

Russia's Strategic Culture and Geopolitics in Europe

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***Shah Meer¹ & Muhammad Ahmed²**

Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which many in Europe interpreted as part of President Putin's ambitions to redefine the European regional order established after World War II. This order imposed structural constraints and introduced reliance on collective security in order to check Russia's long-held ambitions. However, despite the systemic constraints and collective security, Russia has continued observing Eastern Europe through a historical lens wherein Russia's strategic and geopolitical choices have continued to be influenced by its strategic culture. This study investigates how Russia's geopolitical behavior and strategic preferences are shaped by its strategic culture. Primarily, it analyzes the role of Russian strategic culture as the most important variable, persuading Russian policymakers to pursue assertive geopolitics. It also focuses on the factors that diminish the impact of structural constraints in Russia's geopolitical behavior.

Keywords

Russia, strategic culture, Ukraine war, Europe, regional order

Introduction

In December 2021, the U.S. intelligence community warned Europe of an impending Russian military offensive against Ukraine. The European Union (EU) failed to heed American warnings (Nardelli et al., 2021). It underestimated President Putin's threats and Russia's military buildup along Ukraine's borders (Vicente, 2022). However, the U.S.'s warnings materialized into a grim reality when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, exposing the limits of the European security order.

The post-Cold War security policy of Europe rested on the assumption that structural factors such as economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, regional and international institutions, the rising costs of war, and a host of other bilateral arrangements would deter Russia from becoming a military threat. European

¹ *Corresponding Author: *Shah Meer* is a Research Assistant at Balochistan Think Tank Network (BTTN), Quetta

E-mail: shah.meer@bttan.org.pk

² *Muhammad Ahmed* serves as a Lecturer in the Department of International Relations, University of Balochistan.

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policymakers had assumed that under the existing structural conditions, military aggression or war would be inconsistent with Russia's geo-economic interests and strategic capabilities.

As events unfolded after the invasion of Ukraine, political and academic consensus soon broke down as scholars attributed Russia's attack to a range of factors, including North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) expansion, President Putin's ambitions, shifts in the distribution of power within the international system (Mearsheimer, 2022), and the increasing authoritarianism of the Russian government (Daalder, 2022). Amid this debate, the role of Russia's strategic culture in shaping its strategic preferences and geopolitical behavior remained largely overlooked.

This study investigates Russia's invasion of Ukraine through the lens of its strategic culture, highlighting its role as an enduring variable that has influenced Russian leaders to pursue recurring patterns of geopolitical behavior. The strategic culture is a sum of ideational factors stemming from the distinct historical socialization of a state. In its evolutionary course, a state develops norms, values, and systems through which it conceptualizes the connotations of statecraft. Since the history and evolution of every state is different, its conceptualization of war and peace will also be different. It highlights the incompatibilities that often emerge between the strategic preferences of Russia and those of European countries. This study recognizes the importance of the structural elements of European security architecture, emphasizing the role of structural components such as institutions, norms, and collective defense mechanisms in promoting stability and regional security. However, it argues that the utility of structural elements weakens in cases such as Russia, which has a history of military invasions, cycles of territorial expansion and contraction, and an enduring sense of strategic insecurity.

Theorizing Strategic Culture

Strategic culture refers to a set of discursive expressions and narratives of a state's leaders related to a state's security and its military affairs (Götz & Staun, 2022). Russia's strategic culture is the product of its historical socialization, elite perceptions, identity, and geopolitical insecurities. Debates surrounding the role of culture in state behavior have persisted for millennia. Classical philosophers such as Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and Kautilya have referred to the elements of strategic culture in national policy (Bhattacharyya, 2019).

The Chinese strategist Sun Tzu is perhaps the first scholar to have discussed the influence of culture on strategy. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu highlights psychological persuasion, information, and deception as critical factors that can influence the outcome of war. He also emphasizes the need for cultural intelligence in policymaking. Contemporary scholars note that Sun Tzu's ideas represent the antecedents of the modern concept of soft power in foreign policy and diplomacy (Ota, 2014; Tzu et al., 1963).

In addition to Sun Tzu, Greek philosopher Thucydides, as pointed out by Lebow (2001), highlights the cultural dimension of national policy in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Athens' assertion that 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must' points to the cultural element underlying military decision-making. It also illustrates how a society's 'cultural ethos' shapes its foreign policy

behavior. Thucydides' views of honor, identity, and policy continue to inform modern conceptions of strategic culture³ (Lebow, 2001).

Another classical work that integrates cultural considerations into statecraft is Kautilya's *Artha Shastra*. His theory of foreign relations, *raja-mandala* or the *circle of Kings*, reflects cultural conceptions of kinship, proximity, and trust among states (Kangle, 1963). Kautilya underscores the importance of shared beliefs and social norms in diplomacy and governance.

Taken together, the writings of Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and Kautilya emphasize the enduring role of culture in foreign policy and military affairs. Their writings inform contemporary debates on the role of identity and culture in global politics. Their writings also reveal that culture is not peripheral to policy but constitutes it, deeply influencing how a state perceives itself and engages with the world.

The evolution of the concept of strategic culture from the ancient to the modern era reflects both thematic and analytical transformations. Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and Kautilya have emphasized the role of culture and historical experience in statecraft and diplomacy, while contemporary scholars of politics and international relations have reframed these ideas within the analytical framework of strategic culture to explain military affairs and security, linking historical experience, collective memory, geographical insecurities, values, and national identity to recurring patterns of strategic choices.

Building on these ideas, Snyder (1977) provides an elaborate approach to understanding the relationship between strategy and culture in the modern age, stating that a state's strategic behavior is not solely determined by rational calculations alone, but is deeply embedded in the cultural narratives and collective experiences. He defines strategic culture as the sum of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community share concerning nuclear strategy (Snyder, 1977). He further argues that every society has its unique historical, political, social, and technological experiences that inevitably lead to the formation of policy traditions and doctrines that produce distinct strategic preferences.

Building on Snyder's view, subsequent scholars expanded the concept further, giving rise to two distinct generations of strategic culture thought. These schools of thought emphasize various dimensions of strategic culture, from material and institutional factors to ideational, normative, and interpretive frameworks. The first generation of scholars studying strategic culture has focused largely on the Soviet Union (Johnston, 1995). They aimed to identify the fundamental elements that shaped military and security policy.

David Jones, for example, proposed that strategic culture operates on three levels: macro, social, and micro. At the macro level, he emphasized the influence of ethno-cultural traits and historical experience. The social level, he suggested, reflects a society's political culture, while the micro level captures the role of military institutions and civil-military relations. Johnston (1995) argues that writings, military doctrines, rhetoric, leadership behavior, strategic discourse, and war literature are vital units of analysis for understanding state behavior. Similarly, Jones (1990) viewed differences in macro-environmental variables such as political culture, geography, and historical experience between the U.S. and the Soviet Union as key explanations for variation in strategic behavior.

³ For more info read: Philosophy Break. (n.d.). *Thucydides' Melian Dialogue: Can international politics be fair?* <https://philosophybreak.com/articles/thucydides-melian-dialogue-can-international-politics-be-fair>

Building on these ideas, Johnston (1995) has argued that sources such as official writings, military doctrines, leadership behavior, and even war literature offer valuable clues about how a state understands and practices strategy. Similarly, Colin Gray (1999) highlighted that differences in political culture, geography, and historical experience between the U.S. and the Soviet Union help explain why their strategic behaviors diverged so sharply.

The second generation of strategic culture theorists took these ideas further, seeing culture itself as central to understanding state behavior. Bradley S. Klein, for instance, argued that a state's strategic behavior arises from its historical experiences (Klein, 1994). Expanding this framework, Lantis (2016) identified three key dimensions that shape strategic culture: physical factors such as geography, climate, and technology; political factors including socialization, political systems, and elite beliefs; and socio-cultural influences such as myths, symbols, and foundational texts. Together, these elements paint a richer picture of how history and identity inform a nation's approach to security and military affairs.

Historical Continuity and Geopolitical Determinism

Russia's strategic culture is generally understood to be the product of three factors: first, a history of invasions and wars; second, a vast, open geographic expanse that is penetrable and lacks strategic depth; and third, the Russian elite, which has always remained hostile toward the West (Sokolsky, 2020). Resultantly, Russia's geographic vulnerability and its history of invasions by Mongols and Europeans have produced enduring behavioral patterns that Russian leaders have consistently adhered to.

Underlying Russia's behavior is a pervasive sense of encirclement that reinforces a siege mentality, legitimizing domestic authoritarianism and foreign assertiveness (Tsygankov, 2012). This 'encirclement narrative' portrays Russia not as an aggressor but as a besieged state, surrounded by hostile forces determined to harm its sovereignty and freedom. From the very beginning, when the Duchy of Moscow was formed after the collapse of the Golden Horde, Russia has faced a geostrategic vulnerability: encirclement. Fearing encirclement, Russia has consistently sought to appear strong and relevant, create buffer zones, and be recognized as a great power, all of which are central to its identity and pride.

Russia has usually sought to display strength through military intervention and diplomatic defiance, turning prestige into a form of security. In this enduring cycle of expansion, resistance, and recognition, Russia's past continually informs its present, and its quest for status becomes inseparable from its strategy for survival.

Russian geography has remained another important factor in shaping its strategic preferences. Billington (2004) claims that it's not Russian history but Russian geography that has shaped Russian thinking. Moscow has long faced strategic vulnerabilities and insecurities stemming from its geography. Mackinder (1904) argued that Russia's geography has shaped its destiny. With open borders and long memories of invasion, from Napoleon to Hitler, Russia has learnt to view even expansion not as ambition but as protection.

To survive, it had to push its borders outward and create buffer zones that could absorb danger before it reached Moscow. Over time, this logic became part of Russia's strategic culture (Johnston, 1995). Russia's war in Ukraine reflects the same historical thinking. For Russia, Ukraine is not just a neighboring state, but a critical piece of what Mackinder called the 'Heartland', the geographic core that determines

who controls Eurasia. Russian leaders believe that if Russia loses influence there, it risks losing national security and global status.

The fear of Western encirclement, heightened by NATO's expansion, sharpens it further (NESA, 2023). So, when Moscow describes its invasion as a defensive act, it's not merely propaganda; it's a reflection of this deeply rooted belief that geography has forced Russia to either expand or be threatened. In other words, keeping control over geographical space remains central to Russia's security. Russia's invasion of Ukraine lies partly in a kind of geopolitical inheritance that views geopolitical domination as necessary for Russia's survival. Hence, the result of this thinking is that geography still dictates destiny.

Realizing these vulnerabilities, Russian King Ivan IV laid the foundation of offense as defense. He used war and expansion as policy instruments to break Russia's encirclement. In addition to breaking the encirclement, Ivan IV further expanded Russia towards the Far East by conquering Kazan, Astrakhan, and some parts of the Golden Horde, paving the way for Russian hegemony in Siberia. Consequently, an unwritten norm emerged in Russia that admired strength, expansion, and dominance, and rejected weakness, cowardice, and non-expansion (Marshall, 2016).

Norms pertaining to geographical expansion and dominance have remained an influential factor in Russia's foreign policy for centuries. In addition to norms, geographical expansion possesses religious legitimacy in Russia in the shape of orthodox geopolitics. Arguably, geographical insecurities and religious sanction of expansionism, along with norms, have emerged as critical factors that shape Russian strategic preferences and foreign policy. This puts Russia in a unique place in Europe, as no other European state has inherited a similar historical heritage.

Russia at least fought once in every thirty-three years with hostile armies marching into Russia from the northern plain (Marshall, 2016). Poles attacked Russia in 1605, Sweden in 1708, Napoleon in 1812, and Germany in two world wars (Fuller, 1998). Considering repeated invasions, Russian leaders have opted to build a ring around Russian borders to prevent such attacks. This policy found resonance and following during the entire nineteenth century and the Cold War. Russia expanded into Western Germany, and today, when it is relatively weak, it considers these areas to be within its sphere of influence.

Therefore, being insecure despite having strong means to fight an enemy is a significant effect of Russian geographical history. According to Jones (1990), Russia cannot sail out of the Baltic Sea in the event of war. It must pass through the Skagerrak, a body of water controlled by NATO member countries Denmark and Norway, to reach the Baltic Sea. Additionally, Russia must look south for ports where it can exercise free passage. In this example, too, the realities of its geography led Russia to annex Crimea in 2014 so that it could use the warm water of the Black Sea.

More broadly, Russia considers the Black Sea important to its geo-economic strategy, as it provides access to the free markets of Europe (Stronski, 2021). But again, Russia could sail out a very limited number of ships from the Bosphorus and could not use it in wartime for peaceful and military purposes under the Montreux Convention of 1936 (Segell, 2023). Jones (1990) again states that if it reaches the Mediterranean Sea, there, it must face eight NATO members that surround the Mediterranean. That said, Russia is as geopolitically encircled as the Duchy of Moscow was. The fear and insecurity have forced Russia to try to penetrate the encirclement.

In 2008, Russia attacked Georgia, and in 2014, it annexed Crimea, and in 2022 invaded Ukraine (Tchantouridzé, 2022). In the south, Moscow has demonstrated that it

can accommodate Turkey, regardless of the conditions, because Turkey holds the upper hand in the Black Sea. Together, these examples clearly suggest that geographical vulnerabilities shape the strategic environment around Russia that guides its strategic preferences and foreign policy.

Elite Socialization and Its Role in Decision-making in Russia

The Russian elite not only dominate key parts of the Russian economy but also occupy important positions in the government (Zimmerman, 2009). The widespread influence of the Russian elite allows them to play a decisive role in the decision-making of the state (Guillermo, 2022). The influence of the elite reached its zenith in the Soviet era, when the Russian elite occupied all major state functions and institutions (Lazarev, 2001). The decisive influence of the elite on policymaking and state decisions created a huge disparity of power between the elite and the wider society. As a result, the very process of decision-making has at times become significantly extractive.

The contemporary Russian elite comprises four groups: oligarchs, the state bureaucracy, Silo Viki, and Putin's Politburo, connected by an ideology or some form of consensus on running the government (Guillermo, 2022). The elite use their influence to persuade the government to adopt policies that benefit their businesses and to avoid policies that negatively affect their interests. Secondly, since they hold key positions in decision-making, Russia's strategic preferences remain largely contingent on their level of socialization, preferences, and values.

The elite's control over Russian media helps them promote the state narrative. During the reign of the Soviet Union, the famous Russian elite class, Nomenklatura, became popular due to its role in shaping Russian policy preferences. The word Nomenklatura referred to a list of key positions in the Soviet bureaucracy, filled by appointing suitable persons who belonged to the Communist Party and could not defect from the official narrative of Russia (Hill, 1991). Nomenklatura was not just an administrative function in the Soviet Union, but it was a mechanism for the distribution and exercise of power.

In recent times, the Russian elite played a crucial role in promoting Russia's narrative in the Crimean War (Zend, 2022). Their approach has been to control and influence public opinion through narratives of resentment and propaganda (Hobson, 2016). Similarly, Russian leaders in the past have shown remarkable continuity of thought in their attempts to expand territory to survive and defend themselves, blurring the line between defense and aggression. The Tsarists based their rule on faith and autocracy. In the Soviet era, Russian leaders replaced faith with socialist ideology, while President Putin has revived Russian nationalism to strengthen his rule.

Furthermore, Russian leaders have continuously adhered to the doctrine of the *Russkiy Mir*, or 'Russian World', which has remained the history of high vulnerability to foreign invasions since the inception of Kievan Rus, the old political entity from where Russia started expanding to four directions in the medieval age. Military strength functions both as a shield and symbol, proving Russia's resilience and reaffirming its great-power identity.

Russian War Literature and Its Role in Shaping Russian Strategic Preferences

Joe Woodward (2005) observes that writers inevitably confront war through critical reflection, transforming its destruction into meaning. There is no victor in war except literature (Paikova, 2021). European wars have always remained a theme in socio-political and literary discourse (Brosman, 1992). Russian writers have consistently

made war a subject of their writings. Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, published in 1869, Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, and *Quiet Flows the Don* by Mikhail Sholokhov, and other writers have portrayed the impact of war on society and humans. All these writers have criticized war and highlighted its disasters. However, war literature has relatively more fame than anti-war literature, the reason for which is governmental support, geostrategic insecurities, and Western opposition. In one way or another, strategic culture is reproduced through storytelling: how Russia remembers wars, victories, and humiliations. Even to this day, WWII, also termed the Great Patriotic War, remains central to Russia's identity.

Scholars such as Leo Tolstoy have written extensively on the destruction and horrors of the Napoleonic Wars. The developments that have taken place in Russian geography, coupled with Moscow's geostrategic disadvantages and periodic wars, have caused the Russian war literature to be very different than the war literature of Western European powers. In contrast to Western European war literature, qualities like valor and geographical expansion of the Russian empire have received much praise from the writers as well as from Russian society (Marshall, 2016). The wars Russia fought throughout its history are glorified. Every victory Russia achieved has been called the will of God. The Russian Romantic writer and poet, Mikhail Lermontov, as explained by Paikova (2021), remarks on the Russian War of Liberation in 1812 that Moscow would not have stood the war were it not the will of God.

Fast forward to post-war reconstruction, the Bolsheviks under Stalin took charge of literature in which they glorified flawless and confident leaders of Russian history (Kasack, 1989). Similarly, during German aggression in 1941, which Russians call the Great Patriotic War, a Russian poet named Arseny Tarkovsky wrote that the war against Hitler was a war of salvation. Russian literature of the 21st century, too, is a continuation of this very strategic understanding.

According to some reports, more than five hundred writers have signed a letter of support for the Russian war in Ukraine. Moreover, Russian state media continuously works to promote views that portray Russia as a great nation and save Russia from foreign threats. On the academic side, the school and college curriculum entail the mention of 'select Russian history and grievances' (Tabachnik, 2020).

Russian Political Conservatism, Values and Traditions

Conservatism is a political ideology that values religion, tradition, organic growth, and historical institutions (Timofeev, 2020). Contrary to common belief, it does not oppose change but favors gradual, organic evolution rooted in historical continuity (Suslov, 2019). Russian conservatism has deeply influenced the country's political thought and strategic culture. It emphasizes the supremacy of the state over the individual, the centrality of Orthodox Christianity, and the preservation of autocratic authority, all of which have shaped Russia's understanding of power, order, and legitimacy (Pipes, 2007). This worldview promotes societal unity and moral cohesion as the foundation of state stability, rejecting secularism and liberal individualism.

Historically, Russian conservative thought held that strong autocracy was essential to national strength. According to the NESA (2023) in *Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia*, Karamzin argued that only centralized authority rooted in native traditions could secure Russia's unity and prevent societal decay. This linkage between autocracy, faith, and state continuity became a defining feature of Russia's political identity. Russian history and identity have always found reflection in its foreign policy (NESA, 2023).

The Slavophiles later reinforced these ideas by asserting that Russia possessed a unique civilization, distinct from the West, and should follow its own path based on Orthodox and communal values (Riasanovsky, 1952). This belief in Russia's exceptionalism and moral mission continues to inform its strategic culture, encouraging a defensive stance toward Western influence and a reliance on centralized authority for national survival.

Although suppressed during the Soviet era, conservative ideas resurfaced after the USSR's collapse. Since the early 2000s, they have reemerged as a core element of Russian political and strategic discourse (Suslov, 2019). The ruling United Russia Party formally embraced conservatism in 2009, framing it as an ideology that upholds tradition, state sovereignty, and cultural continuity (Roberts, 2012). Today, these values underpin Russia's strategic outlook, emphasizing stability, moral order, and resistance to external ideological intrusion.

Structural Constraints and Geopolitical Behavior of Russia

Insights from strategic culture theory stand in contrast to traditional theories of state behavior, which are largely grounded in rationality and power distribution. The neo-realist school of International Relations argues that state behavior is determined by the international balance of power and the anarchic nature of the system (Mearsheimer, 2001). It views strategic choices as driven primarily by fear and insecurity. Game theorists, such as Thomas Schelling, maintain that in the absence of communication, actors define outcomes by default and adjust their choices in response to others (Schelling, 1981). State preferences are seen as reactive and externally determined from the vantage point of game theory.

The theory of constructivism presents its own arguments claiming that state behavior is shaped by social interaction and ideational factors (Wendt, 1992). It emphasizes the importance and influence of norms, ideas, and shared meanings in shaping state identity and, by extension, its national interests. Although the constructivist school of IR falls very close to strategic culture theory, the latter encompasses a broader range of influences, including historical experience, geography, religion, and political traditions.

Departing from the dominant theories of International Relations, scholars suggest that strategic culture should be viewed within the framework of limited rationality in which choices are conditioned not merely by structure, but by culturally and historically embedded perceptions of threat, identity, and power. Within this framework, the European security architecture can be viewed as a policy to constrain Russia's geopolitical ambitions through structural means. Despite these constraints, Russia's behavior has remained assertive and often resistant to Western expectations.

Rooted in its heartland identity, Russian strategic thought prioritizes territorial unity and the maintenance of a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe as essential to national survival (Dugin, 2016). This pursuit of strategic depth and the protection of Slavic identity have long guided Russia's foreign policy, reflecting deep-seated cultural and historical continuities. The persistence of these patterns over centuries, whether in response to Napoleon, NATO, or the EU, illustrates the enduring role of historical experience in shaping Russian strategy. Strategic culture explains why Russia's reactions are not merely rational calculations but expressions of historical memory and identity.

Another important dimension of Russia's strategic culture is the protection of its political system from perceived external interference. Moscow views Western

involvement in Georgia and Ukraine as efforts to induce political change within Russia itself. Consequently, safeguarding the domestic political order has become intertwined with foreign policy objectives. Policy analysts have noted that Russia's strategic behavior reflects the interaction of elements that together define its political culture, including history, geography, nationalism, religion, and conservatism. A complex array of these factors has likely motivated President Putin to challenge Western constraints repeatedly over the past two decades, culminating in the war in Ukraine.

From a strategic culture perspective, these actions are not simply reactions to immediate pressures but are rooted in Russia's enduring worldview that prioritizes sovereignty, order, and historical continuity over integration with the Western system. Hence, Russia's policies have reflected a mistrust of the West and a dependence on coercion (Monaghan, 2017; Johnston, 1995). Moreover, from Russia's war against Chechnya to Georgia and Ukraine, wars have served not merely to secure territory but to demonstrate that Russia remains a force to be reckoned with (Giles, 2019).

The Incompatibility of the Strategic Preferences of Europe and Russia

Russia's long history of wars and invasions has profoundly shaped its strategic preferences and worldview, which explains why regional structures and other constraints have failed to encourage a change of behavior in Russia. Historical patterns of confronting and defending against Western invasions have an enduring influence on Russia's strategic view and planning.

The expansion of NATO, for example, is perceived in Russia as an existential threat to its security and sphere of influence (Rumer & Gurganus, 2019). For other Russians, the expansion of NATO marks a continuation of invasions that have marked Russian history (Putin, 2021). An important factor that causes deadlock and fundamentally different strategic outlooks in Russia and Europe is their evolution along divergent cultural and political trajectories, producing distinct sets of norms and identities.

This historical conditioning has cultivated a belief within Russia's strategic community that maintaining a secure buffer zone in Eastern Europe is essential to national survival. It also underpins Russia's emphasis on a strong military posture as a guarantee of sovereignty and deterrence. Within this framework, Ukraine occupies a central place. Russia views Ukraine as part of its traditional sphere of influence, and ensuring Kyiv remains outside Western institutions aligns with Russia's sense of identity, pride, and historical continuity. Russian strategic culture, shaped by this historical socialization, constrains the range of options available to its policymakers. It encourages continuity, consensus, and the development of nationalistic narratives that legitimize assertive foreign policies. Consequently, Russia's actions are less about short-term geopolitical gain and more about the defense of a historically rooted conception of security and order.

Throughout history, this worldview has frequently clashed with that of Europe. The European security order, grounded in principles of balance, interdependence, and relative gain, contrasts sharply with Russia's preference for autonomy, hierarchy, and absolute security. This divergence has deep historical roots. Following the Peace of Westphalia, Peter the Great transformed Russia into a continental empire, expanding its territory by nearly 100,000 square kilometers annually between 1552 and 1917 (Kissinger, 1994).

By the nineteenth century, Russia had become a central actor in the European balance of power, integrated into European politics yet distinct in its outlook (Hosking,

2012). The Treaty of Tilsit (1807) and Napoleon's invasion of 1812 reinforced Russia's enduring perception of its territorial indefensibility and the necessity of strategic depth. Even as part of the European system, Russia maintained a distinct approach to statecraft, prioritizing centralized control, territorial security, and civilizational identity. This persistent divergence in vision and strategy continues to shape the fault lines between Russia and Europe in the contemporary security order.

The Implications of Russian Geopolitical Behavior on Regional Order

After the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, major European powers sought to establish peace in Europe through concert diplomacy and collective security. European powers tried to maintain a balance of power that would reduce the chances of war and hegemony. European monarchs recognized that maintaining a balance of power was key to peace (Kissinger, 1994).

In the beginning, Russia played an active role in the concert; however, with the passage of time, it began to act outside or against the framework of the concert. Russia attacked the weakening Ottoman Empire in 1853, thereby upsetting the regional order. Exploiting Ottoman decline, Russia claimed to protect Greek Christians while in reality it sought influence over the Black Sea straits and regional trade routes. In response to Russia's actions, European powers concluded that preserving the Ottoman Empire, however fragile, was vital to prevent any single state from dominating the Balkans, an issue later known as the 'Eastern Question' (Frary & Kozelsky, 2014).

Guided by imperial ambition and a strategic culture rooted in insecurity, Russia's assault on Moldavia and Wallachia alarmed the Allies, who feared Russian expansion into the Near East. Britain, France, and Sardinia intervened to restore balance, resulting in the Crimean War (Bechev et al., 2021). The costly conflict ended with the 1856 Treaty of Paris, which neutralized the Black Sea, secured free navigation of the Danube, and restricted Russia's role as protector of Christians under Ottoman rule. Though humiliated, Russia responded pragmatically, consolidating its position over time.

Russia's strategic culture is shaped by identity, history, and geographical insecurities, and it continues to drive behavior that frequently disrupts the European balance of power. More than a century later, similar patterns reemerged. In 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine once again destabilized Europe's balance of power. If Moscow were to secure permanent control over eastern Ukraine, it could dominate nearly a third of the global wheat market (Eisele, 2022). Such control would enhance Russia's leverage in global diplomacy, enabling it to convert economic influence into political capital.

Russia's actions in Ukraine, Crimea (2014), and Georgia (2008) reveal a consistent strategic logic rooted in its historical experience. Conservatism, geographic vulnerability, rivalry with the West, and the doctrine of 'offense as defense' continue to shape Moscow's worldview. These elements often place Russia at odds with the European balance of power, as it seeks not only security but recognition as a legitimate and indispensable actor in European affairs (Makarychev, 2014).

Conclusion

Western countries have long relied on the balance of power and structural tools to deal with Russia. They have sought to contain Russia through military, economic, and institutional constraints. However, despite these facts, Russia has often acted in ways that defy Western expectations. This defiance is best understood through the lens of

Russia's strategic culture, which deeply influences its decision-making and perception of security.

The way Russia sets its strategic priorities, views threats, and interprets power relations in the region is contingent upon the strategic culture of Russia. Resultantly, strategic culture has always remained relevant in Russia's decision-making. Europe has often overlooked Russia's historical experiences, geographic insecurities, and domestic norms. These factors differ sharply from Western political traditions. Backed by the U.S., European powers have continued to apply traditional Realpolitik in their dealings with Russia, which has further widened the gap in understanding each other and developing mutual trust. As global politics shifts with China's rise and the relative decline of U.S. influence, the clash between Russia's strategic preferences and Western approaches will increasingly challenge Europe's stability. Moscow's growing partnership with Beijing gives it leverage in the evolving East-West rivalry, allowing it to assert its influence more confidently on the global stage. European policymakers must move beyond structural deterrence and engage with the deeper cultural, historical, and psychological dimensions that drive Moscow's behavior to promote peaceful regional order and develop long-term stability.

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