

## HISTORY OF THE EMPIRE AND STRATEGIC CULTURE OF RUSSIA: A REFLECTION ON MEARSHEIMER'S WORK ON UKRAINE

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the arguments presented by John Mearsheimer in his work on the Ukrainian crisis. Guided by the principles of neorealism, Mearsheimer fundamentally portrays Russia as a declining power forced to defend itself due to Washington's reckless policies. Policies driven by liberal ideals rather than the principles of realpolitik led to NATO's expansion into parts of Europe that constitute Russia's sphere of interest, ultimately resulting in the conflict in Ukraine. While we agree with certain aspects of Mearsheimer's work, we believe that specific deficiencies create a misleading picture of Russia and its policies in Central and Eastern Europe. Our analysis focuses on aspects of Russian history in these areas and the development of its strategic culture. Based on these foundations, we come to understand that Russian strategic culture is deeply rooted in its historical experience and largely adheres to principles of offensive strategy. Its policy in Ukraine, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe, represents a historical continuity of Russian military activity, which is not a reaction to Washington's policy but rather a part of a broader strategic culture and the way Moscow formulates foreign policy and perceives the international environment.

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## Introduction

The conflict in Ukraine represents one of the most significant events of the 21st century, attracting the attention of numerous researchers and serving as the central subject of many studies in the field of international relations. John Mearsheimer's paper, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault", has had a profound impact on the academic community, which largely sided with Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression with the onset of the crisis in this country in 2014. On the other hand, Mearsheimer, guided by realist principles, provides arguments as to why and how the crisis occurred and why Russia is not the sole culprit. The main argument Mearsheimer presents in his work is that NATO expansion after the Cold War triggered the conflict in Ukraine and that such a policy was driven by the idealistic impulses of Western states rather than a realism-based policy. Essentially, as Mearsheimer sees it, the West does not understand the international environment in which it finds itself. On the other hand, new rivals are guided by the foundational principles of 19th-century *realpolitik*, which is why the United States makes mistakes and enters unnecessary conflicts. Ultimately, as the author points out, Russia does not have the capacity to pose a threat to the United States given that it is a declining power, and it would actually be better to win it over to more effectively contain China (Mearsheimer 2014, 12).

In his article, Mearsheimer portrays Russia as a relatively weak and benign power that, due to poor international circumstances imposed by the West's imprudent policy, is forced to fight for its survival.<sup>3</sup> Although we agree with the argument that the West bears a significant degree of responsibility for the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, Mearsheimer's perspective on Russia has several issues. One of the primary problems in his analysis of Russia is the neglect of Russian history and policy in this region of Europe, its intentions, and the numerous aspects of its strategic culture, all of which have often been in the realms of offensive-expansionist actions. By neglecting these factors, Mearsheimer (2014, 5) sees Russian actions in Ukraine as a defensive-realist policy through which Moscow seeks to preserve the state's security and great power status. Therefore, Mearsheimer perceives Russian policy primarily as a reaction to Washington's poor strategy, implying that it might not have been such if the circumstances were different.

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<sup>3</sup> Though Mearsheimer does not explain in detail why he sees Russia as a declining power in the article, his assumptions were most probably based on the overall factors that impact one country's performance in terms of being a great power. Such factors can be seen in various publications (Oliker and Charlick-Paley 2002; Shlapentokh 2006; Oxenstierna 2016; Wimbush and Portale 2017).

These “different circumstances” Mearsheimer (2018, 171) primarily views through the lens of American policy mistakes in the context of supporting NATO expansion, given that the international circumstances at the time allowed Washington to do what it wanted rather than what it had to. In other words, the policy of achieving so-called liberal hegemony should have been replaced with a policy of restraint, thereby not jeopardising Russia’s position as a great power on the old continent. The proposed solution appears intuitive, but it neither explains nor takes into account what would have happened in the region of Eastern and Central Europe if NATO expansion had not occurred after the Cold War. The idea Mearsheimer (2018, 172) reiterates is that Moscow, at the end of the Cold War, wanted to support NATO’s presence in Europe, ostensibly to contain Germany after reunification, but not its further expansion.

To counterpoise some of Mearshimer’s arguments, we believe it is necessary to analyse Russian history and strategic culture, which exert a strong influence on contemporary Russian policy. By analysing these factors, we will see that throughout history, Russia has pursued an offensive policy towards Europe to project power and achieve some form of regional hegemony. Moreover, Russian strategic culture does not reject the principles of offensive actions, nor is this a characteristic of states that see themselves as great powers. Although a discussion that includes historical aspects, or those concerning strategic culture, goes beyond the narrower framework of neorealism, we believe that we remain within similar methodological boundaries, given that Mearsheimer also touched upon the political principles on which the American administration operates. Additionally, by examining these factors, we remain at the level of analysing the second image of international relations that Kenneth Waltz (2001) referred to when he attempted to create a methodological framework for the realist school.

In the first part of this paper, we will focus on the historical aspect of Russian policy in Eastern and Central Europe, primarily starting from the Great Northern War in 1700, when Russia managed to legitimise itself as one of the European powers. Although the nature of this paper does not allow for a detailed analysis of specific events during this long period, by reviewing the retrospective of Russian conquests and the development of strategic interests during this time, we can understand the character of Russian foreign policy and how the empire transformed into one of the great powers of the old continent. In examining this part of Russian history, we observe that Russian policy was inclined towards offensive actions and utilised the weakness of its opponents to impose its interests or conquer territory for future geopolitical positioning. Despite being a victim of European great power politics during certain periods, such as the Napoleonic wars and the First and Second World Wars, Russian overall strategy did not differ from its European counterparts in terms of conquest and power projection.

In the second part of this study, we will analyse various aspects of Russian strategic culture, examining the conditions of its emergence and assessing the extent to which historical factors shape its ongoing development. Our analysis of Russian strategic culture leads us to conclude that Russia is deeply entrenched in its historical legacy, which predominantly emphasises expansionism and advocates for an offensive policy and strategy. While we agree with Mearsheimer that the Ukrainian crisis stems from Western policies in some part, it is erroneous to assume that a state viewing the Soviet Union's superpower status as ideal would refrain from extending its influence and control over Ukraine or from attempting to expand its reach over the former Warsaw Pact nations. The involvement of Western powers in the Ukrainian crisis can, therefore, be interpreted as preemptive action aiming to secure the achievements made by the United States after decades of Cold War struggles rather than a policy solely guided by liberal ideals.

In the third part of this paper, we will briefly outline our counterarguments regarding other viewpoints presented by Mearsheimer in his work. These viewpoints include portraying Russia as a declining power that does not pose a threat or problem to the United States, advocating for cooperation with Russia to contain China, and criticising the American administration for being guided by idealism rather than realpolitik.

### **Historical Overview of Russian Policy in the Broader Region of Eastern and Central Europe**

We begin our analysis with events like the Great Northern War, where Russia defeated Sweden in 1721, securing its role as a European power. The weakness of Poland and Russia facilitated the development of the Swedish Empire during the 16th and 17th centuries, allowing Stockholm to maintain control over much of northern Europe (Hatton 1971, 649). Declaring war on Sweden in 1700, Russia aimed to reclaim territories lost during the Time of Troubles and secure Baltic ports for commercial and military purposes. According to some historians, the conquest of Baltic seaports was the primary reason Peter the Great went to war with Sweden (Bushkovitch 2006, 495-496). The Russo-Swedish War that ensued as retaliation from Stockholm in 1741-1743 also ended poorly for the Swedes and affirmed Russia's dominance in this part of Europe. The war demonstrated Russia's ability to project power beyond its borders and deep into enemy territory (LeDonne 1997, 37).

Peter the Great's contribution to the development of the Russian Empire can be seen through various aspects of politics and society. Paul Bushkovitch highlights that during Peter the Great's reign, Russia embraced various aspects of European civilisation, including how statesmen viewed international politics.

According to this author, Russian rulers understood how European states protect and advance their interests while employing different political means to justify conquests. Bushkovitch (2006, 498) argues that Peter the Great was guided by geopolitical interests and understood the significance of military strength and victory in providing diplomatic opportunities for a state.

In the second half of the 18th century, Russian and, to a large extent, European politics were shaped by the reign of Catherine II. During her rule, Russia expanded its territory by approximately 200,000 square miles to the west and south. Catherine's diplomatic acumen enabled Russia to establish itself as a great power following the Seven Years' War. Catherine II's foreign policy was primarily influenced by two ideological directions. The first, militaristic direction advocated for a policy of "classic" expansion towards Europe, whereby Russia would seize new territory when the opportunity presented itself. The second direction, for which Catherine was more inclined, focused on political control over other actors and their gradual integration into the Russian sphere of interest (Davies 2005, 388-389). Both ideological directions materialised in Russian foreign policy during the partition of Poland and the Russo-Turkish War of 1768.

By winning the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774, Catherine II significantly increased Russia's control over the Black Sea basin and effectively pushed the Ottoman forces out of the northern part of the Black Sea. While the focal point of military operations during the war was on land, Russian naval victories over the Ottoman Empire in the Aegean Sea allowed Russia to present itself as one of Europe's major maritime powers (Scott 2001, 199). The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca was signed in 1774, marking a pivotal moment for Russia. It resulted in Russia separating Crimea from the Ottoman Empire, portraying itself as a protector of the Orthodox Christian population in the region, and securing free navigation for its merchant fleet in the Black Sea (Ragsdale 2006, 505). As John P. LeDonne (1997, 105-111) points out, "with this peace, Russia began the process of dismembering the Ottoman Empire". The annexation of Crimea in 1783 and the conquest of Izmail in 1790 were further steps that enabled Russia to establish a military foothold on the Black Sea, laying the groundwork for its power projection across the entire basin.

During the late 18th century, despite geopolitical developments on its southern borders, Russia actively engaged in Central European politics, particularly concerning Poland. Russia positioned itself as a defender of the Polish constitution, aiming, as Alexander Kamenskii (2019, 175) highlights, to utilise Poland as a "buffer zone" against Western European powers. To achieve these goals, Russia worked to maintain Poland's internal weakness and division, facilitating easier manipulation of its domestic politics (Scott 2001, 105). Furthermore, Russia played a significant role in the partitioning of Poland, which unfolded in three stages. The first partition occurred in 1772 at the initiative of

Prussia, where Russia gained a substantial territory of approximately 36,000 square miles (Scott 2001, 220). The second partition followed in 1792, facilitated by the military intervention of the Russian armed forces, and was formalised by the Russo-Prussian Agreement of 1793. The Russian court justified its armed intervention as necessary to “prevent the spread of immediate danger arising from the spread of the spirit of rebellion and innovation” within Poland. Finally, after unsuccessful uprisings by some Polish nobility, the third partition took place in 1794/1795, resulting in Poland losing all forms of sovereignty. This series of partitions significantly diminished Poland’s territorial extent and political independence, solidifying Russia’s influence in the region and highlighting its strategic manoeuvres in Central Europe during that era (LeDonne 1997, 58-60).

Although it is debatable to what extent Russia desired the partition of Poland, Paul W. Schroeder argues that the political events surrounding the partition not only secured Russian possessions in Eastern Europe but also deepened rivalries between the Habsburg Empire and Prussia. According to Schroeder, as a result, France lost influence in the region. He contends that these developments, along with conflicts involving Sweden and Denmark in the Baltic, created favourable conditions for Russia and brought it closer to achieving regional hegemony (Schroeder 1996, 19). Furthermore, Russia’s influence in Central European politics was strengthened following the war between Prussia and the Habsburg Empire in 1778-1779. Prussia’s unfavourable outcome in the war forced it to sign the Treaty of Teschen in 1779, where Russia positioned itself as a protector of the German constitution. This move enhanced Russia’s prestige in Europe and provided opportunities for influencing German politics. In summary, Schroeder’s analysis underscores how the partition of Poland and subsequent geopolitical developments in Central Europe bolstered Russia’s strategic position and international prestige during the late 18th century (Ragsdale 2006, 511; Kamenskii 2019, 179).

In the early 19th century, Russia’s grand strategy underwent no significant changes. Despite facing considerable challenges, such as the Napoleonic Wars, Russia managed to acquire new territories and expand its influence at the expense of the Ottoman Empire (a policy that persisted until 1878). Specifically, through the Treaty of Tilsit in 1807, Russia gained French support in its struggle against other powers, effectively securing French non-interference in further partitioning of the Ottoman Empire and strengthening the Russian sphere of interests in Eastern and Southeastern Europe (Aksan 2007, 243). After the Russo-Turkish War of 1806-1812, concluded with the Treaty of Bucharest, Russia obtained a large portion of Bessarabia and significantly expanded its possessions to the banks of the Danube River. Victory over Napoleon’s army further affirmed Russia’s status as a great power in Europe, and following the Congress of Vienna, Russia managed to re-establish dominance over Poland (Scott 2006, 359).



During the 19th century, the Crimean War and subsequently the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 marked Russia's imperial policy in Europe. The Crimean War was ostensibly launched under the pretext of protecting Christian populations but fundamentally represented the continuity of Russian geopolitical ambitions (Taylor 1955, 61; Almond 2009, 182; Badem 2010, 65; Baumgart 2020, 29). Its significance was amplified because Russia was perceived as a serious threat capable of disrupting the continental balance of power in Europe at the time. As Oleg Rudolfovich Airapetov explains, by the mid-19th century, when conflicts arose, Russia ceased to be viewed as a "desirable ally" from the periphery of the continent by other European powers. Following the Napoleonic Wars, Russia managed to position itself as a major power on the European stage, asserting its claim to primacy, which also influenced how other European powers perceived the threat it posed. The alignment of France and Great Britain with the Ottoman Empire, as well as Vienna's refusal to cooperate with Russia, underscored the magnitude of Russian power and the seriousness of the threat in the context of its expanding influence towards Ottoman territories in the Balkans and the Black Sea basin (Айрапетов 2023, 298-306).

After the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, Russia's position did not significantly change. Despite its victory, Russia was viewed as a serious threat, whose expansion at the expense of the Ottoman Empire could have negative implications for the rest of Europe. For example, Great Britain perceived a threat of Russia's expansion towards the southern part of the Black Sea basin, concurrent with Russian conquests in Central Asia. The Treaty of San Stefano, which proposed the creation of Greater Bulgaria, further influenced the decisions of European powers, as it would have *de facto* allowed Russian control over key sea routes (Kissinger 1994, 151-154). The sovereignty of Greater Bulgaria was seen by European powers as a fiction. The entire project was viewed as an intermediate step in Russian policy, with the ultimate goal of pushing the Ottomans out of Europe and seizing Constantinople. Moreover, the creation of Greater Bulgaria would likely have granted Russia access to the port of Kavala in the northern Aegean Sea, thereby securing access to the Mediterranean (LeDonne 1997, 141). At the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the Treaty of San Stefano was revised, replacing the project of Greater Bulgaria with the creation of smaller entities and preserving Ottoman authority in these regions.

During the first half of the 20th century, Russian expansionism in Eastern Europe was relatively limited. However, despite facing two major wars and a civil conflict, Russia managed to regain control over parts of Eastern Europe. Under Stalin's leadership, Moscow annexed the Baltic states, executed another partition of Poland, occupied parts of what was then Romania, and seized a portion of Western Karelia. Stalin's policies secured a significant geostrategic space that would prove practical during World War II. With its victory in World War II and

the formation of the Warsaw Pact, Moscow established dominance over this part of Europe and maintained this *status quo* until the late 20th century. Through stringent policy and repressive measures, the Soviet Union ensured that its influence in Eastern Europe persisted during the Cold War despite dissatisfaction among the populations of certain states in this region. During the Cold War, the significance of Eastern and parts of Central Europe for the Soviet Union and Moscow's political activities in this region were well-established concepts in international politics. Therefore, we will not delve extensively into this period.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union marked a significant loss for Moscow, materially and politically. The Kremlin no longer had complete control over the resources of the former Soviet republics, and its influence in these territories and international politics diminished. While the end of the bipolar era ushered in a unipolar world order, much of Russia's post-Cold War political leadership viewed it as the beginning of multipolarity. For instance, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov argued that the new democratic multipolar order required equal participation of all states and could not be controlled by the dictate of military power of individual actors (Lo 2002, 92). Despite the "democratic" visions of international order, Russia never fundamentally relinquished its status as a great power, nor did it wish to be treated as "just another state" by other actors. Analysing Russian literature, Bobo Lo explains that Russia essentially saw the new world order as an opportunity to recreate the concept of great powers akin to those in Europe during the 19th century. In such an environment, Russia, alongside other great powers, would shape regional and global politics (Lo 2002, 92-94).

Taking into account the reflections of former Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov on international politics, it becomes evident that Russia's intentions towards the West were no less "benign" than during the Soviet Union era. Primakov's doctrine emphasised the importance of balancing American power, securing influence in the post-Soviet space, and halting NATO expansion (Rumer 2019). Essentially, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not significantly alter Russia's foreign policy or its leaders' perception of international relations. On the contrary, Russia aimed to leverage its Soviet legacy to reaffirm its status as a great power, which included asserting dominance over much of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea basin. As some analysts underscore, the doctrine was geared towards constructing a multipolar order that would undermine American power. To achieve these objectives, the doctrine envisioned forming a broad informal coalition of states seeking to counter the United States, notably involving China (Kainikara 2019).

The vision of international politics presented in the doctrine of Russia's former Foreign Minister continued to evolve in the early 21st century. Bobo Lo highlights that with Vladimir Putin coming to power, the Russian political elite viewed



European politics through the lens of a Concert of Powers, aiming to strengthen the positions of France and Germany, and above all, Russia, on the old continent. Such a distribution of power would place Russia at the forefront of European politics and remove outsiders like the United States and the United Kingdom from Europe. Lo argues that by establishing such a geopolitical framework, Russia lays the foundation for projecting power across the Eurasian landmass in the future. The essence of Russian policy lies in strengthening bilateral cooperation with specific states, which simultaneously undermines the multilateral frameworks of the EU and NATO (Lo 2015, 180-161). For Russia, NATO, which determines the direction of European security policy development, has always represented a fundamental geopolitical challenge aside from its primary security concerns (Lo 2003, 86).

### **Russian Strategic Culture and Historical Legacy**

The concept of strategic culture is relatively ambiguous and a subject of methodological debate. However, those who utilise it largely agree that strategic culture represents, explicitly or implicitly, historical patterns of behaviour by individual states when using armed force to achieve political interests (Johnston 1995a, 1). Veljko Blagojević observed that this concept is inherent in all states and their elite decision-makers who shape policy. Indeed, all political regimes, including totalitarian ones, operate in relation to and in accordance with existing emotions, metaphors, myths, ideological discourses, and “rules from the past” that constitute an integral part of political culture. These elements shape simultaneously and are also shaped by the culture, as they share common beliefs, ideas, and reference points (Благојевић 2019, 166).

Some of the more prominent definitions of strategic culture have been proposed by Jack L. Snyder and Alistair Ian Johnston. Snyder emphasises that strategic culture is permeated by history and past experiences that shape strategic discourse and individuals within a state’s strategic community. The evolution of strategic concepts in such circumstances is relatively marginal and maintains a high level of continuity with history. Therefore, Snyder highlights that decisions are not made solely based on rational thinking expected in concepts like game theory but also on cultural experience and the environment in which they operate (Snyder 1977, 9). Johnston presents similar observations, emphasising that strategic culture can explain why political elites facing similar circumstances may make different decisions. While strategic culture does not reject rationality, a fundamental assumption of realism, specific experiences, and social contexts create a unique framework of thinking that can vary from state to state (Johnston 1995b, 35).

It appears that Russian strategic culture is deeply rooted in history and geography, as evidenced by the continuity of policies and strategic interests primarily focused on maintaining great power status (Eitelhuber 2009, 2). The

influence of history on the development of strategic culture is also observed in social consciousness, which largely relies on history rather than the present (Antczak 2018, 229). The strategic culture that nurtures the cult of power and the memory of Russia as a great power shaping events in international politics is grounded in two historical factors. The first factor involves the policy of expansionism that peaked during the imperial period. The second factor is associated with the Soviet Union and the legacy that this system left behind, which still influences Russian politics today.

Russian strategic culture includes expansionism as one of its fundamental characteristics, conditioned by its specific geographic position. Expansionism is viewed as a historical necessity stemming from Russia's vulnerable geographic position and is perceived in a defensive rather than offensive sense (Borozna 2022, 24-25). For certain anthropologists, the association of expansion with enhancing security began in the 14th century, when Russian strategic culture adopted characteristics from the Mongolian. The impacts of nomadic culture blending with European elements created a unique strategic mindset where a clear distinction between offensive and defensive actions is blurred. According to anthropologist Emilio Willems, there is no better way to counteract hostile actions than by subjugating the adversary (Soundhaus 2006, 29).

John LeDonne (2004, 139) argues that the expansion of the Russian Empire during the 18th century significantly influenced the formation of a strategic culture that prioritises conquest and power, presenting them as legitimising factors for authority. Lev Gudkov also spoke about the importance of expansionism and empire-building. This Russian sociologist believes that the concept of the empire is equated with vast territory and the projection of power, which provides a strong sense of respect and greatness for the ordinary Russian person. The collective consciousness rooted in such premises greatly contributes to the strengthening of social pride, which has often been subjected to chronic humiliation, failures, and poverty in the past (Khvostunova 2021).

The desire for power expansion is viewed as a matter of prestige in Russian society, and a "positive" characteristic of authority can be seen in how the people perceive individual rulers. Stalin, who elevated the Soviet Union to the status of a superpower, is considered one of the main leaders in Russian history despite the tyranny that accompanied his regime (Lo 2015, 22).<sup>4</sup> On the other

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<sup>4</sup> Stalin, as observed by Lo, is not portrayed in Russia as a tyrant directly responsible for the deaths of numerous individuals and the creator of an inherently unsustainable system. On the contrary, Stalin is seen as a historical figure who brought glory to Russia and positioned the country as a superpower. A critical examination of the life and work of Joseph Stalin, grounded in historical facts, is often interpreted as an attempt to revise Russian history and an attack on national identity. Confronting the dark side of Soviet history is presented by the Kremlin as an effort by foreign powers to harm the state.

hand, Gorbachev, who secured many personal freedoms and rights that Russian citizens enjoy today but also directly participated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union, is regarded as one of the poorer leaders in the history of this state (Abalov and Inozemtsev 2020, 6-7).

Alexander Abalov and Vladislav Inozemtsev offer a coherent explanation as to why the issue of expansion is deeply ingrained in Russian strategic culture. Unlike European powers that evolved into empires over time, Russia was created as an empire from its inception. This distinction is crucial because it shaped the way Russia developed and formed the foundation of its national identity. Specifically, Russia did not have the option to separate its colonies from the central part of the state, thus creating a distinction between a core, which served as the basis for the development of the national state, and the colonial part of the empire, which eventually became sovereign, as happened with European powers over time. The process of expansion towards the east and west, including the settlement of vast territories such as Siberia, the Urals, and the Far East, began before Russia had fully outlined its national state. As highlighted by Abalov and Inozemtsev, the intensive expansion of territory also posed one of the main challenges contributing to Russia's struggle to form a national state throughout its history. The identity of this "new" state and its society were primarily based not on a shared history but on the extent of territory it could appropriate (Abalov and Inozemtsev 2020, 1-4). In conclusion, these authors argue that Russia became an empire out of necessity rather than choice, which serves as a cautionary note for other states when engaging in policy with Russia (Abalov and Inozemtsev 2020, 7).

Dmitry Adamsky explains that the continuity of Russia's concept as an imperial power largely relies on historical experience ingrained in the political discourse of Russian authorities (past, present, and likely future). Emphasising this continuity, despite the challenges that have plagued the state over centuries, reflects on strategic culture and the development of state strategy. Adamsky argues that the Russian approach to strategy is essentially holistic, viewing strategy as a continuous struggle with opponents on both domestic and foreign fronts, without distinct boundaries between periods of war and peace. The only distinction lies in the intensity with which the strategy is implemented. The rivalry with adversaries, which drives the development of the strategy, is unquestioned and often seen as a prolonged, continuous process (Adamsky 2024, 61). This perspective on Russian strategy, as well as its strategic culture, is significant because it largely confirms suspicions that the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union did not fundamentally signify the end of the struggle with Washington and Western powers for Moscow. In other words, while the altered international circumstances at the end of the 20th century influenced the intensity of the struggle, as Adamsky discusses,

they did not bring about an end to the rivalry that represents a deeper historical continuity in Russian strategic culture.

The political legacy of the Soviet Union is another significant factor that influences contemporary Russian strategic culture. Tracey German highlights that, after the Cold War, Russian strategic culture did not undergo fundamental changes apart from shedding the Communist ideological dimension prevalent during the Soviet era. Moreover, she argues that this historical continuity has been further reinforced by the current political elite in the Kremlin, which matured during the Cold War (German 2020, 6). For the Russian political elite, history serves as a cornerstone upon which the modern Russian state rests.

Graeme Herd emphasises the critical political function of history in Russia, evident in the actions and statements of individuals within the Russian government and various institutions (Herd 2022, 53-55). According to Herd, the Russian leadership of the past two decades has invested considerable effort and time in revitalising and consolidating political patterns that enabled the Soviets to position the state as one of the world's foremost powers. This political approach involves stringent population control, invoking significant historical events, and perpetuating external threats to a level of paranoia. This strategy, in turn, frees up space for enhancing the armed forces and pursuing policies orientated towards some form of expansion (Herd 2022, 81-102). Overall, the persistence of Soviet-era political strategies and historical narratives underscores the enduring influence of the Soviet legacy on contemporary Russian strategic culture, shaping both domestic governance and international relations.

During the Cold War, Soviet strategic thought was characterised by a monolithic structure deeply integrated into the politics of the Soviet Union. The goals and ideas guiding the policy of this communist giant often had a strong military backdrop, with the armed forces seen as a crucial instrument of state strategy. Yitzhak Klein (1991, 16) observes that Soviet methods of strategic planning had a pronounced offensive dimension. Moscow unmistakably emphasised the dynamic use of the armed forces and the application of force to achieve political goals through war, with the ultimate outcome being the destruction of enemy regimes and territorial occupation. Soviet strategic culture viewed the world through the lens of zero-sum games, where cooperation with other actors served to satisfy their own interests rather than seeking win-win solutions. This mindset was present during Stalin's and Lenin's eras, where politics was seen as a struggle for survival and class warfare (Skak 2024, 165). Analysing Stalin's speeches reveals a strong influence of Darwinism on Soviet political thought. Specifically, when discussing the state and its position relative to other actors, Stalin highlighted that those who lag behind inevitably become victims (Leites 1951, 79). George Kennan warned about such attitudes in Soviet strategy in his famous telegram, noting that Soviet policy followed the "logic of

force” and adjusted its course of action accordingly. In other words, Moscow would not engage in risky military ventures unless the adversary clearly demonstrated the political will and necessary material capacities to resist (Kennan, 1946). Thus, Soviet strategic culture during the Cold War was marked by a militarised approach where the use of force and military means played a central role in achieving political objectives, reflecting a worldview rooted in power dynamics and a zero-sum mentality.

Bobo Lo argues that the continuity of Soviet and Russian strategic culture rests on the relationships between major powers, which fundamentally did not change after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The relations between the United States and Russia in the early 21st century, despite attempts at “resetting”, have not significantly deviated from the patterns established in the previous century (Lo 2015, 172).<sup>5</sup> After the Cold War, the Russian political elite continued to nurture attitudes that shaped the foreign policy strategy of the Soviet Union. The Russian vision of multipolarity was not rooted in a genuine idea of a multipolar world but rather in the concert of different powers that would collectively oppose Washington (Lo 2002, 24-25). Lo (2015, 51), like previous authors, observes that the thinking of the Russian political elite is based on the premise of a zero-sum game in relation to the United States. In other words, what is detrimental to Washington, in most cases, would be beneficial to Moscow.

In the conclusion of our analysis, it is essential to address the personified political phenomenon of Vladimir Putin. For President Putin, Russia has always represented a great power. Russia, according to his view, does not need to prove itself as a major power because this status naturally belongs to it based on its vast potential, culture, and history (Herd 2022, 30). As the formal and *de facto* leader of Russian politics for the past 25 years, President Putin has had a far-reaching impact on various spheres of societal, political, and economic life. The political discourse under Putin’s rule tends to establish a direct connection with the imperial legacy of the Russian Empire, often relying on myths to justify current geopolitical interests. As noted by various authors, this discourse stretches from Kievan Rus through the Grand Duchy of Moscow to the imperial and Soviet eras. In this manner, Moscow legalises spheres of influence as part of its historical legacy while downplaying other historical circumstances that are

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<sup>5</sup> The “reset” policy was interpreted by Moscow as a sign of Washington’s weakness and an opportunity to gain certain concessions from the United States in various areas of Russian foreign policy. In other words, Moscow viewed the desire for better relations with Russia as an acknowledgement of its power and great influence by Washington. However, as Bobo Lo points out, this was not the case. Although the Obama administration sought to improve relations with Russia, it was not prepared to make any serious concessions that would satisfy Russia’s geopolitical aspirations. Essentially, the United States did not perceive Russia as a power of equal capacity.

less advantageous. Herd highlights that, through his political actions, President Putin has deeply influenced Russian strategic culture, making him a systems-forming figure who shapes the system itself (Herd 2022, 14). Therefore, Vladimir Putin's leadership has not only reinforced Russia's self-perception as a great power but also embedded a narrative that links contemporary geopolitical actions to a historical continuum.

Such political attitudes and narratives have been increasingly proliferating since the onset of the invasion of Ukraine. An article by President Putin published in 2021, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", further consolidates the historical narrative of Russian great power status. Although the article resonates with a benevolent tone regarding the centuries-old camaraderie between the Russian and Ukrainian populace, it suggests, in essence, that Ukrainian state sovereignty cannot exist without Russian consent. Wanting to be recognised as a great power and secure regional dominance is an important aspect of Russian strategic culture. Elias Götz and Jørgen Staun (2022, 485-486) found numerous examples of such behaviour in speeches and writings of Russian state officials. For example, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov argued that Russia can exist within its present borders only as a great power. Both President Yeltsin and Putin strived for this status and claimed that Russia represents one of the power poles in world politics.

In such political discourse, the Ukrainian question prevails as the most important aspect of the Russian claim for greatness. Historically, Ukraine has become an inseparable part of Russian state identity and strategic culture. Officials such as Sergey Kortunov, presidential adviser during the Yeltsin era, said that Russia cannot expect to be a great power without a strategic alliance with Ukraine. For others, Ukraine is seen as an integral part of the Eurasia project that provides the link between the continents and a gate for Russia into Europe (Götz and Staun 2022, 486-487). Given the importance of the Eurasian project for Russia's achieving a sustaining great power status, Ukraine has again become the centrepiece of the puzzle (Krickovic and Pellicciari 2021). Kiev's departure from the Russian sphere of influence was perceived as a cardinal sin on numerous levels, including historical and cultural. After Maidan in 2014, Ukrainian cooperation with the West became the centrepiece of Russian foreign policy. The prevailing narrative was that, from a historical perspective, such political events are dangerous for Russia and constitute a national security threat (German 2020).

However, as Götz and Staun (2022, 490-491) point out, the Ukrainian issue is not strictly a security issue. By pulling Ukraine away from Russia, the West is essentially stripping Russia of its great power status. For the West, Ukraine is a geopolitical entity, while for Moscow, this state gives global significance. Returning to the previous article President Putin published, we can see how



granting sovereignty to “lesser” countries is a mark of great power. By retaining Ukraine in the Russian sphere of influence, Moscow essentially protects its self-understanding image of great power (Gotz 2017, 237). The country, in many ways, represents a crucible of Russian state identity, history, and strategic culture while, at the same time, providing Moscow with a gateway for projecting power and influence into Europe. The invasion of Ukraine, despite numerous miscalculations, is understandable from the Russian vantage point and is in line with the broader historical development of its strategic culture.

While the previous analysis of Russian strategic culture may give the impression that the authors hold deterministic views rejecting the possibility of change in this sphere, this was not their aim, nor do the authors believe such a stance is correct. While dismissing the possibility of change in strategic culture would be erroneous, radical transformations in this area are relatively rare. Strategic culture encompasses a set of values, behavioural norms, and beliefs historically rooted in and accepted by society. Certainly, there is a degree of flexibility, but changes that occur often represent a complementary enhancement of existing strategic culture rather than its displacement from its historical foundation. We contend that John Duffield’s observations regarding political culture, as a phenomenon that slowly and infrequently accepts changes, largely apply to strategic culture as well (Duffield 1998, 23).

### **The Decline of Russia’s Power, Russia as an Ally against China, and the Idealistic Approach of the American Administration**

Examining the decline of a state requires caution, as it involves assessments based on a multitude of variables that may or may not accurately reflect the true state of a nation and its people. Moreover, portraying a country as a declining power can often be a subjective judgement rooted in the author’s perceptions and the indicators they consider crucial. Can anyone truly assert that Russia fared worse in the second decade of the 21st century compared to the first, or perhaps the final, decade of the 20th century? Furthermore, even if Russia is indeed a declining power, the process of decline is not guaranteed and can be reversed, as noted by Dragan Simić and Dragan Živojinović (2010).

Declining powers, despite their problems, can still influence international politics and even pose a threat to certain actors. Take the Habsburg Monarchy, for example. This state was under pressure from various forces for centuries. After the War of Spanish Succession, the Habsburg Monarchy definitively entered a phase of decline that lasted until the end of World War I, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the final successor of this European power, ceased to exist. Despite the difficult geopolitical situations Vienna repeatedly faced, the Danubian Empire managed to survive and exert significant influence on political

developments both in Europe and beyond. As Wes Mitchell (2018, 4-5) points out, considering the duration of its existence, the number of successful wars and alliances, as well as the enormous influence the Habsburg Monarchy wielded during its time, this European power must be viewed as geopolitically successful.

Other states have also faced similar circumstances but managed to maintain their positions. For example, the Ottoman Empire experienced a long period of decline while simultaneously exerting strong influence across the Balkans and the Middle East. Furthermore, the sick man on the Bosphorus was viewed as a key player in the region, guaranteeing a balance of power. The United States has faced similar analyses of decline for decades, yet no other country in the world, perhaps except China, has come close to matching its quantum of power. Ultimately, if Russia is indeed in a phase of decline, this should not lead to Washington's indifference on the matter. On the contrary, as Mearsheimer notes in his concluding reflections in the renowned work "Back to the Future", accelerating the decline of an adversary is in the interest of every power. It is difficult to expect that states will not seize the opportunity to hasten the downfall of a rival when circumstances in international politics allow for it (Mearsheimer 1990, 53).

The notion that Russia should align with the West against China is mainly a product of neorealist thinking rather than a reflection of actual political circumstances. Over the past twenty years, Russia and China have managed to forge strong ties, not so much due to the unconsidered actions of the United States in Eastern Europe but rather because of the different visions of international order that Beijing and Moscow share in contrast to Washington. Robert Kagan has observed that the fundamental problem in Western cooperation with Russia is based on a mistaken perception of the post-Cold War order. While disputes occur over various weapons systems and specific political manoeuvres by individual actors, the primary reason for Russia's difficulty in cooperating with the West and its inclination towards revisionism is its dissatisfaction with the overall shape of the international order that emerged after the Cold War (Kagan 2007).

In the early 21st century, Moscow and Beijing developed extensive cooperation in various fields such as economy, energy, diplomacy, and military affairs. Although collaboration and the strengthening of a major power in close proximity might seem like an imprudent strategy from a neorealist perspective, certain theoretical approaches within the realist school can explain Moscow's behaviour. If Russia is a dissatisfied state, as Kagan suggests, it could be positioned between the so-called "jackals" and "wolves" in Randall Schweller's (1994, 100-105) analogy of revisionist powers. The behaviour of such states is relatively similar, with differences in the intensity of aggressive policies and the willingness to accept greater risks. While it is difficult to describe Russia as a

wolf state, a combination of dissatisfaction with the post-Cold War order and fear of further loss of power might drive the country to adopt a policy that entails higher risk and potentially greater reward. If Russia is indeed a declining power, as Mearsheimer argues, Moscow has equal chances of cooperating with China as with the West. Furthermore, consulting the theoretical concept presented by Joshua Shiffrin (2018, 13-41), Russia holds real strategic value for China, which suggests that Beijing is likely to exert more effort to keep Russia on its side.<sup>6</sup>

Schweller's theoretical concept of underbalancing can also clarify the cooperation between China and Russia. States may choose not to balance against an actor whose accumulation of power is dangerous and whose intentions are aggressive. Schweller (2006, 10) attributes this to the internal politics of states, the functioning of elites, how politicians calculate external threats, and the potential costs of balancing for the state and the regime in power. Opportunistic behaviour is a significant aspect here, where the ruling authorities assess at various levels whether it is worthwhile to balance against a potential threat, considering both external and internal politics. Underbalancing an obvious threat for potential gains has historical precedent in Russia's case. The signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany ended poorly for the Soviet Union, although it initially allowed Moscow to gain immediate control over parts of Central and Eastern Europe.

Ultimately, claims that mistakes in American foreign policy arise from idealistic inclinations of the state administration are not entirely accurate. In other words, United States foreign politics are governed by false illusions of promoting liberal values while neglecting real strategic interests (Mearsheimer 2018). It is difficult to speak of American foreign policy as being solely based on *realpolitik*. Even during the Cold War, when the system's structure required great powers to behave according to realist principles, Washington did not abandon the principles of democracy and liberalism. Moreover, the ideological framework of policy can serve to achieve *realpolitik* objectives. The Marshall Plan is a prime example of such a policy. The plan aimed to maintain a favourable balance of power on the continent by providing financial aid to

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<sup>6</sup> The theoretical concept proposed by Shiffrin also provides insight into why Russia is more inclined to cooperate with China than the United States. As this author highlights, rising powers, despite having aggressive intentions towards declining powers, occasionally see benefits in them and reasons to assist rather than hasten their decline. In this context, China, as an ascending power, has an interest in collaborating with Russia to further weaken the U.S. Moreover, Russia holds greater strategic value for China than it does for the United States. The recent events in Ukraine and the seemingly tacit support China extends to Russia align with the strategy of bolstering that rising powers implement towards declining partners.

European countries on the condition that their regimes adhere to democratic and liberal principles, thereby sidelining communist parties from power. The architects of the Marshall Plan skillfully exploited the unfavourable position of Europeans to secure their influence on the old continent while simultaneously curbing potential Soviet ideological expansion (Leffler 1988, 277-306). The promotion of ideology served both superpowers as a means of *realpolitik*, a way to constrain the opponent's influence. As Melvyn Leffler (1988, 283) points out, one of the ideas behind the Marshall Plan was to draw Eastern European states into cooperation with the rest of the continent, thereby pulling them away from the Kremlin's orbit.

Sebastian Rosato presents intriguing observations regarding the structure of the international system and its impact on the ideological aspects of states. In his monograph, Rosato offers a series of compelling arguments demonstrating that the ideological beliefs and ideas underpinning the European Union are fundamentally based on realist principles and a sense of threat perceived from the Soviet Union at that time (Rosato 2011). Although we cannot fully apply this analogy to the current situation, the facts Rosato presents suggest that the ideological framework serves more as a "wrapping paper" for strategic interests from which states cannot deviate. Thus, American engagement in Ukraine should not be seen as an ideological issue but rather as an opportunity to remove a rival from the international arena (Mitchell, 2023; Grygiel and Mitchell, 2024).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The analysis of historical events in Eastern and Central Europe reveals that Russia has often conducted military campaigns aimed not merely at defending the state but at conquering and controlling territory. The principles guiding the policies and strategies of the Empire were rooted in power projection, which became undeniable when Russia attempted to expand towards the Black Sea. The situation was not markedly different in the last century, as the Soviet Union invested substantial resources to breach the American barrier in Eurasia and extend its influence to other parts of the world. Following the Cold War, despite the significant problems and challenges faced by Russian society, the Kremlin did not abandon this part of Europe. Moreover, the architects of Russian foreign policy viewed Western powers as rivals, with the goal of restoring the state to its historical status as a great power.

The analysis of Russian strategic culture reveals that the outcomes of Russian policy are not solely attributed to a series of historical circumstances. Rather, contemporary Russian strategic culture has deep-seated origins, possibly tracing back to the mediaeval era during the Mongol invasions. The

development of the Russian Empire differed notably from that of other European powers, as the expansion into new territories often involved direct integration with the central core of the state. Furthermore, the policies of the Soviet Union largely perpetuated this approach, seeking ideological justification under communist rule. The strategic doctrine formulated during this period typically exhibited an offensive posture with a clearly identified adversary, a stance that has persisted beyond the Cold War era. The continuity of Russian strategic culture suggests that systemic changes in the international order do not necessarily lead to changes in the behaviour of states and the policies of great powers.

Based on the aforementioned points, we consider Mearsheimer's hypothesis regarding Ukraine to be not entirely accurate. Specifically, historical circumstances and strategic culture, which have developed in parallel and in accord with them, primarily indicate a strong continuity in Russian policies and strategies in the Eastern and Central European regions. It is difficult to expect that not expanding NATO in these areas would lead to a different outcome in Russian relations with the West. Moreover, Russia would likely strive to fully reclaim its sphere of influence, which, on the one hand, undermines American efforts during the Cold War while, on the other, draws Russia closer to creating a regional hegemony, as discussed by Schroeder. Such a scenario would be unacceptable according to the theoretical framework advocated by Mearsheimer, which posits that existing regional hegemonies do not want to see similar power capabilities elsewhere in the world (Mearsheimer 2013, 88). Whether Russia truly lacks the capacity to revert to its old borders is also debatable, which, at the very least, does not mean that Moscow would refrain from attempting such a policy. Considering its evolving relationship with China over the past decades and its perception of the post-Cold War order, we cannot assert with certainty that Moscow perceives a clear threat in Beijing's policies, nor would it necessarily accept Western offers aimed at containing this power.

Mearsheimer's perspectives on Russia and its engagement in Ukraine are partially correct; however, they overlook historical context and other realistic explanations that suggest alternative directions in Russian policy. Moreover, an analysis steeped in extensive criticism of the American administration and its policies guided by liberal principles also demands an understanding of Russian policy and the strategic culture upon which it is grounded. The absence of Russian strategic culture in Mearsheimer's analyses creates a misguided impression that Washington's current rivals are rational actors liberated from the burdens of history and ideology when formulating foreign policy. Conversely, strategic culture offers a framework that addresses the limitations of the realist approach, which prioritises rationality while often overlooking other critical factors and circumstances.

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#### **ISTORIJA IMPERIJE I STRATEŠKA KULTURA RUSIJE: OSVRT NA MIRŠAJMEROV RAD O UKRAJINI**

*Apstrakt:* U radu ispitujemo argumente koje je Džon Miršajmer predstavio u svom radu o Ukrajinskoj krizi. Rukovodeći se principima neorealizma Miršajmer Rusiju suštinski predstavlja kao silu u opadanju koja je primorana da se brani usled nepromišljene politike Vašingtona. Politika rukovođena idealima liberalizma, a ne principima realpolitike vodila je do ekspanzije NATO saveza u delove Evrope koji predstavljaju rusku zonu interesa, što je na kraju rezultiralo sukobom u Ukrajini. Iako se slažemo sa jednim delom argumentacije koju je Miršajmer predstavio, smatramo da postoje određene manjkavosti koje utiču na stvaranje pogrešne slike o Rusiji i njenoj politici u regionima centralne i istočne Evrope. Naša analiza fokusirana je na aspekte ruske istorije na ovim prostorima i razvoju njene strateške kulture. Na ovim osnovama dolazimo do saznanja da je ruska strateška kultura utemeljena na istorijskom iskustvu i u velikoj meri sledi principe ofanzive strategije. Njena politika u Ukrajini kao i na prostoru istočne i centralne Evrope predstavlja istorijski kontinuitet ruskog vojnog delovanja koji nije reakcija na politiku Vašingtona, već je deo šire strateške kulture i načina na koji Moskva formuliše spoljnu politiku u vidu međunarodno okruženje.

*Ključne reči:* međunarodni odnosi; Rusija; strategija; strateška kultura; Sjedinjene Države.