

The importance of understanding Russian strategic culture

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Several articles in Dutch military journals and newspapers have openly stated that the West, and by extension the Netherlands, has failed to correctly understand Russia. This is problematic as Russia is increasingly perceived as a threat to Western Europe, and concurrently Dutch relations with Russia have been deteriorating for several years. In essence, not understanding a threat is detrimental to one's security. Although no direct sense of territorial insecurity is currently present in the Netherlands, terms like "deterrence" and "containment" are again regularly used when discussing countering Russia's foreign aspirations. However, for such a policy to be successful, one must actually understand the party to be deterred, the roots of its actions and the nature of its decision-making processes.¹

The Netherlands does recognize the deteriorating security environment. Correspondingly, pressed on one side by successive U.S. administrations to increase spending on defense, and on the other by increased Russian aggressiveness, the Netherlands has decided to end the decades of budget cuts on defense. In the contemporary geopolitical environment, this is an understandable policy change. Still, several Dutch political parties continue to deviate from the aforementioned perception and openly flirt with rapprochement with Russia. This in spite of Russia posing a threat to the security environment as it is a major military power and a direct neighbor of several NATO-aligned states that disregards other states' sovereignty. Furthermore, the current Russian administration has in the recent past reverted to atrocities such as the state-sanctioned bombing of its own populace to strengthen its position as well as political assassinations of dissidents in other countries. This article argues

that the Netherlands has insufficient understanding of Russian strategic goals and strategic culture to properly align its foreign policy efforts to counter increasing Russian aggression.

This article aims to elucidate Russian strategic culture, its continuing strained relations with the Netherlands, and why the Dutch continue to struggle to implement the lessons learned from dealing with Russia for centuries. As "Russia" is a generalization that does not credit the diversity and complexity of the country, this article does not aim to be comprehensive. Rather, this article aspires to highlight the necessity to study Russia, its history and strategic culture, its language and customs. Although the Netherlands and many states in Europe consider Russia a security threat, they currently possess little institutional knowledge about Russia. Reinvesting in 'knowing Russia' would be highly advisable, as this would allow

politicians as well as the military to better understand and deal with the new strategic environment.

In making a case to reinvest in the institutional knowledge on Russia, its power instruments and its way of conducting foreign policy, this article will address Russian strategic culture, its self-image and the way Russia wields its independent power instruments in pursuit of its foreign policy goals. Ultimately, this article aims to incite renewed efforts to study Russia, which are both warranted and overdue, considering the increasing recognition of Russia as a major opponent to Western interests.

RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

Strategic culture describes how states and their leaders view the role of war, the nature of their enemy, how force should be used and against whom. Furthermore, strategic culture indicates the strategic and operational preferences regarding the use of armed forces. Every state has its own strategic culture. Understanding strategic culture is to understand the behavior of the state, in this case Russia, and to predict and explain operational preferences. As the history and culture of Russia are too vast and expansive to permit a comprehensive study here, the scope will thus be limited to a number of important constants in the Russian geopolitical perception that contradict Dutch strategic culture.

First, Russia considers itself a great power and demands to be treated as such. Secondly, Russia has a historical and enduring sense of insecurity, which is addressed by authoritarian leadership and highly capable armed forces. Finally, Russian strategic culture focuses on engaging in conflict beyond state borders and places few obstacles to using its armed forces as a foreign policy tool in a coercive manner. These aspects of Russian strategic culture are in sharp contrast to that of the Netherlands. Democracy and freedom of the press are highly valued, Dutch aspirations of global power are long gone, and the Netherlands combines its strong belief in international cooperation and compromise with an Huntingtonian view of its armed forces under thorough parliamentary oversight.

RUSSIA'S IDENTITY

In order to assert itself as a great power, it must have resources reflecting that power, as well the recognition of other states. Russia's independent power instruments have historically been based on its strong armed forces, including a nuclear triad. Indeed, military power is how Russia defines its strength as a state. Other power instruments include the Russian position in the energy market and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The need for recognition is exemplified by the

Russian indignation that followed the 2014 remarks by then U.S. President Obama that Russia was a struggling regional power acting out of weakness.² Mark Galeotti states that Russia's understanding of great-power status has three criteria: a buffer zone of dominions between itself and its adversaries, a globally recognized voice (de facto a veto), and a "get-out clause, an exemption from the rules that ordinarily govern interstate behavior."³

The willingness to use the military to establish itself as a great power is combined with a persistent conviction that Russia is threatened. This enduring sense of insecurity might be best illustrated with a quote from Kennan's "long telegram":

"At the bottom of Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs is traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity. Originally, this was insecurity of a peaceful agricultural people trying to live on vast exposed plain in neighborhood of fierce nomadic peoples. To this was added, as Russia came into contact with economically advanced West, fear of more competent, more powerful, more highly organized societies in that area."⁴

Events that have further shaped the Russian threat perception include the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Arab Spring, the Western intervention in Libya and the domestic protests during the 2011 elections. To the Russian security elite, these events pointed towards the Western policymakers' goal of destabilizing Russia and forcing a regime change via a "colour revolution." This sparked Gerasimov's 2013 article "The Value of Science is in the Foresight." Although this is now interpreted as the Russian indirect and asymmetric reaction to the new Western way of war, earlier interpretations saw it as a malevolent new Russian doctrine. Still, as the initiation of military power on Russian soil by Western powers is considered unlikely by Western policymakers, the decrease of buffer-states since the fall of the Soviet Union has provided Russia with the opportunity to use NATO's close presence as a leitmotiv in its strategic security narrative. However, as transitions of power are usually accompanied by a period of chaos and violence in Russia, few, if any, states would actually profit from a regime change in Russia. The fact that an unstable Russia is not in the interest of most states, however, does not edge Russia away from the conviction that the West is out for a regime change. Moreover, the NATO narrative on being a defensive alliance is considered by Russia to have been disproved by multiple NATO-led foreign interventions and perceived military build-up.



Military power is how Russia defines its strength as a state. Other power instruments include the Russian position in the energy market and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Pictured is Vasily Nebenzya. He is Russia's current Permanent Representative to the United Nations (photo: a katz/Shutterstock.com)

RUSSIA'S SECURITY GOALS

To Russia, security is a limited commodity, which means that when its opponents are less secure, Russia itself is automatically more secure. This zero-sum approach to security, in combination with its perceived status as a great power and continuing sense of insecurity, leads to three motives that influence decisions regarding the actual use of Russia's army. First, the possibility of conflict beyond Russia's borders that can impact Russia's security. Secondly, the Russian notion of a sphere of interest, closely linked to a sense of responsibility for regions that have been tied to or dominated by Russia for centuries, and lastly, the concern for *Russikya*, the Russian diaspora in its neighboring states, or "near abroad."

In asserting these foreign policy goals, Russia has a more liberal attitude towards using coercive military

power than many Western states. Still, in the Clausewitzian sense, the alignment of military ways and means to reach political ends are, however, applicable to the contemporary Russian strategy. Russian strategic concepts such as "mobilization" and "strategic deterrence" give insight into the ways the military is used and organized.

According to Andrew Monaghan, the Russian concept of State Mobilization (*mobilizatsiya*) describes "a coordinated attempt on the part of the state to address an array of evolving security threats – in both narrow and broad senses."⁵ It has much in common with the Western approach towards grand strategy, as it describes "the set of measures for activating the resources, strength, and capabilities of the state for the achievement of military-political aims."⁶ One of "the most notable features of this sense of mobilisation has been the attempt to

enhance coordination and implementation across the state.” In doing so, the Kremlin attempts to enforce a national unity of effort on all levels.

Strategic deterrence, or *strategicheskoe sderzhivanie*, is exactly what is perceived as “hybrid” in many Western states. Kirstin Ven Bruusgaard explains that:

“Strategic deterrence is the indigenous concept that encompasses what others call Russia’s ‘hybrid warfare doctrine’, Russia’s ‘ability for cross-domain coercion’ and Russia’s ‘nuclear brinkmanship’. The Russian concept, which can be translated as ‘strategic deterrence’, is conceived much more broadly than the traditional Western concept of deterrence. It is not entirely defensive: it contains offensive and defensive, nuclear, non-nuclear and non-military deterrent tools. These are to be used in times of peace and war – making the concept resemble, to Western eyes, a combined strategy of containment, deterrence and coercion – using all means available to deter or dominate conflict.”⁷

Russia’s foreign policy has been studded with political and military actions that are considered abject and inappropriate in common diplomatic exchanges. These include the annexation of the Crimea, the wars in Georgia and Donbass, (attempted) assassinations in Great Britain, and hostile actions in the economic, information and cyber domains. In Western discourse, these type of activities are classified as “hybrid warfare,” usually citing General Gerasimov, the chief of the Russian General Staff, as the doctrinal mastermind. Indeed, hybrid warfare has become a buzzword in contemporary Western political and military thinking. For Western states, “hybrid” is a way to describe the 21st-century security challenge, and as such it is usually used to style the detrimental activities posed by states such as China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. Generally, hybrid threats can be characterized as “coordinated and synchronised action, that deliberately targets democratic states and its institutions’ systemic vulnerabilities, through a wide range of means.”⁸ Although the term originates from a 2007 paper by Frank Hoffman, the concept predates the term. Presenting hybrid warfare as a new Russian way of warfare is both inaccurate as well as ahistorical. As all states use a variety of means to press foreign policy objectives, activities like propaganda, espionage, sabotage and proxy warfare can hardly be considered new. Also the activities that Russia is now accused of in the information domain have a long history in, for instance, Soviet-era “active measures” (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*) and the concept of *komprometiruyushchy material*, which

constitutes the use of damaging information to create negative publicity.⁹ Even political assassinations such as the 2006 poisoning of Litvinenko have also a long history, including on Dutch soil, exemplified by the 1938 assassination of Ukrainian dissident Konovalts in Rotterdam.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

As described in the previous section, Russian aggressiveness, rearmament and increased willingness to use its military prowess to pursue foreign policy interests reinforce the need for a first step: achieving a better understanding of Russia and its objectives, in order to pursue Dutch interests accordingly. Understanding Russia, however, is problematic as little effort is put into it. For instance, very few service members of the Dutch armed forces speak Russian, unlike in the Cold War era, when Russian language skills were more widespread, especially amongst military interrogators and members of signal units. Moreover, as Keir Giles explains in his book *Moscow Rules*, the cultural difference between Western Europe and Russia is greater than the geographical distance. Further pressing his point that Russian culture is substantially different from Western culture, Giles echoes Gonzague de Reynold’s claim that the Russian people and culture should be considered Asian, not European. To illustrate the ease with which friction could emerge in diplomatic conversations, just look at the difference in interpretations of concepts like compromise, truth and respect.

Compromise, which constitutes good statesmanship in the Netherlands, is seen as a sign of weakness in Russian strategic culture. It is imperative for policymakers to appreciate the Russian reluctance to accept a compromise. Compromising would imply weakness, and as a Russian military newspaper stated: “Moscow will not earn anything from a policy of concessions. Quite the reverse, any retreat from our position would show weakness of nerve on the part of Russian diplomacy.” Secondly, the concept of “truth,” highly valued by the Dutch, may be a translation of either *pravda* or *istina*.¹⁰ *Pravda* translates as “truth as a norm or value for both thinking and acting,” while *istina* is truth in the context of theory of knowledge. And while similar in translation, the two words have ultimately different meanings and can and will be used to manipulate the objective state of affairs, with the proceedings in the Crimea as a prime example. Indeed, the manipulation of the truth has found its way into Western politics as well, and the West is struggling to deal with this phenomenon. As a final example, a Dutch general advised in a 2015 article that the West should show more respect to Russia.¹¹ Although this advice on “respect” was most likely grounded in the Dutch

sense of respect as holding one another in high esteem, Giles explains that “‘respect’ in Russia is equated with fear, and the expression of respect by other states that Russia is consulted – and deferred to- on all major aspects of international affairs.”¹²

CONCLUSION

Much knowledge about Russia has evaporated in the Netherlands while the country has been enjoying the post-Cold War peace dividend. Yet, with the re-emergence of Russia as a global competitor and even as a threat to security in Western Europe, the Netherlands



Russian troops without identification in the Crimea have become known as “little green men”, and as such the quintessential display of the use of combat troops in Russian hybrid foreign policy efforts. This picture was taken near Simferopol, Crimea, on 5 March 2014 (photo: Serghiy Morgunov/Shutterstock.com)



In asserting its foreign policy goals, Russia has a more liberal attitude towards using coercive military power than many Western states
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must reinvest in institutional knowledge about Russian strategic culture, language and threat perception. Russia has shown itself to be unscrupulous in using its armed forces nefariously. Furthermore, it considers the use of armed forces as an exponent of normal foreign policy. Not playing by the rules is considered a privilege of a world power such as Russia. In this forceful competition, understanding one's opponent and understanding what incites him to reconsider are crucial. The fact that the Netherlands is only a small military power does not relieve it from the responsibility to broaden its institutional knowledge on the strategic culture of its competitors and opponents, with Russia being a case in point. This article has thus aimed to elaborate on several aspects of Russian (strategic) culture and has restated the need to study and understand a country that in a few decades has shifted from enemy, to ally, to dangerous global competitor.

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