

Russian Strategic Culture and its Implications on the Russia-Ukraine War

Introduction

Strategic culture can be defined as a body of belief, behavior, patterns, and practices associated with the implementation of force, which is consistently carried out over a period of time. It is a direct result of congruous leadership decisions against security threats and national domestic politics, and shapes a nation's security policy. Strategic culture can evolve over time in order to adjust with changing internal and external factors.

Strategic culture is heavily dependent on the goal of its implementation, the method of the force, and the nation's preferred mode of cooperation. Furthermore, a nation is bound to constraints like institutional restrictions, defence limitations, and budgetary capabilities.

Russian Strategic Culture

Russian strategic culture is founded on 'russkij mir', which means the Russian world, and is based on its aspiration to be a superpower. Russian strategic culture relies on hard power as a defining factor due to Russia's unique approach towards patriotism and glorification of the values of the Orthodox Church. Russia's history as the USSR sets the foundation for Russia's modern strategic culture. It is a hybrid product resulting from its political culture, willingness to use force, and economic policies.

The vigorous militarism in Russian strategic culture is a result of the conditions under which the Russian state was developed. There was pressure to protect a large nation in a vast territory with barely any secure border, and Russia's prolonged state of vulnerability has resulted in incessant paranoia, which is reflected in its inclination to use the military. A disregard for casualties is a persevering feature, as men have always been viewed as available, due to which they are not treated as a valuable tool. This has resulted in a lack of training, equipment, and professionalisation of armed forces. Russian warfare favours the combined arms doctrine, which is an approach to warfare where various methods of combat are integrated into one. Instruments like propaganda and ideological consolidation have existed since the Soviet era.

Russian identity is founded on grounds of its historical presence, which has shaped its present consciousness. A common tactic in Russian strategic culture is the remanufacturing of history to highlight its past glory. History is often manipulated to promote political transgression. The Russian attachment to its history has resulted in a strong dissatisfaction with the changing era, as its past is its only source of pride. Russian feelings of inferiority and isolation have increased multifold post the Soviet era due to Russian isolation in the international arena. This has also increased Russian hesitation to mend relations with the outside world.

Russian nationalism lies in the nation's subjective view of state interests rather than the real issues the nation has to deal with. This has led to binary oppositions such as 'we and them'. There is an obsessive awareness of threats against Russian sovereignty. Competitiveness and aggressiveness are basic traits of Russian strategic culture. This is bound with self-centrism and a dread of the outside world. Furthermore, there is a sense of duty to balance the US-centered western world.

Russian strategic culture is heavily influenced by two contradictory forces at play; an inferiority and a superiority complex. The latter due to its glorified past, and the former due to its post-

USSR alienation. This is reflected in its foreign policy, which is a combination of paranoid defensiveness and dominant assertiveness. There is insecurity based on the perception that former Soviet nations are drifting towards the west, and results of this perception can be seen in Russia's actions against Ukraine.

The Russia-Ukraine War

Russia's geopolitical posture in Europe has significantly deteriorated as a result of its actions against Ukraine. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has abandoned its past ambitions for a partnership with Russia. Russia has created an unstable international scenario with its unpredictability, and is unlikely to settle for a status quo where the west is superior. It is likely that it will continue on its path of intimidation against its neighbors, the west, and former Soviet nations. Russia has a turbulent relationship with Europe, which stems from an individual Russian identity that is isolated from that of a unified European identity. Russia has struggled to establish legitimacy among European powers, and cannot count on European nations to be reliable partners.

Russian authorities initially released conflicting statements behind Vladimir Putin's attack in Ukraine, and the invasion was said to be an effort towards 'de-nazifying' Ukraine. The surest reason though is Ukraine's willingness to join NATO, and how close it got to doing the same. The Russian attack on Ukraine illustrates that Putin does not see NATO as an alliance, but as an extension of American power.

Ukraine has spent the past decades westernising itself and adapting to the global order. Being a part of NATO will help Ukraine further westernise itself and will also be a historical landmark, making Ukraine one of the rare nations that have been a part of the WARSAW pact and NATO, both. Russia has historically posed a threat to Ukraine, and NATO's 'an attack on one is seen as an attack on all' policy will provide Ukraine a certain level of security.

One of Russia's arguments behind invading Ukraine was the claim that Ukraine's membership in NATO breached the west's 1990 vow not to expand to the east, which included the former Soviet sphere. While these promises were made prior to the disintegration of USSR, it is possible that Putin's reaction is a result the west completely disregarding a promise they made, while Russia is expected to sit by and watch.

Russian Perspective

It is valid to question the entire narrative of Russia being the villain in the first place. The inhumane war crimes are inexcusable at Russia's part, however, looking at Russia's reasoning behind the war; not these atrocities, is worth exploring. Putin is already paranoid about Russia appearing weak in the global sphere. This paired with Russia's declining economy and yet another Soviet nation joining NATO does no favors to Russia. It is also probable that if Ukraine becomes an ally of NATO, there is a chance of Ukraine becoming a nuclear or military base, which poses a national security threat to Russia. A nation that Russia has close proximity and an unstable relationship with becoming an ally of Russia's biggest rivals is a matter of extreme concern.

Ukraine is caught in an indirect crossfire between the west and Russia. The 'legal expertise' and minimal aid being provided to Ukraine by NATO at such a time is laughable. The assistance being given to Ukraine is extremely insignificant in comparison to the enormity of the situation.

Conclusion

Russian strategic culture is a product of its long history of wars, and an elite narrative of Russian identity. The paranoia in Russian strategic culture is, however, not irrational. In addition to its isolation by the West, Europe has capitalized on Russia's preoccupation with its internal affairs to make territorial gains multiple times.

A nation must choose wars that it can win, and Russia appears to fight every losing one. Though it seems to have the upper hand, Russia will have to face long-term consequences of its actions. Russian intelligence and policymakers should have predicted the large number of sanctions that have been imposed on Russia. Russia has done minimal preparations to deal with the same, and this will lead to financial fluctuations in trade and recession. The Russian currency is also in decline and is leading to inflation. These factors will lead to extremely poor living standards for the Russian population.

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