



ANALYSIS

THINKING ABOUT RUSSIAN NUCLEAR WEAPONS THINKING

Christopher A. Ford

Introduction

There was a time, not too long ago, when leaders in Washington and in Moscow enjoyed the unaccustomed luxury of looking at each other without fear and anxiety. After the end of the Cold War, American leaders professed themselves committed—as President Bill Clinton’s 1994 *National Security Strategy* phrased it, to helping “support and ... consolidate democratic and market reforms” in the newly-democratic Russian Federation of that period in ways that would “turn a former threat into a region of valued diplomatic and economic partners.”¹ It was, therefore, said to be a key U.S. objective to “accelerate Russian membership on commercial terms in key economic organizations such as the WTO and the Paris Club ... [and] support ... Russia’s integration into various international economic institutions.”²

This was not merely a partisan belief, for President George W. Bush agreed, happily noting in his 2002 State of the Union Address to Congress that “America is working with Russia ... in ways we never have before, to achieve peace and prosperity.”³ The Russian Federation, it was in those days still believed, was “in the midst of a hopeful transition, reaching for its democratic future and a partner in the war on terror.” Indeed, it was “the hallmark of our relationship with Russia” that we had “moved from confrontation to cooperation.”⁴

Nor was this merely how the Americans saw things. The Russian government of Boris Yeltsin reciprocated such warmth. In his remarks to the United Nations Security Council in January 1992, for instance, Yeltsin made clear that he saw an opportunity for Washington and Moscow—and indeed other countries—to work together “to put an end to despotism and to dismantle the totalitarian order, whatever shape it may take.” In this new era, he said, the former Cold War antagonists had overcome their rivalry: “Russia considers the United States and the West not as mere partners but rather as allies.”⁵

¹ *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, February 1994, available at <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1994.pdf?ver=YPdbuschbfpPz3tyQQxaLg%3d%3d>.

² *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, May 1997, from Part III, available at <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1997.pdf?ver=2whGiEUYiceAyme45GiJzA%3d%3d>.

³ George W. Bush, State of the Union Address (January 29, 2002), available at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

⁴ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, from introductory letter & p.13, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2002.pdf?ver=oyVN99aEnrAWijAc_O5eiQ%3d%3d.

⁵ Boris Yeltsin, remarks to the U.N. Security Council, in “U.N. Security Council, Provisional Verbatim Record of the Three Thousand and Forty-Sixth Meeting,” S/PV.3026, January 31, 1992, available at <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/RO%20SPV%203046.pdf>.



It is thus not altogether surprising that in those years considerable strides were made in arms control and in the reduction of nuclear armaments. Arms reductions had begun with the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty⁶ as Cold War tensions had begun to wane in the late 1980s, and they picked up pace with the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)⁷ in 1991 and the reciprocal unilateral promises of the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-92.⁸

Unfortunately, however, all of this seems a terribly long time ago, with Russia under Vladimir Putin having subsequently emerged as a congenital arms control violator and now being involved both in building up Russia's theater-range nuclear forces and in a ferocious campaign of nuclear saber-rattling intended to intimidate the West into allowing it to invade and annex the independent democracy of Ukraine.⁹ Far from being a context in which "the easing of international tension and the strengthening of trust between States"¹⁰ is facilitating progress toward disarmament, today's world is a steadily *more* threatening place. Accordingly, as the *Wall Street Journal* recently proclaimed, "the Bomb is back."¹¹

In this context, it is vital to understand as much as we can about how Russia thinks about nuclear weaponry. This paper attempts to contribute to such understanding by comparing modern Russian nuclear weapons thinking to that of Soviet times, and by suggesting three different conceptual "framings" that may help make some sense of how the Kremlin has in recent years approached these issues. These three framings—specifically, (1) nuclear posture as guided by game theory, (2) nuclear policy as driven by geopolitical status-seeking, and (3) nuclear weapons as the object of a sort of cultish fixation—are not offered as mutually-exclusive alternative explanations for the Putin regime's nuclear behavior. It may be, for instance, that they *all* influence Russian policy to some extent, albeit perhaps to varying degrees. They are offered here as conceptual organizing devices to help the reader

⁶ Treaty Between The United States Of America And The Union Of Soviet Socialist Republics On The Elimination Of Their Intermediate-Range And Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty), December 8, 1987, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm>.

⁷ Treaty Between The United States Of America And The Union Of Soviet Socialist Republics On Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START I), July 31, 1991, available at https://media.nti.org/documents/start_1_treaty.pdf.

⁸ See generally, for example, Susan J. Koch, "The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992," National Defense University, Case Study Series no. 5, September 2012, available at https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/casestudies/cswmd_casestudy-5.pdf. It has been estimated that the United States previously had nearly 5,000 tactical nuclear weapons deployed overseas. See, for example, "The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) on Tactical Nuclear Weapons at a Glance," Arms Control Association, July 2017, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/pniglance>.

⁹ See generally, for example, Christopher A. Ford, "Dead or Deferred? Nuclear Arms Control in the Age of Revisionism," in *Aligning Arms Control with the New Security Environment* (Center for Global Security Research, 2024), pp.49-52, available at https://irp.cdn-website.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/Ford_in_CGSR_Arms_Control_Book.pdf.

¹⁰ Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, July 1, 1968, from the Preamble, available at <https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/npt/text/>.

¹¹ Laurence Norman, Daniel Kiss, Ming Li, & Peter Saidel, "The Bomb Is Back as the Risk of Nuclear War Enters a New Age," *Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2025, available at https://www.wsj.com/world/nuclear-bomb-weapons-war-explained-01d6e397?mod=hp_featst_pos4.

better understand particular *aspects, themes, or tendencies* in Moscow's nuclear weapons thinking.

The Soviet Strategic Mindset

On the whole, in ideological and doctrinal terms—and both with respect to nuclear weaponry and more broadly—the old Soviet Union seems to have had a remarkably “offensive” strategic mindset. As Andrei Kokoshin has noted, moreover, Soviet and Russian thinking on “deterrence” in the aggression-dissuasive Western sense—that is, about establishing conditions that will persuade a potential adversary to abjure aggression on the grounds that the price it will pay for attack is likely to outweigh any benefit it might hope to gain—remained notably underdeveloped at least through the 1990s.¹²

What is also striking is just how sanguine Soviet leaders seemed to be, at least in the earlier phases of the Cold War, about the prospect of nuclear weapons use. In the Stalin era, for instance, Soviet theorists had a concept of “permanently operating factors” and the “correlation of forces” that would decide the outcome of war.¹³ The aggregative quality and seeming automaticity of these dynamics—perhaps a conceptual outgrowth of Marxian dialectics, which tended to see the relationships between underlying forces as architectonic, with the particulars of human agency being of secondary importance—may have led them to downplay the significance of any single factor in determining results, nuclear weaponry included.

Particularly since it was also one of the key substructures of Soviet doctrine to assume that a general war would inevitably end capitalism¹⁴—and that, *pace* Joseph Stalin, such a climactic global conflict was inevitable—this may have encouraged Soviet planners to downplay both the awfulness and the relative importance of nuclear weaponry in warfare.¹⁵ From the 1950s into the 1970s, Soviet military writings—including those by the Minister of Defense himself—pooh-poohed the likely impact of a nuclear war and urged their readers not to “exaggerate it.”¹⁶

This was accompanied, moreover, by a pronounced offensive mindset. With Soviet doctrine insisting that it would be the overall military correlation of forces that would be decisive in war, it was felt important to take the strategic offensive wherever possible to destroy as many enemy forces as one could, and thus improving the correlation of forces that

¹² Andrei A. Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-91* (MIT Press, 1999), p. 4.

¹³ It was, for instance, a key objective for Soviet forces “to do maximum damage to the enemy forces in order to exhaust them and thus to improve the correlation of forces in the Soviet Union’s favor.” Kokoshin, *op. cit.*, p. 167 (quoting Zhukov, *Vospominaniya i razmyshleniya*, p. 218).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116 (noting that Stalin had an ideological “concept of ‘permanently operating factors,’ which played down the significance of nuclear weapons”).

¹⁶ See *Ibid.*, p. 115. Apparently the Soviet embassy in Tokyo had also concluded that Japanese officials had exaggerated the impact of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to justify Japan’s surrender. “*Tragediya Hirosimy I Nagasaki. Dokumenty*” (The tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Documents), *Mezhdunarodnaya zvezda*, no. 8, 1990 (cited in Kokoshin, *op. cit.*, p. 114).

would let one win. Clearly being a rapid way to reduce enemy numbers, nuclear weapons were thus considered a critical tool of warfighting, even if they did not *themselves* directly drive outcomes. Since war with the capitalist world was believed to be inevitable, it was also clearly better to seize the initiative and go on the offensive as quickly as possible in order to seize advantage and seek war termination on favorable grounds.¹⁷

These factors led to a powerful bias in favor of offensive action, both in the period immediately following the Second World War¹⁸ and for many years thereafter. As one standard Soviet military text of the mid-1960s put it,

The last war confirmed the vitality of the fundamental position of Soviet military doctrine, that only as a result of a decisive offensive is it possible to destroy the armed forces of the enemy, seize its territory, break down its will to resist, and achieve a decisive victory in war.¹⁹

Nor was this offensive mindset restricted solely to conventional conflict. Quite to the contrary, according to that document:

The imperialists are preparing for an offensive war against our country, a war of all-out destruction and the mass annihilation of our people with nuclear weapons. Therefore we must oppose them with decisive, active operations by our armed forces and, in the first, place destructive nuclear strikes by our strategic forces.²⁰

Defense Minister Rodion Malinovsky argued explicitly in the late 1950s that the outcome of war with the West would be determined by whomever was most successful in quickly mounting massed nuclear strikes. On such assumptions, “frustrating a nuclear surprise attack by the enemy and taking the strategic lead at the very beginning of war” was the key to victory. For this reason, Soviet military writings placed a high premium upon nuclear strikes and counterstrikes.²¹

Indeed, even Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev argued to the Supreme Soviet in January 1960 that nuclear weapons would be the main way in which modern war is fought.²² By the 1970s and 1980s—as Soviet forces expanded and the Kremlin seemed to be acquiring more options in the event of a cataclysmic exchange—there was less talk about the need for some kind of preemptive nuclear strike and more preparation for large-scale conventional conflict

¹⁷ As Scott Boston and Dara Massicot have recounted, “Russian military theorists retain a strong bias in favor of offensive action. Their view is essentially that at the tactical and operational levels of war, the best defense really is a good offense; if Russian leaders judged that a conflict was inevitable, there would be a strong impulse to seize the initiative and go on the attack.” Scott Boston & Dara Massicot, “The Russian Way of Warfare: A Primer,” RAND Corporation, 2017, p. 3, available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE231/RAND_PE231.pdf.

¹⁸ Kokoshin, op. cit., 170.

¹⁹ V.D. Sokolovkky, ed., *Voennaya strategiya* (Military strategy), 2nd ed. (Voenizdat, 1963), p. 173 (quoted in Kokoshin, op. cit., p. 172).

²⁰ Sokolovkky, ed., *Voennaya strategiya*, p. 371 (quoted in Kokoshin, op. cit., p. 73).

²¹ Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought*, pp. 123-24 (citing writings by N.A. Lomov, V.D. Sokolovsky, P.A. Rotmistrov, and others (e.g., N. Lomov, “*Sovetskaya voennaya doktrina*” (Soviet military doctrine), *Vennaya msyl'*, no. 1, 1963, p. 25)).

²² Ibid., pp. 117 & 117 n.189.

with the West.²³ All along, however, there was a strong emphasis on the ways in which strategic—that is, nuclear—strikes would be important in shaping the outcome of a conflict.

This is not to say that in those years the Kremlin was necessarily committed to large-scale nuclear offensive action in war, for some factors may have somewhat tempered Moscow's nuclear enthusiasms. The powerful geographic position that the USSR won for itself by occupying all of Eastern Europe by 1945 and installing Communist client states there in the opening years of the Cold War, for example—coupled with the sheer size of the Red Army's conventional forces, especially when supported by the armies of their new Warsaw Pact vassals—may have helped reduce Moscow's sense of immediate territorial threat. Soviet leaders were also the heirs to and leaders of a global Communist movement that emphasized revolutionary dialectics driven by changes in the means of economic production rather than, say, strictly military operations.

Together, these may have at least somewhat tempered the Kremlin's offensively-minded approach to nuclear posture. After all, if you were a Marxist true believer who thought you were going to win the great world-historical contest of modern geopolitics *anyway*—and if your geographic situation and conventional military posture meant that you faced little concrete prospect of direct invasion from your adversary—there might seem little reason to risk a nuclear war that would devastate you as well as your adversaries. And indeed, such a tempering seems to have occurred after Stalin's death in 1953, upon which the more pragmatic Nikita Khrushchev took the helm in Moscow.

Even Khrushchev was not above nuclear adventurism that nearly led to a catastrophic war, of course—specifically in the form of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the Soviets covertly deployed medium-range nuclear-armed ballistic missiles into Cuba. That episode seems to have frightened and unsettled his leadership enough, however, to help make direct confrontation with the United States seem highly unattractive.

As a good Communist, moreover, Khrushchev believed that the Soviet Union would in time “bury” capitalism.²⁴ The inevitability of this eventual triumph had been part of the ideological orthodoxy of Communism from the outset. His nuclear adventurism in Cuba arguably had nearly cost him the inevitability of that triumph, and he seems to have realized it.

Rather than focus upon direct head-to-head confrontation, the Soviets from the early 1960s onward seem to have emphasized building client relationships and gaining advantage in the developing world—a push for global position attributable to the surge of Kremlin confidence, described by the historian Christopher Andrew and the Soviet defector Vasili Mitrokhin, that the Soviets and their allies would triumph globally through a combination of economic success and KGB-led political subversion in the Third World *without* the need for direct confrontation with Washington.²⁵

²³ Ibid., pp. 123-24.

²⁴ See, for example, Central Intelligence Agency, “Khrushchev’s ‘We Will Bury You,’” February 2, 1962, available at <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP73B00296R000200040087-1.pdf>.

²⁵ See generally Christopher Andrew & Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (Basic Books, 2005), pp. 8-24.

Soviet Nuclear Posture and Doctrine

To be sure, any such arguable tempering effect only went so far, and none of this prevented the Soviet Union from building a truly enormous nuclear weapons stockpile—and indeed one that substantially exceeded that of the United States. Whereas the U.S. arsenal peaked in about 1967 with approximately 32,000 weapons—a total which fell thereafter to perhaps 22,000 by the end of the Cold War²⁶—the Soviets kept building. By the late 1980s, it has been reported, Moscow had around 40,000 warheads.²⁷

Because both the United States and the USSR built nuclear capabilities that were in most ways broadly similar to each other's and planned in considerable detail for nuclear warfighting, an "Occam's Razor" approach might conclude that both powers must have thought in generally similar terms about doctrinal issues such as mutually assured destruction, managing movement up the "escalation ladder," and counterforce targeting. This is by no means necessarily the case, however, and the structural similarities between the superpowers' nuclear postures may obscure important differences in how the two countries actually thought about nuclear weapons—both in the Cold War and today.

According to Dmitry Adamsky, for example, deterrence "was not a central notion in Soviet strategic thinking and military art due to Moscow's dichotomous attitude toward nuclear war" during the Cold War.²⁸ For a long time, Soviet thinking did *not* tend toward aggression-dissuasive theories of deterrence as Western doctrine did with its notions of "flexible response" and escalation dominance, instead focusing primarily on concepts of massive retaliation.²⁹ As noted earlier, deterrence-type theory remained underdeveloped for decades.³⁰

In fact, in the USSR it was actually not *permitted* to research "limited nuclear war" theories, and Soviet doctrine rejected ideas of escalation dominance, flexible response, or limited nuclear conflict as "a 'monstrous heresy.'"³¹ The Soviets had a theory of how to fight a nuclear war, but their concept was not about deftly trying to manage escalation tensions *en route* to negotiated war termination; it was maximalist in its ambitions and in the toolkit it envisioned employing. The Kremlin

had a coherent nuclear war fighting strategy, which did not differentiate between conventional and nuclear war. ... All nuclear and conventional efforts, of all services,

²⁶ See, for example, U.S. Department of State, "Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Stockpile," October 5, 2021, available at <https://www.state.gov/transparency-in-the-u-s-nuclear-weapons-stockpile/>.

²⁷ See, for example, Hans Kristensen et al., "Status of World Nuclear Forces," Federation of American Scientists, March 29, 2024 (reproducing chart entitled "Estimated Global Nuclear Weapon Stockpiles, 1945-2024"), available at <https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/>.

²⁸ Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War* (Stanford University Press, 2024), p. 21.

²⁹ Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, p. 21.

³⁰ Kokoshin, *op. cit.*, 4.

³¹ Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, p. 21.

on all levels and in all theaters of operations, were seen as interconnected and aimed at producing victory.³²

The degree of ruthless and offensively-focused bloody-mindedness implied in such an approach seems to have waned in the late 1980s, however. In part, this waning may have been related to the increasingly ossified and sclerotic nature of the Soviet technical and industrial economy, and eventually also—with the arrival in power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985—to the ascension of a new generation of leadership who painfully understood just how tenuous the domestic bases of Soviet power actually were.

This shift may also have been, in part, a reaction to the dramatic turnaround in American nuclear thinking *provoked* by Moscow's huge nuclear build-up and Third World aggressiveness in the 1970s. By the early years of the Reagan Administration, for example, U.S. military planning had come to include extremely forward-leaning initiatives such as the "Maritime Strategy" of 1982, which sought to deter Soviet aggression by demonstrating that the United States could hold at risk the ballistic missile submarines Soviet admirals sought to protect in underwater "bastions" in their northern seas.³³ For Kremlin leaders weaned on the idea that victory depended upon a favorable "correlation of forces," the prospect of being deprived even of their nuclear second-strike retaliatory capability may have been a daunting prospect. (It was certainly intended to be.)

Whatever the reasons, by the late 1980s Soviet thinking about nuclear weapons seemed to be evolving fast. In 1985, Defense Minister Nikolai Vasilyevich Ogarkov suggested that fighting a thermonuclear war would be irrational, and perhaps even "criminal."³⁴ Under Gorbachev, the Soviets seem to have concluded that a nuclear war could not really have a winner, and senior officials began making statements to this effect in 1986-87; this idea frequently surfaced thereafter in Soviet military writings.³⁵ In 1986, it was also said that nuclear parity with an adversary at high levels was more dangerous than parity at lower ones.³⁶ Such statements—a striking reversal of earlier ideas that the USSR could prevail in

³² Ibid., p. 22.

³³ See, generally, for example, Christopher Ford & David Rosenberg, *The Admirals' Advantage: U.S. Navy Operational Intelligence in World War II and the Cold War* (Naval Institute Press, 2005), pp. 77-108.

³⁴ N.V. Ogarkov, *Istoriya uchit bditel'nosti* (History teaches vigilance) (Voenizdat, 1985), p. 59 (quoted in Kokoshin, op. cit., pp. 56-57).

³⁵ See Ibid., 58-59.

³⁶ Ibid., 141 (recounting that "[a] number of Soviet works published in the 1980s differentiated between military-strategic parity and strategic stability. In his political report at the 27th Party Congress in 1986, Gorbachev noted that the present level of the nuclear balance was too high and posed an equal danger to both sides. The continuation of the nuclear arms race, he asserted, would inevitably increase the mutual danger, to the point that it would no longer be a deterrent. Soviet military leaders soon followed suit. For example, in 1988, Marshal of the Soviet Union D.T. Kulikov wrote that 'further raising the level of parity would not increase the security of either side. Instead it would lead directly to the opposite result.'") (citing *Materialy XXVII s'yezda KPSS* (Materials of the 27th Congress of the CPSU) (Politizdat, 1986), p. 65, and quoting V.G. Kulikov, "O voenno-strategicheskoy peritete i dostatochnosti dlya oborony" (On military-strategic parity and defense sufficiency), *Voennyya mysli*, no. 5, 1985, p. 7).

an arms race³⁷—signaled a clear understanding of the need to avoid conflict with the United States.

The Putin-Era Mindset

But what about Russia today? When in government service in 2019, this author spoke publicly about modern Russia's highly idiosyncratic—and deeply disturbing—fixation, under President Vladimir Putin, upon narratives of national grievance, and the degree to which Russian political iconography is today filled with notions of special status and historical mission, coupled with bitterness toward a hostile outside world that has supposedly conspired to corrupt Russia's unique essence and keep the country down (or even destroy it).³⁸ Those remarks were focused more directly upon nonproliferation policy than upon Russian nuclear weapons thinking more broadly, but that Russian mindset nonetheless has implications that are perhaps even more significant for the latter than for the former.³⁹

Pronouncements of Russian leaders such as Putin, the writings of sometime regime propagandists such as Vladislav Surkov, and analyses by foreign scholarly observers, make clear that Russia has developed its own “myth of exceptionalism.” This myth revolves around the idea of a recurring “salvational role” in the international community won through defiant resistance and stoic martyrdom against endless waves of foreign enemies determined to subjugate and humiliate it.

In this conception, Russia is a distinct civilization having a unique essence and spirit that is constantly under threat from evil foreign forces, both physically and ideologically. These are threats against which Russians must always be vigilant, and in response to which it is necessary to organize politics along authoritarian lines not accountable to democratic or legal check. The Putin regime has also entered into a symbiotic relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in trying to cultivate a state-centered, authoritarian, patriotic nationalism that draws upon Orthodox mysticism and spirituality. In this relationship, the ROC has been sufficiently debased and degraded into a regime cheerleader that its leaders now endorse Putin's war of aggression in Ukraine as part of a broader “Holy War” against the West.⁴⁰

³⁷ Minister of Defense Rodion Malinovksy told the 21st Party Congress in 1959, for instance, that “[t]he traditional vulnerability of the United States has been liquidated forever,” and that “[i]n the future, if the arms race does not end, our superiority will be even greater.” Quoted in Kokoshin, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³⁸ Assistant Secretary of State Christopher A. Ford, “Ideological ‘Grievance States’ and Nonproliferation: China, Russia, and Iran,” remarks at the Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv, Israel, November 11, 2019, available at <http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=2442>. The following pages are based in part upon those remarks.

³⁹ Christopher A. Ford, “Russia, China, and the Challenge of Asymmetry in Nuclear Ethics,” presentation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, September 6, 2024, available at <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/russia-china-and-the-challenges-of-asymmetry-in-nuclear-ethics>.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Brian Mefford, “Russian Orthodox Church declares ‘Holy War’ against Ukraine and West,” Atlantic Council, April 9, 2024 (quoting ROC Patriarch Kirill), available at

This narrative involves, and indeed requires, finger-pointing at alleged outside threats. It also asserts linkages between those outside threats and those within Russia who have the temerity to disagree with Putin — or, more specifically, the effrontery to suggest that Russians should be offered choices other than his regime. Putin's narrative paints a disturbingly dark, dehumanizing narrative of his domestic opposition, which he describes as a "fifth column" in league with foreign saboteurs, and likens to an infectious bacterium of which Mother Russia must be cleansed.⁴¹

The Putin regime's vision of the world is also bound up with a sense of imperial nostalgia, a longing for the status and sense of historical self-importance that Russia felt during the tsarist period and during its decades of Soviet global reach.⁴² Not for nothing, for instance, has Putin declared that the collapse of the USSR was the 20th Century's "greatest global catastrophe."⁴³

The modern Russian regime thus promotes a kind of global "restoration narrative," in which its self-assertive authoritarianism provides the vehicle for national or even civilizational resurrection. It is critical to this ideology that Russia deserves to be a great power and to exert its influence widely abroad, and it is central to Putin's agenda—as he has proclaimed ever since his so-called "Millennium Message" manifesto of December 1999⁴⁴—that Moscow must put behind it the weakness and humiliations of the 1990s and reclaim its birthright of great power status. This hunger for a return to lost glory lies at the heart of the geopolitically revisionist agenda of what I have called the modern Russian "grievance state."⁴⁵

Developments in Nuclear Weapons Thinking

Adamsky's survey of modern Russian nuclear writings suggests that the historically "underdeveloped" nature of the Kremlin's thinking about deterrence has been quite turned around in recent years. In his telling, although the Soviets had not thought much about nuclear deterrence in the Western sense during the Cold War, they became very serious about trying to learn from Western literature on this topic in the 1990s, at a time when Russia's conventional power seemed feeble. In this context, Russian planners began to explore what we might today call "cross-domain deterrence." In such thinking for instance, nuclear influence—the one thing Russia could still draw upon in those days, not just

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russian-orthodox-church-declares-holy-war-against-ukraine-and-west/>.

⁴¹ See Fiona Hill & Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Brookings Institution, 2015), pp. 241, 254, & 256 (quoting Putin).

⁴² Ford, "Ideological 'Grievance States' and Nonproliferation: China, Russia, and Iran."

⁴³ See, for example, Gregory Carleton, *Russia: The Story of War* (Belknap Press, 2017), p. 202; see also Hill & Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 56.

⁴⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium" [*Rossii na nubezhe tysyacheletii*], *Nvzavisimaia gazeta*, no. 4, December 30, 1999, available at <https://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm>.

⁴⁵ Ford, "Ideological 'Grievance States' and Nonproliferation."

strategically but also especially with regard to the shorter-range weaponry which the United States had dismantled⁴⁶ but Russia had not⁴⁷—could be “maneuvered to the conventional sphere to compensate for Russia’s strategic operational inferiority.”⁴⁸

In this sense, at least, such embryonic Kremlin deterrence thinking roughly paralleled Western thought, inasmuch as the United States itself has long envisioned nuclear threats as a way to forestall attack by the kind of overwhelming conventional adversary seen (for instance) in the Red Army, poised on the inter-German frontier after 1945. So far, so good.

With Russia’s conventional military modernization after its invasion of Georgia in 2008, however, Russian “strategic deterrence” thinking evolved. The objective of this modernization effort was to build for Moscow a “reconnaissance-strike complex” based on information technology, and this push coincided with the development of ideas of what Russian strategists now called “new-generation warfare” (NGW)—an umbrella term loosely analogous to Western “hybrid warfare,” and which referred to “an amalgamation of hard and nonkinetic tools across various domains, namely the coordinated application of military, diplomatic, and economic means.” NGW, in the Russian view, was how powers tried to bring about regime change in their adversaries through exploiting externally-instigated protests, informational subversion, and private military activity, backed by sophisticated conventional and nuclear capabilities.⁴⁹

As Adamsky has recounted, as the Kremlin’s conventional might and confidence grew Russian strategists expanded their deterrence theory “to a wide diapason of domains beyond the nuclear, ranging from the conventional to the informational (cyber) realms and beyond the military sphere *per se*.” The aim was to achieve “merger of these tools into one system” that would improve Russia’s overall coercive capabilities by increasing its ability both to signal and to escalate in various domains and levels, including with long-range conventional precision strikes, non-kinetic engagement, selective damage to military and civilian infrastructure, and limited nuclear strikes.⁵⁰ Putin’s 2014 Military Doctrine⁵¹ codified this into ideas of a nonnuclear deterrence *system*, a repertoire “of foreign policy, military and nonmilitary measures aimed at preventing aggression by nonnuclear means.” Overall, the tendency was “to merge all the emerging tools of coercive influence into one unified system.”⁵²

⁴⁶ See generally, for example, Susan J. Koch, “The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992,” National Defense University, Case Study Series no. 5, September 2012, available at https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/casestudies/cswmd_casestudy-5.pdf.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher A. Ford, “Russian Arms Control Compliance: A Report Card, 1984-2020,” U.S. Department of State, *ACIS Papers*, vol.1, no.10, June 18, 2020, p. 7, available at <http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=2641>.

⁴⁸ Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, pp. 24-25 & 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵¹ President of the Russian Federation, “The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation,” No. Pr.-2976, December 25, 2014, available at https://rusmilsec.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/mildoc_rf_2014_eng.pdf.

⁵² Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, pp. 27-28.

What has emerged in Russian thinking is, in effect, a holistic and comprehensive “unified field theory” of coercive bargaining. In Adamsky’s characterization,

Russians perceive strategic interaction holistically, as encapsulating a permanent dialectics between two coercive stratagems: “intimidation” or “fear-inducement” (*ustrashenie*), which refers to declaratory signaling and manifestations of resolve and capability, and “forceful deterrence” (*silovoe sderzhivanie*), which refers to a diapason of limited use of force, on the battlefield or beyond, to coerce the adversary and shape his strategic behavior. Implicitly, both stratagems could and should be employed in tandem during peace time, the period of threat[,] and wartime.⁵³

The elements of this Russian schema are not separable, instead merging into and reinforcing each other. Western strategists may think of deterrence as being designed to dissuade aggression, and may envision “escalation ladders” as having crisp and distinct separate “rungs,” with the so-called “nuclear threshold” standing out therein as a step-change of huge game-theoretical consequence. By contrast, however, Adamsky’s account suggests that Russian thinking represents more of a general theory of coercive bargaining, focused upon gaining advantage in either offensive *or* defensive situations rather than upon dissuading aggression *per se*, and envisioning smoother and much more complex multi-variable gradients of escalatory force. In this conception, “when Russia is maneuvering from one domain to another, all tools of influence should merge and then move as one organic whole into the sphere where the main engagement is taking place.”⁵⁴ The aim is to “synthesize nuclear, conventional, and nonkinetic forms of influence” into one overall, holistic framework.⁵⁵

Whereas Western conceptions of deterrence tend to be psychologically passive, moreover—at least in the sense that it is generally their objective to set a baseline of peacetime conditions that incentivize adversary inaction, thus maintaining a generally peaceful *status quo*—Russian thinking is much more active, involving a constant effort to engage with and cause challenges to and “friction” for the adversary. As Adamsky describes it with respect to what is conceived of as “informational deterrence,” for instance, this is “a two-phase endeavor.”

First comes the generation of “detering potential” (*sderzhivaiushcii potentsial*). This is done by means of constant but relatively low-intensity engagement with the adversary. For internal needs, this operational friction *explores* the strategic reality (*i.e.*, examines the adversary, the environment, and oneself), its boundaries, risks, and opportunities. Externally, it fosters a reputation about one’s capabilities and resolve, and generates, figuratively speaking, “detering potential” for prospective employment. The second phase is the leveraging of the preproduced energy

⁵³ Ibid., p. 35.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

according to the needs of the moment. ... [This therefore] involves the serial use of limited force to generate an aggregate effect, which can then be exploited as the occasion demands. For a certain period, uninterrupted friction on informational fronts might not serve any specific goal other than to generate and to maintain a generic deterring posture. Eventually, the latter turns into a building block, or even the backbone, of concrete influence leverage when Russian strategists see fit. In sum, persistent operational friction creates a deterring potential, maintains it (*i.e.*, regular recharging), and exploits it to coerce an adversary at the moment of truth.⁵⁶

He uses the term “cumulative deterrence” to cover the way in which Russian concepts of informational deterrence work from a baseline of uninterrupted friction to create a deterrent potential, and thence into leveraging that potential for tactical or strategic advantage via coercive bargaining.⁵⁷

Three “Framings” for Exploring About Russian Nuclear Thinking

With all of this as background, let us thus examine three possible “framings” that may help us understand more about Russia’s nuclear posture today: (1) nuclear posture as guided by game theory; (2) nuclear weapons policy as driven by geopolitical status-seeking; and (3) nuclear weapons as a form of cult.

Possible Game-Theoretical Logics

“Countervalue Overkill”. There are various ways in which a general game-theoretical framing might perhaps help explain Russian nuclear posture. With respect to the *strategic* game-theoretical framing, of course, it is probably analytically impossible to rule out that there *isn’t* actually anything particularly distinctive about Russian nuclear thinking. Both the United States and the Russian Federation, after all, have nuclear “Triads” of land, sea, and air forces that are structured in ways to maximize operational flexibility to national leaders and the survivability of enough second-strike retaliatory forces in the event of enemy attack that the enemy will be deterred from trying one. On that basis, one might perhaps conclude that the two countries must therefore think about nuclear strategy in broadly similar ways.

This cannot be ruled out, but as during the Cold War, such a parallelism of nuclear thinking needs to be empirically demonstrated rather than simply assumed—and there are more than enough differences in context and circumstance to suggest the likelihood of important conceptual divergence between Washington and Moscow. Indeed, particularly in light of the peculiar darkness and vehemence of the Putin-era “strategic mindset”—not to mention some of the dynamics of “theocratization” in nuclear policy discussed below—the

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 51-52.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 52.

burden of proof should presumably lie with anyone contending that U.S. and Russian leaders “think alike” about nuclear weapons. There seems little real sign that they do.

That said, it is not impossible to imagine an alternative nuclear logic quite different from U.S. thinking but that would still arguably justify the same basic nuclear posture we see in the Russian Federation, albeit on very different grounds. Conceivably, rather than seeing the details of nuclear posture as the outgrowth of complicated calculations about how many warheads would be needed to achieve specific “counterforce” effects—that is, targeting the adversary’s nuclear forces in ways designed to hold those forces at risk for purposes of deterrence and to maximally degrade their ability to inflict harm upon one’s own forces and homeland if deterrence were to fail—it is possible to imagine that a purely “countervalue” logic could justify a posture very much like what the Russians have today.

There is a stereotypical view of “countervalue” targeting—that is, threatening the annihilation of multiple civilian population centers in the adversary’s homeland rather than targeting its nuclear and other military forces as such—in which such an approach requires only a “minimal” force posture (*e.g.*, just enough missiles and warheads to wipe out a handful of cities). If one is sufficiently geopolitically paranoid and bellicosely bloody-minded, however, such minimalist assumptions may not necessarily hold.

Specifically, it is at least possible that a purely countervalue strategy might (more or less) logically call for a very large and diverse Russian nuclear force under at least three conditions. First and most obviously, Russia would have to believe that the best way to deter (or coerce) the United States is to threaten American cities, and therefore to conclude that the most important objective of Russian nuclear strategy is to ensure that there is absolutely no way for the United States ever to ensure those cities’ survival in a conflict.

Second, Russian leaders would have to be both sufficiently paranoid to assume that a U.S. “bolt from the blue” preemptive first strike was quite possible, and convinced that the United States possessed the ability, with such a strike, to radically attrit Russian nuclear forces—perhaps including ballistic missile submarines at sea. (And one should remember here, of course, that it had been the objective of the old U.S. Maritime Strategy to convince Moscow this was the case.) Third, the Kremlin would have to believe American missile defense capabilities are effective enough to be able to protect U.S. cities from a nuclear attack of modest (if still relatively small) proportions.

These three factors, read together, might lead Russian strategists to conclude that a large and diverse Russian nuclear force was necessary in order to implement Moscow’s countervalue strategy against a small number of American cities because of the possibility that the United States would (a) strike preemptively against Russian nuclear forces (*e.g.*, using a mix of nuclear weapons, long-range conventional precision strike systems, and perhaps other weapons) and thereafter (b) rely upon missile defenses to protect the American homeland against the relatively small numbers of Russian nuclear forces that would survive this onslaught.

In this vision, a sizeable Russian force would be needed, but not to ensure Russian strikes against U.S. forces. Instead, the point would be almost comically simple: there would need to be *so many* Russian warheads aimed at a small number of major American cities—that is,

such a huge degree of planned “overkill”—that there would be no way whatsoever that those cities could survive no matter how effective any U.S. first strike was, and no matter how good U.S. missile defenses were.

To observe this is not to argue (much less demonstrate) that this actually *is* the logic behind Russia’s nuclear force posture, of course, for there does not seem to be empirical evidence of such a purely countervalue strategy. If anything, the flexible and holistic nature of Russian thinking about “strategic deterrence” described by Adamsky would seem to point in the opposite direction—that is, away from simple assumptions about or approaches to nuclear coercion, and toward efforts to apply a wide variety of shifting and improvisational coercive responses to changing circumstances. (The complexities recounted by Adamsky do not seem consonant with a simple mantra of “make sure you can kill a few cities no matter what.”) Nevertheless, this is at least a *conceivable* logic, and it is one that could perhaps explain the Kremlin’s longstanding neuralgia about even relatively *ineffective* U.S. missile defense capabilities, as well as Putin’s fixation upon developing new “exotic” strategic systems that are touted as being highly resistant to missile defenses.⁵⁸

Hyperflexible Coercion

To my eye, however, given what we have seen about Russian “strategic deterrence” (*a.k.a.* full-spectrum coercive bargaining) theory, the point of a large nuclear force is more likely not to be the analytically simple task of ensuring massively redundant countervalue target coverage, but rather to be the more interesting one of giving leaders in the Kremlin as diverse, flexible, and “tailorable” a range of coercive tools as possible. Ideally, if one were preparing a force to support a strategy in which—as Adamsky phrases it—“all tools of influence ... merge and then move as one organic whole into the sphere where the main engagement is taking place,”⁵⁹ one would presumably want a large force.

More importantly, however, a Russian planner with that strategy in mind would also want a force that was maximally *flexible*—including not just a large number of assets across a traditional “Triad”-type architecture, but also “exotic” delivery systems intended to create novel warning or defense dilemmas for the adversary, as well as a great diversity of shorter-range systems, with varying yields and effects and with freely interchangeable conventional and nuclear warhead load-outs. (And that’s just the *nuclear* side. Such a Russian strategist would presumably also want a huge range of other capabilities, including conventional weaponry, “active measures” political subversion, economic mechanisms, sabotage and assassination teams, cyberattack, electronic warfare, and other non-kinetic effects, and so on—perhaps even including chemical or biological weaponry, and some ability to task and leverage transnational organized criminal networks.) One would want, in other words, a force posture with maximal flexibility and diversity in order to maximize its ability to

⁵⁸ See, for example, Neil MacFarquhar & David E. Sanger, “Putin’s ‘Invincible’ Missile Is Aimed at U.S. Vulnerabilities,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2018, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/world/europe/russia-putin-speech.html>.

⁵⁹ Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, p. 38.

contribute to and support coercion-focused activity across the full range of power and in as great a range of circumstances as possible.

Because of its consistency with Russian doctrinal thinking about coercive bargaining, this logic feels more persuasively explanatory of Moscow's current nuclear posture than it would be to hypothesize a simple "countervalue overkill" approach. In fact, the above description of a "hyperflexible" nuclear force—and indeed an analogously broad repertoire of non-nuclear coercive capabilities—comes very close to describing exactly the kind of force the Russians have built for themselves. This is likely no coincidence.

The "Offensive Umbrella"

But there is at least one additional possible nuclear logic that may have importance in explaining Russian approaches: the logic of the "offensive nuclear umbrella."⁶⁰ This logic envisions the use of nuclear weapons, and especially theater-range systems, in support of a strategy of regional territorial aggression. In contrast to the more "normal" *defensive* way in which Western strategists conceptualize nuclear deterrence, this use of "deterrence" is *offensive* in that it is employed to *facilitate* aggression by deterring third-party states from *responding* to one's effort to invade and annex another country.

Such a logic would explain quite a bit about Russian nuclear-related behavior under Vladimir Putin. Thanks to its refusal to comply with the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of the early 1990s, as mentioned earlier—as well as Putin's development and deployment of missiles in violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty⁶¹—Russia has a much larger arsenal of theater-range forces than does the United States or any of its NATO allies. Russia uses this force, accompanied by nuclear saber-rattling, in an effort to create operational "space," if you will, in which Putin can invade and annex his neighbors.

In his examination several years ago of Russian precision conventional strike capabilities, Dave Johnson noted that

[t]he assiduous efforts by President Putin and other high-level Russian officials to highlight nuclear weapons in the "psychological background" of the current security environment is one example [of efforts to employ what some Russian strategists call "reflexive control"]. In general, Russia is re-shaping perceptions on the

⁶⁰ See, for example, Christopher A. Ford, "Countervailing Posture, the 'Offensive Nuclear Umbrella,' and the Future of Arms Control," remarks at DACOR Bacon House, Washington, D.C., October 6, 2023, available at <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/countervailing-posture-the-offensive-nuclear-umbrella-and-the-future-of-arms-control>; Christopher A. Ford "Offensive Nuclear Umbrellas and the Challenge of Modern Strategic Thinking," remarks to the Nuclear Security Working Group (NSWG) Congressional Seminar "Nuclear Security in the 21st Century," February 10, 2016, available at <http://www.newparadigmsforum.com/NPFtestsite/?p=2007>.

⁶¹ Treaty Between The United States Of America And The Union Of Soviet Socialist Republics On The Elimination Of Their Intermediate-Range And Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty), December 8, 1987, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm>. According to former U.S. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller, Russian violations of the INF Treaty began in 2008. "Carroll: The enduring nuclear threat," interview with Gottemoeller, *Denver Post*, November 6, 2015. By the late 2010s, Russia had deploying multiple battalions of its new INF-class missile. See, for example, Ford, "Russian Arms Control Compliance," p. 4.

psychological front using a range of political, diplomatic, military, and other activities in order to deter a perceived threat of aggression and to create more favorable conditions for Russia in case of actual conflict.⁶²

With the acceleration of Putin's war against Ukraine in 2022, moreover, Russia has moved its nuclear weapons from the "psychological background" very much into the "foreground." Russian State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin, for example, has warned that provision of equipment to Ukraine could produce "global catastrophe,"⁶³ and former president Dmitri Medvedev has said Western aid will "bring the nuclear apocalypse closer."⁶⁴ Putin himself has admitted deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus, and warns that if anyone is "thinking of inflicting a strategic defeat on us ... the use of extreme measures is possible."⁶⁵ Such statements seldom *quite* promise nuclear attack, but Medvedev recently came just about as close as anyone has:

Imagine if the ... [Ukrainian] offensive, which is backed by NATO, was a success and they tore off a part of our land then we would be forced to use a nuclear weapon according to the rules of a decree from the president of Russia. There would simply be no other option.⁶⁶

All of this is quite consistent with an "offensive nuclear umbrella" approach. The point is to deter Russia's adversaries, but this is not a *defensive* type of deterrence. It is designed, instead, to deter others (*i.e.*, NATO) from intervening *against* Russian aggression.

Status-Seeking. The second general conceptual framing that it may be useful to consider in thinking about Russian approaches to nuclear weapons relates to great power status-seeking. This idea is fairly self-explanatory, but it is worth stressing that especially in the somewhat chaotic 1990s, after the Soviet collapse, nuclear weapons probably remained the only real reason why the rest of the world still felt Russia to be one of the great powers at all.

It must have galled the Russians decades ago that West German leader Helmut Schmidt referred to the Soviet Union as "Upper Volta with missiles."⁶⁷ If that could be said at the

⁶² Johnson, Dave, "Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds," *Livermore Papers on Global Security*, no. 3, February 2018, p. 45, available at <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/Precision-Strike-Capabilities-report-v3-7.pdf>.

⁶³ Andrew Meldrum, "Russia official warns West of 'global catastrophe' for arming Ukraine," *PBS News*, January 22, 2023 (quoting Volodin), available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russia-official-warns-west-of-global-catastrophe-for-arming-ukraine>.

⁶⁴ Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia's security chief blasts West, dangles nuclear threats," *Associated Press*, March 23, 2023 (quoting Dmitri Medvedev), available at <https://apnews.com/article/medvedev-nuclear-putin-arrest-warrant-germany-ukraine-6dcde92e06f41a7c5cb7386f7939df33>.

⁶⁵ "Ukraine war: Putin confirms first nuclear weapons moved to Belarus," *BBC*, June 17, 2023 (quoting Putin), available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65932700>.

⁶⁶ Andrew Osborn, "Russia's Medvedev: We'd have to use a nuclear weapon if Ukrainian offensive was a success," *Reuters*, July 30, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-medvedev-wed-have-use-nuclear-weapon-if-ukrainian-offensive-was-success-2023-07-30/>.

⁶⁷ Deborah Welch Larson & Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (Yale University Press, 2019), p. 131; see also Hill & Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 38.

height of the Cold War, however, it may have seemed even more true—and more irritating—in the 1990s. After the collapse of the USSR, the dismissive wisecracks continued: one journalist, for instance, described the Russian Federation as “Zaire with permafrost,”⁶⁸ and U.S. Senator John McCain called it “a gas station masquerading as a country.”⁶⁹ Given what was described earlier about the Putin regime’s strategic mindset and its fixation upon restoring Russia’s image and status as a great power, it is not hard to see how such sneers would be remembered and resented today—even while helping solidify an almost desperate status-based Russian attachment to nuclear firepower.

For some time, it may indeed have seemed that the only reason anyone respected Russia was its nuclear arsenal. This was, at least, what many Russians seem to have perceived—perhaps leading many to fixate upon nuclear weaponry as essential to Russia’s great-power identity. The Russian scholar Dmitry Suslov, for instance, has argued that strategic parity with the United States was “what distinguishes Russia from the other power poles, including new ones, and what makes it a key player in big-time politics by definition.”⁷⁰

Indeed, Russian officials all but officially admitted this in 2002, when negotiating the Moscow Treaty of 2002⁷¹ with the United States. Significantly, the strategic arms reductions made in that agreement had *already* been announced unilaterally by each power, and would have occurred absent the existence of a treaty. In that sense, therefore, the treaty was unnecessary. Russian officials insisted upon these reciprocal pledges being turned into a legally-binding instrument of nuclear arms control, however, because they “valued the *political symbolism* of signaling that Russia remained a superpower entitled to engage formally with the mighty Americans on such matters.”⁷²

For these reasons, it is plausible to suggest that great power status-seeking is at least *one* driver for Russia’s maintenance of the large and diverse nuclear force that it possesses today.

Nuclear Weapons as Cult. As for my third framing—the idea that Russian nuclear weapons policy can be understood, at least in part, by seeing nuclear weaponry as the object of a sort of cultish fixation by Russia’s elite—it is necessary here to dig a little deeper into the dark and paranoid legitimacy narratives being spun by the Putin regime. In this respect, a valuable—if disturbing—window into Putin’s worldview can perhaps be found in the

⁶⁸ Larson & Shevchenko, op. cit., p. 187.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 227.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 219.

⁷¹ Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation On Strategic Offensive Reductions, May 24, 2002, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/18016.htm>.

⁷² See, for example, Christopher A. Ford, “Dead or Deferred? Nuclear Arms Control in the Age of Revisionism,” in *Aligning Arms Control with the New Security Environment* (Center for Global Security Research, 2024) p. 36 (citing “Nuclear Arms Control: The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty,” Congressional Research Service, February 7, 2011, from the Summary, available at https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20110207_RL31448_bd1c6cee57542178d8ac403eb729970056e8b799.pdf), available at https://irp.cdn-website.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/Ford_in_CGSR_Arms_Control_Book.pdf.

writings of the early 20th Century White Russian émigré Ivan Alexandrovich Ilyin (1883-1954).⁷³

Ilyin is apparently a great favorite of Putin, who quotes frequently from the man and at one point even sent copies of Ilyin's work to Russian government officials, urging them to read it.⁷⁴ Orlando Figes has described Ilyin as the writer "most often cited as the 'key' to Putin's ideology,"⁷⁵ and Walter Laqueur has written that "Putin and his colleagues believe that ... in Ilyin they have found the prophet to present their much-needed new ideology."⁷⁶ Russia's minister of regional development seems to agree, noting that "[t]he demand for his ideas in today's Russia is so strong that sometimes there is a feeling that Ivan Ilyin is our contemporary."⁷⁷

Ilyin, however, was not a nuclear theorist. He was a Russian Orthodox fascist. He openly admired European fascism, worked briefly in Joseph Goebbels' Nazi Ministry of Propaganda in Germany,⁷⁸ and seems to have "considered Nazism a positive phenomenon that with some modifications and adjustments could serve as a model for the future of Russia."⁷⁹ He also nursed a disturbing view of the spiritually cleansing potential of violence when warfare is waged by what he called the "Orthodox knightly tradition" of "Russian warriors of Christian favour."⁸⁰ In this, Ilyin claimed as his spiritual model Jesus casting the moneylenders out of the Temple,⁸¹ which he characterized as an example of the kind of violent "negative love" that all Christians should emulate in suppressing evil and spiritual corruption.⁸² As he saw it, the Orthodox warrior must be willing—even eager—to "transgress the limits of his moral righteousness" in service of a higher good.⁸³

The violence of holy war was, for Ilyin, a "process of purification," and the strong, virtuous warrior should bear "the burden of spiritual compromise, the burden of descending to the grave, violent and cunning means of struggle."⁸⁴ Through such *unrighteous* brutality in the fight against evil, the warrior would "receive[] grace in the sacrament and ... strength for his actions," for this violence "confirms the purpose of his service and cleanses his soul. And his sword itself becomes a fiery prayer."⁸⁵ As I noted about Ilyin last year,

⁷³ See generally Ford, "Russia, China, and the Challenge of Asymmetry in Nuclear Ethics."

⁷⁴ See Anton Barbashin, "Putin's Philosopher: Ivan Ilyin and the Ideology of Moscow's Rule," *Foreign Affairs*, September 20, 2015, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2015-09-20/putins-philosopher>.

⁷⁵ Orlando Figes, *The Story of Russia* (Metropolitan, 2022), p. 287.

⁷⁶ Walter Laqueur, *Putinism: Russia and Its Future with the West* (Thomas Dunne, 2015), p. 178.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Laqueur, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

⁷⁸ Laqueur, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁸⁰ Ivan Alexandrovich Ilyin, *On Resistance to Evil By Force* (K. Benois, trans.) (Taxiarch Press, 2018), p. 1.

⁸¹ Matthew 21: 12-14 (King James Version) ("And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, 'It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.'").

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 203 & 206.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

Here we see what might be described as almost a cult of self-exonerating warrior-militancy that exults in the nobility of suffering in an eternal Holy War against evil and spiritual corruption. This is a tradition that surfaces repeatedly in Russian politics, religiosity, and culture. One sees aspects of it, for instance, from the conviction of Ivan IV (“The Terrible”) that he was, in the words of British historian Orlando Figes, “a sword-bearing archangel, an agent sent by God to protect the Orthodox and purge the world of infidels and sinners before the Apocalypse,”⁸⁶ all the way up to Vladimir Putin’s much more recent fulminations about the need to resist “Satanic” Western forces of spiritual pollution that threatened Russia’s ‘traditional values.’⁸⁷

Such glorifications of spiritual conflict and worldly suffering may even trace their roots all the way back to the semi-mythical Boris and Gleb, the first saints of the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian tradition, after all, presents them (*e.g.*, in the 12th-Century Primary Chronicle) as noble “passion-sufferers” (*strastoterptsy*) who had—as Figes recounts—“willingly laid down their lives for the salvation of the Russian land” and whose sacrifice forced “a covenant between God and the newly baptized Rus, a new Terra Sancta, which was thus endowed with special grace.”⁸⁸ In the traditions of such thinking, Ivan Ilyin’s writings do not seem so outlandish.⁸⁹

And there would indeed seem to be something distinctly *Ilyinist*—if that is a word—about Vladimir Putin today. In the last several years, especially with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine that kicked off in early 2022, Putin has leaned into near-apocalyptic rhetoric about evil foreign threats and Russia’s holy mission to resist them. In a speech in which he also announced the annexation of portions of Ukraine, some of which Russian forces did not yet even control, for instance, Putin declared in September 2022 that Russia had been called by “fate and history” to a “battlefield”—“the battlefield for our people, for great historical Russia, for future generations, our children, grandchildren[,] and great-grandchildren.” It was Russia’s duty, he said, to fight the West’s “radical denial of moral norms, religion, and family”:

The dictatorship of the Western elites is directed against all societies, including the peoples of the Western countries themselves. This [Western conspiracy] is a challenge to all. This is a complete denial of humanity, the overthrow of faith and

⁸⁶ Figes, p. 75.

⁸⁷ “Putin attacks West as ‘satanic,’ hails Russian ‘traditional’ values,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/us/putin-attacks-west-as-satanic-hails-russian-traditional-values-idUSS8N2Z80G1/>.

⁸⁸ Figes, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁸⁹ Ford, “Russia, China, and the Challenge of Asymmetry in Nuclear Ethics.”

traditional values. Indeed, the suppression of freedom itself has taken on the features of a religion: outright Satanism.⁹⁰

A month later, Putin said the West is “racist and neocolonial” and its objective is “to make Russia more vulnerable,” to “slander Russia, to humiliate it, or to ignore its interests.” (It had also, he claimed, subverted Russia by providing “hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars ... to support the opposition” to his government.) The West is nothing, he said, but “boundless despotism.”⁹¹

One would not expect a political culture tied to such narratives to demonstrate any particular sensitivity to the grave responsibilities and risks associated with nuclear weapons stewardship. It is no surprise, therefore, that modern Russia seems to approach nuclear weaponry with neither reservation nor qualm. If anything, in the age of Putin, nuclear weaponry appears to be regarded as an emblem of Russia’s continuing (and future) greatness, a tool with which to vindicate its dreams of restored glory, and perhaps even an Ilyanist “fiery sword” with which to achieve some kind of dark, retributive purification.

Senior Russian Orthodox Church officials—among them Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, the Primate of the entire ROC—use their pulpits and religious authority to endorse the Putin regime’s narrative about Russia being imperiled by evil outside threats, and about the insidious “spiritual pollution” of Western ideas of liberal democracy. With respect specifically to nuclear weapons issues, ROC leaders encourage military service in this struggle as “the most Christian of professions,” and have stressed what they describe as “the vitally important role of the nuclear weapons [sic] in preserving an independent and united Russia.”⁹²

In a phenomenon that Adamsky calls the “theocratization of the nuclear complex,”⁹³ the Russian Orthodox Church has become deeply entangled in the Kremlin’s nuclear weapons policy, uncritically supporting the government line (whatever it may be) and providing Russian nuclear forces with spiritual legitimacy and endorsement. ROC leaders have provided Russia’s nuclear weapons industry, its strategic missile forces, its long-range nuclear bombers, its ballistic missile submarine fleet, and its nuclear high command with official patron saints. Individual nuclear bombers are often consecrated with an ROC rite specially developed for this purpose, and an Orthodox monk is apparently even permanently assigned to the Russian nuclear weapons test site.⁹⁴

Even as early as 1996, in fact,—several years before Putin’s rise to power—ROC officials had begun to think about nuclear weapons serving as “an ‘obstacle to the [Western] forces of darkness’” that threatened Russia, and as being necessary to “deter the [Western] satanic

⁹⁰ “Excerpts from Putin’s speech at annexation ceremony,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/extracts-putins-speech-annexation-ceremony-2022-09-30/>.

⁹¹ Vladimir Putin, remarks at the 19th Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club, October 27, 2022, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>.

⁹² Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* (Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 53 & 153-54.

⁹³ Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, p. 5.

⁹⁴ See *Ibid.*, pp. 29-31, 49, 51-52, 56, 58-59, 60, 63, 65, 68, 100-01, 109, 115, 123, 127, 130, 194, & 218-19.

effort to civilize Russia.” The Archbishop of Nizhni Novgorod has praised “the nuclear shield, which stopped the aggressive aspirations of the Fatherland’s adversaries” and which he said had enabled Russia to save the world from Western intimidation.⁹⁵ ROC officials laud the Russian “defender-bomb” that they compare to the American “killer-bomb,” arguing that the Russian nuclear arsenal thus serves the good of humanity. Kirill himself has declared that nuclear weapons are the key to Russia’s “preserv[ing] [its] great power status,” for the country “could not be a great power” without them.⁹⁶

These church positions have clearly been encouraged by the government of President Putin as a tool of his domestic power, especially as the regime—now in wartime, thanks to Putin’s invasion—has nursed notions of redemptive holy mission and ferocious self-sacrifice in a crusade against evil and spiritual corruption. But however cynical and opportunistic such narratives may be as foci for government propaganda, to the degree that they have currency in contemporary Russian political culture, they may indeed influence on Russian nuclear policy.

Conclusion

I do not pretend to offer a conclusive adjudication of the relative explanatory power of these various “framings” for helping to understand Russian nuclear weapons policy. I do, however, believe all three interpretations have at least some explanatory strength. In particular, both the game-theoretical framing of “hyperflexible coercion” and that of the “offensive nuclear umbrella” seem to me highly compelling, and both seem highly congruent both with the concrete circumstances of Russia’s nuclear posture and the complexities of its doctrinal approaches to nuclear coercion. Yet great power status-seeking also seems likely to be an important factor in the Kremlin’s approach to nuclear weaponry—as, alas, does the disturbing framing of modern Russia’s “nuclear cult.”

As U.S. leaders struggle with how to deal with Russia and its continuing nuclear bellicosity, it may be very helpful to remember the complicated valences suggested by this multiple-framing analysis. Russian nuclear weapons thinking is likely to be resistant to simple, monocausal explanation. As we work to deter the Kremlin from further aggression and eventually perhaps someday to entice it to return to the business of negotiated nuclear reductions, it will be important to understand this complexity.

Dr. Christopher Ford is a professor of international relations and security studies with Missouri State University’s Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies, a Visiting Fellow with Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, and a Distinguished Visiting Fellow with the Pharos Foundation at Oxford. He previously served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, and before that as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Weapons

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 75 & 111-12.

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 76, 88, 93-97, 118, 132, & 147.

of Mass Destruction and Counterproliferation at the U.S. National Security Council. This paper is adapted from a lecture Dr. Ford delivered to a class at Missouri State University's Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies. The views Dr. Ford expresses herein are entirely his own, and do not necessarily represent those of anyone else.