrée en vigueur du cessez-le-feu. C'était plutôt un signal d'alarme signifiant aux leaders occidentaux que la Russie ne peut plus être ce que ses dirigeants ont longtemps soupçonné qu'elle était en Occident, l'objet de dérision. Au lieu de cela, les dirigeants russes définiront leur propre approche face aux enjeux primordiaux de leur pays, y compris ceux qui s'inscrivent dans l'arène internationale. Conséquemment, ils s'attendent à être traités avec respect et à ce que les autres puissances prennent en compte leurs intérêts, ce qui inclut les États européens et, plus particulièrement, les États-Unis.

This page intentionally left blank.

# Table of contents

---

Abstract .....	i
Résumé .....	i
Executive summary .....	iii
Sommaire. vi	
Table of contents .....	xi
Acknowledgements .....	xiii
1.... Introduction.....	1
2.... The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 .....	3
3.... Strategic Culture .....	9
4.... Confrontation or Cooperation, or Both? .....	18
5.... Relations with NATO .....	22
6.... Moscow looks at Washington.....	27
7.... Conclusion .....	33
Distribution list.....	35

This page intentionally left blank.

## Acknowledgements

---

Science is as much about engaging in a dialogue by means of publications with others working in similar fields on similar topics to advance knowledge, as it is about an individual interacting alone with his research materials. There is, as a consequence, an unavoidable debt that can be repaid, though only partially, by acknowledging the work and ideas of others. The author would, therefore, like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and Dr. Stephen Blank who read an earlier draft of this paper. The comments that they provided were very helpful, both in improving the quality of the arguments found herein and, more generally, in helping to situate the work in the larger field of Russian studies. These scholars brought to my attention sources I had not found, details I was not aware of, and arguments that I had not considered. The reviewers' comments were not always taken on board; however, they were all carefully considered. I hope that where disagreements remain in the final text, they will still see some merit in the overall work. I would also like to thank the staff at the DRDC CORA Library, particularly Michael Cowhey and Andrea Burrows, who very efficiently located the many works I requested. That assistance was essential to the completion of this technical memorandum.

This page intentionally left blank.

# 1 Introduction

---

This technical memorandum was prepared in October-November 2008 as the first of what is projected to be a series of rolling strategic estimates of Russia. The arguments and conclusions presented herein will be re-examined during the preparation of the next such estimate in light of newly available evidence and findings.

There are obviously many reasons to prepare a paper such as this, including the need to respond to a growing chorus that believes Russia has once again become a long-term adversary. It is important to participate in that debate, but Russia should nonetheless claim our attention because of its continuing geopolitical importance. Although it no longer occupies the positions it held during the age of the tsars or when the Soviet empire stretched from the Elbe to the Pacific, Russia is still one of the world's major Powers. As such, its political life and the policies its government pursues are of intrinsic interest to anyone concerned about the international security environment. In recent years, however, the optimism concerning the future of Russia that followed upon the end of the Cold War has largely dissipated. While the economic and social transformation that the country is undergoing is positive according to some indicators, the conclusions derived from political developments often seem far less so. A 2006 report prepared by the Council on Foreign Relations stated that "taken as a whole the political balance sheet of the past five years is extremely negative:"

The practices and institutions that have developed over this period have become far less open, far less transparent, far less pluralist, far less subject to the rule of law, and far less vulnerable to the criticism and counterbalancing of a vigorous opposition or independent media. As the fifteen-year milestone of the Soviet Union's breakup approaches, Russia—almost alone among European countries—is actually moving further away from modern European political norms.<sup>1</sup>

A review of last year's presidential election and the Russo-Georgian conflict of this past summer will only serve to reinforce that assessment. And yet, given that there is little evidence of widespread unease in Russia with what is transpiring inside the country, such developments may reflect more the essentially authoritarian political culture of the Russian state that is being exploited by its current leadership. Russia's foreign relations are equally influenced. In her study of Imperial Russian foreign policy, Barbara Jelavich noted that the sacrifices demanded of the Russian people to support the growth and maintenance of state power "have perhaps been greater than those asked of any other European nation" but "[t]hey have, in return, maintained their independence from foreign control, [and] gained dominance over one of the largest stretches of territory on the globe."<sup>2</sup> It is possible that some cultures, such as Russia's, value order and security—responses to a danger-filled and violent history—more than they do the uncertainties and vulnerabilities associated with liberal democracy.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Edwards and Jack Kemp (Co-Chairs), "Russia's Wrong Direction: What the United States Can and Should Do," Independent Task Force Report #57 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Jelavich, *A Century of Russian Foreign Policy, 1814-1915* (Philadelphia: J.W. Lippincott, 1964), p. v.

The process of building a “strong state” in the post-Cold War era was begun by the former president, Vladimir Putin, and was a reaction to the decade-long uncertainty that had afflicted both state and society in Russia. But he did not invent such a concept, as its roots lie deep in the Russian national consciousness. The “strong state” is a product of a political culture where authority is legitimised by the accumulation of power. (It is too soon to know if his handpicked successor, Dmitri Medvedev, will pursue the same approach, but their close association over many years would suggest that continuity is likely. The expectation that greeted his accession to office that he would abandon Putin’s approach to reform and to governance so far seems misplaced.<sup>3</sup>) But in the absence of a revolutionary ideology that advocates the elimination of liberal-democracy, which was the *raison d’être* of the Soviet Union, it is not at all certain that the “strong state” is a natural adversary of the West. Instead, its relationship will almost certainly follow a path similar to the pre-Soviet era, where emulation, cooperation and competition all coexisted. Given its background and its geography, Moscow can be expected to differ, sometimes significantly, on some issues with the Western Powers, but on others interests might coincide. Greater attention to understanding the Russian position in each case would, it seems obvious, allow a more informed and nuanced assessment of Moscow’s intentions.

---

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Rahr and Stefan Meister, “Russia under Medvedev,” *DGAP aktuell*, April 2008 [*Accessed at [www.dgap.org/publikationen/views/1dceffebee15dcb44ffeb11dca9644bc3941fbb55bb55.html](http://www.dgap.org/publikationen/views/1dceffebee15dcb44ffeb11dca9644bc3941fbb55bb55.html)*].

## 2 The Russo-Georgian War of 2008

---

Much of the discussion as to whether or not Russia has once again become an implacable opponent coalesced around the August 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict—a “clarifying act of violence” according to one writer<sup>4</sup>—and the subsequent recognition by Moscow of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The de facto annexation of those territories—de facto in that neither is likely to be viable as an independent entity in the mid- to long-term—has led many to question whether Russia is still a viable international partner for the West. But the Georgian war did not occur in a political vacuum and seemed to be consistent with what many saw as Putin’s ongoing assault on nascent democratic institutions at home. Some observers have grown particularly concerned by the growing number of leading figures in politically-prominent positions whose background lies in either the military or the intelligence apparatus (i.e., the *siloviki*<sup>5</sup>). Olga Kryshantovskaya and Stephen White have argued that the reliance by Putin and now Medvedev on *siloviki* is an attempt by the regime to maintain control, as much as possible, over all social processes—a style of government reminiscent of the Soviet era.<sup>6</sup> The Russian state, it is argued, has been captured by people who are intent both on extracting “rent” to enrich themselves and, as a result of a “militarization” of politics, are predisposed to employing an aggressive foreign policy. Their emphasis on national security concerns purposely exaggerates the dangers of the outside world, thereby dampening domestic criticism of their actions, slowing economic and political reform, and buttressing their power and influence.

This thesis is thought-provoking for observers of modern Russia. It is undeniable that the number of *siloviki* was greater under Putin than under his predecessor, and it is possible that this might account for the apparent aggressiveness in the country’s foreign relations. However, it is not entirely convincing. There is research available that raises questions about a direct causal link between the institutional origins of the regime’s circle of influence and the new international assertiveness of Russia.<sup>7</sup> Nepotism and clientelism have, after all, long been a component of Russian and Soviet politics. (President Medvedev, for example, did not come from the ranks of the military or intelligence structures and owes his position entirely to a connection with Putin that stretches back to the latter’s involvement in St. Petersburg’s municipal politics.) So, while the presence of the *siloviki* is important and worthy of continuing study, it is likely of more immediate concern to Western observers. The opacity of Russian governance structures, that the presence of the *siloviki* represent and reinforce, has left many foreign observers unsettled by the

---

<sup>4</sup> Harvey Sicherman, “A Clarifying Act of Violence: Russia, Georgia and the West,” Electronic newsletter distributed by the Foreign Policy Research Institute (visit <http://www.fpri.org>), 20 August 2008.

<sup>5</sup> *Siloviki* refers to people from the Russian armed forces, paramilitary forces and intelligence agencies (*silovye struktury*).

<sup>6</sup> See Olga Kryshantovskaya and Stephen White, “Putin’s Militocracy,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 4, October-December 2003, pp. 289-306.

<sup>7</sup> The thesis rests on a belief that Russian governance structures have survived largely unchanged from the Soviet era, and that the new elite are homogenous in their outlook. Neither is certain. President Medvedev, for example, was a lawyer with no ties to the country’s force structures. See Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin’s Legacy* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), pp. 42-70. Bettina Renz argues, moreover, that many *siloviki* do not appear to share a common mindset and, instead, believe that their appointment was due to personal loyalty to Putin, rather than institutional background. See her “Putin’s militocracy? An alternative interpretation of Siloviki in contemporary Russian politics,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 6, September 2006, pp. 903-924.

seeming concentration of political power and an apparent willingness to use it in a manner that is inconsistent with very basic liberal-democratic standards. But, of course, both are characteristic of Russia's authoritarian political culture.

Such developments have, nonetheless, led many commentators to question the underlying belief that has guided the West's foreign policy-making since the collapse of the USSR: namely that Russia would become a progressively more integrated member of the Western liberal-democratic community of states. Translated onto the international stage, there is a growing unease that Russia might not be a source of stability in global affairs that so many had hoped. Indeed, in the eyes of some people, it has become little more than a spoiler in the international system, with its leadership identifying areas where opposition, particularly from the Western Powers, might be weak or disunited and then aggressively seek to advance its own agenda.<sup>8</sup> The Georgian war only reinforced such concerns. In a much reported trip to the Baltic Republics shortly after last summer's fighting ended, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that "I believe, one must say, that the war in Georgia has not only changed the South Caucasus, but the world political situation."<sup>9</sup> British Foreign Secretary David Miliband observed that "[t]his is not the way in which international relations can be run in the twenty-first century."<sup>10</sup> Disappointment with Russia has also been accompanied by what can only be described as hyperbole. Former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski likened the war to the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1940, and both Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt and Estonian President Toomas Henrik Ilves compared Russian actions to that of Hitler and the Sudetenland.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the tone adopted by critics, the war has led many to believe that Russia and the West are now on divergent, and possibly conflicting, strategic paths.

Given such a belief, therefore, it is not at all surprising that the conflict has strongly suggested to some people that a new Cold War has begun. That perspective has led to demands that Russia be punished for what has been described as an aggressive and anachronistic policy toward its weaker, southern neighbour. "The West must make plain to Mr. Putin," a lead editorial in *The Economist* emphasised, "that Russia's invasion of Georgia means an end to business as usual."<sup>12</sup> The view that Russian actions in the Caucasus pose a severe challenge to the West, a position most emphatically voiced by US, British, and Polish leaders, may in time be proven correct. If so, the implications are profoundly worrisome. A relationship with Russia characterised only by confrontation would severely constrain the advance of key international objectives—e.g., in the war on terrorism, in Afghanistan, on Iran and in areas currently unforeseen—by the Western Powers. It would substantively alter the dynamic of international politics for many decades to come.

It is not entirely clear, however, if that is the only course that events can take. Much naturally depends on what Russia intended to accomplish with its use of military force in Georgia and,

---

<sup>8</sup> Such areas include the Caucasus, Ukraine, Kosovo, Iraq, and, most recently, the Arctic. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to this argument.

<sup>9</sup> Bundesregierung Deutschlands, "Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel in Tallinn, Estland," 26 August 2008, accessed at [http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/nn\\_5296/Content/DE/Rede/2008/08/2008-08-26-merkel-kunstmuseum-tallinn.html](http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/nn_5296/Content/DE/Rede/2008/08/2008-08-26-merkel-kunstmuseum-tallinn.html).

<sup>10</sup> James Meikle, "Miliband criticises Russian aggression in Georgia," *The Guardian*, 13 August 2008.

<sup>11</sup> See "Vladimir Putin takes on a Powerless West," *Der Spiegel*, 18 August 2008, and "Diplomatic Mood Darkens in Georgia," *BBC News*, 11 August 2008.

<sup>12</sup> "Russia resurgent," *The Economist*, 16 August 2008.

beyond humiliating Tbilisi, those objectives are not entirely clear. The Georgian leadership has claimed that it was responding to unprovoked Russian aggression—and the rapid deployment and movement of Russian combat formations into and outside of South Ossetia and Abkhazia would seem at first to support this charge.<sup>13</sup> “We know, without doubt” that Georgia’s actions were purely defensive, Richard Holbrooke and Ronald Asmus, the former likely to be named a special envoy for the incoming Obama Administration, confidently asserted in an on-line forum.<sup>14</sup> And while Moscow has not denied that it had made contingency plans, it has repeatedly argued that its actions were defensive, and designed to protect the civilian populations of those two regions, for which it had responsibility, as well as its own peacekeeping contingents there from Georgian attacks.<sup>15</sup> The growing awareness in Europe that the Georgian president’s more forceful approach to dealing with the two provinces might have contributed to the actual outbreak of hostilities has probably prevented the emergence of any consensus about the war. It has, instead, led to an interest in investigating this dispute.<sup>16</sup> German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier has demanded that an independent international panel look into the origins of the conflict.<sup>17</sup> And, alongside a demand that Moscow rescind its recognition of the two breakaway provinces, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) has seconded the proposal for an international investigation.<sup>18</sup> It is expected that the European Union will convene an independent panel to undertake the task.

Although a detailed discussion of the conflict is beyond the scope of this paper, it is reasonable to hypothesise that the use of military force might have been initiated by the Georgian president but

---

<sup>13</sup> The Georgian government’s argument that it was responding to Russian aggression is found in documents that it presented to the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE): OSCE SEC.DEL/255/08, “Russian Invasion of Georgia—Facts and Figures,” 15 September 2008; and OSCE SEC.DEL/258/08, “Russian Invasion of Georgia—Media and television intercepts confirm Russia started the war,” 22 September 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Holbrooke and Ronald D. Asmus, “Only TransAtlantic Unity Can Stop This War,” AtlanticCommunity.org, 17 August 2008, accessed at [http://www.atlantic-community.org/index/articles/views/Only\\_TransAtlantic\\_Unity\\_Can\\_Stop\\_This\\_War.html](http://www.atlantic-community.org/index/articles/views/Only_TransAtlantic_Unity_Can_Stop_This_War.html).

<sup>15</sup> During an early-September exchange with the Valdai Club, Vladimir Putin challenged the Georgian claim that the deployment of Russian military units preceded Tbilisi’s order for its forces to cross into South Ossetia. In rejecting the argument that the Russian response was disproportionate, he rather crudely asked “Should we have this time also wiped the bloody snot from our face and bowed our head? What do you want—that we wave pocket knives?” (Andrei Zolotov Jr., “Three Hours With Vladimir Putin,” *RussiaProfile.org*, 12 September 2008.) In his presentation at the World Policy Conference a month later, President Medvedev referred to the outbreak of conflict as having been caused by the “irresponsible, adventurous actions by the ruling regime of a small country (Georgia in this case)...”. See President of Russia, “Speech at World Policy Conference, Evian, France,” 8 October 2008.

<sup>16</sup> In a December 2007 report by the Assembly of Western European Union, Tbilisi’s new approach was identified as the cause of an increase in tensions. “Following 12 years of relative peace without military confrontation, the active policy conducted by the Georgian Government of President Saakashvili with a view to restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity led to an increase presence of Georgian interior ministry troops and a major escalation of violence in the summer of 2004. A new ceasefire was agreed in August 2004, but the unrest in the region continues, the negotiations on a future status have practically ground to a standstill and the parties have little confidence in each other.” See “Georgia’s quest for integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures,” Document A/1980 (Paris: Assembly of Western European Union, 3 December 2007), p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> “Steimeier Calls for International Probe into Georgia Conflict,” *DeutscheWelle*, 5 September 2008.

<sup>18</sup> “The West Begins to Doubt Georgian Leader,” *Der Spiegel*, 15 September 2008.

that the ensuing conflict was very ably exploited by Moscow. Russian forces were, after all, prepared for exactly that contingency and had been conducting exercises in the region for the previous three years.<sup>19</sup> The escalation of tensions in the months preceding the outbreak of hostilities, the build-up and re-equipping of Russian combat units in the region, and the repeated violations of Georgian airspace, should have led Tbilisi to expect Russia to respond when it chose to use armed force to resolve its problem with the South Ossetians.<sup>20</sup> Why the Georgians did not expect a very forceful response – and one that would ensure an undeniable victory for Moscow – is unclear, as is the absence of any anticipation in European capitals in the weeks leading up to the war that a conflict was imminent. It is also unclear why the Bush Administration was unable to stop the outbreak of a conflict it obviously did not want, particularly after it had purportedly warned Tbilisi, a key regional partner, not to provoke Moscow. Subsequently, media reports suggest that the Georgian leadership had allowed hubris to overrule such advice; and that Georgian officials had drawn up a concept of operations for a crisis in South Ossetia that would see their army sweep in and seize the territory before Russia could respond.<sup>21</sup> The failure of that approach, if that was what the Georgian government had attempted, has led some members of the Georgian parliament to term the conflict with Russia a national disaster, and has called for the resignation of their president.<sup>22</sup>

In Russian military circles, the war with Georgia has not escaped a critical analysis by both military and political leaders. First of all, they are very much aware of the operational shortcomings of the armed forces. Aged military equipment and “the calamitous performance of Russia’s C<sup>3</sup>I in combat operations” helped speed the demand for transformation.<sup>23</sup> By October 2008, therefore, the government announced a major military reform program that it admitted had been “strongly influenced” by the war and that included downsizing of the armed forces, acquisition of new equipment, and a new emphasis on a “permanent readiness force structure”. Although the reform plans had been drafted before the summer military campaign, the war became the justification for its promulgation.<sup>24</sup> From yet another perspective, the war may not be termed an unqualified success for it remains unclear if the *status quo post bellum* has really advanced Russian interests in the Caucasus. If the war has stalled the movement of Georgia toward NATO, it led instead to Tbilisi obtaining a “strategic partnership” with Washington; and, possibly just as significant, Russia has lost an overland route through Georgia, necessary for the supply of its bases and troops in Armenia.

---

<sup>19</sup> Pavel Felgenhauer, a well-known observer of Russia, has argued that not only was the invasion of Georgia pre-planned under the cover of military exercises, but that “massive strategic reinforcements were mobilized for a possible escalation of hostilities in case Washington offered Tbilisi assistance and became directly involved in the fray.” No other source consulted by this writer repeated this claim. Pavel Felgenhauer, “Medvedev’s Plans for Military Rearmament,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 3 October 2008.

<sup>20</sup> See Andrew C. Monaghan, “The Russo-Georgian Conflict,” *Immediate Report* (Rome, Research Division, NATO Defence College, August 2008), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Helene Cooper, C.J. Chivers and Clifford J. Levy, “U.S. Watched as a Squabble Turned Into a Showdown,” *The New York Times*, 18 August 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Molly Corso, “Georgia: Opposition Takes on Saakashvilli in Tbilisi,” *Eurasia Insight*, 23 September 2008, accessed at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav092308a.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Roger McDermott, “Russia’s Conventional Forces After the 2008 Georgia War,” unpublished manuscript, undated, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

As one might expect, last summer's war has nevertheless been presented by Moscow as a forceful response to aggression, and there has been a sustained effort to downplay any negative consequences for its broader international agenda. This was to be expected. Over the past few years, even as its policy has become more confident, sometimes overly assertive, Russia has sought to emphasise that the constant tension associated with the Cold War is a thing of the past. Its leaders, including President Medvedev and Premier (former president) Putin, have frequently noted that they are not interested in the return to an era of confrontation. In mid-2007, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov wrote that "Russia and the West are no longer adversaries" and observed that his country had abandoned "ideology and imperial ambitions."<sup>25</sup> At Sochi, in April 2008, President Bush and then-President Putin signed the *Strategic Framework Declaration* that addressed cooperation in a broad range of areas, including non-proliferation, missile limitations, energy, Iran, North Korea, terrorism, and climate change.<sup>26</sup> In its immediate aftermath, now-Premier Putin repeatedly stated that the Georgian conflict did not mark the beginning of a new Cold War.<sup>27</sup> More recently, Medvedev has noted that "we in Russia think that such times are gone. We cannot rebuild the Berlin Wall and restart the Cold War."<sup>28</sup> Two weeks later, he told the World Policy Conference in Evian, France, that "[w]e are in no way interested in confrontation. Russia's successful development depends on transparent and equal international relations."<sup>29</sup> And, by late-October, the Chief of the Russian General Staff, Army General Nikolai Makarov emphasised to his US counterpart, Admiral Michael Mullen, that neither country had "the stamina or spirit for a fully-fledged Cold War."<sup>30</sup>

If the Russian leadership is sincere then the war in Georgia was probably not caused by, as many commentators asserted, that the Russian bear has awakened from a nearly two-decade long hibernation and is hungry. Reconciling the events last summer with the more measured statements coming out of Moscow might at first appear difficult, but it is not impossible. One other possible explanation worth exploring is that Russia's conflict with Georgia, which has a history going back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was not necessarily instigated as a direct challenge to the West, nor need it be a component in a larger expansionist agenda within the area occupied by the former USSR. Instead, it might well have an unexpected, if somewhat predictable, crisis that was exploited to provide a means of military suasion and diplomatic signalling.<sup>31</sup> Within this alternate explanation, Russia can be understood as a Great Power seeking to release itself from the post-Cold War settlement that it was unable to oppose in the early-1990s due to its own weaknesses, but elements of which it has long declared to be incompatible with core national interests. As a result, a war in the South Caucasus, where

---

<sup>25</sup> Information and Press Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "The Article by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov—"Containing Russia: Back to the Future?" 19 July 2007.

<sup>26</sup> President of the United States, *US-Russia Strategic Framework Declaration*, 6 April 2008.

<sup>27</sup> "Russia's Putin Says no Basis for New Cold War with U.S.," *FoxNews.com*, 11 September 2008. See also Andrei Zolotov Jr., "Three Hours with Vladimir Putin," *RussiaProfile.org*, 12 September 2008.

<sup>28</sup> "New Cold War Impossible – Medvedev," *Interfax*, 2 October 2008.

<sup>29</sup> President of Russia, "Speech at World Policy Conference," Evian, France, 8 October 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Kirill Zubov, "No Stamina for Another Cold War," *RBK Daily*, 23 October 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Of course, another possible explanation for the discrepancy is that the Russian leadership is just lying to deceive and divide the West. Given that prevarication was a well-honed practice in the Soviet Union, and frequently employed in that country's foreign relations, one can assume that many in the current regime are familiar with it. However, as this paper will argue, seeing the Georgian war as nascent expansionism does not fit larger domestic and foreign policy goals.

Western intentions often seem considerable but its real interests are minimal, was probably viewed as an opportunity not to be missed. Unhappy that its strong opposition to Georgia's increasingly close relationship with NATO was of no apparent consequence to the West, Moscow acted to defend both regional and broader international interests. Without engaging in a direct military confrontation with the US and its allies that might have led to an incalculable escalation of tensions, the Georgian operation was a very useful means of signalling Moscow's position that the European security architecture cannot be constructed in opposition to the declared interests of a key international player, namely Russia. "The Russian Federation," President Medvedev has stated, "is not happy with the current system. We are not happy with it because we see no place in it for Russia."<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> President of Russia, "Transcript of the Meeting with the Participants in the International Club Valdai," 12 September 2008.

### 3 Strategic Culture

---

If this alternate explanation is accurate, what does it say about the role of the Russian Federation in the international system? Or, and more precisely, what foreign policy instruments does Russia view as legitimate and why? Strategic culture is an analytical tool that assists us in understanding the behaviour of states. In the absence of a generally accepted definition of what constitutes strategic culture, most authors see the concept as a normative envelope within which decision-makers consider the role of armed force in advancing national interests and policies. Colin Gray, one of the best known strategic theorists, described strategic culture as “modes of thought and action with respect to force, which derives from perceptions of the national historical experience, from aspirations for responsible behaviour in national terms.”<sup>33</sup> Gray’s definition ties the contemporary world’s decision-makers to a polity’s traditions and perceptions of itself in history. Those types of considerations are essential, as a country’s strategic identity is, like language itself, multi-generational and the product of how it understands and presents its own experiences. Another, more detailed, definition has been provided by Kerry Longhurst that is derived, in part, from his studies of German history. For Longhurst, strategic culture is

a distinctive body of beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding the use of force, which are held by a collective and arise gradually over time, tending to outlast the era of its original inception, although it is not a permanent or static feature. It is shaped and influenced by formative periods and can alter, either fundamentally or piecemeal, at critical junctures in the collective’s experiences.<sup>34</sup>

The fundamental change Longhurst refers to is, perhaps, most obvious in the case of postwar Germany, but the value of his definition is that it denies any determinism to strategic culture. Individuals, not their culture, continue to make decisions about the use of armed force, although those decisions are likely being influenced by a set of common beliefs. Moreover, Longhurst’s approach argues that, for decision-makers, not all parts of a country’s history need be viewed as equally valuable by policy-makers. Strategic culture is, at its root, an umbrella concept under which multiple identities coexist and are interacting. So the “formative periods” while still agreed to be part of a common understanding of history, are subject to assessment by leaders.

For some international relations theorists, strategic culture is too woolly a concept to be of much analytical worth. “Strategic culture too often emphasises stereotypical views of other cultures,” one scholar has written, “and ignores the nuance of political institutions, geostrategic context, and specific leaders.”<sup>35</sup> However, while strategic culture is not a panacea, all of our institutions and

---

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in John Baylis, James J. Wirtz, Eliot Cohen and Colin Gray, *Strategy in the Contemporary World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 86.

<sup>34</sup> Kerry Longhurst, “The Concept of Strategic Culture,” Gerhard Kummel and Andreas D. Prufert (eds). *Military Sociology* (Baden-Baden, Germany: NOMOS Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000), p. 200.

<sup>35</sup> An interesting overview of the critique of strategic culture can be found in Christopher Towney, “Lacunae in the Study of Culture in International Security,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 29, No. 2, August 2008, pp. 338-357. The quotation is found on page 339. This author’s disagreement with Towney centres on the role of methodological rigor. Colin Gray’s call for greater recognition that rigor, while admirable, should not “take precedence over an inconvenient reality” seems to offer a more practical and insightful approach to research in this field.

processes of governance have been influenced by the norms and values associated with culture—and it offers a range of *acceptable* answers to leaders that seem to make sense of a given geostrategic context. Far from being deterministic, all studies that utilise strategic culture should aim to provide, therefore, greater insight into the context within which leaders make their decisions about peace and war. “When we refer to Russian strategic culture,” Colin Gray recently wrote in an article in *Comparative Strategy*,

what we are claiming is that there is a Russian way both of thinking about the threat or use of force for political purpose and of acting strategically. In the latter regard ... there is a Russian “way of war.” This “Russian way” is a distinctive product of Russia’s history and geography, as interpreted for guidance by Russians.<sup>36</sup>

What is the “Russian way”? Russia’s passage through the centuries has left the country and its people with a particular set of intertwined beliefs regarding political power, state-society relations, and the role of the armed forces. Indeed, with regard to the latter, military power has consistently played a key role in legitimising the political authority of the governing regime. Fritz Ermarth has argued that Russian strategic culture—“that of Imperial Russia from its emergence as a state in the middle of the last millennium through most of the existence of the Soviet Union into the late 1980s—has been one of the most martial and militarized such cultures in history rivaling (sic), if not exceeding, those of Prussia, Imperial and Nazi Germany, and Imperial Japan in this respect.”<sup>37</sup> Russia has not been generally governed by its military leaders,<sup>38</sup> although several have played important national roles, but the military mentality and “modes of acting and decision” have been carried into civilian politics.<sup>39</sup> As a consequence of this influence, the armed forces have played and continue to play an important role in the construction of Russia’s political identity. This was perhaps most evident in the nineteenth century because, in the social hierarchy of Imperial Russia, the military “ranked directly after the imperial family, holding precedence over members of the imperial court, the State Council, the Committee of Ministers, and other government officials.”<sup>40</sup> Such prominence also had a direct impact on the conduct of politics. Emperor Alexander III (1881-1894), “the Peacemaker”, avoided becoming embroiled in any

---

<sup>36</sup> Colin Gray, “Out of the Wilderness: Prime Time for Strategic Culture,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 26, No. 1, January-February 2007, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Fritz W. Ermarth, *Russia’s Strategic Culture: Past, Present, and ... in Transition?*, paper prepared for the Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, Defence Threat Reduction Agency, Washington, D.C., 31 October 2006, p.3, accessed at [http://dtra.mil/documents/asco/pulications/comparative\\_strategic\\_cultures\\_curriculum/cse%20studies/Russia%20\(ermath\)%20final%202%20Nov%2006.pdf](http://dtra.mil/documents/asco/pulications/comparative_strategic_cultures_curriculum/cse%20studies/Russia%20(ermath)%20final%202%20Nov%2006.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> Gerhard Ritter makes this point in his study of militarism. See his chapter, “The Role of Militarism in Czarist Russia” in *The Sword and the Sceptre, The Problem of Militarism in Germany, Volume Two: The European Powers and the Wilhelminian Empire, 1890-1914* (Coral Gables, Florida: The University of Miami Press, 1970), pp. 77-89.

<sup>39</sup> The entire passage from which the quotation is taken reads thus: “Militarism is thus not the opposite of pacifism; its true counterpart is civilianism. Love of war, bellicosity, is the counterpart of the love of peace, pacifism; but militarism is more, and sometimes less, than love of war. It covers every system of thinking and valuing and every complex of feelings which rank military institutions and ways above the ways of civilian life, carrying military mentality and modes of acting and decision into the civilian sphere.” Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism: Civilian and Military* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Greg King, *The Court of the Last Tsar: Pomp, Power and Pageantry in the Reign of Nicholas II* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), p. 131.

foreign wars but is well remembered for his comment that Russia's only true allies were its army and its navy.<sup>41</sup> It is noteworthy that when he gave up the throne, Nicholas II (1894-1917) did not initially announce his intention to abdicate to the Duma's representative from St. Petersburg: he first of all consulted the General Staff which agreed that such an act was necessary.<sup>42</sup> For that unfortunate ruler, just as with all his predecessors, "the army was the creator as well as embodiment of the stability and legitimacy of the Russian Empire."<sup>43</sup> The "military monarchs" are long gone, but one saw evidence of a similar attachment during the Soviet era, particularly when civilian officials (e.g., Stalin and Brezhnev) adopted military rank. And echoes of the tsarist outlook can also be heard nearly a century later when Deputy Premier Sergei Ivanov noted that the goals of the Putin government are "sovereign democracy, robust economy and military might."<sup>44</sup> While they would never publicly deny the utility of the armed forces, few, if any, Western leaders would grant their state's military capabilities such pre-eminence.

Why is Russia different? In part, the explanation lies in the country's geography and its impact over the ages. Russia, a continental power surrounded by many potential adversaries, has had a far greater reliance on its armed forces for its survival than have island powers such as the United Kingdom or the United States and Canada. In other words, the vulnerabilities and weaknesses associated with its geography have, since the Russian people's emergence, left their mark on the national consciousness. Consequently, military power (both the capabilities and the willingness to use them in pursuit of national objectives) is an indispensable element of statehood. Russia has experienced periods of ideological messianism (i.e., the "third Rome" thinking that dominated up to the early-1800s or the Soviet Union's Marxist-Leninist creed) that have added impetus to forceful expansion of its borders. Yet, it is arguable that the quest for greater security, namely the protection of distant settlements or the pursuit of more secure borders, played an important role in the creation of what became the Russian, and later, Soviet empires.<sup>45</sup> The celebration of past military victories, while of practical political utility, is also an expression of national pride at threats that have been overcome. In some cases, as in the post-1945 era, the celebrations might appear exaggerated, but there is a deeply held belief that the national existence was preserved by the enormous (almost unimaginable in the West) sacrifices that that conflict demanded. The sensitivity of both the Russian people and its leaders about any criticism (sometimes very deserved) of the Red Army in what is termed the Great Patriotic War is a case-in-point. The armed forces are not just viewed as bastions of tradition or incompetence (e.g., public evasion of the draft due to the feared *dedovshchina*), for they are also seen as guardians of national existence.<sup>46</sup> It is because of these elements—security, tradition and identity—that military force has always played such a prominent role in Russian foreign policy.

---

<sup>41</sup> Boris Antonov, *Russian Tsars* (St. Petersburg, Russia: Ivan Fiodorov, 2005), p. 147.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the Russian Army's role in the abdication of Nicholas II, see Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 308-311, and Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 408-409.

<sup>43</sup> William Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 388-389.

<sup>44</sup> Lilia Shevtsova, "Russia's Ersatz Democracy," *Current History*, October 2006, p. 308.

<sup>45</sup> Dominic Lieven, *The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 266-267.

<sup>46</sup> This is reflected in recent opinion polling in Russia. See "Attitudes on the Armed Forces," The Public Opinion Foundation Database, 17 February 2005, accessed at [http://bd.english.form.ru/report/cat/societas/army/army\\_image/etb050712](http://bd.english.form.ru/report/cat/societas/army/army_image/etb050712). Also see polls conducted by the

Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the loss of a large portion of its empire, Russia “experienced a profound crisis of strategic identity.”<sup>47</sup> Not only were its domestic political institutions and economy radically transformed, the international status it had long enjoyed was lost. A Great Power from the time of Peter the Great’s victory at Poltava (1709), Russia and its people were not psychologically prepared (what empire ever is?) for such a sudden and fundamental change. One writer has argued that the country “from Ivan IV’s to Putin’s day” has worn its Great Power status on its sleeve, and that *derzhavnost* (the Russian term for that standing) is little short of a national preoccupation.<sup>48</sup> Others have observed likewise. “The worldwide power and prestige of both the imperial state and the imperial high culture,” historian Dominic Lieven notes, “had become part of Russian pride and of what it meant to be a Russian.”<sup>49</sup> The vast majority of Russians in 1991 did not favour the loss of the empire, but were not willing to bear the burden of maintaining it. More to the point, the people ultimately repudiated the Soviet Russian identity that had been grounded in Marxist-Leninist ideology, not just because of the “Soviet system’s complete failure to compete in economic terms with the West,” but also because of a new awareness of the scale of the crimes committed by that regime. It is true that Russian statehood was linked to imperial identity in a way that was not the case in the West, and so the loss of empire was less easily, if at all, accommodated within the national consciousness. But it is also the case that the collapse was viewed by many Russians as a national defeat of enormous proportions that saw their country outmatched in military as well as economic power and, unlike the former Western imperial powers (Germany being the most notable exception), encumbered by the horrific excesses of the former regime.

For many observers and analysts in the West, the Soviet collapse was viewed as the result of an imperial experiment gone awry. There was a sense that history was finally moving forward for Russia and its beleaguered people. That country would, it was assumed, implement political and economic changes that would inexorably lead it toward liberal-democratic models of governance:

Abandonment of the imperial legacy and the associated dynamic of expansionism were considered to be particularly important. Russia’s critics defined autocratic governance and expansionism as complementary aspects of the Russian state tradition—a tradition “that insisted on strong centralized authority, unconstrained by law or parliament” in search of “security through constant expansion. The

---

Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM): “Russia Has Two Allies: The Army and the Mass Media,” 7 December 2007, accessed at [http://wciom.com/news/press-releases/press-release/single/9326.html?no\\_cache=1&cHash=2c488e57fc&print=1](http://wciom.com/news/press-releases/press-release/single/9326.html?no_cache=1&cHash=2c488e57fc&print=1), and “Will our Army Protect Us?” 22 February 2008, accessed at [http://wciom.com/news/press-releases/pressrelease/single/9687.html?no\\_cache=1&cHash=95fc0aa3aa&print=1](http://wciom.com/news/press-releases/pressrelease/single/9687.html?no_cache=1&cHash=95fc0aa3aa&print=1).

<sup>47</sup> Stanislav Secieru, “Executive Summary,” *Russia’s Quest for Strategic Identity* (Rome: NATO Defence College, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Robery Legvold, “Russian Foreign Policy During Periods of Great State Transformation,” Robert Legvold (ed), *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the Shadow of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 114.

<sup>49</sup> Lieven, *The Russian Empire and its Rivals*, p. 384.

break up of the Soviet Union was an opportunity for Russia to escape from the demons of its past.<sup>50</sup>

The results of the transition in those early years were, however, anything but positive. Instead of “democratization, market economy and rule of law,” Russia was forced to endure a “severe economic depression, a breakdown of civic order and public morale, and a widespread perception of international defeat and humiliation.”<sup>51</sup> Russia had not only lost its empire, with its European borders pushed back to where they had been in the mid-seventeenth century, but its national pride had been significantly undermined. Any hope for a better life in the post-Soviet era essentially disappeared. Possessed of “a terrible thirst for greatness,” Lieven believes that many Russians view democracy as little more than “a pompous verbiage and broken promises, covering a reality of corruption, gross and illegitimate inequality, mass poverty and crime.”<sup>52</sup>

In confronting this chaotic environment, Putin (and most probably Medvedev) have fallen back on a distinctly authoritarian solution. Termed the “stability paradigm” by *Strategic Survey 2008*, this new authoritarianism represents a downgrading of democratic accountability and transparency “in favour of a state-controlled and elite-driven modernisation project.”<sup>53</sup> For some Western commentators, this is viewed in a very negative light, but that assessment is not likely shared by most Russians.<sup>54</sup> After all, the parameters of Russian political culture allow for such an approach in a way that would be deemed illegitimate in the Anglo-American democracies. Putin may have publicly lamented the collapse of the Soviet Union—the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the twentieth century—but in the same speech emphasised that Russia must develop as “a free and democratic country.”<sup>55</sup> The current president has voiced similar views, adding that “[p]eople should be studying the new Russia, not reviving Soviet phantoms.”<sup>56</sup> If anything, this more autocratic formula recalls earlier efforts of the mid-nineteenth century<sup>57</sup> where the state controlled the scope and pace of political and economic change.<sup>58</sup> In our own age, this has taken the form of “sovereign democracy,” and includes a very strong element of

---

<sup>50</sup> Craig Nation, “U.S. Interests in the New Eurasia,” in Craig Nation and Dmitri Trenin (eds), *Russian Security Strategy Under Putin: U.S. and Russian Perspectives* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, November 2007), pp. 2-3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Lieven, *The Russian Empire and its Rivals*, p. 387.

<sup>53</sup> “Russia,” *Strategic Survey 2008* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2008), p.186.

<sup>54</sup> Edwards and Kemp, “Russia’s Wrong Direction: What the United States Can and Should Do,” p. 16.

<sup>55</sup> “Putin deplores collapse of USSR,” *BBC News*, 25 April 2005.

<sup>56</sup> President of Russia, “Speech at World Policy Conference”, Evian, France, 8 October 2008.

<sup>57</sup> One thinks here of the reason for the abolition of serfdom given by the Emperor Alexander II to representatives of the Moscow nobility in April 1856: “It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to await the time when it will begin to abolish itself from below.” (Quoted in W. E. Mosse, *Alexander II and the Modernization of Russia*, London: The English Universities Press, 1958, p. 48.) The image of Russia’s leaders as always being unresponsive to demands for social change is far from deserved. It is relevant to note that the decision to abolish serfdom was taken in 1861, two years before Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and four years before slavery was abolished in the United States with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment – and, perhaps most significant, the decision was taken by an autocratic monarch and not in the midst of the bloodiest war in American history to the outbreak of which the existence of the institution of slavery had greatly contributed.

<sup>58</sup> For an overview of the earlier efforts at modernisation, see Mosse, *Alexander II and the Modernization of Russia*. See also Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire, 1801-1917* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 332-460.

resistance to interference in the setting of the agenda from outside the elite structure. This attitude was made very clear by President Medvedev during a June 2008 press conference in Berlin:

I would like to say that all procedures, including executive and criminal procedures that exist in our country, must be based on Russian law, and issues of enforcement or issues of pardon should not be subject to interstate negotiations. It is a matter of national sovereignty.<sup>59</sup>

Quite obviously irked by the continuing international criticism of the Khodorkovsky case,<sup>60</sup> he was giving voice to widely popular sentiment that sovereignty means, in the case of his country, respect for Russian traditions of and approaches to governance. In laying down this marker, the regime is seeking to protect its interests and its agenda from populist demands for change, foreign instigated or otherwise, that characterised the glasnost era under Mikhail Gorbachev and the so-called “colour revolutions” in Ukraine and Georgia.<sup>61</sup> But it also supports the government’s argument that Russia’s expressions of sovereignty (necessarily including self-government) cannot be subject to external, namely Western, assessments. In doing so, it has earned the support of a large percentage, most probably the majority of Russians, including Gorbachev and the recently deceased Alexander Solzhenitsyn, both of whom resented the negative consequences of Westernization in their country that they associated with weak governance.<sup>62</sup>

In Russia’s strategic culture, the regime’s emphasis on the “strong state requires a more confident and vigorous foreign policy. The “authoritarian approach to a functionally capable state” needs a state-centric legitimising principle “to make possible Russia’s re-emergence in world affairs and its emerging hegemonial claims.”<sup>63</sup> The recovery of Great Power status, that almost all Russians believe is naturally due their country, is therefore a key normative consideration in the reconstitution of the Russian state.<sup>64</sup> In the current context, therefore, the assertion of that status has become a facet of the country’s strategic culture. And, as a Great Power, Moscow believes that it must be consulted on international developments and its core interests must be taken into account by the other most powerful countries. At the same time, it fully expects that weaker countries (e.g., Georgia) will subordinate their interests to those of Moscow.<sup>65</sup> “Russia has a place

---

<sup>59</sup> President of Russia, “Press Statement and Answers to Questions following Russian-German Talks,” Berlin, 5 June 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Mikhail Khodorkovsky (b. 1963) was, as the owner of the YUKOS oil company, the wealthiest person in Russia. In 2003, he was arrested on charges of fraud and, two years later, sentenced to nine (later reduced to eight) years in a Siberian prison camp. The arrest attracted international attention, not only because of who Khodokovsky was, but also because it seemed to be a consequence of his public criticism of Vladimir Putin’s presidency. See the interview with Marshall Goldman, “Goldman: Khodokovsky Trial Worries Investors, Slows Economic Growth, 2 June 2005,” accessed on the Council of Foreign Relations website at <http://www.cfr.org/publication/8155/goldman.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Edwards and Kemp, “Russia’s Wrong Direction: What the United States Can and Should Do,” p. 34.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Conquest, “Patriot, Poet and Prophet,” *Standpoint*, September 2008, pp. 36-37.

<sup>63</sup> Petra Stykow, “Außenpolitische Implikationen der “souveränen Demokratie,” *Rußland in der Internationalen Politik – Rückkehr einer Großmacht?* (Proceedings of a conference organised by the German Institute for International Politics, the German Society for East European Studies and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Berlin, 26-27 January 2007), p. 35.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>65</sup> The suspension of rail traffic to Estonia in response to what the Russian government saw as the desecration of a Soviet war memorial is a case in point. Unable to convince Estonian authorities not to move the memorial, it sought to inflict punitive economic damage on that small country. (While there is no

in the world, its mission, if you will, as a big country and permanent member of the Security Council and a fast growing economy,” President Medvedev observed, and with remarkable candour added that

We will formulate our objectives in accordance with this understanding. *I have said before and I will say again now, there are regions in which Russia has interests. It would be foolish and in some cases even damaging to deny this.* [emphasis added] Our partners in the international community speak in these terms with regard to their own interests, and we also need to state this out loud. If we keep quiet as if ashamed of it we will end up with situations like the crisis in August. Of course, we will defend our interests, but most important of all, we will protect our citizens.<sup>66</sup>

As with any Great Power, there is a sphere of influence (or sphere of interests, in more modern parlance) that other countries must respect or risk, sometimes violent, confrontation. For Russia, this region includes Belarus, Ukraine, the South Caucasus and Central Asia—lands that, by and large, comprised the tsarist empire. If Russia’s stability paradigm harkens back to the nineteenth century in its approach to internal reforms, its approach to international affairs is also heavily imbued with an earlier tradition of foreign relations.

Nevertheless, Russian foreign policy is sometimes as much about asserting as it is about doing, save in areas that challenge key—i.e., core and vital—interests. (It is, after all, the hallmark of a weaker Power that vigorous rhetoric is often used as a substitute for non-existent capabilities.) The Georgian war was a calculated gamble against a much weaker opponent, but one that paid a large dividend. In most other examples of Russia’s new assertiveness, the returns are far more limited on the international stage even if they appear to translate well in the Russian domestic political sphere. One thinks here of the aged Bear bombers approaching the airspace of NATO allies, or Moscow’s highly publicised naval visits to Venezuela and Cuba. In other cases, the assertion of Great Power status is little more than a claim to be able to address the most powerful as an equal, and to have its views treated seriously. Vladimir Putin’s speech to the 2007 Munich Security Conference is one such example.<sup>67</sup> In an unexpectedly harsh address, the Russian president excused himself for his frankness and thereupon launched into a verbal assault that described the international security order as one-sided, and as only advancing Western interests.<sup>68</sup>

---

clear chain of evidence linking the Russian government to the cyber attack that shut down the Estonian government’s computer network at the same time as the rail disruption, many people at the time interpreted the event as hostile.) The fact that Estonia’s relations with its ethnic Russian minority are troubled undoubtedly inflamed the situation for many in Moscow.

<sup>66</sup> President of Russia, “Transcript of the Meeting with the Participants in the International Club Valdai,” 12 September 2008.

<sup>67</sup> President of Russia, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Security Conference on Security Policy,” 10 February 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Vladimir Putin: “This conference’s structure allows me to avoid excessive politeness and the need to speak in roundabout, pleasant but empty diplomatic terms. This conference’s format will allow me to say what I really think about international security problems. And if my comments seem unduly polemical, pointed or inexact to our colleagues, then I would ask you not to get angry with me. After all, this is only a conference.” For the full text, see President of Russia. “Speech and the Following Discussion at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Security Conference on Security Policy,” 10 February 2007.

Afterward, senior Russian officials seemed genuinely surprised (perhaps disingenuously)<sup>69</sup> by the expressions of shock in the European media, some articles of which predicted the beginning of a new Cold War.<sup>70</sup>

One also sees this new self-confidence in both foreign policy concepts (2000 and 2008) where Moscow lays claim to what many would see, given the country's palpable vulnerabilities, as an exaggerated international footprint. Few would dispute the statement, found in the most recent version (July 2008), that foreign policy is "one of the major instruments of steady national development and of ensuring [the country's] competitiveness in a globalizing world." A late-November 2007 poll by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) found that 80 percent of Russians are "convinced that our country is playing a more and more significant and serious role in the world politics [sic]."<sup>71</sup> Many observers would, however, take issue with the argument that Russia's international status has already been transformed into "a full-fledged role in global affairs":

Russia, being a permanent member of the UN Security Council, participant in the G8 and other authoritative international and regional organizations, intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation mechanisms, and as a country possessing a major potential and significant resources in all spheres of human activities, vigorously developing relations with leading States and associations throughout the world and integrating consistently into the world economy and politics, exerts a substantial influence upon the development of a new architecture of international relations.<sup>72</sup>

Such an assessment is, however, far too positive, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies.<sup>73</sup> Moscow's economic and demographic weaknesses, and the growing criticism of its domestic, foreign and energy policies by many Western Powers, would suggest that the concept's characterisation is exaggerated. Russia lacks the power capabilities to force its way into world counsels without the support of other, more powerful players, such as the European Union, China and the US. The effectiveness of its armed forces continues to be undermined by obsolete

---

<sup>69</sup> Immediately after its delivery by Putin, Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov denied that the speech was confrontational: "I do not believe that the speech was aggressive or confrontational, why get upset? (...) First of all, I believe that our relations with the EU, the USA and Germany are so mature that we are free to say what we really think and to give signals that we want to be received openly, and without hypocrisy and the philosophy of 'cold war'. If someone did not like some of the things we said, what can we do? This is our point of view. (...) We understand this (Russia's arrival in the West) is causing concern and some trepidation, but believe me, we don't have a hidden agenda." See "Putin's speech in Munich not confrontational – Russian defence minister," ITAR-TASS (as transcribed by World News Connection), 11 February 2007.

<sup>70</sup> See Ben Lombardi, "Putin in Munich: The View From Berlin," Background Paper (Ottawa: Directorate of Strategic Analysis, Department of National Defence, 4 March 2007). For the European reaction to the speech, see Gerard Baker, "Icey blast from Putin hints at a new Cold War," The Times (London), 12 February 2007, and Manfred Quiring, "Putins Welt," Die Welt, 12 Februar 2007.

<sup>71</sup> Press Release, "Russia's Role in the World is Growing," Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 27 November 2007, accessed at [http://wciom.com/news/press-releases/press-release/single/9260.html?no\\_cache=1&cHash=d852b73e82&print=1](http://wciom.com/news/press-releases/press-release/single/9260.html?no_cache=1&cHash=d852b73e82&print=1).

<sup>72</sup> President of Russia, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, 12 July 2008.

<sup>73</sup> "Russia," *Strategic Survey 2008*, p. 187.

equipment, training issues and manpower problems, all of which were evident during the campaign in Georgia. Declining oil prices (i.e., government revenues) and the international financial situation have significantly weakened the national economy, challenging the unspoken compact whereby greater authoritarianism is accompanied by improved living standards. A lack of any discernible soft power resources outside a few of the former Soviet Republics weakens the ability of Moscow to sell its policies abroad, such as its recent calls for a new European security organisation. Such statements as the one above seem, therefore, to be intended more to project to a domestic audience the image of a “strong state,” a confident and determined Russia, than to reflect a careful assessment by the government of international realities.

## 4 Confrontation or Cooperation, or Both?

---

It seems unlikely that the Russo-Georgian war is evidence that Moscow had chosen a policy of confrontation. Admittedly, it is not certain what Russia's long-term intentions are and how those are factored into decision-making on particular issues. In the absence of a definitive understanding, one might be willing to fall back on Winston Churchill's off-quoted comment, that "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest." Insofar as Russia's foreign relations with the West are concerned, at the core of that national interest there appear to be two inter-connected goals: obtaining respect for a traditional sphere of influence and the weakening of NATO cohesion. The first goal is rooted in national honour and a conviction that many Western policies are injurious to Russian interests. The second is animated by a growing hostility toward and suspicion about NATO, that Moscow sees as a Cold War relic and whose purpose is viewed as directed at Russia. From Moscow's perspective, both goals support the pursuit of the "strong state" and are viewed as a means of ensuring that the international environment does not endanger internal reforms.

Yet it is its strategic culture that nonetheless distinguishes Russia from other actors in the Euro-Atlantic region. It is best to remember, as George Orwell once wrote, that "[a]nyone able to use his eyes knows that the average of human behaviour differs enormously from country to country. Things that could happen in one country could not happen in another."<sup>74</sup> Like many Western powers, Russia defines national interest as an amalgam of power, wealth and influence. but, while most Western liberal democracies see armed force as a last resort, and diplomacy's fundamental purpose as the avoidance of crises, the military option is alive and well in Moscow's arsenal of policy instruments and, most noteworthy, Russian diplomacy has traditionally viewed crises as a useful mechanism to advance its strategic goals. It did so in the nineteenth century (viz. the denunciation of the Black Sea clauses in 1870) and it appears to be doing so now as well (e.g., Kosovo, Iraq and Georgia). In the case of Georgia, the use of force was successful for it reasserted Russian hegemony in the south Caucasus by humiliating Tbilisi and, most likely, put paid to that country's goal of NATO membership, or at the very least significantly stalled the accession process. Exploiting such apparently low- to medium risk "opportunities" gives Russia a chance to manoeuvre: to move out of the corner that it has found itself in since the end of the Cold War into a more influential position on the international stage. Its policy toward Iran is yet another example: while supplying nuclear fuel rods for that country's Bushehr reactor, it opposes Teheran's pursuit of nuclear weapons capability though the international sanctions it supports must not seriously endanger existing bilateral relations.<sup>75</sup> As a result, Moscow's current foreign policy is far more pragmatic and politically flexible than many of its critics assume. It is not

---

<sup>74</sup> The quotation comes from George Orwell's essay "The Lion and the Unicorn" published in 1941, accessed at <http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/lion/English/e-eye>. The complete passage from which the quotation is taken reads thus: "One must admit that the divisions between nation and nation are founded on real differences of outlook. Till recently, it was thought proper to pretend that all human beings are very much alike, but in fact "[a]nyone able to use his eyes knows that the average of human behaviour differs enormously from country to country. Things that could happen in one country could not happen in another."

<sup>75</sup> James Blitz, "Russia joins UN move to condemn Tehran," *Financial Times*, 27 September 2008.

certain to observers that such trimming will, in the end, advance Russian interests, but Moscow obviously believes that a harder line would be counter-productive.

Rather than the harbinger of a new era of confrontation that would suggest a return of Soviet thinking, this more pragmatic approach to foreign policy appears to be drawing upon Imperial Russia's foreign policy tradition, particularly the era from the mid-nineteenth century on. (The situation is analogous, for after its decisive defeat in the Crimean War, many people thought they were about to witness the demise of the Russian Empire or, at the very least, its relegation to the status of a second-rate Power.<sup>76</sup> Russia spent the next two decades seeking a means of regaining the power and prestige that it had lost: and, interestingly, modern Russian leaders have made frequent reference to Tsarist policy in that era.<sup>77</sup>) There are two main reasons for the current leadership to look to that earlier age. First, unlike the USSR that was always ideologically hidebound, the last sixty years of Imperial Russia witnessed a very pragmatic approach to foreign policy. Under the last three tsars, being a partner of the West was never viewed as implying that Russia's national interests somehow became permanently identical with those of the West.

A second reason for looking beyond the Soviet era is that the current Russian leadership undoubtedly sees, just as their predecessors did in the nineteenth century, international affairs as inherently fluid and characterized by occasional fluctuations of power. Such an environment can be exploited to advance core interests. Russian foreign policy today appears to be seeking any advantage it can find in a dynamic international environment. As a weaker player, it is trying to take advantage of real or perceived vulnerabilities of their stronger opponents to advance the goals contained within what might be termed the *stability paradigm*: a programme to rebuild

---

<sup>76</sup> For an excellent study of Russian foreign policy during this era, see W.E. Mosse, *The Rise and Fall of the Crimean System, 1855-1871* (London, MacMillan, 1963).

<sup>77</sup> The best evidence of this is, perhaps, to be found in the repeated references to Prince Alexander M. Gorchakov, the chancellor and foreign minister during the Emperor Alexander II's reign (1855-1881). Former foreign minister Boris Primakov inaugurated the Gorchakov lectures at the Foreign Ministry and edited a volume of essays on the two hundredth anniversary of the prince's birth. See Paul Goble, "Analysis from Washington – Primakov's Nineteenth Century Model," *RFE/RL*, 3 August 1998, accessed at <http://www.rferl.org/Content/Article/1089195.html>. Unfortunately, Primakov's book has yet to be translated. Former foreign minister Igor Ivanov also stated that Russian policy makers discussed Gorchakov's approach to foreign policy during the process leading to the drafting of the 2000 Foreign Policy Concept. See Igor S. Ivanov, *The New Russian Diplomacy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2002), p. 26. Interestingly, this author was unable to locate any non-Russian language biographies of Gorchakov, and very few analytical studies of his policies written by non-Russians. Perhaps we have all been influenced by Bismarck's assessment of Gorchakov as an incompetent egoist. (See Charles Lowe, *Prince Bismarck; Volume Two* (London: Cassel and Company, 1885), p. 105. See also Lothar Gall, *Bismarck— The White Revolutionary: Volume Two, 1871-1898* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1986), p. 117, for a discussion of an exchange between the Russian and German emperors concerning Bismarck's animosity toward Gorchakov.) Whether intended or not, the Russian Chancellor and his approach to foreign policy have largely been overlooked outside of Russia. Two exceptions are William Demarcus Starnes, *The Diplomacy and Foreign Policies of Prince Alexander Gorchakov* (unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1951), and Merritt Gold Abrash, *Personalities Behind Policies: Studies of Seven Leading Figures in Anglo-Russian Relations, 1855-1895* (unpublished PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1961), but it is noteworthy that neither work seems to ever have been published in whole, or in part. A short overview of Gorchakov, which is focused on applying his ideas to contemporary affairs, can be found in Flemming Splidsboel-Hansen, "Past and Future Meet: Aleksandr Gorchakov and Russian Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2002, pp. 377-396.

Russia's strength by emphasising strong governance and economic recovery at home, while assiduously advancing where possible national interests abroad. "I understand only one policy," Alexander III told his ministers in 1881: "To exact from every situation all that is needed by and is useful to Russia, to discard all other considerations, and to act in a straightforward and resolute manner. We can have no policy except one that is purely Russian and national: this is the only policy we can and must follow."<sup>78</sup> One of the most effective options is to try to exploit opportunities (often by generating crises) to advance one's own interests. The May 2007 abrogation of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) by Vladimir Putin, in part due to opposition to the flank limitations that were viewed as humiliating and, more recently, Russia's disagreement with NATO over ballistic missile defence, accompanied by harsh and sometimes threatening rhetoric, are consistent with this approach. In both cases, Moscow's goal has been to weaken NATO cohesion and to persuade the NATO allies that their policies will increase tensions. In some cases, such as its very strident opposition to the Kosovo war (1999) and later that statelet's unilateral declaration of independence (2008), Moscow was unable to move its policy forward – but far from dampening Russian expectations, failure only fuelled the belief that Russia needed to act more like a Great Power.

Therefore, alongside cooperation, competition and confrontation are to be expected, although carefully managed in a way to avoid dangerous military collisions with other Great Powers that would undermine the domestic agenda. Moscow's actions following the Georgian war would seem to support this interpretation. More recently, Medvedev announced that missile systems will be deployed into the Kaliningrad region to counter the US-led ballistic missile defence system (BMD) to be deployed in Poland and the Czech Republic. Additionally, efforts will be made to jam the BMD system itself.<sup>79</sup> Despite such decisions, including the scaling back of ties with NATO in the wake of last summer's crisis, Russia has not blocked all contact. The terms of the missile deployment announced by the president seem to suggest a framework for negotiations. Neither the NATO Information Office in Moscow has been closed nor has the Russian ambassador to NATO been withdrawn, thereby keeping lines of communication open; and, just as important, signalling that it views those lines as important. In the immediate aftermath of the war, statements by Medvedev regretting the suspension of negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, and Foreign Minister Lavrov's visit to Poland (11 September), the most inveterate of Russia's critics, clearly expressed a desire to maintain normal diplomatic ties with the West.<sup>80</sup> More recently, and despite the continuing suspension of the NATO-Russia Council, Moscow has supported the development of practical responses to piracy, a problem with close links to terrorism.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps, most significant, Russia did not revisit its decision to support the Alliance's mission in Afghanistan. While it clearly sees an advantage in the Alliance's many problems accruing from its Afghan mission, Moscow recognises that its own security would be placed in jeopardy were NATO to be defeated by the Taliban and its Islamist supporters. In this case, opposition to NATO is countered by its own violent exposure to jihadist violence. A profound disagreement over Georgia's pro-Western policy and, by extension, NATO ambitions on Russia's borders, does not, therefore, translate in Moscow's eyes into a necessary return to a rejection of cooperation in other areas where shared interests exist.

---

<sup>78</sup> Jelavich, *A Century of Russian Foreign Policy, 1814-1914*, p. 190.

<sup>79</sup> President of Russia, "Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation," 5 November 2008.

<sup>80</sup> "Lavrov Goes to Poland to Deliberate," *Kommersant*, 11 September 2008.

<sup>81</sup> Ksenia Fokina, "Jolly Roger as Factor of Russian-NATO Unity," *Izvestia*, 6 October 2008.

Moscow's attitude toward its foreign policy has been reinforced by a belief that Russia, now richer and more self-confident than at any time since 1991, is also basically immune to Western pressure and sanctions. The limited options available to the Western Powers in responding to the Georgian war would seem to bear out this assessment. But miscalculation and foreign dangers are nonetheless possible, and there are very real constraints that Russia's policy-makers will need to confront. If the foreign policy tradition of the late-nineteenth century offers a means of supporting the reconstruction of the country, it also harbours a warning: while the fomenting or manipulation of foreign crises can sometimes advance key national goals, they can also completely derail the achievement of those objectives. (Both the 1905 revolution and the overthrow of the monarchy in 1917 followed serious missteps in the international sphere.) The economic losses that accompanied the Russian actions in Georgia, and that were not likely predicted by the political leadership when decisions were taken to intervene, are a more recent example. If Moscow's reading of the likely Western response had proven wrong, and strong support for Tbilisi had been forthcoming, the outcome of the dangerous game this past summer might have been very different. Perhaps the most overarching long-term constraint on the achievement of its modern goals is, however, that Russia is facing a profound demographic crisis. Since 1992, the population has declined by three percent, and life expectancy has dropped to a level not seen since the 1940s. According to one study, the Russian labour force peaked at 90 million people in 2007, but will, if population trends continue, drop by 15 million by 2020.<sup>82</sup> The health of the general population, especially those young males who are needed to fill the ranks of the country's armed forces is also a significant concern. The immunity to external sanction cannot hide the fact that many of the ambitions contained within the stability paradigm require a strong economy and sustained manpower, neither of which can be guaranteed.

---

<sup>82</sup> Judy Dempsey, "Letter from Europe: Russia's demographic crisis," *International Herald Tribune*, 6 September 2007.

## 5 Relations with NATO

---

What is the likely impact of the “strong state” on relations with NATO? In a nutshell, Moscow does not see any requirement for NATO, an alliance created in 1949 to contain the Soviet Union. It is a strategic entity with which relations are maintained, but it is not viewed as a strategic partner. Until its suspension in the wake of the Georgian conflict, the NATO-Russia Council was the principal venue for the discussion of strategic political issues, and 17 other subordinate bodies were created to deal with a number of key areas of cooperation. Russia has also permitted France and Germany to use an air corridor to support their forces in Afghanistan, and Moscow has actively supported the efforts of the Alliance during the war on terror.<sup>83</sup> But cooperation cannot mask a profound disquiet and distrust that permeates Russian official thinking about the Western Alliance.

In an era where ideological adversaries no longer exist, and foreign policy ought to be based on a pragmatic appreciation of interests, as Sergei Lavrov has argued, the North Atlantic Alliance appears to be antediluvian. Never seriously considered as a possible member itself, Russia’s leaders and a broad section of its political class wonder what the Alliance is for. “Let us speak frankly, gentlemen,” Prince Talleyrand stated when he first appeared before the four victorious powers at the Congress of Vienna to negotiate a new order in post-Napoleonic Europe, “if there are to be Allies in this business, then there is no place for me.”<sup>84</sup> The Russian position echoes that of France two centuries ago—who is NATO defending against? And, when asked in that manner, the only answer that appears to make sense to Moscow is “Russia.”<sup>85</sup> The Russian president was very frank about this perception of NATO during a meeting of the International Valdai Club:

I think that for all of us it is clear that Russia cannot feel comfortable in a situation where military bases are increasingly being built around it, and there are more and more missile missiles and anti-missile systems. Really, Russia just cannot feel comfortable in such a situation. Do you understand? My colleagues say to me: “what are you worried about? This is not against you”—we have heard this from our American friends and from Europe a hundred times over. Well, how is this build-up not against us, if there are targets for strategic nuclear forces, objectives, and you know yourself where they are. It is absolutely against us—there is no other way to understand the situation.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “NATO and Russia: Sobering thoughts and practical suggestions,” *NATO Review*, Issue #2, 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Talleyrand is quoted in Harold Nicolson, *The Congress of Vienna* (London: Methuen, 1946), p. 141.

<sup>85</sup> During his 2007 address at the Munich Security Conference, Vladimir Putin indicated that this is the Russian perception: “I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have a right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended. And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact?” See President of Russia, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Security Conference on Security Policy,” 10 February 2007.

<sup>86</sup> President of Russia, “Transcript of the Meeting with the Participants in the International Club Valdai,” 12 September 2008.

Although Russian opposition to NATO was muted for much of the 1990s, it was nonetheless undeniably present. Given its strategic outlook, NATO could only ever be viewed as a direct challenge. The NATO-Russia Founding Act (1997) was an attempt by the Allies to mollify Moscow's well-known opposition to the initial expansion of the membership to include former members of the Warsaw Pact. Russian leaders have long asserted that Secretary-General Manfred Wörner and US Secretary of State James Baker had promised Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev that the Alliance would not move eastward<sup>87</sup>, but Moscow lacked the confidence to directly confront the West as each round of enlargement took place. However, from an early stage and most recently during NATO's Bucharest Summit and at the Bush-Putin summit in Sochi, both in April 2008, Russia had made known to Western leaders that the accession of either Ukraine or Georgia would cross a "red line"—in other words, directly confront core Russian national interests. Repeated statements by NATO governments that both countries would be permitted to accede to the Alliance once they had met the required standards, and, more recently, the possibility that they might each be granted a Membership Action Plan (MAP)<sup>88</sup>, only served to anger Russian policy makers. For Moscow, the extension of NATO membership—or even the prospect of doing so—led some to believe that the West was engaging in a policy of strategic encirclement of Russia.<sup>89</sup> The "colour revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia, that Moscow believes were orchestrated by the United States to eliminate pro-Russian governments, have reinforced the image of an aggressive agenda on the part of the Alliance's leadership, namely Washington.<sup>90</sup> While Western leaders frequently state that Russia must not have a veto on further enlargement, Moscow views the extension of the membership to Ukraine and Georgia as threatening both to its status as a Great Power and to its national security.

In response, Russia has taken a series of actions that are consistent with a strategic culture rooted in *derzhavnost*, and the implicit right of Great Powers to a sphere of interest. First, it has become more actively involved in attempting to influence the domestic politics of both Ukraine and Georgia. This approach suffered a setback in December 2004 during the Ukrainian presidential election, but the effort continues nonetheless: and there is fertile ground in Ukraine to support the Russian position as NATO membership has never acquired more than 35 percent support among the population. In Georgia, Russia has quite obviously stalled negotiations toward resolving the settlement of the South Ossetian and Abkhazian questions,<sup>91</sup> although in this regard it has been very ably assisted by the confrontational policies of the Saakashvili government. The crisis of last summer fits neatly into this category, as it represents an attempt by Moscow to maintain what

---

<sup>87</sup> In February 1990, during the negotiations with the USSR on German reunification, German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher urged the US to grant a major concession to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, namely that if Germany reunified, NATO would not expand eastward. Gorbachev is reported to have said such an enlargement of the Alliance would be unacceptable, and Baker agreed. Since then, Baker has denied that his agreement implied any sort of guarantee that NATO would not enlarge its membership by including former Warsaw Pact countries. For a discussion of the "promise" see Michael Gordon, "The Anatomy of a Misunderstanding," *The New York Times*, 25 May 1997, and Susan Eisenhower, "The Perils of Victory," Ted Galen Carpenter and Barbara Conry (eds.), *NATO Enlargement: Illusions and Reality* (Washington, D.C.: The CATO Institute, 1998), p. 110.

<sup>88</sup> Instituted by NATO in April 1999, the Membership Action Plan helps aspirants meet NATO standards and monitors their progress. Although a MAP does guarantee NATO membership, no MAP country has failed to join the Alliance.

<sup>89</sup> George Friedman, "The Russo-Georgian War and the Balance of Power," *Stratfor*, 12 August 2008.

<sup>90</sup> "Russia-NATO: return of the great game," *RIA-Novosti*, 29 August 2008.

<sup>91</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee, "Georgia on their mind," *International Herald Tribune*, 27 March 2008.

President Medvedev declared a geographical area “of privileged interest.”<sup>92</sup> And, indeed, Russian leaders themselves believed that their actions had ended Georgia’s prospects of membership.<sup>93</sup> Just as the NATO war with Serbia resolved the Kosovo crisis, recognising the independence of Georgia’s two breakaway provinces keeps alive a territorial dispute that, according to NATO’s own declarations, should put paid to Tbilisi’s ambitions in Brussels.<sup>94</sup> Second, however justified its dispute with Kiev over the transit of its energy, Moscow has nonetheless sought to convert the dependence of West European countries on its energy exports into a lever on the behaviour of some governments. Given that the EU/NATO countries are dependent on Russia’s hydrocarbon exports for approximately 25 percent of natural gas consumption and 30 percent of its oil needs, energy resources are a key strategic asset for Moscow.<sup>95</sup> While Russia has denied any intention of using its “energy weapon,” it has not hesitated to turn off the supply to Ukraine, the Czech Republic and the Baltic States when they have disagreed. And it has done this knowing fully that the trickle down effects of such embargoes affect other, more powerful EU/NATO members. (This subject deserves a much larger study of its own.) This has back-fired, however, as energy security has become a pressing concern in NATO and the European Union in part because of Russia’s behaviour.

And, last, Russia has sought to use aggressive rhetoric to create divisions within what it sees as the Western bloc. On occasion this has meant very pointed remarks that attempt to inflate the significance that Russia, although not the US, is a European country. Most recently, this has taken the form of a proposed new security system that could radically transform the trans-Atlantic relationship. While it is so far unclear what role Washington might be expected to play in the creation of the new system to be based on five basic principles that President Medvedev has repeated on a variety of occasions.<sup>96</sup> The Russian ambassador to NATO was supposed to present this proposal to the NATO-Russia Council in mid-September, but the Georgian conflict led to the suspension of that body. This proposal is both a predictable and reasonable strategy for a new security order, constructed through negotiations that would have to take account of the national interests of a more confident Russian Federation and would forestall any further NATO enlargement. Indeed, it would almost certainly eliminate the need—if not the legitimacy—of the North Atlantic Alliance itself, as that is most likely its goal. And, as a *sine qua non* of any accord with Moscow, a new order would be required to respect the independent path of political development Russia or any other state has chosen. No country claiming to be a Great Power could expect any less. This would also, by implication, de-ideologise in Moscow’s eyes much of the West’s approach to international politics.

---

<sup>92</sup> “Russia announces ‘sphere of interest,’” *The Financial Times*, 1 September 2008.

<sup>93</sup> In this regard, the Russian ambassador to NATO, Dmitri Rogozin, stated that “I believe that Georgia’s chances of joining NATO have collapsed, no matter what US representatives must say.” See “Russia’s NATO Representative Rogozin on South Ossetia-Georgia Crisis,” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* (as transcribed by World News Connection), 14 August 2008.

<sup>94</sup> Western leaders have argued that recognising Kosovo’s independence did not create an international precedent. That assertion was quickly proven incorrect by the outcome of the Russo-Georgian conflict. That this could happen should have been expected given that precedents, by their very nature, exist or do not exist in the eye of the beholder.

<sup>95</sup> Vlad Sobell, *Washington blunders into an unwinnable campaign against Russia* (London: DAIWA Institute of Research), 8 September 2008.

<sup>96</sup> See “Security Treaty Principles,” *Kommersant*, 9 October 2008.

Deep divisions within NATO-Europe and among the members of the European Union have been evident in the different responses to the more assertive Russia and this became very evident addressing the Russo-Georgian war. While almost all governments harshly condemned the war—although French President Nicholas Sarkozy added that it was perfectly normal for Moscow to want to defend Russian citizens<sup>97</sup>—there was considerable disagreement concerning what tangible measures should follow. The most obvious division occurred between what former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld termed “old Europe”, namely the longstanding members of NATO, and “new Europe”, those countries that had only two decades ago been a part of the Soviet bloc.

While Poland, the Baltic States, the Czech Republic and Britain advocated a strong response to the war including the suspension of security cooperation with Moscow, others, such as France, Germany and Italy, did not. While Polish president Kaczynski flew to Tbilisi to show solidarity with the Georgian leadership, the German foreign minister strongly urged the Alliance to avoid a “spiral of escalation.”<sup>98</sup> Indeed, Berlin’s approach to the crisis demonstrates the enormous difficulties attached to any effort to fashion a common approach to Russia in post-Cold War Europe. Heavily invested, politically and financially, in a positive bilateral relationship, and with a long tradition of good relations with Russia, Germany cannot afford to alienate Moscow and has no intention to abandon its policy of engagement. In the aftermath of this summer’s conflict, Angela Merkel made a number of harsh statements about what she termed “disproportionate” Russian actions in the Caucasus, and travelled to Tallinn to deliver a very hard-hitting speech where she declared that Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty was of fundamental importance and, despite her earlier opposition, that “Georgia and Ukraine will be members of NATO.”<sup>99</sup> But, as the weeks passed, the natural dynamic of German policy returned. By the time an early-September special summit of the European Union called to discuss the war had convened, Germany and France were working together to ensure that any collective position avoided the imposition of sanctions on Moscow.<sup>100</sup> In her early-October 2008 visit to St. Petersburg, where Merkel met with Medvedev, the rhetoric was far more diplomatic with a focus on rebuilding trust and avenues for further cooperation. Beyond statements of outrage, and a reassertion of NATO’s value (in case, one assumes, Russia was trying to take advantage of Germany’s large body of anti-American sentiment), Europe’s largest Power saw few options: less than two months after the Chancellor’s speech in Tallinn, it was largely business as usual. Indeed, by early-November, even the EU had decided to lift the only sanction it had imposed on Moscow, namely the suspension of its dialogue to fashion a strategic partnership with Russia.<sup>101</sup>

Despite the rhetoric that accompanied the hostilities in the South Caucasus, none of the European states are ready for a political confrontation with Moscow. It is possible that the Russian leadership understands this constraint that its European counterparts operate under. Neither the EU nor NATO-Europe is able, psychologically and politically, to play the game of Realpolitik

---

<sup>97</sup> Ralf Beste, Markus Feldenkirchen and Alexander Szander, “Merkel’s Most Serious Foreign Policy Crisis,” *Der Spiegel*, 18 August 2008.

<sup>98</sup> Michael Evans, “NATO torn between threats and caution over Russia and Georgia,” *The Times* (London), 18 August 2008.

<sup>99</sup> Bundesregierung Deutschlands, “Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel in Tallinn, Estland,” 26 August 2008.

<sup>100</sup> Severin Weiland, “Sarkozy and Merkel Soften Up the Hardliners,” *Der Spiegel*, 2 September 2008. See also Bertrand Benoit, “Merkel committed to rapport despite war,” *The Financial Times*, 20 August 2008.

<sup>101</sup> Jean-Jacques Mével, “L’Europe décide de renouer avec la Russie,” *Le Figaro*, 10 novembre 2008.

that it is pursuing. As the analyst Robert Kagan has observed, the idea of power politics is largely beyond their comprehension—“many in the West still want to believe this is the era of geo-economics.”<sup>102</sup> Here again there is an opportunity for Moscow to exploit, for it is uncertain how America’s European allies and partners will ultimately respond to the Russian proposal for a new security system. Currently, political discussion orbits the possibility of Russia re-emerging as an adversary, with governments actively looking for ways to prevent that from coming to pass. However, should the Russian leadership be able to put the Georgian war behind it, and its rhetoric continue to emphasise the need for pragmatic interaction with Europe as it is clearly trying to do, the attitudes will almost certainly change. It seems almost certain that as time passes, the attitude of many of those governments, particularly those of the leading European Powers, will be favourable to finding new mechanisms to accommodate Russian concerns.

---

<sup>102</sup> Robert Kagan, “New Europe, Old Russia,” *The Washington Post*, 6 February 2008.

## 6 Moscow looks at Washington

---

In recent years, the United States has become the target of increasingly bitter invective by Russian leaders. In Putin's speech to the 2007 Munich Security Conference, he condemned what he called the "unipolar model" in contemporary world affairs arguing that it was contributing to much of the instability today. Later that year, he went so far as to compare the US to Nazi Germany.<sup>103</sup> While avoiding such offensive analogies, Dmitri Medvedev echoed his prime minister's point of view in late-August 2008 when he noted that a "single-pole" system "is unstable and threatened by conflict."<sup>104</sup> Indeed, he has also argued that the "continuing crisis of the entire Euro-Atlantic policy brought about by the 'unipolar syndrome'" lay at the heart of the Georgian crisis. In other words, Washington's policy, either directly or indirectly, acted as an impetus for what it views as the criminal actions of the Georgian leadership. More recently, still, the Russian president has sought to capitalise diplomatically on the international anger surrounding the financial meltdown to draw the attention of European leaders to the disastrous economic policies of the Bush Administration. Terming it "financial egoism," he argued that the days when one single power dominated the global economy have vanished, undoubtedly implying that greater cooperation with Europe in the future will avoid the problems they were all now facing. Similar views were voiced by his prime minister and mentor, Vladimir Putin, who termed US economic policy "irresponsible."<sup>105</sup> Taken as a whole, all of these comments suggest that the US-Russian bilateral relationship is in serious distress.

There is no question that Moscow is very concerned about Washington's global footprint. If Russia is not attempting to change the international order as the Soviet Union wanted to do, it nonetheless rejects the US claim to global leadership. There are several reasons for this. First, acceptance of unipolarity is incompatible with the national honour of Russia and the country's claim to being a Great Power. Great Powers are equals in a ranking shared by few, and an institutionalised acknowledgement of US primacy cannot formally coexist with such a status. In this understanding, Moscow is no different than some other states, most notably France, that have long chafed at US leadership. And, like France, Russia does not dispute the fact that the US is the most powerful global actor, or that it has interests throughout the world. Nonetheless, it is only prepared to acknowledge the US as *primus inter pares* (first among equals), a status that implies a reciprocal respect and recognition of national interests.<sup>106</sup> Ignoring Russian interests, such as has happened in the discussion of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, or categorically rejecting Moscow's views, as happened with Kosovo and Iraq, are not viewed as respectful of Russia's status as a Great Power or of its own special interests. A "poly-centric order" would, the Russian leadership has frequently observed, ensure that no one country was determining the standards of acceptable behaviour:

---

<sup>103</sup> C.J. Chivers, "The Cure for Chilling Words Could be a Cooler Temper," *The New York Times*, 13 May 2007.

<sup>104</sup> "Medvedev's Plans for Military Rearmament," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 3 October 2008.

<sup>105</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia sees in credit crisis end to U.S. domination," *The International Herald Tribune*, 2 October 2008.

<sup>106</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "A less ideological America," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Autumn 2008, p. 121.

[t]he creation of a polycentric system is more relevant than ever. This cannot be done without a range of measures including the reform of major international institutions and the general strengthening of multilateral diplomacy. Together with all interested parties, we will create a truly democratic model of international relations, not allowing any one country to dominate in any sphere.<sup>107</sup>

It is an argument that many critics of US policy, but also the relative weight of the US in the international system, will find compelling. In its overtures to the European Powers, both Putin and Medvedev have argued that the crisis of the past summer was caused, in part, because there was no interest on the part of the US to constrain Georgian ambitions. A fear that Tbilisi's accession to NATO would involve the alliance in the Caucasus, a region vital to Russia's security, undoubtedly fed that perspective. "I think that the recent events mark the complete loss of any illusions that still remained," Medvedev told the International Valdai Club. "These were illusions," he added, "that the world is a fair place, the security system based on the current division of political influence is optimum and keeps the world in balance, and the main players on the global political stage are in a state of equilibrium. But none of this is so."

Second, Russia believes that US policies are often wrong-headed and that the security system that Washington has attempted to create around its leadership has, far from contributing to global stability, instead done the opposite. For a weak Power seeking time to recover its strength and rebuild itself internally, the dangerous consequences of US policy seem too obvious to ignore.<sup>108</sup> From Moscow's perspective, whether it is the issue of Iran's nuclear programme, or the wars that erupted in the former Yugoslavia, Washington is too ready to resort to military force. The US capability to project military power so easily is particularly galling to the former Superpower, and Russian leaders have frequently argued that the "unilateralism" of the US is directly challenging the international system's normative and legal structures. Given Russian actions in the Caucasus this past summer that argument is transparently self-serving; but weaker states are always interested in constraining, wherever possible and by whatever means, the actions of the more powerful. And yet, at a deeper level, Moscow's opposition to the US also appears to be based on a belief that the outcomes of Washington's interventions are likely to prove more threatening to its own interests than the situations prior to the initiation of conflict. The Russian leadership undoubtedly believes that its own weakness has left it vulnerable. It has permitted the US to act unconstrained and, it is implied, in a manner that would not likely occur if the other major Powers worked together.

The US-led wars in Kosovo and Iraq have especially drawn the ire of Russian policymakers. Both were described in Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference as examples of "an almost

---

<sup>107</sup> President of Russia, "Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation," 5 November 2008.

<sup>108</sup> In making a reference to nineteenth century foreign policy, former foreign minister Igor Ivanov quoted a lengthy, but undated, memorandum prepared by Prince Gorchakov for Alexander II: "Our policies should pursue a double goal. First, to keep Russia safe from becoming involved in any kind of external complications that could divert some of our effort away from our internal development. Second, we must make every effort during this time to ensure that no changes—either territorial or in the balance of power—occur in Europe that might seriously damage our interests or political situation. (...) If we attain these two goals, we can hope that Russia can recover from its losses, become stronger and replenish its resources, to regain its position, authority, influence, and destiny among the Great Powers." Igor Ivanov, *The New Russian Diplomacy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2002), p. 26.

uncontained hyper use of force—military force—in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts.”<sup>109</sup> Kosovo was, in Russia’s opinion, an illegitimate and illegal use of armed force that violated the UN Charter’s proscription on interference in the internal affairs of member-states. (Medvedev has stated that the US-led recognition of that statelet’s independence is the precedent for the recent recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>110</sup>) But despite Moscow’s own action, Kosovo’s independence is believed to threaten further instability globally. For Moscow, therefore, far from solving an ethnic conflict in the southern Balkans, it raises the spectre of secessionist movements in multi-ethnic states, such as the Russian Federation. The war in Iraq has been likewise problematic. It is true that the Bush Administration’s attack eliminated a regime that had long had good relations with both the USSR and the Russian Federation. But, alongside a natural *Schadenfreude* that accompanies any weakening of a rival Power, the ensuing instability in that country is, nonetheless worrisome given that Russia’s southern regions border the Muslim world. In its last years, the Soviet Union had directly confronted a surge in Islamism and jihadism within its Muslim populations of Central Asia as a result of the war in Afghanistan.<sup>111</sup> Since then, it had also fought two wars with jihadist elements operating in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia, and is still confronted by a low-level insurgency in those provinces. Fear of radical Islam and the increased appeal of jihadist ideas in what is often termed the “crescent of crisis”, and even within the large Muslim communities inside the Russian Federation,<sup>112</sup> underpins its opposition to US policy.<sup>113</sup>

When Moscow’s view of US policy as wrong-headed is combined with a belief that Washington does not really support Russia’s recovery, it leads to a grave concern that the US is a dangerous actor in the international system. Operating in a strategic culture that is sensitive to national security challenges and views the international system as a competitive environment, Russia’s leaders harbour a considerable distrust of Washington’s intentions. Dmitri Trenin has argued that the lack of any ideology behind current Russian policy has meant that Moscow has fallen back on a Realpolitik perspective of global interactions: “They believe that all nations seek to expand their influence, and in order to do so, they rely on their power, hard and soft. In their view, military force is a usable tool of foreign policy; war prevention is not enough. They focus on states’ military capabilities, rather than their political affiliations.”<sup>114</sup> Moscow tends to look at Washington’s discourse of values and democratization “as essentially disingenuous, thoroughly

---

<sup>109</sup> President of Russia, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Security Conference on Security Policy,” 10 February 2007.

<sup>110</sup> “In my view today there is certainly no serious argument which would allow one to, for example, separate the process of the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from the decision taken with regard to Kosovo.” See President of Russia, “Transcript of the Meeting with the Participants in the International Club Valdai,” 12 September 2008.

<sup>111</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 103-104.

<sup>112</sup> The 2002 census indicated that there were 14 million Muslims in the Russian Federation, or about 10 percent of the country’s total population. However, that census did not capture a number of smaller Muslim communities and so a more accurate figure would likely be about 15 million. This means that 50 percent of the country’s population that is not ethnically Russian is Muslim. Of much more significance is the birth-rate of the Muslim minority which grew by 20 percent between 1989 and 2002. Interestingly, those Muslims groups that had some of the highest growth rates live in areas that have experienced the most jihad-inspired violence. See Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia’s Islamic Threat* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 8-10.

<sup>113</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Threat Perception and Strategic Posture,” Nation and Trenin (eds), *Russian Security Strategy Under Putin: U.S. and Russian Perspectives*, p. 35.

compromised by double standards, and serving the purpose of global expansionism.”<sup>115</sup> Trenin believes that this outlook, prevalent in the current regime, represents a “near-total repudiation of the Mikhail Gorbachev and early Boris Yeltsin-era philosophy of common security.” This change is undoubtedly influenced by new opportunities provided by the increase in Russian capabilities and confidence.

It should nevertheless be mentioned that US actions have probably reinforced the ingrained Realpolitik perspective. Hard-line statements about Russia by members of the Bush Administration, Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in particular, have undoubtedly reinforced this concern. And, indeed, for some in Russian political circles, the distrust obviously goes much deeper and is caused by a strong suspicion that the US views Russia as a rival that needs to be contained, a policy goal expressed in the National Security Strategy of the United States (2002). In an early-2008 interview with Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister gave vent to this perspective:

A geopolitical ideology prevails in the American government and the governments of some other countries – primarily those which have chosen complete loyalty to Washington’s directives in their foreign policy decision-making. This ideology boils down to one thing: making every effort to “contain” Russia.<sup>116</sup>

The continuing refusal of the US Congress to lift the Cold War-era’s Jackson-Vanick Amendment that restricts trade with Russia, the ejection of Russia’s energy giant LUKoil from Iraq, and limp support for Moscow’s membership application to the World Trade Organisation (despite its advocacy of Ukraine’s successful bid), have all served to reinforce this impression. Aspects of the war with Georgia also fit this pattern: US training of the Georgian Army prior to the conflict last summer, and the decision during the fighting to airlift Georgian troops stationed in Iraq back home, as well as promises to re-equip and re-supply the Georgian armed forces after the fighting had ended, are most likely viewed as a continuing policy that is intended to contain Russia. There are reports that leading elements in the Russian political circles, including Prime Minister Putin, even think that the war happened because Washington wanted it, thereby fostering the impression of a Cold War proxy conflict.<sup>117</sup>

In the wake of 9/11, the increase of the US presence in areas where, traditionally, Russia influence was supreme, has also been very worrisome to Moscow. This has led to measures that the Russian authorities obviously hoped would strengthen its own hand vis-à-vis the US. Despite supporting the NATO presence in Afghanistan, it brought pressure to bear on the former Soviet republics in Central Asia to restrict NATO access to air bases. In May 2008, Moscow convinced Uzbekistan (already subject to considerable criticism due to its abominable human rights record) to order the closing of the Karshi Khanabad facility that was being used to support US operations in Afghanistan. After the colour revolutions of 2003 to 2005, the US presence probably took on a

---

<sup>115</sup> Trenin, “A less ideological America” p.117.

<sup>116</sup> Vladislav Vorobiev, “The Diplomat’s Key; Sincerity and rejecting double standards, according to Sergei Lavrov,” *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, 7 October 2008.

<sup>117</sup> Vladimir Putin even claimed that the Bush Administration orchestrated the conflict to assist John McCain’s presidential campaign. See Tony Halpin, “Vladimir Putin accuses Bush of provoking Georgia conflict to help John McCain,” *The Times* (London), 28 August 2008.

more suspicious dimension for Russian policy-makers who already saw Washington's emphasis on democratization as subversive. And, it is as a part of a more aggressive image of US policy that the US-led BMD shield is assessed. While US officials assert—with a variety of arguments and evidence concerning the technology—that the BMD shield will not negate Russia's strategic nuclear capabilities, Moscow is unwilling and, indeed, unable to agree.<sup>118</sup> In fact, it has very publicly expressed doubts about the underlying rationale for the system, and President Medvedev has stated that it would represent a “threat to Russian interests.” The agreements Washington has reached with Poland and the Czech Republic, the timing of which were clearly accelerated by the war in the South Caucasus, will likely reinforce the Russian view that the purpose of the BMD shield is other than that which is stated. While decrying the onset of what Putin termed a new arms race in Europe, Russia has threatened to respond through “military-technical methods.”<sup>119</sup>

Believing that its own weaknesses have contributed to many of the negative international developments it sees as threatening, Russia has sought to increase its own capabilities in an attempt to increase its relative weight in global power calculations, particularly in its dealings with the US. An increase in annual defence expenditure to over US\$50 billion, a newly announced reform programme that will see the armed forces structure modernised and streamlined, and a US\$200 billion procurement package over many years, are all designed to modernise and expand military capabilities, much of which is obsolete, incapable of sustained deployment or threatened by rust-out. Moscow's decision to strengthen the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a military pact whose members include Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia and Tajikistan, as well as closer relations with China and a focus on cooperation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, are clearly intended to shore up Russia's profile in Eurasia, where the US presence has also been growing. Overtures made to Syria, including the acquisition of basing facilities, recall similar measures undertaken by the USSR and hold out some possibility of improving Russia's position in the Middle East. And Moscow has even proposed to the EU the creation of mechanisms by means of which it could support crisis management operations under the auspices of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

But in its efforts to find a means of increasing its power relative to the USA, there are obvious limits to the political effectiveness and sustainability of such initiatives. Russia's military expenditure and its capabilities are still dwarfed by those of the US (US\$660 billion in 2007 and projected to be \$711 billion in 2008) and that of Europe (projected to be US\$289 billion in 2008).<sup>120</sup> As this situation is likely to prevail for years to come the EU has no incentive to turn to Moscow for assistance on ESDP missions. The ramshackle structure of the CSTO will not prove a multiplier of influence or capabilities, for everyone knows that any diplomatic leverage it might seek derives exclusively from Russian involvement.<sup>121</sup> This is especially so given that most of the

---

<sup>118</sup> Artyom Ivanovsky, “Reaction to American ABM System,” *Voyenno-Promyshlenny Kurier*, No. 40, 4-14 October 2008.

<sup>119</sup> “Russia,” *Strategic Survey 2008*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>120</sup> Anup Shah, “World Military Spending,” *Global Issues*, 1 March 2008, accessed at <http://www.globalissues.org/article/75/world-military-expenditures#USMilitarySpending>.

<sup>121</sup> At the September 2008 meeting in Moscow, a statement was released condemning the actions of Georgia and calling upon NATO to “weigh all possible consequences of expanding the alliance eastward and placing new antimissile defence facilities along the borders of member states.” See “Russia said to Want a Military Bloc of its Own,” *Moscow Vedomosti* (as transcribed by World News Connection), 8 September 2008.

member-states (Belarus being an obvious exception) are anxious to attract foreign investment and build closer ties with Washington and the EU. And there are very clear limits to the value of the Eurasian option. Given the disparity in strength of the two “strategic partners”, including the very sparse population in Russia’s far eastern provinces, Beijing would almost certainly be in the driver’s seat of any Sino-Russian alliance. That would be, perhaps, an outcome even more humiliating than the current relationship with the West given Russia’s traditional sense of superiority over its Asian neighbours.

## 7 Conclusion

---

Rather than the return of the Cold War, a framework of relations with Moscow that prevailed for half a century, the situation today recalls an even earlier era. While no analogy is ever entirely accurate, the approach to foreign policy practised by Russia in the last half of the nineteenth century seems apposite to what we are seeing today. In that earlier time, Russia's foreign policy was principally motivated by a need to create "the most favorable conditions possible for internal reform while (...) not allowing the country's international position to be weakened."<sup>122</sup> Within this paradigm, pragmatism as opposed to dogmatism can be expected to hold sway, inviting cooperation but accepting that both it and confrontation are sometimes required. The Russian leadership knows that its actions this past summer with regard to Georgia have reinforced negative views—even negative stereotypes—held in many quarters. Talk of a "resurgent Russia" and of a new imperialism that could pose a direct and growing threat to core Western interests is quite commonplace now. Moscow recognises that its foreign policy must now also respond to this criticism in order to advance its own objectives. Indeed, it is the very nature of a pragmatic foreign policy that requires such sensitivity to fluctuations abroad. But, in Russia's case, the task is much more difficult than that confronted by many other countries, for it lacks the soft power resources that might dampen that type of criticism. Instead, it must rely on increasingly clever diplomacy, strategically-informed rhetoric, and carefully applied pressure to continue its projection of Russia as a Great Power and as a global actor.

What does the future hold? On a very narrow front, it seems fairly certain that the Russo-Georgian war achieved what many assume was a goal that Moscow sought to advance; namely, to stop Georgia's drift into the Western Alliance. Regardless of what US and some European leaders assert publicly, the chances that Georgia and Ukraine will accede to NATO in the near future are less today than they were six months ago at the Bucharest Summit. Few, if any, in NATO-Europe see any tangible gain for the Alliance's security being achieved by the accession of such a geographically and culturally distant country as Georgia. Indeed, recognising the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia—a status that one can expect Russia to use as a bargaining chip should the international situation so warrant—has created a territorial dispute that should preoccupy Tbilisi's leaders for the next few years. And the summer's conflict has brought to the fore a question (so far unanswered, but perhaps unanswerable) that almost everyone had failed to acknowledge in previous rounds of enlargement: if Georgia had obtained access to MAP what would NATO have done in response? Would NATO have provided military assistance risking, in the eyes of many, all that has been achieved since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR? Such thinking is politically unpalatable, but necessary on those occasions when reality thrusts aside the rhetoric of political leaders.

For Russia, the construction of the strong state and the concomitant assertion of Great Power status are intertwined—for many reasons, the country's strategic culture would seem to demand that both be maintained. Security for a state and society that have experienced so much insecurity in their past, both recent and more distant, is rather like walking toward the horizon—the goals, while legitimate, are forever unachievable, at least to a degree that is categorical. Sir Christopher Meyer, a former British ambassador to the United States, noted recently that "[t]he Russia that we

---

<sup>122</sup> Ivanov, *The New Russian Diplomacy*, p. 27.

are dealing with today, with its fear of encirclement, its suspicion of foreigners and natural appetite for autocracy, is as old as the hills, long pre-dating communism.”<sup>123</sup> A criticism frequently directed at decision-makers is that they design their foreign policy for the world that they want, not to address the world as it is. Disappointment with the direction of Moscow’s foreign policy is, in part, rooted in exaggerated expectations of the velocity by, and extent to, which Russia could become a member of the Western grouping of states. Given its historical experience and strategic culture, more modest ambitions are both logical and reasonable: in other words, accepting the country for what it is and working with it on that basis, instead of basing policy on how foreigners think *it ought to behave* and what interests *it ought to have*. The crisis created by the Russo-Georgian conflict was, in part, a product of the intersection of Western hopes and Russian realities. Moscow’s invasion of Georgia was not intended to be the first shots of a new Cold War, nor even necessarily the onset of a new era of confrontation—and Russia’s leaders have stated this many times in the weeks since the ceasefire took effect. It was, instead, an alarm bell that advised Western leaders that Russia will no longer be what its leaders have long suspected it has been in the West, the object of derision and of policies designed to transform it in ways foreign to its traditions and culture. Instead, the Russian leadership will more confidently define its own approaches to the questions that most concern its country, including those in the broader international arena. And, as a consequence, it expects to be treated with respect and to have its interests taken into account by other Powers, including the European states and most especially, the US.

---

<sup>123</sup> Christopher Meyer, “A return to 1815 is the way forward for Europe,” *The Times* (London), 2 September 2008.

## Distribution list

---

Document No.: DRDC CORA TM 2009-016

### Information

#### Internal

- 1 DDG
- 1 Section Head Strategic Analysis
- 1 Library
- 4 Author

#### External

- 1 DM
- 1 Assoc DM
- 1 CDS
- 1 DOS SJS
- 1 ADM(Pol)
- 1 Comd CEFCOM
- 1 Comd CANSOFCOM
- 1 ADM(S&T)
- 1 COS VCDS
- 1 CDI
- 1 CFD
- 1 DGIP
- 1 DG Cap Dev
- 1 DG FDA
- 1 DG MFD
- 1 DG LCD
- 1 DG AFD
- 1 DGIS Pol
- 1 DG Pol Plan
- 1 D Strat A
- 1 DMTAP
- 1 D NATO Pol
- 3 SJS/DSOA
- 1 DFSA
- 1 DPFL
- 1 DRDKIM

Alan Barnes  
International Assessment Staff  
Privy Council Office  
59 Sparks Street  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A3

Director – Policy Research Division  
Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada  
125 Sussex Drive  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0G2

Dr. Paul Wilson  
Director of Policy  
Prime Minister's Office  
Langevin Block

Dr. Roy Rempel  
Senior Policy Advisor  
Office of the Minister of International Trade DFAIT  
Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada  
125 Sussex Drive  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0G2

Dr. Jeremy Littewood  
Canadian Centre of Intelligence and Security Studies  
The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA)  
Carleton University DT-1404  
1125 Colonel By Drive  
Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6

Dr. Marc Milner  
Director  
The Brigadier Milton F. Gregg Centre for the Study of War and Society  
Tilley Hall Room 43  
9 Macaulay Lane  
University of New Brunswick  
P.O. Box 4400  
Fredericton NB E3B 5A3

Professor Hugh White  
Head  
Strategic and Defence Studies Centre  
Level 3, Hedley Bull Centre  
Australian National University  
130 Garran Road  
Canberra ACT 0200  
Australia

Caroline Flintoft  
Director of Research and Publications  
International Crisis Group  
149 Avenue Louise  
Level 24  
B-1050 Brussels  
Belgium

Álvaro de Vasconcelos  
Director  
EU Institute for Security Studies  
43 Avenue du Président Wilson  
75775 Paris cedex 16  
France

Dr. Karl-Heinz Kamp  
Director – Research Division  
NATO Defense College  
Via Giorgio Pelosi, 1  
Cecchignola  
00143 Rome, Italy

Director of Research  
National Defence College  
Drottning Kristinas väg 37  
Box 27805  
SE-115 93  
Stockholm  
Sweden

Professor Keith Krause  
Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement  
The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies  
132, rue de Lausanne  
Case postale 136  
CH 1211 Genève 21  
Switzerland

Dr. Robin Niblett  
Director  
Royal Institute of International Affairs  
Chatham House  
10 James's Square  
London SW1Y 4LE  
United Kingdom

Dr. John Chipman  
Director-General and Chief Executive  
The International Institute for Strategic Studies  
Arundel House, 13-15 Arundel Street, Temple Place  
London WC2R 3DX  
United Kingdom

Dr. Jamie MacIntosh  
Advanced Research and Assessment Group (ARAG)  
Defence Academy of the United Kingdom  
Headquarters  
Greenhill House  
Shrivenham  
Nr Swindon  
Wiltshire SN6 8LA  
United Kingdom

Mr. Roger McDermott  
Department of Politics and International Relations  
University of Kent  
Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NX  
United Kingdom

Robert S. Litwak  
Director, International Security Studies  
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20004-3027  
United States

Dr. Eric Thompson  
International Affairs Group (IAG)  
The Center for Strategic Studies  
The CAN Corporation  
4825 Mark Center Drive  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
United States

Richard K. Betts  
Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies  
420 West 118th Street  
13th Floor, Room 1336, MC 3347  
New York, NY 10027  
United States

Professor Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute (SSI)  
United States Army War College  
122 Forbes Avenue  
Carlisle, Pennsylvania 17013-5244  
United States

This page intentionally left blank.

<b>DOCUMENT CONTROL DATA</b>		
(Security classification of title, body of abstract and indexing annotation must be entered when the overall document is classified)		
<p>1. <b>ORIGINATOR</b> (The name and address of the organization preparing the document. Organizations for whom the document was prepared, e.g. Centre sponsoring a contractor's report, or tasking agency, are entered in section 8.)</p> <p><b>Defence R&amp;D Canada 305 Rideau Street Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K2</b></p>	<p>2. <b>SECURITY CLASSIFICATION</b> (Overall security classification of the document including special warning terms if applicable.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>UNCLASSIFIED</b></p>	
<p>3. <b>TITLE</b> (The complete document title as indicated on the title page. Its classification should be indicated by the appropriate abbreviation (S, C or U) in parentheses after the title.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strategic Assessment - Russia: Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy</b></p>		
<p>4. <b>AUTHORS</b> (last name, followed by initials – ranks, titles, etc. not to be used)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Ben Lombardi</b></p>		
<p>5. <b>DATE OF PUBLICATION</b> (Month and year of publication of document.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>April 2009</b></p>	<p>6a. <b>NO. OF PAGES</b> Total containing information, including Annexes, Appendices, etc.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>57</b></p>	<p>6b. <b>NO. OF REFS</b> Total cited in document.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>123</b></p>
<p>7. <b>DESCRIPTIVE NOTES</b> (The category of the document, e.g. technical report, technical note or memorandum. If appropriate, enter the type of report, e.g. interim, progress, summary, annual or final. Give the inclusive dates when a specific reporting period is covered.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Technical Memorandum</b></p>		
<p>8. <b>SPONSORING ACTIVITY</b> (The name of the department project office or laboratory sponsoring the research and development – include address.)</p> <p><b>Defence R&amp;D Canada 305 Rideau Street Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K2</b></p>		
<p>9a. <b>PROJECT OR GRANT NO.</b> (If appropriate, the applicable research and development project or grant number under which the document was written. Please specify whether project or grant.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PG0 10ac</b></p>	<p>9b. <b>CONTRACT NO.</b> (If appropriate, the applicable number under which the document was written.)</p>	
<p>10a. <b>ORIGINATOR'S DOCUMENT NUMBER</b> (The official document number by which the document is identified by the originating activity. This number must be unique to this document.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>DRDC CORA TM 2009-016</b></p>	<p>10b. <b>OTHER DOCUMENT NO(s).</b> (Any other numbers which may be assigned this document either by the originator or by the sponsor.)</p>	
<p>11. <b>DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY</b> (Any limitations on further dissemination of the document, other than those imposed by security classification.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Unlimited</b></p>		
<p>12. <b>DOCUMENT ANNOUNCEMENT</b> (Any limitation to the bibliographic announcement of this document. This will normally correspond to the Document Availability (11). However, where further distribution (beyond the audience specified in (11) is possible, a wider announcement audience may be selected.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Unlimited</b></p>		

13. ABSTRACT (A brief and factual summary of the document. It may also appear elsewhere in the body of the document itself. It is highly desirable that the abstract of classified documents be unclassified. Each paragraph of the abstract shall begin with an indication of the security classification of the information in the paragraph (unless the document itself is unclassified) represented as (S), (C), (R), or (U). It is not necessary to include here abstracts in both official languages unless the text is bilingual.)

The Russo-Georgian conflict during summer 2008 has led many commentators to question the belief that has guided the West's foreign policy-making since the collapse of the USSR, namely that Russia would become a progressively more integrated member of the Western community of states. The accompanying sense of disappointment has led to fears that a new Cold War is likely to ensue. This Technical Memorandum argues that the roots of contemporary Russian foreign policy are to be found in the country's strategic culture, within which the armed forces have always played an important role in the construction of Russian political identity. Today, that includes the current regime's agenda of building a strong state. The Russo-Georgian war does not, therefore, necessarily mark the onset of a new age of confrontation with the West. Moscow's objective in using military force against Tbilisi was almost certainly to put an end to any prospect of Georgia joining NATO, a development that Russian leaders have frequently identified as a challenge to core national interests. Foreign policy under Presidents Putin and Medvedev is primarily designed to create the most favourable conditions for Russia's political, social and economic modernization, while not permitting its international position to be weakened.

Le conflit qui a opposé la Russie et la Géorgie au cours de l'été 2008 a amené plusieurs commentateurs à remettre en cause la conviction ayant guidé l'élaboration de la politique étrangère occidentale depuis l'effondrement de l'URSS, soit que la Russie s'intégrerait progressivement à la communauté des États occidentaux. La déception associée à cet événement a fait resurgir le spectre d'une nouvelle guerre froide. Selon les auteurs de cette analyse technique, la politique étrangère russe contemporaine est ancrée dans la culture stratégique du pays. Dans cette culture, les forces armées ont toujours joué un rôle important dans la construction de l'identité politique russe. Aujourd'hui, cela s'inscrit dans le plan du régime actuel de bâtir un État fort. En conséquence, le conflit russo-géorgien ne marque pas nécessairement le début d'une nouvelle ère d'affrontement avec l'Occident. En recourant à une intervention militaire contre Tbilisi, l'objectif de Moscou était sans doute de stopper toute velléité de la Géorgie d'adhérer à l'OTAN, une possibilité que les dirigeants russes ont fréquemment dénoncée comme une atteinte aux intérêts fondamentaux du pays. Sous la direction des présidents Poutine et Medvedev, la politique étrangère vise essentiellement à créer les conditions les plus favorables à la modernisation politique, sociale et économique de la Russie, tout en ne permettant pas un affaiblissement de sa position sur la scène internationale.

14. KEYWORDS, DESCRIPTORS or IDENTIFIERS (Technically meaningful terms or short phrases that characterize a document and could be helpful in cataloguing the document. They should be selected so that no security classification is required. Identifiers, such as equipment model designation, trade name, military project code name, geographic location may also be included. If possible keywords should be selected from a published thesaurus, e.g. Thesaurus of Engineering and Scientific Terms (TEST) and that thesaurus identified. If it is not possible to select indexing terms which are Unclassified, the classification of each should be indicated as with the title.)

Russia; Diplomacy; Foreign Policy; NATO; USA; Georgia; Strategic Culture



[www.drdc-rddc.gc.ca](http://www.drdc-rddc.gc.ca)