



Russia's Grand Strategy (Not Opportunism)

By Dr Andrew Monaghan

This is the first of a series of four reports in the project “Russian Globally Integrated Operations” which examines Russian strategic thinking and activity. The reports are intended as introductory texts for subsequent presentation and discussion.

Executive Summary

- In Moscow's view, international affairs are in structural transition and dominated by intensifying geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalry. Senior Russian officials assert growing competition for the global commons, and for access to energy resources, transit routes and markets. Such competition is considered likely to increase during the 2020s, and to be a potential cause of conflict. The Russian leadership sees this transition as offering both serious risks and also potential benefits, and this view guides Russian strategic thinking and activity. This view of geopolitical competition means that Russia's military and economic interests are closely related.
- The Russian military has sought to enhance its positions in the “strategically important global areas”. This has been most notable in the Middle East and in parts of Africa, and increasingly visibly in North Africa. Activity in the Indian and Pacific Oceans suggests that Moscow is engaged in establishing presence there.
- Moscow seeks to link economic capacity across regions through major infrastructure projects. If Moscow's prioritization of the Northern Sea Route - an “Ice Silk Road” - is the most obvious, a number of other ambitious projects seek to link Europe to China and the Indian and Pacific Oceans.



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Russian Grand Strategy in a World of Geopolitical Rivalry

Does the Russian leadership have a grand strategy, or is it merely pragmatically seizing opportunities that present themselves? This question has permeated Euro-Atlantic thinking about Russia since the mid 2010s as Russian economic and military (and paramilitary) entities have appeared across the world, including in the Middle East and North Africa, in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America.

Most opinion suggests that Moscow's activity is opportunistic - pursuing localised initiatives, primarily those offered by Western inactivity or hesitation, and with a short-term or temporary nature. But this is a misleading conclusion based on a fragmented view of Russian activity and often overlooking how the Russian leadership has defined its interests. For those thinking about how to deal with Russia, particularly how to deter or contest its activities, or even to defend against it, it is instructive to examine Moscow's more holistic global view and to frame the trajectory of Russian activity in terms of its attempt, albeit often flawed and beset by fog, friction and dysfunction, to generate grand strategy.

Moscow already concluded that a new era of "Great Power Competition" was emerging years before this idea took shape in the Euro-Atlantic community. Already in the mid 2000s, the view that systemic changes were taking place in the international architecture, leading to the intensification of global geopolitical and geoeconomic competition, featured regularly in the pronouncements of senior Russian officials and policy documents. It is this sense of global competition that underpins Russian strategic thought and activity.

When in 2008 President Putin set out Russian strategic thinking for the next decade, for instance, he announced his intention for Russia to be involved in resolving global problems, and in being 'as involved as possible in global and regional integration'. Equally, he observed that 'a fierce battle for resources is unfolding, and the whiff of gas or oil is behind many conflicts, foreign policy actions and diplomatic demarches'.¹

Four years later, Putin stated that the world was in a period of transition and possible shocks as global development became increasingly unequal. This, he asserted, created 'fertile grounds' for new economic and geopolitical conflicts, and that the competition for resources was becoming increasingly intense.² This view was also reflected in official documents: Moscow saw that such changes create both serious risks and potential benefits for Russia as it pursued its 'special responsibility for maintaining security in the world on both the global and regional levels'.³

An important feature of this situation, according to some Russian officials is the growing 'rivalry for spaces', particularly in the Polar regions and on the high seas (and the sea depths). This rivalry, including over the global commons, is considered to be a potential cause of conflict in the 2020s and to require, therefore, both the fortification of borders and the preparation of "starting positions" of those states that are competing - in effect, the establishment of bridgeheads.⁴



Towards a Global Russian Military Presence

Such views are prominent in Russian defence thinking. Addressing a major conference on the theme of Russia's Military Security in the 21st Century in February 2013, the then newly appointed Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov pointed to the growing range and type of challenges and threats resulting from the emergence of a polycentric world. In the period to 2030, he stated, the level of existing and potential military dangers will have substantially increased as a consequence of the struggle among leading states for fuel-energy resources and markets, and that to guarantee access to these resources, some states would resort to the use of military potential.⁵

For the Russian defence establishment, concerns have been two-fold. The first is about the USA developing prompt global strike capabilities with global missile defence, and the ability to deploy highly mobile groups of forces. This has led to an emphasis on the development of strategic deterrence and active defence. The second is how Russia itself seeks both to understand the development of military-political and strategic situations in the most important parts of the world and to be able to organise and implement the re-grouping of forces to distant military theatres.

This is what has underpinned the re-organisations of Russia's armed forces, including the establishment of autonomous force groupings on strategic directions, and the attempts in major exercises to enhance the ability to move forces long distances, linking together distant regions. It also provides the context for Gerasimov's statement that the Russian armed forces have significantly extended their presence in the strategically important areas of the world.⁶ Recent exercises in the Indian and Pacific Oceans are noteworthy.

Economic Competition and Linking Regions

Economic questions also underpin Moscow's security thinking, particularly in terms of energy security. Sanctions, together with the changing role of the US in energy markets, partly through the combination of the US shale oil and gas industry and the lifting by Washington DC of the ban on crude oil exports in 2015, is seen as a challenge to Russia's access to major energy markets, and thus a national security threat.

But Moscow also sees potential benefits in the shifting international architecture and geoeconomic competition, and is seeking to link economic capacity together across different regions in Russia and abroad. Russia has prioritised the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). In 2011, for instance, Putin announced major Russian investment in the Arctic to challenge traditional trade routes,⁷ and in July 2017 Russia and China agreed to develop an "Ice Silk Road". Since then there have been further announcements about infrastructural development through the 2020s. This includes the building of new deep water, year-round ports, such as Indiga on the Barents Sea, to connect with the new Arctic-bound Belkomur railway to create an Asia-NSR transport corridor. The broader attempt to link regions was made clear by Putin in 2019, who pointed to several joint projects underway. These included the North-South trading route from Europe via Russia to the Caspian region, Central Asia, Iran and India, and the Europe-West China which would connect Russia's Baltic Sea ports with Yellow Sea ports.⁸



About the “Russian Globally Integrated Operations” project

This project examines Russian grand strategy. The concept of “Globally Integrated Operations – one explicitly discussed by the Russian leadership – provides a holistic lens through which to view Russian strategic thinking and activity. It illuminates how Moscow seeks to reorganise the structure of its defence and security landscape to cope with perceived security challenges, and the trajectory of its international activity. It examines Moscow’s “mental maps” and how Russian economic and security interests are intertwined.

Future reports will address:

- Moscow’s Mapping of the World.
- Russian energy and globally integrated operations
- The Importance of Geo-economics to Moscow.

About the author

Dr Andrew Monaghan is the Founder and Director of the Russia Research Network Ltd. He is also a Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London and a Non-Resident Associate Fellow at the NATO Defence College in Rome. He has been employed by the Oxford Changing Character of War Centre, Chatham House, NATO and the UK’s Defence Academy. He has advised various governments and international organisations, as well as major companies. He is widely published and is the author of several books, including *Dealing with the Russians* (Polity, 2019), *Power in Modern Russia* (MUP, 2017) and *The New Politics of Russia – Interpreting Change* (MUP, 2016).

About the Russia Research Network, Ltd.

Established in 2006, The Russia Research Network is a small consultancy offering tailored research, analysis of Russian politics, defence, energy and economic issues. Based in London, our team are all highly qualified and internationally recognized subject matter experts, with many years of experience advising international organisations, governments and parliaments, and major companies. We have built a reputation for delivering high quality and timely analysis and advice to decision-makers in small and large organisations alike.



Endnotes

- ¹ “Vladimir Putin vystupil na rasshirennom zasedanii Gosudarstvennovo soveta ‘O strategii razvitya Rossii do 2020 goda”, *Website of the Russian Presidential Administration*, 8 February 2008, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/43775>
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- ⁵ “V period do 2030 goda uroven potentsialnoi voennoi opasnosti znachitelno povysitsya – Valerii Gerasimov”, *Voenna-promyshlenny Kurier*, 18 February 2013, https://vpk.name/news/84463_v_period_do_2030_goda_uroven_potencialnoi_voennoi_opasnosti_znachitelno_povysitsya_valerii_gerasimov.html
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- ⁸ “Zasedaniye diskussionnovo kluba ‘Valdai’”, *Website of the Russian Presidential Administration*, 3 October 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719>