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Understanding Russian strategic culture and the low-yield nuclear threat

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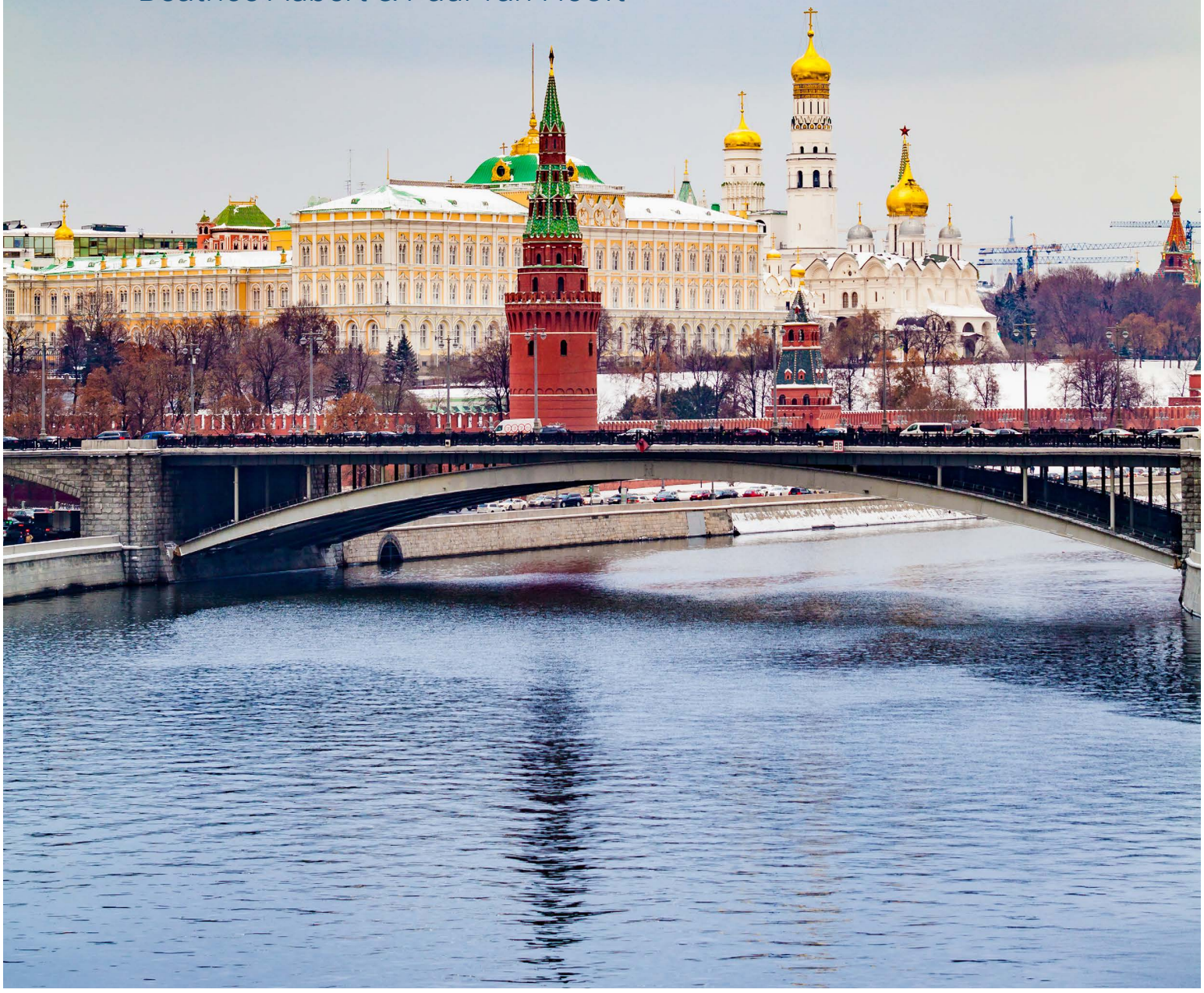

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Preface

The concept of strategic culture was formulated in 1977 by RAND Corporation's Jack Snyder, specifically with regards to nuclear strategy. Looking at the Soviet Union, Snyder stated that 'a set of general beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral patterns with regard to nuclear strategy [had] achieved a state of semipermanence that [placed] them on the level of "culture" rather than mere "policy".[1] More generally, strategic culture can be defined as a collection of shared beliefs, assumptions and behaviours – stemming from common experiences and accepted narratives, both oral and written – that shape collective identity and relationships with other groups, determining the appropriate ends, ways and means for achieving security objectives.[2] Similarly, deterrence is not a one-size-fits-all concept; it is shaped by specific cultural contexts and therefore varies across strategic communities. Cultural factors influence how a state formulates its deterrence and coercion strategy and explain differences in national approaches.[3] To fully grasp an actor's deterrence strategy, it is therefore necessary to understand how they perceive and analyse information through the lens of their strategic culture.

The strategic culture of modern Russia plays a significant role in shaping its military doctrines, including its nuclear strategy. Despite this, however, most Western analyses tend to mirror image Russian thinking or, conversely, demonise Russia and thereby fail to explore how it perceives its own deterrence balance or how Russian strategic culture influences its coercion theory and strategy.[4] By interpreting data through the lens of Western strategic theory, with little consideration for Russian strategic culture or the intellectual and military traditions that shape Russia's approach to military strategy, Western scholarship likely misses the logic and implications behind Russia's actions. As a result, Western observers too often lack an appropriate framework for analysing Russian strategic theory and its operational applications.[5]

This study examines how the strategic culture of Russia influences its nuclear weapons posture, particularly in relation to its non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs) and whether the country favours NSNWs over advanced conventional capabilities. In addition, this study explores the influence of Russia's strategic culture on its nuclear signalling, as observed in the ongoing Ukraine conflict. By considering the underlying cultural and historical factors that drive Russia's nuclear posture, this report seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved.

This report was commissioned in November 2024 by the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) via

1 Snyder (1977).

2 Johnson et al. (2009).

3 Adamsky (2025).

4 Adamsky (2025).

5 Adamsky (2025).

its recently established Nuclear Deterrence Fund, alongside several other RAND studies.[6]

The research presented here was conducted by a dedicated team at RAND Europe, the European arm of RAND, a nonprofit research institute with a mission to improve public policy and decision making through objective and rigorous research and analysis. With offices in the UK, Belgium and the Netherlands, RAND Europe is well-positioned to address the strategic concerns of European and global security. RAND has an almost 80-year history of contributing to the development of theories and strategies related to military and nuclear issues, including leading the development of game theory, deterrence theory and nuclear strategy.

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6 Three additional RAND Europe studies are forthcoming in 2025, focusing on: (1) NATO perceptions of Russian behaviours; (2) Russian perceptions of the UK and French deterrents; and (3) implications of the future information environment for the UK's nuclear strategy and decision making. These studies have been commissioned by the UK MOD and the Nuclear Deterrence Fund.

Summary

This study analyses Russian strategic culture and its influence on the country's nuclear posture, particularly regarding non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs). Through an examination of the cultural, historical and ideological factors that shape Russia's strategic decision making, Russia's strategic culture and potential nuclear strategies are examined. This improved comprehension of Russia's strategic culture provides context for interpreting Russia's actions and intentions, especially concerning its nuclear posture and signalling – for example in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Moreover, the study integrates insights into scenario planning, resulting in the strategic culture scenarios featured in the report. These consider not only geopolitical and military factors but also the strategic cultural mindset that influences Russia's behaviour. The scenarios illustrate how Russia might employ NSNWs and elucidate the rationale behind such decisions, including the strategic cultural underpinnings that could drive nuclear escalations. Additionally, perspectives from subject matter experts, obtained through interview, illuminate Western perceptions of Russian strategic culture and its implications for nuclear posture. Such insights aid in shaping informed strategic planning and risk mitigation strategies for NATO Allies such as nuclear-armed France, the UK and the US.

The study illustrates distinct ways in which Russian strategic culture significantly informs the country's reliance on nuclear weapons as a central element of its national security policy. This reliance is characterised by a focus on deterrence through the threat of first use and on managing escalation in regional conflicts, offsetting Russia's conventional weaknesses. Russia perceives itself as conventionally inferior to the US (and, to a lesser extent, other Allied militaries), particularly in the aerospace domain, influencing its nuclear posture. Acknowledging NATO's superior combined military capabilities, Russia views its nuclear arsenal as a necessary insurance policy against Western threats – primarily, the fear of an overwhelming aerospace attack. Nuclear weapons also function as a significant status symbol within Russia's strategic culture. They represent one of the few domains in which Russia regards itself as 'equal' to other major powers (including China) and, in the case of NSNWs, superior to the West. This perception enhances Russia's sense of security, reinforces its international standing, and serves to counterbalance NATO's military capabilities.

Russia's zero-sum worldview, in which it sees international relations as a battleground of absolute gains and losses, is part of its strategic culture, including its reliance on nuclear deterrence to counter perceived threats from NATO and other adversaries. Nevertheless, the role of nuclear weapons in Russia's strategy is dynamic, fluctuating based on threat perceptions and assessments of conventional military strength. While nuclear use is considered a last-resort option in response to existential threats, the threshold for such threats remains deliberately vague. Russian deterrence therefore hinges on strategic uncertainty, a trait shared with other nuclear powers, with changes to nuclear doctrine designed to preserve this ambiguity. More so than in Western countries, however, in the Russian

system of deterrence, conventional and nuclear capabilities complement each other, enhancing the Russian posture through interchangeable options. Whereas the Western approach to escalation is typically more linear and vertical, Russian thinking is contrastingly more horizontal and holistic. NSNWs remain integral to this system, with nuclear strikes retained as a worst-case option – but Russia's approach allows for a flexible and expansive stance, leveraging both conventional and nuclear capabilities to enhance overall coercion efforts.

It is recommended that NATO Allies should deepen their understanding of Russian strategic culture to anticipate actions and develop effective deterrence strategies. Monitoring of Russia's NSNWs, particularly regarding changes in national-level storage and deployments to base-level facilities, should be prioritised to ensure preparedness. Additionally, Allies should continue to prepare for further Russian strategic gestures and geopolitical uncertainty, conducting assessments to enhance deterrence against potential Russian attacks or nuclear deployment. Exercises based on potential Russian escalation pathways could improve coherence within the Alliance and thus help with coordinating appropriate responses. Given the centralised decision making in Russia and potential for Kremlin miscalculation, NATO countries should not dismiss Russia's nuclear signalling and must exercise prudent judgement regarding the limits of Russian strategic deterrence. Developing a contingency plan for a quicker response to Russian nuclear signalling is advised, with a more assertive stance reminding Russia of NATO Allies' nuclear capabilities.

Addressing the challenges posed by Russia's nuclear posture requires consideration of both nuclear and conventional advanced weapons capabilities. NATO and individual nations could examine credible conventional deterrence models, such as increased reliance on advanced conventional weapons and air policing missions using modern dual-capable aircraft (DCA). In the nuclear domain, France, the UK, the US and non-nuclear Allies could expand deliberations on the role and number of NSNWs in Europe to overcome gaps in the escalation ladder. Potential solutions include expanding NATO's nuclear sharing agreement, with NSNWs stationed in eastern Europe or the Baltic, or adding a sovereign air capability to the UK deterrent, while carefully analysing potential drawbacks and industrial capacity. This is particularly relevant for European NATO Allies, including not only nuclear-armed France and the UK, but also major non-nuclear players such as Germany or Poland, as the issue of Russian NSNWs is predominantly a concern in the European theatre of operations.

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Chapter 2. **Russian strategic culture**

This chapter offers an analysis of the key features of Russia's strategic culture and aims to provide the foundational context necessary for understanding Russia's potential actions and decisions with regards to its nuclear posture, including NSNWs. In previous work for the UK government, RAND has analysed the essential facets of Russian strategic culture and mapped them against different dimensions, as illustrated in Table 1.

The purpose of this chapter is to build on the above analysis and unpick the web of historical, cultural and ideological factors that shape Russia's strategic outlook and influence its military and political strategies. Drawing from a review of relevant literature, both Russian and Western, this chapter delves into the narratives and beliefs that underpin Russia's strategic thinking. By examining historical experiences, leadership dynamics and prevailing geopolitical perceptions, the analysis aims to illuminate the core elements defining this strategic culture. This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding how these elements might manifest in practical decision making, particularly concerning the potential use of NSNWs as discussed in Chapter 3 and in the scenarios covered in Chapter 4.

Table 1. Themes identified in Russian strategic culture

Category	Russia
Religious belief system	Orthodoxy and messianism
Political system	Autocracy, lack of rule of law, centralisation
View of history	Strategic consistency throughout history
Approach to international relations	Russia is under threat from the West and within; Russia has a regional sphere of influence; zero-sum approach
Way of war	Force is the foundation of strategic interaction; emphasis on distortion / deception / asymmetry
Approach to development	Catch up with the West

Source: RAND Europe analysis.

2.1. Key characteristics of Russian strategic culture

2.1.1. Territorial anxieties and 'besieged fortress' mentality

History plays a central role in shaping Russian strategic culture.[14] Russian political elites often draw parallels between past events and current circumstances, utilising historical narratives to justify strategic claims. For instance, Russian anxiety regarding its territory and an inability to defend its own borders can be traced back to historical experiences, ranging from the Mongol invasions in the 13th century to Nazi Germany's Operation Barbarossa in World War II and, most recently, the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Oblast in 2024 as a consequence of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Such events have ingrained a deep-seated concern for territorial security within Russian strategic thinking, whether justified or not.[15]

Russia perceives the West, in particular, as the principal threat in terms of foreign invasion.[16] This perception is rooted in the historical difficulty of defending Russia's western border and a deep-seated sense of vulnerability and military inferiority. Consequently, Russia believes it must always be prepared for an attack and employ all available means to secure its position. At the core of this perception is a fear that the West is undermining Russia's survival, or at least that of the regime, by encroaching upon the country's sphere of influence. This belief contributes to a siege mentality, also referred to as the 'besieged fortress' among the leadership.[17] This reflects a broadly held anxiety in Russia regarding its status and a perceived victimisation by the West. Any opposition against Russia, or its regime, is consequently viewed as Western interference. In the mindset of Russia's elite, it is considered unacceptable that Ukraine, Belarus or any other state formerly of the Russian Empire seeks a system modelled after the West. Such an outcome would mean that Russia has failed as a regional hegemon.[18]

This sense of vulnerability and siege mentality among Russia's elite is largely attributed to NATO and the enlargement of the Alliance, particularly into the territories of the former Soviet Union in the Baltics and eastern Europe.[19] Russia views this as expansionism and a direct threat to its security.[20] Indeed, 'containing' NATO is part of the justification for Russia's nuclear rhetoric.[21] The belief that Russia has faced, and continues to face, constant threats is a fundamental aspect of Russian strategic culture.[22] The notion that Russia is perpetually engaged in a struggle for survival is deeply ingrained in the national psyche, a mindset forged through centuries of conflict and a pervasive fear of being unprepared. This is further intensified by the immense disparity in losses suffered by the

14 Becker (1993); Barnes (2015).
15 Becker (1993).
16 Kanet & Moulioukova (2021).
17 van Hooft & Ellison (2023).
18 Berzins (2023).
19 Berzins (2023).
20 Woolf (2019).
21 Trenin et al. (2024).
22 German (2020).

Soviet Union during World War II compared to countries such as the UK or the US, with the collective trauma of the staggering losses continuing to influence Russian strategic thinking and cultural identity. Furthermore, Russia's culture of war prioritises morale and psychological factors over material considerations. In essence, according to this view, victories are achieved through the spiritual and psychological resilience of Russian servicemen and their superior ability to endure hardship.[23] As a result, Russian military doctrine emphasises the threat of subversion, framing confrontation as a constant state of existence.[24]

In the Russian perception, the West has actively fostered Colour Revolutions across the former Soviet Union over the past three decades, notably in Ukraine and Georgia. Russia frequently characterises its confrontation with the West as a 'civilisational contest', seeing it as an effort to alter the Russian cultural code.[25] Foreign influence is seen as an attempt to undermine the value system of Russia's elite, with the goal being to manipulate the mentality of the population and impose false national interests. Such subversive efforts, they believe, would compel Russia to voluntarily make ideological concessions, resulting in geopolitical, military and economic submission to the West.[26] This view is compounded by the Russian perception of the Western interventions in Iraq and Libya in 2003 and 2011 respectively, where the West, seemingly without an international legal mandate, deposed Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi. These interventions showcased the West's superiority in air, space and precision strike capabilities, with decapitation strikes swiftly dismantling the Soviet-equipped Iraqi and Libyan militaries. Such demonstrations of military prowess, dating back to the First Gulf War of 1991, have alarmed the Russian leadership, highlighting vulnerabilities in their own defence postures and underscoring Russian technological inferiority compared to the US.[27] As long as these deficiencies in Russian strategic capabilities persist (including problems with C2 and an insufficient conventional arsenal), the Russian military will continue to fear aerospace attacks.[28]

2.1.2. Zero-sum worldview and great power status

In the realm of international relations, Russia frequently perceives interactions as a zero-sum game.[29] Any gain by an adversarial external power is viewed as a loss for Russia, prompting the Russian state to employ a wide variety of means to achieve its objectives. However, it remains unclear whether the reverse holds true – whether a Russian victory necessarily equates to a loss for Moscow's adversaries, such as the West. This ambiguity may represent a potential vulnerability for Russia. In addition, Russia is grappling with the challenge of maintaining its great power status while attempting to catch up with the

23 Adamsky (2025).
24 German (2020).
25 Adamsky (2024).
26 Adamsky (2024).
27 Reach (2023).
28 Adamsky (2021).
29 Kerrane (2022).

West technologically and economically.[30] This struggle to compete drives the Russian state to reassert its influence over former Soviet states or satellites, as projecting power in such regions is considered a fundamental aspect of Russia's great power status, alongside the ability to challenge US hegemony.

The fear of a loss of status and of influence has often been used by Russia as a justification for actions – often characterised by the leadership as 'defensive' – that contradict international norms as understood in the West.[31] For instance, the Kremlin viewed its military operations in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 as defensive measures.[32] This also underscores Russia's zero-sum approach to international relations, the harsh logic being that if Russia cannot achieve its objectives in regions such as Georgia, then no other power should be permitted to succeed there either. In this context, preventing the loss of influence in its near abroad could be perceived as a victory for Russia. Additionally, Russian doctrine incorporates offensive and defensive measures within a concept known as 'active defence'.[33] This approach avoids a clear distinction between offensive and defensive operations, as opposed to the more linear approach to escalation adopted by the West. 'Active defence' encompasses pre-emptive measures designed to deter conflict, as well as wartime operations aimed at denying an opponent a decisive victory early in a conflict by degrading and disorganising their forces. Offensive actions are also framed as defensive measures to pre-emptively counter perceived threats.[34]

To external observers, however, such 'defensive' actions by Russia appear unreservedly aggressive. Ensuring that signals are absorbed and interpreted as intended is a critical yet often overlooked aspect of deterrence efforts and scholarship. There is a significant discrepancy between Moscow's reputation in the West and the Kremlin's self-perception – and vice versa. This is demonstrated primarily by the West's view that NATO enlargement has brought stability to Central and Eastern Europe, with Russia misunderstanding such developments as unequivocally aggressive actions.[35] While most Western strategists view Russia as an aggressive revisionist power, the Kremlin sees itself as signalling from the position of a defensive, status quo power. One contributing factor to the West's 'confusion' may be the insufficient attention that Russian strategists have paid to the communication of signals. In many ways, Russia appears to have assumed that the West would naturally understand its coercive signalling, even though the context in which the signals are sent is often unclear to Western observers.[36] It remains uncertain to what extent the evaluation of effectiveness has been institutionalised within Russian deterrence operations. Assessment of coercion efforts appears more intuitive than systematic, undermining the clarity and impact of Russia's signalling.[37]

30 Borozna (2022).

31 Götz & Staun (2022).

32 Götz & Staun (2022); Osflaten (2020).

33 Kofman et al. (2021).

34 Kofman et al. (2021).

35 Adamsky (2024).

36 Adamsky (2024).

37 Adamsky (2024).

Russian strategic culture also exhibits a degree of flexibility by employing narratives based on convenience. For example, pan-Slavic narratives have been used to justify the invasion of Ukraine, while Eurasian narratives have been employed to rationalise Russia's strategic pivot towards Asia, as seen in its partnerships with China and North Korea.[38] This adaptability allows Russian leaders to interpret historical events and themes in ways that support their strategic decisions, ensuring that historical narratives remain relevant to their contemporary geopolitical objectives. Nevertheless, the Russian leadership's underlying siege mentality continues to fundamentally shape its strategic interactions. There is a perceived necessity to ally with convenient likeminded authoritarian regimes, such as China, to counter what Russia views as a US-led unipolar world order. Creating a multipolar world where Russia is a geopolitical centre with influence in its near abroad is critical for the Russian leadership.[39] Building strong bonds with nations such as China, North Korea and Iran to push back against US dominance on the global stage is a traditional Russian 'balancing' behaviour – but through the 'besieged fortress' mentality and employment of flexible narratives this behaviour is also driven by Russia's strategic culture.

There are several elements of Russian strategic culture that are different – sometimes subtly so – from other nuclear-armed states, with implications for both the nuclear and non-nuclear elements of strategic culture. Firstly, since the imperial era, Russian political elites have held a belief in *derzhavnost*, the notion of Russia as a great power.[40] This in itself is not unique to Russia – it is common to former imperial powers such as the UK and France, as well as to the US as a current superpower. However, the Russian quest for great power status differs in that it is existential – for Russia, great power status is a condition for survival given its perceived vulnerability and history of invasions. Consequently, Russian strategic culture is built on the self-perception that the country is a great power by fact, right and necessity.

Russian society has further institutionalised militarism (as well as martial-influenced conceptions of Russian manhood) and glorifies power.[41] President Putin, a former KGB officer, has established a government largely dominated by a cadre of security officials (*siloviki*) who were trained during the Soviet era. These *siloviki* are tasked with restoring Russia's international power.[42] Furthermore, as former KGB officers or individuals who lived through the chaos and humiliations of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many feel betrayed by what they see as broken promises regarding Russia's reintegration into the Western liberal international order, among other grievances. Many of the *siloviki* regard the collapse of the Soviet Union as having led to widespread corruption and poverty, which, in turn, have undermined Russia's standing and reputation on the global stage. Militarism, and by extension nuclear weapons, are thus seen a key part of Russia's strategic culture – with the armed forces viewed as central to the objective of Russia regaining its global standing.

38 Nieman (2016); Borozna (2016).

39 Berzins (2023).

40 Busygina (2023); Götz & Staun (2022); Neumann (2008); Tsygankov (2008).

41 Kerrane (2022); Herd (2022).

42 Herd (2022).

2.1.3. Centralisation of power and leadership dynamics

Russian strategic decision making is characterised by a high degree of centralisation and reliance on a relatively unconstrained executive.[43] Again, this aspect is not unique to Russia's strategic culture as most nuclear powers, such as France and the US, are also highly centralised with regards to their nuclear postures. Historically, Russia has favoured strong leaders capable of imposing order across its vast territory and varied peoples and local jurisdictions, and today such leaders can utilise the military and other state resources to achieve their goals with minimal opposition.[44] A strong leader is seen as a personification of the power of the Russian state and is part of an autocratic tradition where power is concentrated in an individual; as encapsulated in the contemporary saying 'if there is Putin, there is Russia; if there is no Putin, there is no Russia'.[45] This tradition of equating leaders to the state itself can be traced back to the tsars.[46]

With regards to Russian centralisation, in the current context President Putin is the most pivotal actor. His dominant role in Russia's military-political systems means that he holds ultimate control over military doctrine and key organisations.[47] Indeed, Putin frequently establishes parallel, competing organisations to ensure that no single entity becomes strong enough to challenge him, and to provide him with alternative power bases to isolate potential challengers. This dynamic is further intensified by the fact that, unlike during the Cold War when Soviet leaders governed with the backing of the Politburo, contemporary Russia is far more dependent on a single individual – namely Putin. Crucially, the emphasis on strong centralised leaders in the Russian military means that its strategic culture is driven by its top leaders, who may misinterpret cues, react to perceived provocations, or take pre-emptive actions if they judge conflict to be unavoidable.[48] Russian leaders are frequently told what they want to hear in intelligence briefings, with little to no debate about decisions.[49]

This centralisation stems from the fact that the Russian military, historically reliant on conscription, draws from a diverse population across the Russian Federation, including many individuals who are not well-educated or do not speak Russian fluently. This diversity has led to a general lack of trust in the competence and political reliability of lower echelons of the armed forces. Consequently, there is a strong desire to centralise authority at the top levels of the military and manage operations from higher echelons. This contrasts sharply with NATO militaries, which embrace the concept of 'mission command' that advocates delegating authority as far down the chain of command as possible (with the exception of nuclear responsibility outside of specific crisis conditions) and trusting subordinates to solve problems independently rather than deferring upwards.

43 Barabashev & Semenov (2019).
44 Eitelhuber (2009).
45 Prozorova (2024).
46 Prozorova (2024); Surkov (2008).
47 Kremlin (2023).
48 Boston & Massicot (2017).
49 Galeotti (2023).

Russia's autocratic tradition is further reinforced by the significance of Christian Orthodoxy and the current Russian state's 'messianic' aim to unite all 'Russian and Slavic people' under a new 'Rus'.[50] Within Russia, orthodoxy and the state have developed a mutually reinforcing relationship, with each justifying the other's role and actions.[51] Under Putin, the relationship has intensified, with the Russian Orthodox Church routinely cooperating with and aligning itself to the state's official policies.[52] The religious aspects of Russian nuclear thinking are particularly unusual; when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it did so against the backdrop of a nexus between the Russian Orthodox Church and the nuclear establishment – a phenomenon referred to as Russian nuclear orthodoxy.[53] This political myth, endorsed by Putin himself, posits that nuclear weapons and traditional values (orthodoxy) are the twin pillars of Russia's statehood and the guarantors of its national security. According to this belief, preserving Russia's national character requires maintaining its status as a strong nuclear power. Contemporary Russia is characterised by the fusion of politicised religious philosophy, conservatism, nationalism and militarism.[54]

The image of being deeply religious additionally provides Russia with a reputation that secular actors lack. Adversaries might perceive religiously motivated actors as undeterrable and willing to take extreme risks, which could enhance the credibility of their threats.[55] Another parallel trend is the emergence of an extraordinary pro-nuclear climate within Russia. Nuclear weapons have become a frequent topic in public discourse, with the notion that their use should be a last resort – but not an unthinkable option – becoming commonplace in the media and shaping public perceptions of escalation.[56] This 'new nuclear normal' has been reinforced by the messianic and existential framing of the war with Ukraine by the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church, as well as the ecclesiastical legitimisation of nuclear assertiveness. A powerful armed force is central to this view, as seen in the nuclear threats made against Ukraine. In the zero-sum worldview adopted by Russia, a state equipped with nuclear weapons and sufficient resources can take whatever measures it deems necessary to achieve its goals. Therefore, it is essential for Russia to maintain robust nuclear forces.[57]

Russia's highly centralised military system nevertheless creates a gap between top-level nuclear decision making and military implementation. While political leaders use nuclear threats as strategic and political tools, the military views escalation during wartime as a real risk and trains accordingly. This disconnect causes confusion among military commanders, who must navigate between formal doctrine and the leadership's shifting intentions.[58] It is to this strategic culture impact on Russia's nuclear forces and doctrine that the next chapter will now turn to in detail.

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50 Adamsky (2020).

51 Drozdova (2021).

52 Igumnova (2011).

53 Adamsky (2025).

54 Adamsky (2025).

55 Adamsky (2025).

56 Adamsky (2025).

57 Kerrane (2022); Herd (2022).

58 RAND Europe interview, 4 April 2025.

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