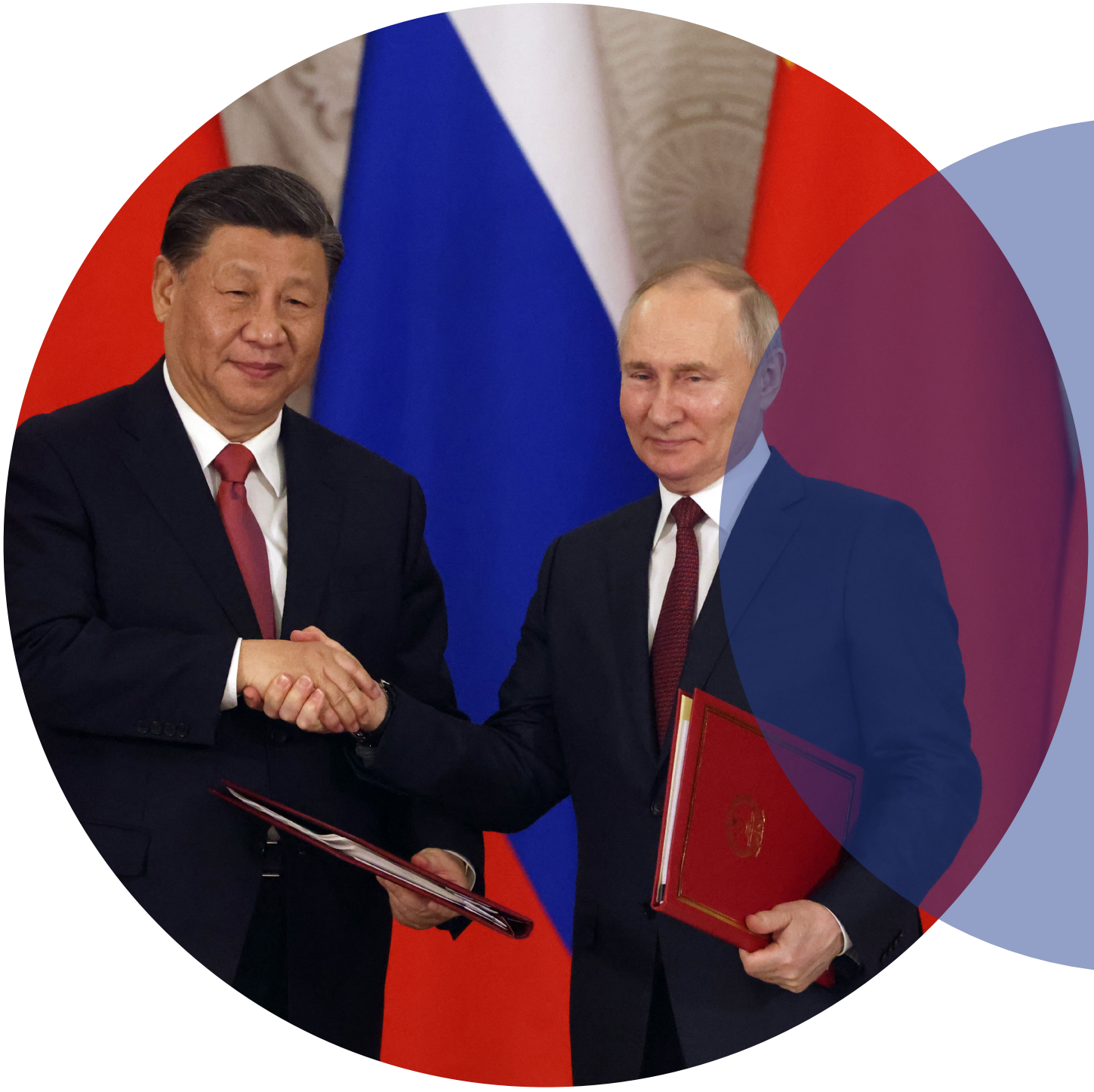
Hybrid CoE Research Report 8

Russia and China as hybrid threat actors: The shared self-other dynamics



Hybrid CoE

Jukka Aukia & Lucjan Kubica – March 2023

Hybrid CoE Research Reports are thorough, in-depth studies providing a deep understanding of hybrid threats and phenomena relating to them. Research Reports build on an original idea and follow academic research report standards, presenting new research findings. They provide either policy-relevant recommendations or practical conclusions.

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Hybrid CoE's mission is to strengthen its Participating States' security by providing expertise and training for countering hybrid threats, and by enhancing EU-NATO cooperation in this respect. The Centre is an autonomous hub for practitioners and experts, located in Helsinki, Finland.

Contents

Executive summary

The nature and causes of cooperation regarding Sino-Russian alignment are widely discussed. This Hybrid CoE Research Report focuses on various domestic factors behind Russian and Chinese foreign policy behaviour. It analyzes Russia's and China's authoritarian systems, strategic cultures, aligning and non-aligning interests, and vulnerabilities, thus comparing their strategic self-other dynamics and intentions.

In doing so, the report sheds light on Russian and Chinese underlying drivers of sub-threshold behaviour, that is, malign activities that remain under the threshold of conflict escalation. The focus is on the ways in which various doctrines, worldviews, and attitudes justify the use of instruments that can be termed hybrid threats.

The report argues that present and past commonalities in the shared self-other dynamics, including domestic exceptionalism together with international grievances and victimhood, provide for legitimacy for authoritarian rule domestically, as well as for coercive, sub-threshold measures internationally.

In effect, both Russia and China can be viewed as post-totalitarian authoritarian regimes, which have never clearly broken with their totalitarian legacies. In both states, past and present leadership has used historical and national exceptionalism to build a strong central state, to give legitimacy to authoritarian statehood, and to develop traditions for autocracy.

A key domestic commonality for Moscow and Beijing is the weaponization of their cultural civilizations ("exceptionalism") as a defence against liberal, so-called "Western" values, including democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The main goal is to supress any social unrest and defend the political status quo of the ruling elite.

Regime survival thus creates the domestic framework for Russian and Chinese authoritarian worldviews. It also forms the basis for Russia's and China's international conduct. Both states seek to create moral justifications for authoritarian statecraft to erode the liberal normative order.

The report thus identifies striking similarities in the strategic cultures of Russia and China. Both states perceive their culture and nation as exceptional and distinguished civilizations. This vision of national greatness grants them control over both nearby territories and over neighbouring countries as they perceive themselves as the sole defenders of the civilizational culture. Internationally, both view themselves as belonging to the most prominent "great powers", reserving for themselves wider rights than "regular" countries.

Russia's and China's ruling elites perceive the so-called West as the biggest external threat, not only to their own regimes, but to their cultures and way of life. Thus, a deeply embedded distrust towards the West exists in both states, which is expressed in the overly suspicious approach to Western political and economic initiatives, especially in the closer neighbourhoods of the two countries.

As of now, the shared aim of Moscow and Beijing is to change the international system into greater "multipolarity" and thus diminish US influence and presence. This common goal

and the shared threat perception is the foundation of the current cooperation. As long as this binding force is in place, both are likely to strengthen their cooperation while downplaying differences (e.g., in the Arctic, Central Asia).

Both regimes furthermore seek popular support for their respective national narratives. For both, these factors bring about systemic and structural vulnerabilities. Inevitably, Russia's political system is based on strongmen and the narratives tied to the charismatic leadership of the Kremlin. This makes the regime inflexible to changes. The rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), on the other hand, is based on the economic success narrative.

This report argues that the main characteristics of both states' strategic cultures serve to facilitate and limit Sino-Russian cooperation at the same time. A shared threat perception, an aspiration to achieve "great power" status, exceptionalism, geographical proximity, as well as autocratic roots constitute a common denominator, which is the basis for their mutual understanding.

Yet the same characteristics also contribute to distrust and insecurity in their cooperation. This is likely to prevent Moscow and Beijing from building a solid long-lasting alliance. Once the common enemy is weakened, or a common goal achieved or lost, mistrust and vested interest will likely prevail, making their cooperation harder to sustain.

Introduction

International politics appears to be a zero-sum game for Moscow and Beijing in both a geopolitical and a symbolic sense. Authoritarian expansionism, in moral and in territorial terms, remains the key goal for both regimes. While offers to join and be part of the liberal international system have been on the table for both regimes, neither has been willing to accept them. This has led to increased tensions between authoritarian and democratic camps.

In turn, exceptionalism has been used by both Moscow and Beijing to respond to Western technological and military hegemony. The Russian and Chinese sense of inferiority in combination with their cultural hubris has produced an active enemy image of the West. This is used to justify sub-threshold activities against liberal democracies.

Russia's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine highlight its need to prevent Western liberal influence, ignoring and denying the right to national agency in Moscow's perceived vicinity, while attempting to reinstate a Russian empire. In the case of China, similar attitudes can be observed in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, where Beijing perceives itself as being in competition with Western liberal influences in reasserting its imperial power.

These actions should not be seen as isolated or independent, resulting only from the motivation and worldview of the current leadership in Moscow and Beijing. Instead, they stem from the long-standing self-other dynamics, including notions of Russian and Chinese civilizational exceptionalism and the right to rule over their perceived buffer zones. These attitudes are inevitably rooted in the predecessor states or empires of both Russia and China. They have been adopted over time to the present day, where exposed imperialism does not otherwise fit well with the current political messaging of Moscow and Beijing. Given that these attitudes have a long history in Russia and China, their reappearance in various guises in history underlines their continuous relevance for the present day.

In fact, regarding current Russian and Chinese exceptionalism, both Moscow and Beijing cherry-pick historical elements and bring them together with narratives of success economics and quasi-capitalism to support contemporary hierarchical attitudes. In fact, Russian exceptionalism's key characteristics, such as the Orthodox Church, imperialism, Marxism-Leninism, state interventionism, and Eurasianism, all share one key aspect: they rely on a hierarchical understanding between St. Petersburg/Moscow and "the rest". This is similar to China, where local exceptionalism (imperialism, Han-centrism, self-orientalism, Maoism, and neo-mercantilism) supports hierarchical understanding between Beijing and the nearby regions.

That said, the argument that there is continuity between the imperial and communist past, and the present is not a straightforward one. In fact, the view does not assume or claim that there are concrete institutional, legal, or political norms that are carried over from the past.

Instead, this report observes continuity in structures, discourses, narratives, and practices that showcase the hierarchical imperial relations and worldviews that they legitimize. In effect,

the *longue durée* analysis of contemporary history situates present-day Russia and China as aspiring empires that can flexibly pose as "orientalizers" and "orientalized" at the same time, depending on the narrative needs of their self-other dynamics, that is if they want to assume the role of either a victim or a morally superior actor vis-à-vis the liberal West.

The report firstly looks at authoritarian systems and rule in Russia and China, respectively. It then discusses their strategic cultures, including threat perceptions and various conceptualizations of hybrid threats.[1] Finally, the paper focuses on aligning and non-aligning interests, as well as self-perceived vulnerabilities both domestically and internationally.

1 Giannopoulos, G., Smith, H., Theocharidou, M., 'The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A conceptual model', (Publications Office of the European Union, February 2021), https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC123305.

The authoritarian systems

The obvious commonality between the Russian and Chinese states is that both are not only non-democratic, but both are post-totalitarian authoritarian regimes. In Russia and China, totalitarian institutions (party, powerful security services, state-controlled mass media) remain in power, while the influence of ideological orthodoxy has declined.[2] This means that the influence of the hegemonic ideology (Marxism-Leninism) that supported past totalitarian states has declined in both countries, however, more so in Russia than in China, which officially remains a communist country. At the same time, notable differences characterize their undemocratic rule: Where China is a one-party system, Russia can be seen as an electoral autocracy.[3]

Both regimes, however, can be seen as "limited-access orders". Here, elites restrict access to political power to a limited circle of insiders,[4] thus limiting the role of their population in decision-making processes. In Russia, electoral participation decreased after 2012 when Putin returned to the presidency.[5] It should be noted that political activity had already been low in Russia previously. After 2012, the marginal opposition was shut down. As a result, political participation became less active, and more importantly, while political choices were increasingly limited, this gave way to political apathy. In China, national-level elections never occurred in the first place. Repression, however, has also increased since Xi Jinping rose to power in 2013. Regime survival poses considerable challenges for limited-access orders, such as Russia and China. The lack of institutional support for public participation may lead to majority uprisings by those excluded from power. The distribution of power within the ruling elites presents another challenge. Limited-access orders are unable to rule their respective domains alone. This forces them to share power with a ruling coalition, that is, a so-called "selectorate".[6] The selectorate consists of political, economic, and cultural elites that grant the regime support and consequently keep it in power. The extent to which the stabilizing factor of a selectorate also applies to sub-state and local-level governments in both Russia and China would require further research and is beyond the scope of this report.

Several tools and mechanisms are used by the central state in Russia and China to overcome limitations to their rule by limited-access orders. Elite co-optation is applied in both countries to convince the selectorate to support the regime.[7] An increasing range of media, from mass media to social media, are also used by both Moscow and Beijing to convince the population to support the respective regime.

2 Mark J. Gasiorowski, 'The Political Regimes Project', in *On Measuring Democracy: Its Consequences and Concomitants*, ed. Alex Inketes (2006).
3 Libman, A., & Obydenkova, A. V., 'Global governance and Eurasian international organisations: Lessons learned and future agenda', *Post-Communist Economies*, Volume 33, Issue 2–3, (2021): 359–377.
4 Douglass North, John Wallis, Barry Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
5 Nikolay Petrov and Michael Rochlitz, 'Control Over the Security Services in Periods of Political Uncertainty: A Comparative Study of Russia and China', *Russian Politics,* Volume 4, Issue 4, (2019): 546–573.
6 Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
7 Jennifer Gandhi, Adam Przeworski, 'Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships', *Economics & Politics,* Volume 18, Issue 1, (2006): 1–26.

Controlled elections are organized in both Russia and China to signal public support for the regime, to gather information on the opposition, and to further co-opt key elites. This key tactic has been similarly used in other authoritarian regimes as well.[8]

Authoritarian regimes often enjoy genuine popular support too. In both Russia and China, economic successes and/or common external/internal adversaries play a vital role in gaining approval.[9] The discourse of participatory governance is also used domestically by both Moscow and Beijing to maintain the legitimacy of authoritarian rule. Concurrently, local participatory mechanisms are used to gain access to the views of population on local issues and to minimize discontent. On a general level, this facilitates policymaking without the need for direct feedback mechanisms of democracy.[10]

However, given that in Russia the ideals of communism have been disregarded in favour of autocracy, citizen or grassroots participation is not encouraged by the regime and not necessarily expected by citizens themselves. In China, the discourse on participatory governance is supposed to reduce unwanted civic activism by channelling the growing political consciousness of the emerging middle-class into officially sanctioned "safe" political activities.[11]

While Moscow does not share China's need to convince others of its democratic nature, it does not seek Western liberal democracy either. Perhaps more so than Moscow, Beijing internationally professes to follow democratic norms and practices. This enables China to demonstrate adherence to internationally valued liberal trends of civic engagement and good governance, countering accusations of authoritarianism both domestically and internationally.[12]

Roots of authoritarianism

In both Russia and China, past and present leaderships have used historical and national exceptionalism to build a strong centralized state, to give legitimacy to authoritarian statehood, and to develop traditions for autocracy.

In Russia, in addition to the influence of the Mongol overlords over the principality of Moscow, the legacy of tsarist autocracy is often seen as, at least partially, contributing to the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and the authoritarianism of the Putin regime.[13] According to this view, autocracy is a key factor in Russia's political history.

8 See e.g. Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

9 Henry Hale, 'How Crimea Pays: Media, Rallying Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support', *Comparative Politics,* Volume 50, Issue 3, (2018): 369–391.

10 Laura Luehrmann, 'Facing Citizen Complaints in China, 1951–1996', *Asian Survey*, Volume 43, Issue 5, (2003): 845–866; Rory Truex, *Making Autocracy Work: Representation and Responsiveness in Modern China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

11 Mary Gallagher, '"Reform and Openness": Why China's Economic Reforms Have Delayed Democracy', *World Politics*, Volume 54, Issue 2, (2002): 372; Catherine Owen, '"Consentful contention" in a Corporate State: Human Rights Activists and Public Monitoring Commissions in Russia', *East European Politics*, Volume 31, Issue 3, (2015): 274–293.

12 Owen, C., 'Participatory authoritarianism: From bureaucratic transformation to civic participation in Russia and China', *Review of International Studies*, Volume 46, Issue 4, (2020): 415–434.

13 Nico de Petro, *The Rebirth of Russian Democracy: An Interpretation of Political Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

In China, the autocratic legacies of imperial dynasties remain influential in Chinese political culture. While these legacies may not necessarily manifest explicitly, parallels between classical and current regimes can be drawn in both Russia and China.[14] These largely concern the international relations of the respective regimes and their stance on outside influences.

In addition to pre-communist legacies, variations of communist legacies are persistent in both Russia and China. While in Russia institutional communism has been formally discontinued, patterns of behaviour of the Putin regime remain much the same. In China, despite the official embracing of a market economy, even if in a nominal role, communism has been maintained as the official state ideology.

Russian tsarist legacies

Elements of Russian authoritarian political culture are still influential today. They were established during the reign of Nicholas I (1796–1855).[15] While the influence of Nicholas should be seen in the context of the conservative counter-revolutionary movement in Europe and the Decembrist revolt, he laid the groundwork for the present-day official state ideology by introducing nationalism into Russia's political discourse. The nationalism of Nicholas I focused on the role of the sovereign, linking love for the nation with love for the Tsar. As a response to the ideals of the French Revolution, which undermined Russian autocracy, Nicholas came to designate Russians as authority-loving and supportive subjects. Following Nicholas I, Alexander III and Nicholas II effectively steered Russia's political model away from the "will of the people". They ignored advice from their more liberal-leaning advisors, and continued to rule autocratically.[16]

The idea of Russia as a continental empire, which stretches over the Eurasian continent, is not novel. In this framework, the empire is a multi-ethnic and multireligious one, a geographically vast area with contested borders. A strong central government has traditionally been a solution to these challenges. In this context, it is interesting that the Russian nobility was never "free" or "equal" to the tsar and/or the central state. The lord-vassal relationship was never fully reciprocal, and the nobility did not rule over independent fiefdoms. In the end, the absolutist tsar had power over the life and death of all his subjects. For those who did not agree to this, the only option was to escape to the Cossacks or to Siberia. Thus, Russian borders – especially to the south and east – have often been contested, but also porous, ephemeral, and seen as uncivilized.

At the same time, the tsarist legacy in Russia has influenced the relationship between the state and Western ideals. The struggle of the central state has continuously been one to gain domestic legitimacy for authoritarian (or absolutistic) governance. Both in the past and more recently, threatening liberal ideas have been

14 See e.g. Kevork Oskanian, 'A Very Ambiguous Empire: Russia's Hybrid Exceptionalism', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Volume 70, Issue 1, (2018): 26–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1412398.

15 See e.g. Sean Cannady & Paul Kubicek, 'Nationalism and legitimation for authoritarianism: A comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 5, Issue 1, (2014): 1–9.

16 While some parallels between Nicholas I and the current Putin regime seem clear, it is Putin himself who emphasizes Peter the Great as a role model. In part, this might be connected to the Russification policies of Nicholas I, which are largely viewed negatively by Russia's Muslim community. Moreover, it would connect Putin to the failed wars of Nicholas I, especially the disastrous Crimean War between 1853 and 1856.

moulded into authoritarian use. The key issue has been the converting of nationalism to serve a statist agenda. Russian nationalism refers here to an ideology that promotes Russian homogeneous cultural identity and unity. The official ideology adopted by Nicholas I incorporated orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality.[17]

Given that Nicholas I portrayed Western-oriented domestic adversaries as "monsters", it was thus assumed by the state that Russians would reject liberalism and embrace autocracy. Thus, nationalism was given a statist role; the state would form the political community, while nationalism became synonymous with the ruling autocrat. The role of the Russian Orthodox Church was limited to teaching ordinary people obedience to state and church authority, thereby stripping people of their political agency.[18]

The Soviet state then came to re-define class identity as a key element of nationalism. However, this does not imply that the Soviet Union promoted nationalism as a concept. Rather, Soviet elites promoted Russian culture indirectly, disguised as class consciousness and Soviet culture. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, democracy and liberalism were supposed to replace socialism as the foundation of the Russian nation-state. Even though the democratic experiment was short-lived, a direct return to authoritarianism was not possible either when President Putin was elected/came to power in 2000. A period of contention followed between advocates of democratic popular sovereignty and authoritarianism.

China's imperial legacies

A key period in China's national history is the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD). The cultural influence of Han is epitomized in the fact that the majority ethnicity in Mandarin is called the Han people (hanren), the Chinese language is the "Han language" (hanyu), and Chinese is written in "Han characters" (hanzi). What is more, the centralized and authoritarian imperial system was established during the Han period and served as a "benchmark" for future dynasties for over 2000 years. In addition to the Han, the influence of the following Tang (618 to 907 AD), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1912) Dynasties is included in the notion of "Tianxia", meaning "all under heaven", and in the practice of the so-called tributary system.

While Tianxia refers to an understanding of the world where everything was deemed to be under the authority of the Chinese Emperor, "tributary relations" are a concurrent conceptualization and practice of Chinese foreign relations, formalized under the Ming Dynasty. This positioned China as culturally, politically, and economically superior to other international actors. The system required that those who wished to trade with China had to subordinate themselves as vassals under the Chinese Emperor.

While the historical existence of the tributary relations sometimes falls under academic suspicion,[19] its legacy and use with regard to the present-day state is twofold: on a global level, it gives legitimacy to the Chinese Communist

17 Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and official nationality in Russia, 1825–1855* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).

18 Sean Cannady & Paul Kubicek, 'Nationalism and legitimation for authoritarianism: A comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 5, Issue 1, (2014): 1–9.

19 Peter C. Perdue, 'The Tenacious Tributary System', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Volume 24, Issue 96, (2015): 1002–1014, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030949.

Party's (CCP) claims about the current world system being unfair and Western-led, and thus replaceable by a more inclusive "world government" (*Tianxia*). On a regional level, it provides legitimacy for the idea that China's surrounding countries should be grateful for Beijing's benevolent ruling, granting China special concessions in the East and South China Seas. This would diminish regional states as China's vassals. However, the view in Beijing is that *Tianxia* and the tributary system are more advanced than the Western colonialism that has built the contemporary international system.

In the present-day Chinese state discourse, the legacy of imperial China is most visible in conceptual approaches such as the "harmonious world", "peaceful development", and "community of shared future", developed, produced, and reinforced by the larger policy community and the Party elites. These are particularly visible in Party domestic propaganda but equally in Chinese public diplomacy. Thus, in similar ways to Russia, ancient China also influences the present-day state in defining Chinese nationalism.[20] In effect, China and the CCP are seen as benevolent but powerful international actors that stand above other actors.[21]

Prior to the economic reforms in the 1970s, Marxist-Leninist doctrines, such as the dominant historical materialism, made the Communist leadership focus on class oppression and resistance. This turned official attitudes against China's imperial past. However, since the 1980s, and with the death of Mao in 1976, official attitudes gradually shifted towards re-endorsing hand-picked elements of China's traditional culture. The declining relevance of communism effectively led to re-emphasizing China's classical history as well as nationalism. However, nationalism in China did maintain socio-political relevance to the present-day despite the communist-era influence. Thus, with the success of the market reforms, nationalism has gradually replaced communism as the gold standard of legitimacy for the state; nationalism and historic memory have become acceptable to the state and the Party.

Overall, the aim of the Party is to boost national pride and confidence in Chinese culture and history. In the Party narrative, concepts such as "equality", "win-win", and "non-intervention" are used. In practice, China's relations with its regional neighbours, as influenced by the legacy, are arranged hierarchically; smaller actors need to acknowledge China's supremacy, and in return, receive economic benefits. Thus, present-day nationalism as defined by the Party is built on a Sino-centric worldview and traditional culture.

An argument can thus be made that the current regimes in Moscow and Beijing have assigned a statist role to their respective civilizations (i.e. "weaponized" them) to combat the influence of liberal Western values and culture, and to confer legitimacy on their rule. Here, arguments over the current world system being of Western origin and thus unfair to Russia and China are part of the overall discourse. In effect, both regimes use civilizational claims in providing justification for their existence and behaviour. Table 1 summarizes pre-communist legacies in Russia and China, and their implications for democratic actors and states.

20 Haiyang Yu, 'Glorious Memories of Imperial China and the Rise of Chinese Populist Nationalism', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Volume 23, Issue 90, (2014): 1174–1187.

21 Jukka Aukia, 'China's Push for Greater Influence in the Popular Culture Arena: The Ip Man Saga', *Asian Studies Review*, (2022), DOI: 10.1080/10357823.2022.2041552.

Table 1. Key components of pre-communist legacies in Russia and China

FACTOR	RUSSIA	CHINA	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST
Stance on outside influences (Western ideals)	• Nationalism given a statist role • People designated as authority-loving and supportive • Anti-liberal orientation	• Nationalism/traditional culture given a statist role • Sino-centric worldview (China as the "Middle Kingdom") • Han-centrism (i.e. focus on Han dynasty as cultural reference point)	• Weaponization of civilizations • Scepticism towards liberal Western values • Claims that current world system is illegitimate and disadvantages Russia and China • Phantom borders

Marxist-Leninist legacies in Russia and China

Despite existing differences, many present-day communist and post-communist states exhibit similarities. A high level of corruption and a low level of democracy are common denominators in many post-communist countries, not least Russia and China. In China, the question of communist legacies is not only theoretical; the CCP maintains communism as the official ideology of the state. In the case of Russia, the discontinuation of official state communism calls into question the extent to which ideology influences present-day politics. In any case, a distinction in both Russia and China should be drawn between the ideological and behavioural legacy.[22]

The early communists in the Soviet Union were highly ideological, and ideology seems to have persisted throughout the Stalin and Khrushchev eras up to the 1960s.[23] However, in the 1970s, increased Soviet consumerism, among other things, lessened interest in ideology.[24] As a result, the mechanisms that explain the persistence of authoritarian behaviour in Russia are not connected to Communist ideology alone. Instead, the practical facets of Communism – opportunism, corruption, patronage relations, and informal networks – are also important factors in explaining authoritarian tendencies, including corruption and inequality, in present-day Russia.[25] Cynicism, opportunism, and rent seeking are equally considered important behavioural consequences stemming from both the tsarist and the communist eras.[26]

During the early years of Communist rule (1949–1978) in China, Maoism as localized Marxism aimed at providing for a coherent Chinese identity. For Mao, Chineseness was synonymous with opposing capitalists, imperialists, and other class enemies, while building a communist utopia for the world. By the 1980s, Maoism was abandoned in all but name. While the economic environment in post-WWII China was different from that of the former Soviet Union, in the

22 G. Pop-Eleches and J. Tucker, *Communism's Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

23 Yuri Slezkine, *The house of government: A saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

24 O. Gurova, 'Ideology of consumption in Soviet Union: From asceticism to legitimating of consumer goods', *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, Volume 24, Issue 2, (2006): 91–98.

25 A. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

26 See Pop-Eleches and Tucker, *Communism's Shadow*.

Table 2. Key components of communist legacies in Russia and China

FACTOR	RUSSIA	CHINA	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST
Behavioural legacies	• Opportunism, cynicism, corruption, patronage relations, informal networks, rent seeking • Lack of innovation capabilities • Elites stemming from Communist party • Career opportunism of state officials	• Opportunism, cynicism, corruption, patronage relations, informal networks, rent seeking • Lack of innovation capabilities • Elites stemming from Communist party • Career opportunism of state officials • Party members associated with stronger political activism	• Eroding of liberal normative order (China doing this from within the system; Russia as a disruptor) • Moral space for authoritarianism through non-democratic means

1970s, the CCP also transformed itself to move away from ideology, emphasizing such behavioural traits as personal opportunism and clientelism.[27]

Both Russia and China are ruled by elites largely stemming from and socialized within their (past) respective communist parties. The career-opportunistic nature of state officials appears to be similar in both countries. In China, CCP membership is associated with stronger political activism. However, party members are not necessarily more loyal to the regime than non-members.[28] In addition to the above-mentioned behavioural traits, as an outcome of the communist legacy, key structural weaknesses are found in post-communist countries, with lack of innovation activity being mentioned most frequently.[29]

During the Soviet era, lack of innovation was mainly due to concentrating on heavy industry at the expense of innovation in and production of consumer goods. In fact, to a large degree, communism can be seen as a modernization project, albeit one that did not encourage societal innovation as a structural, bottom-up element of the system. While scientific and technological innovations, which continued until the late 1980s in the Soviet Union, should be acknowledged, it must be stressed that these innovations were mainly the result of state-driven, top-down initiatives. By contrast, individual creativity and innovation as bottom-up initiatives were insufficiently fostered or encouraged.

Regarding China, many Chinese companies have also emerged as leaders in their fields more recently, especially in technology. This is unlikely to have been possible without prior direct technology transfer from the West, however.

Table 2 summarizes Communist legacies in Russia and China, and their implications for Western-style democracies. Here, China is usually seen as wanting to change the system from within, that is, working towards change either by seeking greater influence in existing institutions (e.g. the UN) or by introducing parallel institutions into the system (e.g. AIIB). Russia, on the other hand, is seen more as a disruptor of the current system and institutions, for instance in seeking to hamper the proper functioning of the UN Security Council.

27 Bian et al. 2001.

28 Bruce Dickson, 'Who wants to be a communist? Career incentives and mobilized loyalty in contemporary China', *China Quarterly,* Volume 217, (2014): 42–68.

29 See e.g. Pop-Eleches and Tucker, *Communism's Shadow*.

Repressive turns in state-society relations

A common denominator in authoritarianism and collectivism is that they seek distance from individualism in prioritizing the group over the individual. Concurrently, collective authoritarianism merges the rights and goals of individuals into collective goals, expectations, and conformities.[30] In both Russia and China, certain internal developments have come to define collective authoritarianism in their state-society relations, influencing the international behaviour of the state.

Russia

Regarding Russia, civil society in the pre-Communist era was largely made up of religious organizations, that is, the Orthodox Church.[31] However, given that the Church was subordinated to the Tsar, it cannot be considered a proper expression of civil society. To some extent, Russian civil society began to develop in the 1850s, mostly in large urban areas and universities. In addition, villages and Cossacks formed a kind of proto-civil society. Thus, civil society saw some development before the First World War and October Revolution of 1917. It could have worked as a counter-force to authoritarianism until it was destroyed by the Civil War and the Bolsheviks. After the communist takeover, Orthodox Church property was also nationalized, whereupon religious teaching and publications were criminalized.[32]

During the early Soviet period, the Party lent its support to various voluntary organizations. This changed during the 1930s, however, when the smaller, and more independent, organizations were replaced by a top-down system of centralized quasi-non-governmental organizations (e.g., Communist Union of the Youth, the All-Union Society of the Deaf, and Society for the Protection of Nature).[33] These organizations had no real power and were mostly viewed as mobilization tools. They provided a way to do some common good and, more importantly, they offered a way for social and political advancement in an authoritarian system.

In the 1990s after the Soviet era, the Boris Yeltsin administration did not encourage the development of an independent civil society. Although there was domestic civil society activity (e.g., Soldiers' Mothers), this was neither very well organized nor funded, and had no proper political platforms.[34] Thus, instead of state support, international actors came to shape the development of the NGO sector.

After the Yeltsin era, the Putin regime adopted a more vigilant approach to Russian civil society. In contrast to the Yeltsin administration, the main driver of repression in the Putin regime has been suspicion towards Western-funded civil society,

30 M. Kemmelmeier et al., 'Individualism, Collectivism, and Authoritarianism in Seven Societies', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology,* Volume 34, Issue 3, (2003): 304.

31 Joseph Bradley, 'Associations and the Development of Civil Society in Tsarist Russia Social Science History', Volume 41, Issue 1, Special Issue: *European Civil Society* (Spring 2017): 19–42; Thomas Earl Porter, 'The Emergence of Civil Society in Late Imperial Russia: The Impact of the Russo–Japanese and First World Wars on Russian Social and Political Life, 1904–1917', *War & Society*, Volume 23, Issue 1, (2005): 41–60.

32 Alfred Evans, 'Civil society in the Soviet Union?', in *Russian civil society: A critical assessment*, A. B. Evans, L. A. Henry, & L. M. Sundstrom (Eds.), (M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 28–54.

33 Romanov & Larskaia-Smirnova (2015, 360).

34 Jo Crotty, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Volume 61, Issue 1, (Jan., 2009): 85–108; Alexander N. Domrin, *The Russian Review,* Volume 62, Issue 2 (Apr., 2003): 193–211.

which has come under the spotlight and been labelled as not serving the real interests of the Russian people. Often described as an "import substitution model", in the long term the Putin regime has provided domestic incentives to push out international actors, while favouring NGOs whose work aligns with the state agenda. In other words, the Putin regime took control of civil society, such as it existed, through mechanisms that chained it to the Kremlin.

The colour revolutions between 2003 and 2005 unseated authoritarian and/or pro-Kremlin regimes in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. According to the Kremlin, Western non-profit actors played a key role in facilitating the uprisings. As a result, the Putin regime's suspicion towards Western civil society actors in Russia turned into hostility, complicating the functioning of the independent NGOs in Russia.[35] Another notable instance that hampered the independent functioning of the NGO sector in Russia was the Beslan school hostage crisis in 2004. It can be argued that NGOs hindered the efforts of the regime to control the narrative of the war against terrorism. Furthermore, NGOs publicized atrocities, failures, and crimes committed by the Russian security forces, and exposed elite corruption and the manipulation of elections during Putin's first two terms.[36]

After these incidents, national security concerns were cited as the primary reason behind policy "reforms", which concentrated power in the Putin regime and started civil society repression (e.g., Public Chamber, 2006 NGO law, new GONGOs, and regime-supporting incentives for activists).[37]

Yet another "repressive turn" took place in the aftermath of the 2011 parliamentary election, during which widespread protests erupted due to alleged voting fraud.[38] After the protests, a series of policy "reforms" were introduced, further complicating the functioning of independent civil society (law on foreign agents, fines for organizing and participating in unregistered demonstrations, laws against extremism and blasphemy, law on undesirable organizations).[39] The Law on Foreign Agents has since been used to tighten censorship, increase arrests during protests, and label individuals such as journalists as foreign agents.[40]

The selective application of these laws has severely hampered the functioning of independent civil society in Russia. Another key mechanism to co-opt civil society workers utilizes the deliberate rotation of positions between civil organizations and state bureaucracy.[41] Since 2021, the application of these mechanisms has connected the state and civil society, granting

35 Steele, J., 'Putin Still Bitter over Orange Revolution', *The Guardian*, September 5, 2005.
36 Bourjaily, Natalia, 'Some Issues related to Russia's NGO Law', *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, Volume 8, Issue 3, (2006): 4–5.
37 Richter, J., 'Putin and the Public Chamber', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Volume 25, Issue 1, (2009): 39–65.
38 Gel'man, Vladimir, 'The Politics of Fear: How the Russian Regime Confronts Its Opponents', *Russian Politics & Law*, Volume 53, Issue 5–6, (2015): 6–26.
39 Tysiachniouk, M., S. Tulaeva, and L. A. Henry, 'Civil Society under the Law 'On Foreign Agents': NGO Strategies and Network Transformation', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Volume 70, Issue 4, (2018): 615–637.
40 Lipman, M., 'At the Turning Point to Repression: Why There are More and More 'Undesirable Elements' in Russia', *Russian Politics & Law*, Volume 54, Issue 4, (2016): 341–350.
41 Khmelnitskaya, Marina, 'Socio-economic Development and the Politics of Expertise in Putin's Russia: The 'Hollow Paradigm' Perspective', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Volume 73, Issue 4, (2021): 625–646.

the Putin regime capabilities to screen NGOs, select their staff, and set the conditions under which they can operate. There has also been an increase in political asylum applications from Russian civil society actors to the EU and the US.[42] The Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in a record number of asylum applications from ex-Soviet bloc nationals.[43]

Stressing commitment to centralized power and paternalism, that is, to making all the decisions for the people you govern, Putin's authoritarian vision towards civil society echoes pre- and post-communist legacies of Russia. By way of illustration, Putin has stated that "people, participating in civil society, will regard as primarily important, not so much the idea of freedom, not so much the idea of interests, as the idea of service to a certain common cause".[44] Putin thus seems to view civil society and NGOs as a unifying mechanism that creates social cohesion in tandem with central state values and the strategic agenda. Civil groups are thus given a statist role.

Therefore, while the actual democratic content has evaporated from Russian democratic institutions and the democratic functioning of institutions has been eviscerated, a parallel evisceration of civil society has taken place and the proper functioning of an independent NGO sector has been hampered.[45]

China

While prior to the founding of the People's Republic of China, civil society was recruited to fight against the Japanese and the nationalists, after 1949, the Party put repressive regulations in place. For civil organizations, official recognition could only be gained in the service of the Party.[46] While some civil organizations were co-opted to penetrate society, independent civil society effectively ceased to exist.[47]

The market reform era from the late 1970s to early 2000s witnessed the CCP briefly diminishing its role vis-à-vis civil society.[48] During this time, security services targeted less openly perceived threats to Party rule. The strategy for repressing civil society was thus subtle and ambiguous.

The Tiananmen Square events in 1989 caused a shift away from liberal tendencies. To restore political authority, the Party aimed at maximizing influence over civil society. This included adopting issue expertise from NGOs and

42 Henry, Laura and Plantan, Elizabeth, 'Activism in exile: how Russian environmentalists maintain voice after exit', *Post-Soviet Affairs,* (2021), DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2021.2002629.

43 See https://euaa.europa.eu/news-events/russian-invasion-results-record-asylum-applications-ex-soviet-bloc-nationals.

44 See Henderson (2011, 18).

45 Henderson, S. L., 'Civil society in Russia: state-society relations in the post-Yeltsin era', *Problems of Post-Communism,* Volume 58, Issue 3, (2011): 11–27.

46 Anthony Spires, Lin Tao, and Kin-Man Chan, 'Societal support for China's grass-roots NGOs: Evidence from Yunnan, Guangdong and Beijing', *The China Journal,* 71, (2014): 65–90.

47 Hee-Jin Han, 'Legal governance of NGOs in China under Xi Jinping: Reinforcing divide and rule', *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Volume 26, Issue 3, (2018): 390–409 (p. 391).

48 Yongjia Yang, Mick Wilkinson, and Xiongxiong Zhang, 'Beyond the abolition of dual administration: The challenges to NGO governance in 21st century China', *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, Volume 27, Issue 5 (2016): 2292–2310 (p. 2299).

Table 3. Key components of repressive turns in Russia and China

FACTOR	RUSSIA	CHINA	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST
Incremental application of repressive law	• Functioning of independent civil society hampered • Western-funded civil society not seen as serving the "real interests" of Russian people • NGOs as a unifying mechanism creating social cohesion	• Functioning of independent civil society hampered • State increasingly recognizing NGOs as legitimate • Civil society co-opted to serve CCP agenda	• State-building through NGOs • Granting the state extraterritorial reach (China) • Increase in political asylum applications from civil society actors (Russia)

economic strategies from corporations.[49] Another key development took place with Xi taking over in 2012. Increasingly, the CCP has considered civil society a threat to regime preservation, thus developing sophisticated and indirect regulatory tools, including negative incentives.[50] It also appears that China has to an extent adopted Russian-style NGO laws during Xi's tenure. At the same time, political power has been directed from the state to the Party, whereby the loyalty of officials is emphasized more than professional performance. In effect, under Xi, political control has become more centralized, in both party-state and state-civil society contexts.[51]

While the CCP argues that a separation between the state and civil society is taking place, under Xi, party control has been reasserted. The Party has actively sought to "enter, grow from within, influence, and work through social organizations [...]".[52] At the same time, the importance of the state recognizing civil society organizations as legitimate has increased, although there are strict controls on which kinds of organizations can be established. In any case, without official recognition by the state, the CCP cannot build influence through social organizations.[53] Table 3 summarizes the key factors of repressive lawfare domestically in Russia and China, respectively.

Conclusion

While the first decade of the 21st century saw Russia becoming more conservative towards liberal Western values, similar developments took place in China during the second decade. The common denominator is the ascendance to power by their current regimes.

A key domestic commonality between Moscow and Beijing is the promotion of Russian and Chinese civilizations as a defence against the spread of liberal Western values, including

49 Lay Lee Tang, 'Rethinking power and rights-promoting NGOs in China', *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, Volume 5, Issue 3 (2012): 343–351 (pp. 347–350).

50 Jessica Teets, 'Let many civil societies bloom: The rise of consultative authoritarianism in China', *The China Quarterly* 213 (2013): 19–38.

51 Carl Minzner, *End of an era: How China's authoritarian revival is undermining its rise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

52 Holly Snape and Weinan Wang, 'Finding a place for the Party: debunking the "party-state" and rethinking the state-society relationship in China's one-party system', *Journal of Chinese Governance*, Volume 5, Issue 4 (2020): 477–502 (p. 492).

53 Snape and Wang, 'Finding a place for the Party', 493.

democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. In effect, both Russian and Chinese cultural civilizations are weaponized against social unrest and to defend the political status quo of the ruling elite. In contrast, in liberal democracies, patriotism and love for one's national culture is used to uphold the larger political system and institutions, not a singular party or regime.

These domestic concerns create the framework for the Russian and Chinese authoritarian worldview. They also form the basis for Russian and Chinese international behaviour. Moral space for authoritarian statecraft is created by attempts to erode the liberal normative order, that is, what in the so-called liberal international order is considered normal.

Another commonality concerns the ways in which nationalism has been given a statist role. Nicholas I embraced nationalism, while Putin has claimed to be building democracy in Russia. However, both redefined the concepts to suit their agendas. While nationalist influences in the rest of Europe during the 17th century resulted increasingly in a power shift from one sovereign – i.e. the monarch – to the people, in Russia nationalism was instrumental in strengethening the role of the tsar.

On the one hand, a pre-communist, and on the other, a communist legacy – a key component of state perception in Russia and China – remain phantom borders. This means that phantom borders stem from both pre-communist and communist eras in Russia and China. While Moscow views the borders of the former Soviet Union and the Russian Empire as relevant for the present day, as far as Beijing is concerned, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Tibet, and Hong Kong belong under Chinese rule.

In China, the Party's understanding of stability differs from the Western understanding. CCP ambition is to control everything, both domestically and internationally. At the same time, the Party paints a picture of itself as a benevolent actor both domestically and internationally. Here, there is a direct contrast to the regime in the Kremlin, which does not make claims of benevolence. Instead, Russia is seen by Moscow as a great power with great power interests, especially in its immediate vicinity.

In fact, the idea of benevolence does not enjoy broad support among the Russian elites nor the public. The Russian people mostly see themselves as losers of the Cold War, whereas the "loser complex" in China dates further back to the 19th century. Concurrently, in contrast to China, in Russia there has never existed any need to create a coherent narrative of the empire – not by Russians themselves nor international observers. The narrative in Russia consists more of various cycles from expansion to chaos and from rise to fall in tandem with different autocrats.

Therefore, the key to understanding Beijing lies in the fact that the Party aims at maintaining domestic legitimacy, while moulding the international community in a direction more compatible with the Party's needs. These tendencies have been underlined during the era of Xi Jinping, which has shown how the Communist Party operates in effect. The CCP controls the Chinese state with a top-down ideology, where co-opting the non-public sector is a central aspect. In the Putin regime, on the other hand, views on civil society are reminiscent of the Soviet-style early NGOs regarding their character, thus offering evidence of continuity between the Soviet and current regimes.

The strategic cultures

Strategic culture is not similarly applicable to all actors. Thus, there is variation in how the concept is applied to different actors and, as a result, different approaches are used to study the strategic cultures of states. A classical approach observes national character, while a more modern one focuses on path dependency and mapping change in strategic thinking.[54] The latter approaches strategic culture from the perspective of conceptual history and other linguistically oriented approaches (e.g., discourse analysis). The focus is on concepts and the sum of the meanings associated with ideas, as well as understanding strategic culture as emerging from competing "sub-cultures" and discourses.[55]

Regarding Russia, there is still an ongoing discussion about whether there is a grand Russian strategy in place, and how the West should respond. This discussion takes different forms, ranging from denial of its existence[56] and proposals on how to handle Russia[57] to strategic myth breaking.[58] In the case of China, statements by the CCP leadership regarding any grand strategy are vague. For this reason, it is equally unclear whether there exists an actual coherent grand strategy within the Party leadership. In the cases of both Russia and China, a viable possibility is that a strategy emerges as Moscow and Beijing react to international events and challenges.[59]

This section discusses the origins of Russian and Chinese strategic thinking, perceptions of threat and approaches to the West, use of force/deterrence, as well as different meanings of "hybrid threats".

Origins of strategic thinking

This report utilizes a cultural approach to national strategy. Strategy is discussed here through cultural elements that form national behaviour. Naturally, different elements of culture do not exist in a vacuum but overlap and influence one another. The deconstruction of strategic culture into different elements potentially informs current behaviour and the overall logic of thinking, as well as changes and future behaviour.

Russian and Chinese exceptionalism

In Russian political thought, Russian culture and the state are perceived as exceptional. In this view, Russian civilization is seen as distinguished and separated, albeit equal to others, such as the Western and the Chinese civilizations.

An important element in the civilization-like thinking is the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church reinforces the perceived uniqueness of Russia by adding a "spiritual" dimension to political thinking. This defines Russia as the "Third Rome", defender of the true (read: Orthodox) Christianity. As the sole defender

54 See https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13523260.2014.927674.
55 Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and political theory: A conceptual approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
56 See https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/russia-does-not-have-a-grand-strategy/.
57 See https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28885?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.
58 See https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/four-myths-about-russian-grand-strategy.
59 See also Lee Jones & Hameiri, Shahar, *Fractured China: How state transformation is shaping China's Rise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Lynch, Ian J. 'The Façade of Chinese Foreign Policy Coherence', *The Strategy Bridge,* (2020)*;* Sutter, Robert, *Chinese foreign relations: Power and policy of an emerging global force* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

of Orthodox values, Russia must thus repel Catholics and Muslims and reunite all Orthodox states.[60] The religious dimension of Russia's exceptionalism is complemented by a mythological narrative in which Russia is given the role of the defender of Europe against Mongolian invasion, Napoleonic adventurism, Nazism and currently against modern liberal ideologies. These narratives additionally reinforce the sense of uniqueness and a special mission for Russia.

From the religious and mythological elements derives the concept of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World). The concept suggests that Russia is much more than a mere country; it is a global superpower with Russian citizens and culture inhabiting the world. In effect, this transforms everyone who feels or associates with Russian culture into a part of *Russkiy Mir*. Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which resulted in many Russians finding themselves living in a different country overnight, the concept found new life in reinforcing a sense of Russianness. *Russkiy Mir* has since developed into a part of Russia's superpower identity, underlining the transnational influence of Moscow.[61]

The idea of a unique Russian culture creates the foundation for alternative civilizational choices for other countries in attempts to create a new multipolar world order. Simultaneously, according to Moscow, Russian "cultural sovereignty", which is an important part of its superpower status, must be protected against foreign influences. These include denying that the Western way of life is a universal one, as well as opposing general Westernization and Western soft power.[62] Consequently, the recent National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation from July 2021[63] contains a new chapter on the protection of traditional values, culture, and historical memory.[64]

Eurasianism is another important element of Russian cultural exceptionalism. This perspective connects the Russian worldview to geography and space.[65] In fact, Putin himself has directly connected Russian exceptionalism to Russian ethnicity in committing to a Russian civilizational identity. The identity provides justification for authoritarian rule. This attempts to depict Western civilization and liberal values as less than universal.[66]

Similarly, Chinese exceptionalism, a distinctive element of political thought in Beijing, claims a unique past for China. Accordingly, China will also develop a unique future for itself

60 Anna Antczak, 'Russia's Strategic Culture: Prisoner of Imperial History?', Athenaeum, *Polish Political Science Studies*, Volume 60, (2018): pp. 223–242, p. 229.

61 Sinovets Polina, Nerez Mykyta, 'The Essence of Russian Strategic Culture: From the Third Rome to the Russian World', *Міжнародні та політичні дослідження*., 2021. Вип. 34, p. 132.

62 Ibid., p. 131.

63 Ukaz of the President of the Russian Federation: On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, July 2, 2021.

64 For more, see Julian Cooper, 'Russia's updated National Security Strategy', Russian Studies Series 2/21 (Nato Defense College, July 2021).

65 A. P. Tsygankov, 'Mastering space in Eurasia: Russia's geopolitical thinking after the Soviet break-up', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Volume 36, Issue 1, (2003): 101–127.

66 Fabian Linde, 'State civilisation: the statist core of Vladimir Putin's civilisational discourse and its implications for Russian Foreign Policy', *Politics in Central Europe*, Volume 12, Issue 1, (2016): 21–35.

and the world.[67] Chinese exceptionalism also has an ethnic dimension, influencing Chinese domestic and foreign security policy thinking. In addition to ethnic exceptionalism, the CCP's socialist rhetoric is also exceptionalist, given that it claims that the CCP (and only the CCP) possesses a unique method for developing China.

At the turn of the 20th century, the political philosopher and initial leader of the Kuomintang, Sun Yat-sen, was the first to propose a Chinese nation-race built on "common blood".[68] While the CCP also regarded ethnic minorities as "backwards", the Mao-era rhetoric officially resisted ethnic-based classifications.[69] This official position was influenced by Soviet thinkers, who regarded ethnic classifications as merely an unnecessary step on the way to socialism. When it came to the 1990s, the more inclusive "ethnic fusion" (*minzu ronghe*) replaced the "inter-ethnic struggle" (*minzu jiān de douzheng*) in the Party rhetoric.[70] As a result, the present-day CCP officially disputes ethnic hierarchies and paints a picture of a unified Chinese nation-state, including all 56 ethnicities.

In tandem with China's "rise", however, Chinese nationalism has regressed into overt ethnic nationalism. This form of popular nationalism is known as Han-centrism (*hanbenwei zhuyi*), referring to the majority ethnic group. It builds on Confucianism and nativism but is less ideological and more Sino-centric.71 The ethnic foundations of Chinese exceptionalism build a geopolitical construct that transcends China's current territorial sovereignty.[72] This race-based extraterritorial sovereignty has increasingly been implemented under Xi.[73]

Akin to Russian strategic thinking, Beijing likewise perceives Chinese civilizational culture as being threatened by "Western cultural hegemony" (*xifang wenhua baquan*), the "export of Western democracy" (*xifang minzhu shuchu*), and "religious penetration" (*zongjiao shentou*).[74] The security implication is that territorial sovereignty is seen to extend not only to Hong Kong, but also to Taiwan, the South China Sea islands, and overseas diaspora communities. Table 4 draws together the main factors regarding exceptionalism in Russian and Chinese strategic thinking.

67 William Callahan, 'Sino-speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 71, Issue 1 (2012): 33–55.

68 Frank Dikötter, 'Culture, "race", and nation: The formation of national identity in twentieth century China', *Journal of International Affairs*, Volume 49, Issue 2 (1996): 590–605.

69 Margaret Maurer-Fazio and Reza Hasmath, 'The Contemporary Ethnic Minority in China: An Introduction', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Volume 56, Issue 1, (2015): 1–7.

70 James Leibold, 'Han cybernationalism and state territorialization in the People's Republic of China', *China Information*, Volume 30, Issue 1, (2016): 3–28 (p. 6).

71 Ming-yan Lai, *Nativism and Modernity: Cultural Contestations in China and Taiwan under Global Capitalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

72 Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente, 'The Empire Strikes Back? China's New Racial Sovereignty', *Political Geography,* Volume 59, (2016): 139–41 (p. 140).

73 James Liebold, 'Beyond Xinjiang: Xi Jinping's Ethnic Crackdown', *The Diplomat*, 1 May 2021.

74 See e.g. Juan Su, 'Zhongguo yìshi xíngtai anquan mianlín de weixie yu zhanlue duice' [Threats to Chinese Ideology. Security and Strategic Countermeasures], *Jiangnan shehui xueyuan xuebao (Journal of Jiangnan Social University)*, Volume 15, Issue 4, (2013): 10–15.

Table 4. Exceptionalism in Russian and Chinese strategic cultures

FACTOR	RUSSIA	CHINA	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST
Exceptionalism	• Russian culture and state seen as distinguished and separated, equal to other civilizations • Russian Orthodox Church defining Russia as the "Third Rome" • Russia's special role as the defender of Christian civilization • *Russkiy Mir*	• China's unique past comprising thousands of years of super-power history • Han-centrism	• The US-led Western liberal culture seen as a threat • Russia and China acting against Western "cultural hegemony", "religious penetration", and "export of Western democracy" • Any Western-style activism considered a means of undermining state foundations • Territorial sovereignty extending beyond state borders

Great power status

From Russia's perspective, the country's size, economic potential, Euro-Asiatic geographic location, and military might (nuclear forces) predestine it to play the role of a superpower and a major pillar of the multipolar world.[75] Regionally, the Kremlin is attempting to legitimize its involvement on civilizational grounds; control over vast territories has been synonymous with and a confirmation of the power and strength of Moscow.

Therefore, in Russia's thinking, its claim to privileged zones of influence is justified, not only by the perception of threat (they serve as security buffer zones), but also by its great power status. The territories are thus treated as a zone of privileged interest[76] and Russia is entitled to wield power over them. In the political thinking, the territories are seen as crucial to the security and stability of Russia.[77] In the Kremlin's view, only great powers (there are only a handful of them in the world, including Russia) with proper military might (such as nuclear forces) can make justified claims over sovereignty. Weaker states (basically the rest of the world) must adjust their policy to great powers.

Historically, Russian territory has been invaded time and again. Thus, defending it has developed into a sacred duty, while regaining lost territories has become a key theme in the country's political thinking. To this end, Russia has been relying on its military might and military industrial complex because, for various reasons, soft power and positive economic incentives have not worked. Among its armed forces, the nuclear triad has played the most significant role, additionally reinforcing Russia's claims to the great power league.

More recently, the economic factors in Russian strategic culture have taken on a more prominent role. The Kremlin views Russia's vast natural resources as an element of its great power status, affording Russia its proper place

75 Agata Włodkowska-Bagan, 'Kultura Strategiczna Rosji', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe*, 2017, no 3, 47.

76 Elias Götz & Jørgen Staun, 'Why Russia attacked Ukraine: Strategic culture and radicalized narratives', *Contemporary Security Policy*, (2022): p. 486.

77 Morten Langsholdt, 'Russia and the use of force: theory and practice', *Norwegian Defence Research Establishment*, November 2005, p. 10; Martti J. Kari & Katri Pynnöniemi: 'Theory of strategic culture: An analytical framework for Russian cyber threat perception', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2019, p. 20.

in the world economy. Moreover, Russia has been exploiting its dominance in selected sectors of the economy (oil and gas production and sales) as a part of the larger strategic playbook, that is, as a tool to subordinate and control the assumed spheres of influence, as well as to facilitate its foreign policy goals. On top of that, the Kremlin uses energy as a means to coerce, intimidate, and control, on a par with the use of kinetic military coercion or force.[78]

Much like Russia's political thinking, the CCP considers that China belongs among the few major international actors. Here, the key element is the CCP's perception of the West and the related idea of the "one hundred years of humiliation", wrongfully inflicted on one of the great powers. The perceived humiliation took place from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s when China was under attack from Japan and the West. According to the narrative, China is one of the most powerful and peaceful countries in history, having never perpetrated aggression or colonialism.[79]

On the contrary, the Party claims that due to its peace-loving tradition, China has been able to win the trust of its neighbouring countries in Asia. In the 17th century, only Western aggression and colonialism interrupted the East Asian *Pax Sinica*. Thus, the narrative should "help" the West to "understand" China.[80] However, the Party appears to recognize an inherent contradiction in the narrative. Should China be understood in the context of the narrative, that would in fact lead to the acceptance of authoritarian governance and thus the undermining of liberal norms and the current international normative order.

Therefore, the narrative explains China's pursuit of reducing or replacing the influence of international liberal norms with norms focusing on economic success. In other words, rather than individual rights, the CCP governance emphasizes collective economic security. In the Party's view, granting individuals and minorities rights limits the power of the state in its central mission to guide society to economic wellbeing.

At the same time, given that the authoritarian governance underlines a normative difference between China and the liberal democracies, in the view of Beijing, China runs the risk of violating international norms as defined by the West. It is expected by Beijing that this, at some point, may trigger economic sanctions and financial penalties against China by Western powers. As a result, the CCP narrative portrays China as the victim of international misunderstanding, which relates to different approaches to the role of the state and the individual; only in hypocritical Western portrayals is China seen as the perpetrator of human rights violations. Concurrently, Western democracies are seen to emphasize human rights only in the utilitarian power competition context of dividing and weakening China.

Instead, the narrative casts China as a model state, superior to old-fashioned Western democracies. The narrative emphasizes the virtues of the CCP in lifting a record number of people out of poverty, while disregarding the self-inflicted nature of the Mao-era human catastrophes. In effect, the narrative stresses past humiliation and victimhood at the hands of the Japanese and Westerners. As a whole,

78 Fizo Wicaksono, 'Russia's Strategic Culture: Past, Present, and... in Transition', *Comparative Strategic Cultures Curriculum*, (2006): pp. 15–17.

79 Xi Jinping, Speech at the College of Europe (2014), http://www.chinamission.be/eng/jd/t1143591.htm.

80 David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press 2013), 11.

Table 5. Great power status narratives in Russian and Chinese strategic cultures

FACTOR	RUSSIA	CHINA	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST
Great power status narratives	• Stressing the size of the country and territorial control • Claiming control over zones of influence (military, political, economic) • Highlighting military might (nuclear forces) • Abundance of natural resources	• China touting itself as one of the most powerful and peaceful countries in the world • Building a peaceful civilization and positioning itself in the middle • Central authority	• Control of peripheries as the condition of great power status, leading to a clash with the EU, NATO and the US • Supporting each other's narratives and policies towards neighbourhoods • Aiming at a new security deal

the narrative functions as a counterargument to the threat posed by liberal democracies to the authoritarian one-party governance. Table 5 summarizes factors in the Russian and Chinese claims for great power status, including their ambition to form a new global security system, as evidenced by joint declarations of Chinese and Russian leadership.

Threat perceptions and approaches to the West

Over the centuries, in Russia's strategic thinking, approaches to the West have oscillated from cooperation (we are part of the West), through balancing (from a cultural and civilizational point of view, we are a part of Europe, but we are a separate, unique Eurasian civilization/empire) to hostility (the West is our enemy).[81] Most of the time, the third approach has dominated and strongly influenced Russia's threat perception. In Russian current strategic thinking, the US, NATO, and the EU to some extent, are the biggest external threats to Russian statehood, basically the "forces of evil" plotting to destroy Russia's might and power.[82]

From Moscow's perspective, expressed in the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation from 2021 and in the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation from 2014, the West is fundamentally and irreconcilably ill-disposed towards Russia. Thus, the West is considered a threat that is expanding (NATO's eastward enlargement[83] and missile defence system, EU structures, as well as the colour revolutions[84]) into Russia's buffer zones.[85] Consequently, according to this view, the aim of the West is to "contain", maximally weaken, and limit Russia's global and regional influence. Moreover, if opportunities arose in a scenario akin to the Arab Spring, the West would not hesitate to support the internal collapse of the country

81 Alexander A. Sergunin, 'Discussions of international relations in post-communism Russia', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, March 2004, Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 2004), pp. 19–35, University of California Press.

82 Sinovets Polina, Nerez Mykyta, 'The Essence of Russian Strategic Culture: From the Third Rome to the Russian World', *Міжнародні та політичні дослідження*. 2021. Вип. 34, p. 129.

83 Hannes Adomeit, 'Russia's Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China?', in *Russia-China Relations. Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?*, 17.

84 Alexander A. Sergunin, 'Discussions of international relations in post-communism Russia', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies,* March 2004, Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 2004), pp. 19–35, University of California Press.

85 Martti J. Kari & Katri Pynnöniemi: 'Theory of strategic culture: An analytical framework for Russian cyber threat perception', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2019, p. 17.

and regime change in Moscow, and this would likely be done by exacerbating socio-economic issues.[86] According to a Russian consensus, a similar scenario already took place in the 1990s with the fall of the Soviet Union.[87]

Against this background, there is deep distrust towards the West and all its policies regarding the states that Moscow considers buffer zones. Moscow believes that if it is weakened by losing its privileged position in these countries, in its next step the West will target Russia itself in the overarching goal of world dominance.[88] Moscow's political thinking does not allow for dividing between the Russian Federation (centre) and the former Soviet republics (peripheries). In Russia's threat perception, the loss of territory (including buffer zones) can be equated with losing the status of a great power.[89] By denying Russia a sphere of influence, one denies not only Russia's great power status, but also its sovereignty.

Therefore, any activity by a third country (particularly the West) in Russia's periphery is perceived as a hostile move against Russia. For this reason, any EU engagement in the former Soviet republics (e.g., the Eastern Partnership programme) is considered an aggressive move against Russia. Having said that, Moscow allows China to operate in Central Asia and Belarus, Türkiye to support Azerbaijan, and Iran to affect issues in the Caspian Sea. States in the Caucasus and Central Asia are also allowed to have independent foreign policies. Thus, it should be emphasized that it is the West that is seen as hostile in Russia's near neighbourhood.

Moscow appears to genuinely disregard all notions that some of the former republics (e.g., Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia) are interested, and supported by the public, in integration with the West. Similarly, in this view, Eastern and Central European countries[90] did not join the EU and NATO out of geopolitical choice (decisions of this kind can only be made by sovereign countries, that is great powers). In contrast, they were absorbed by the West, which expanded its zone of influence at the expense of Russia. What is more, the Russian leadership appears to believe that the political elites in Western great powers (permanent UN Security Council members) share Russian views on great power competition, regardless of what they might say in public.

The idea of the threat coming from the hostile West, coupled with the mission to protect the endangered Russian civilization, has been referred to as the "besieged fortress" syndrome. Being "besieged" by hostile countries, Russia surrounded itself with a belt of buffer states. The buffer zone states, while serving as a part of strategic depth, confirm Russia's great power

86 Russian National Strategy 2021, via Larysa Leszczenko, Olha Tarnavska, 'Russia's 2021 national security strategy in the context of the state's strategic culture, actual problems of international relations' release 147, Kyiv 2021, p. 19; Martti J. Kari & Katri Pynnöniemi: 'Theory of strategic culture: An analytical framework for Russian cyber threat perception', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2019, p. 17.

87 Fritz W. Ermarth, 'Russia's strategic culture: past, present, and... in transition?' (Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, 31 October 2006), p. 14.

88 Polina Sinovets, 'From Stalin to Putin: Russian Strategic Culture in the XXI Century, Its Continuity, and Change', *Philosophy Study*, July 2016, Vol. 6, No. 7, 417–423, p. 419.

89 Sinovets Polina, Nerez Mykyta, 'The Essence of Russian Strategic Culture: From the Third Rome to the Russian World', *Міжнародні та політичні дослідження*. 2021. Вип. 34, p. 128.

90 "Orphans of the deceased Soviet Union", as Lavrov once called them.

status. In this regard, Ukraine's, Georgia's, and Moldova's aspirations to join the Euro-Atlantic community (NATO, the EU) resonate strongly with Russia's threat perception, triggering all the existential fears of Russian rulers.[91]

In China's threat perception, a key element is also the foreign Other.[92] This is still reflected in China's domestic propaganda in particular, which underlines the Party's motivation to challenge the current international system and the leading role of the US.[93] For Mao, the struggle against "American imperialism" was central. Mao even rejected the Soviet proposal for peaceful coexistence and ceased to demand a war with the US only after the 1972 rapprochement.[94]

In a similar manner, and without notable results, the international narrative of a peaceful rise has been questioned inside China for some time. The view is that other countries, particularly the US, are taking advantage of China's commitment to rise peacefully. In joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, for instance, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was concerned about its negative impact on China's defence industries.[95] As a result, the peaceful rise narrative is seen as restricting China's use of hard power.[96]

In the history of political thinking in Beijing, the Mao era witnessed a need to undermine alternative centres of social influence and political power that were perceived to challenge the Party. This mentality can be seen as a precursor of present policies both domestically and internationally. This kind of thinking justifies the undermining of all credible or imagined threats to Party legitimacy.

Western sanctions, imposed in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, duly risked isolating China internationally. According to pragmatic thinking by Deng Xiaoping, a withdrawal to a defensive position would have hampered economic growth. As a solution, the CCP misled the international community with assurances of China's liberal development.[97] Under Hu Jintao, however, the Chinese economy became more import-dependent. Thus, the CCP began developing power projection capabilities for the PLA. The aim was to secure resource imports and hence regime preservation.

Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has put in place ideological restoration within the Party, while strategically emphasizing the world as biased against China. More than a genuinely held view, this is a rhetorical tool to legitimize the present one-party system. An external threat effectively rallies support, especially since the rhetoric taps into post-colonial mentalities of Chinese popular understanding of history. In addition to building on the Communist ideology, Xi considers that Western liberalism provides for an

91 Sinovets Polina, Nerez Mykyta, 'The Essence of Russian Strategic Culture: From the Third Rome to the Russian World', *Міжнародні та політичні дослідження*. 2021. Вип. 34, p 129.

92 Callahan, 'Identity and Security in China', 222–225.

93 Lams, 'Examining Strategic Narratives', 396.

94 Winberg Chai, 'The Ideological Paradigm Shifts of China's World Views: From Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to the Pragmatism-Multilateralism of the Deng-Jiang-Hu Era', *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 30 Issue 3 (2003): 163–175 (pp. 165–166).

95 Ghiselli, 'Revising China's Strategic Culture', 176.

96 Jinghan Zeng, 'Is China committed to peaceful rise? Debating how to secure core interests in China', *International Politics* Vol. 54, Issue 4 (2017): 618–636 (pp. 620–621).

97 Aaron Friedberg, 'Globalisation and Chinese Grand Strategy', *Survival,* Vol. 60, Issue 1 (2018): 7–40 (pp. 14–16).

Table 6. Threat perception towards the West in Russian and Chinese strategic cultures

FACTOR	RUSSIA	CHINA	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST
Threat perception and the West	• Stressing the security of the regime • The West seen as the biggest external threat to Russia • Paranoid approach to any Western initiatives • Besieged fortress syndrome • Control over neighbouring countries connected with Russian sovereignty	• Stressing the security of the regime • Party legitimacy as a priority • Foreign as the Other • Seeing the country as under pressure from Western influences	• The West portrayed as the greatest threat to both regimes • Colour revolutions seen as a Western weapon • Deep distrust towards the West • Any activities by the West in countries seen as zones of influence are regarded as hostile

alternative to the Chinese national culture and thus poses a threat to Party legitimacy.

The Party deems that it is the sole representative of the Chinese nation, and hence the defining agent of national culture. This produces narrow, victimized, and xenophobic nationalism, where anti-Western and anti-Japanese sentiments prevail. As a result, the Party has come to consider global competition a zero-sum struggle over political norms, and/or strategically presents it as such.[98]

The West in general, and the US in particular, are painted as power-hungry and racist political systems.[99] As a result, the Othering of liberal democracies develops an enemy imaginary. In effect, national security is connected to culture, whereby demands to protect domestic culture and ideology are made. To this end, the CCP sees liberal ideas as a serious threat. Such a threat was emphasized in the well-known CCP document called "Document no. 9", which was discussed among Party elites in 2013.[100]

In the narratives, Chinese culture is often presented as being under attack by foreign cultures, whereby American culture is seen as dominant, enabling the US to control the global cultural discourse. The notion of "cultural imperialism" (*wenhua diguozhuyi*) is used to express the fear that foreign culture may turn the Chinese population towards American values. The implication is that the Chinese nation has poor confidence in its current national culture and domestic politics, leaving room for contaminating foreign ideas such as democracy.[101] Since this poses an existential threat to the CCP, the PLA also promotes confidence in Chinese nationalism and national culture,[102] as defined and promoted by the Party.

98 William Callahan, 'Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream', *Politics*, Vol. 35, Issues 3–4 (2015): 216–229 (pp. 223–225).

99 See e.g. *People's Daily*, 'Meiguo minzhong hai zai dengdai "zhongzu gongzheng"' [Americans are still Waiting for "Racial Justice"], 2 February 2021, http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0202/c64387-32019580.html.

100 See https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation.

101 See e.g. Qiushi, 'Wei wenhua zixin tigong jianshi zhicheng' [Provide support for cultural confidence], 30 November 2020, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-11/30/c_1126799130.htm.

102 See e.g. People's Liberation Army Daily, 'Cong youhuan yishi bawo xin fazhan linian' [The New Development Concept through Suffering], 1 April 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-03/31/content_286091.htm.

The strategic orientation of the CCP thus defines a constant state of conflict between China and liberal democracies, as summarized in Table 6. The parabellum culture can also be explained by rational mitigation of the risks of economic opening up. However, while the CCP depicts China as a benevolent actor, the various elements in the strategic thinking coalesce into a culture of rivalry. This justifies emphasizing pre-emptive strategies, as well as asymmetric and indirect approaches, which also applies to Russia in that Moscow acknowledges Russia's inferior position vis-à-vis the US.

Use of force and deterrence

In Russian strategic thinking, military force is an important element of international politics, an immanent feature of any superpower, as well as a guarantor of sovereignty, status, and influence. In terms of strategic deterrence, the Russian nuclear forces have been playing the most significant role.[103]

With the absence or weaknesses of other tools (economic, political, general soft power), Russia regards the military as a legitimate way to control its neighbourhood and to create zones of influence.[104] Use of force in Russian strategic thinking is not a solution of last resort, but rather a foreign policy tool on a par with other tools (e.g. diplomacy, economy). Moreover, use of force is seen in Russia as an acceptable response to even remote threats to national security, including perceived threats to its privileged zones of influence.

For this reason, Russia is particularly sensitive and prone to using force in its neighbourhood, which is understood by Moscow as a security zone designed to protect and buffer Russia against external threats. Therefore, there has been a constant effort to secure Russia's position in its neighbourhood by means of a military presence, permanent military bases, peacekeeping operations, or support for separatist forces. In the Russian understanding, a secure and stable Russia means keeping its neighbours under military, political and preferably economic domination, while blocking third parties from gaining influence. To this end, Russia has supported separatist regimes in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as its primary concern has been to prevent the former Soviet republics from coming under Western influence.[105] When this is not enough, Russia resorts to direct military engagement (Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014 and 2022).

What is more, in Russia's thinking, military forces might be deployed to protect the rights of Russian minorities in the neighbouring countries (which is how Russia explained its military presence in Ukraine in 2014), especially in the former Soviet countries, which, from Russia's

103 In the Russian Military Doctrine, strategic deterrence is one of the most important tasks for the Armed Forces in peacetime (§ 27b). The Doctrine also states that Russia can use nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack on itself and/or its allies or an attack with conventional weapons if it is directed against the Russian state order (§ 22); for more, see Gudrun Persson, 'Security Policy and Military Strategic Thinking', in *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2013*, ed. Jakob Hedenskog and Carolina Vendil Pallin, (2013), p. 81; and also Polina Sinovets, 'From Stalin to Putin: Russian Strategic Culture in the XXI Century, Its Continuity, and Change', *Philosophy Study*, July 2016, Vol. 6, No. 7, 417–423, p. 420.

104 Martti J. Kari & Katri Pynnöniemi: 'Theory of strategic culture: An analytical framework for Russian cyber threat perception', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2019, p. 20.

105 Morten Langsholdt, 'Russia and the use of force: theory and practice', *Norwegian Defence Research Establishment*, November 2005, p. 28.

perspective, are not wholly regarded as foreign countries.[106] Here, the so-called peacekeeping operations in the former Soviet republics function as a tool for increasing Russian influence.

Importantly, excluding nuclear weapons,[107] Russia retains the right to pre-emptive strike and the use of force even against potential threats. However, the term "potential threats" is unclear and may range from antiterrorist operations to full-fledged war (Ukraine in 2022). In using force, Russia is ready to ignore international law, bilateral obligations, and signed treaties if Moscow sees its actions as justified.[108] This justification is often found in Russia's threat perception itself.

Regarding China, the military strategic guidelines of the PLA are not public documents. As a result, research into PLA strategies relies on the statements of the CCP and the central committee, as well as on Chinese policy discourse and the strategy community at large.[109]

While the idea of military strategy in China has expanded outside the realm of kinetic warfare, the main task of the PLA remains the securing of Chinese sovereignty and the legitimacy of the CCP.[110] As discussed, the CCP includes Taiwan and the South China Sea islands within Chinese sovereign territory. Therefore, the PLA military strategy centres around the idea of "counter-intervention", even if the PLA does not directly use such a term. This means that the aim of the PLA is to prevent US intervention in the event that conflicts escalate into kinetic warfare.[111]

Traditionally, nuclear weapons have played only a defensive deterrence role in China's military doctrine. Currently, China is the only country that has officially adopted an unconditional "No First Use" (NFU) policy regarding nuclear weapons. This has given Beijing the moral high ground, which has supported China's international propaganda efforts. At the same time, and in addition to adopting a more assertive security posture in recent years, Beijing has invested in advanced nuclear weapons, built a larger nuclear triad, and developed an open-ended nuclear modernization programme.[112] There is also a growing domestic discussion ongoing in China as to whether the NFU actually serves national interests.[113]

106 Ibid., p. 12.

107 See https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/MCU-Journal/Journal-of-Advanced-Military-Studies-SI-2022/Deterring-Russian-Nuclear-Threats-with-Low-Yield-Nukes-May-Encourage-Limited-Nuclear-War/.

108 Tor Bukkvoll, 'Why Putin went to war: ideology, interests and decision-making in the Russian use of force in Crimea and Donbas', *Contemporary Politics*, (2016): 273.

109 Timothy Heath, 'An Overview of China's National Military Strategy', in *China's Evolving Military strategy*, McReynolds, Joe (ed.), (Washington DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2017), 21–39.

110 Matti Puranen, 'Informaatioherruus. Kiinan sotilasstrategia ja sodan kuva kylmän sodan jälkeisellä aikakaudella', Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu (2022) Julkaisusarja 2: Tutkimusselosteita nro 21.

111 M. Taylor Fravel & Christopher P. Twomey, 'Projecting Strategy: The Myth of Chinese Counter-intervention', *The Washington Quarterly*. Vol. 37. No. 4, (2015): 71–187.

112 Ankit Panda, 'China's Dual-Capable Missiles: A Dangerous Feature, Not a Bug', *The Diplomat*, May 13, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/chinas-dual-capable-missiles-a-dangerous-feature-not-a-bug/; Michael Mazza and Henry Sokolski, 'China's Nuclear Arms Are a Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery', *Foreign Policy*, March 13, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/13/china-nuclear-arms-race-mystery/.

113 Zhao, Tong, 'China and the international debate on no first use of nuclear weapons', *Asian Security*, (2021) DOI: 10.1080/14799855.2021.2015654.

Table 7. Use of force in Russian and Chinese strategic cultures

FACTOR	RUSSIA	CHINA	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST
Use of force	• Military prestige seen as a part of great power status • Military being in control of zones of influence • Low threshold: war is not the solution of last resort • Pre-emptive strike • Ignoring international laws if action seen as justified • Nuclear weapons seen as threat weapons • Ever-larger military budget • Beefing up internal forces	• Military securing the sovereignty and legitimacy of the CCP • Army seen as a "counter-intervention" measure • Higher threshold: Cost-benefit calculations • Use of military force if the geopolitical cost is low • Nuclear weapons seen as defensive (no first use) • Heavy investments	• Both countries investing heavily in military • Greater attention paid by the US to the Pacific region is forcing European states to rethink their defence polices • A new arms race? • Both Russia and China ready to use force but with different thresholds

At the same time, the CCP regards the use of kinetic military force as a legitimate instrument in China's foreign policy toolbox. The circumstances under which China is likely to use military force depend on Beijing's need to signal resolve to the target state, and on its calculation of the geopolitical backlash cost. In other words, Beijing uses military force if the geopolitical backlash cost is low. Other means of coercion are used when the cost is high. This is evident when comparing the actions of Beijing in the Sino-Indian land disputes (China uses military force) to the South China Sea disputes (other means of coercion). The comparison suggests that a rational cost-benefit calculation does take place in Beijing regarding the use of military force.[114] Approaches to the use of force are summarized in Table 7.

Meanings of "hybrid threats"

The view in Moscow has been that the West has pioneered indirect approaches to warfare, leveraging political subversion, propaganda, and social media, along with economic measures such as sanctions. From this perspective, humanitarian interventions, the use of Western special forces, funding for democracy movements, and the deployment of mercenaries and proxies were all features of a US "doctrine of indirect warfare".[115] Basically, this is seen as an example of 21st century warfare, where non-military means are much more effective than classic military ones. In Moscow's view, Russian military science is seen to lag behind in this domain, to which end, a new military theory has been seen as necessary.[116] Against this background, Russia

114 Ketian Zhang, 'Calculating Bully: Explaining Chinese Coercion', PhD dissertation (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018); Ketian Zhang, 'Explaining Chinese Military Coercion in Sino-Indian Border Disputes', *Journal of Contemporary China*, (2022) DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2022.2090081.

115 Michael Kofman, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare and other dark arts', www.warontherocks.com, 11.03.2016.

116 Gudrun Persson, 'Security Policy and Military Strategic Thinking', in *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2013*, ed. Jakob Hedenskog and Carolina Vendil Pallin, (2013), p. 82.

reached the conclusion that if the West is using hybrid threat tools against Russia, then Russia should also develop them and use them in the same way.[117]

From the Kremlin's point of view, the Western concept of hybrid warfare, which the Kremlin believes is waged against Russia by the US and its allies, is particularly dangerous as it undermines the foundations of Russia's strategic deterrence. The large stockpiles of strategic nuclear weapons have given Russia the assurance that no country will dare to challenge its regime. However, with what Russia sees as Western-induced colour revolutions and non-linear hybrid strategies, Russia is no longer safe.

The Russian authorities assess that one of the main Western objectives is regime change in Moscow. To that end, the West has been weaponizing universal human and civil rights, pluralism, democracy, the free flow of information and NGOs, as well as social movements to stage so-called colour revolutions.[118] However, in Russia's understanding, the West aims not only at regime change, but at weakening the whole of Russia's civilization (civilizational originality) and the country's status as one of the great powers.[119] The end goal is a failed state, as was observed in Libya or Iraq, where, according to Russia, Western "hybrid operations" destroyed stable prospering countries. Another outcome of Western hybrid operations is the creation of unfriendly regimes in Russia's neighbourhood to provoke conflicts and pull Russia into full-scale wars, as illustrated by the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine.

Similarly, the view in Beijing seems to be that the particular use of hybrid warfare and threats is a military doctrine developed in the US and/or Russia. The security-related discourse does not consider hybrid threats as emanating from Chinese behaviour or strategic culture. On the contrary, Chinese analysts usually speak of hybrid warfare in reference to Russian and/or US discussions of the issue. The tone of the Chinese discussion, however, is often dismissive but also in part respectful.

The CCP also appears to project this assumption onto its adversaries. Thus, accordingly, hostile actors are perceived as trying to overthrow the Party. Concurrently, their ideological impact on ethnic Han Chinese must be pre-emptively mitigated.[120] Xi himself often illustrates this point in stating that the Party's governance must be secured from internal and external threats through a "holistic" and "non-traditional" national security that "combats all acts of infiltration, subversion, and sabotage".[121]

117 Tor Bukkvoll, 'Why Putin went to war: ideology, interests and decision-making in the Russian use of force in Crimea and Donbas', *Contemporary Politics*, (2016): 267–282.

118 Hannes Adomeit, 'Russia's Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China?', in *Russia-China Relations. Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?*, 17–39, https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978–3–030–97012–3.

119 Katri Pynnöniemi, 'The concept of hybrid war in Russia: A national security threat and means of strategic coercion', *Hybrid CoE*, 2021.

120 Toshi Yoshihara, 'A profile of China's United Front Work Department', *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, May 2018, 46–48.

121 E.g. Documents of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press), 29, 61.

Russian reflexive control[122]

Russia has a long tradition of deception and application of non-military tools in support of its military operations. The most well-known concepts are "military cunning" and *maskirovka*, both aimed at confusing the enemy regarding the factual condition, location, character, readiness, and plans of the Russian forces.[123]

During the Soviet era, the concepts were developed into the reflexive control theory, designed to control the enemy's decision-making processes.[124] Reflexive control tools are used to support military operations abroad, providing a strategic disguise and some political cover.[125] The reflexive control theory duly constitutes a vital component of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy.[126]

Reflexive control is an activity which influences the adversary's decision-making processes with a specifically altered piece of information in a prepared information campaign. The primary goal of such doctored information is to induce the other side to make decisions that are, in fact, predetermined by the producer of the doctored information.[127] The founding father of the concept, Vladimir Lefebvre, defined it simply as "a process by which one enemy transmits the reasons or bases for making decisions to another".[128] The concept was popular and frequently used by the Soviet Union during the cold war against NATO and the West in general, mostly in techniques of information warfare.[129] However, it is much more complex than mere disinformation designed to deceive the adversary. Reflexive control envisages targeting the decision-making processes of an adversary with multiple vectors, including emotional, psychological, and cultural conditions specific to the targeted country.[130] One of the main aims of reflexive control is to identify the weak spot in the adversary's decision-making process and exploit it. To this end, Russia also tries to exploit the personal characteristics of selected decision-makers (prime minister, president, commander, etc.), such as biographical data, habits, ethnicity, social background, and so forth. A key element of successful reflexive control is information about the adversary. For this purpose, in-depth studies of the adversary's inner nature, ideas, concepts, and culture are required.[131]

122 See also https://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/176978.

123 Keir Giles, James Sherr & Anthony Seaboyer, 'Russian Reflexive Control', *Defence Research and Development Canada*, October 2018, p. 10.

124 Timothy L. Thomas, 'Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Volume 17: 237–256, 2004, p. 239.

125 Can Kasapoglu, 'Russia's renewed military thinking: non-linear warfare and reflexive control', *NATO Defense College*, Rome – No. 121 – November 2015, p. 4.

126 Ibid., p. 5.

127 C. Kamphuis, 'Reflexive Control. The relevance of a 50-year-old Russian theory regarding perception control', *Militaire Spectactor*, Jaargang 187, No. 6, 2018, pp. 338–339.

128 Ibid., p. 325.

129 Keir Giles, James Sherr & Anthony Seaboyer, 'Russian Reflexive Control', *Defence Research and Development Canada*, October 2018, p. 4.

130 Ibid., pp. 5–6.

131 Timothy L. Thomas, 'Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 17: 237–256, 2004, pp. 242–243.

The ultimate goal of reflexive control actions is to influence the adversary's political or military plans, their understanding of the situation, and decision-making processes, thereby taking control or partial control over their decisions and pushing them to make unfavourable political or military choices. Simply put, Russian reflexive control-based hybrid threat activities strive to create a "fog of war" and coherent deception that aims not to paralyze the adversary's intelligence and planning, but rather to alter its analytical end-results and perceptions of Russia's strategic intentions.[132]

The theory of reflexive control provides various methods for achieving the above-mentioned goals: camouflage, disinformation, encouragement, blackmail, and compromising various officials and officers are well-known tactics. The most efficient tools to achieve reflexive control are usually summarized as distraction, overload, paralysis, exhaustion, deception, division, pacification, deterrence, provocation, suggestion, and pressure. However, their effectiveness is dependent on information superiority, which is essential in successfully implementing reflexive control. Against this background, it is obvious why Russia is investing heavily in its foreign media outlets around the world (RT International, Sputnik local editions). Indeed, the most "complex and dangerous application of reflexive control will remain its employment to affect a state's decision-making process by use of carefully tailored information or disinformation".[133]

Reflexive control theories have largely influenced and shaped the way that Russia conducts its information warfare against the West. And as confusing the enemy[134] and distorting the perception of real facts[135] are the key to Russia's information war concept, reflexive control provides a theoretical foundation and tools for achieving it. In this context, Russia has basically incorporated some elements of the modern 21st century information environment, such as the internet, social networks, and information openness, into the old Soviet-developed reflexive control theories[136] based on mathematical and scientific components, and psycho-cultural and historical elements.[137]

As the West is identified as the biggest external threat to Russian statehood, a majority of Russian reflexive control-based hybrid threat efforts are aimed at dividing Western allies and altering their collective decision-making processes. A reasonable argument can be made that this was the case, for example, in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) when Russia successfully appeared to prevent a unified, coherent, and effective decision-making process from the West with regard to protecting Ukraine's territorial integrity. At the point when the West had a clearer picture of what was happening, Russia seemed to achieve a fait accompli on the

132 Can Kasapoglu, 'Russia's renewed military thinking: non-linear warfare and reflexive control', *NATO Defense College*, Rome – No. 121 – November 2015, p. 6.

133 For more, see Timothy L. Thomas, 'Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17: 237–256, 2004, p. 254.

134 Maria Snegovaya, 'Putin's information warfare in Ukraine', *The Institute for the Study of War*, 2015, p. 11.

135 Keir Giles, James Sherr & Anthony Seaboyer, 'Russian Reflexive Control', *Defence Research and Development Canada*, October 2018, p. 26.

136 Maria Snegovaya, 'Putin's information warfare in Ukraine', *The Institute for the Study of War*, 2015, p. 12.

137 Can Kasapoglu, 'Russia's renewed military thinking: non-linear warfare and reflexive control', *NATO Defense College*, Rome – No. 121 – November 2015, p. 5.

ground. Having said that, it is difficult to cite a clear case where it can be shown without a doubt that Russia successfully used reflexive control, and not merely successful deception.

Chinese indirect approaches

Traditionally, while imperial China was constantly at war with its neighbours, and brutal, direct offensives were also part of its conduct,[138] strategic culture in China has emphasized indirect and asymmetric tools and approaches to warfare. In the military doctrine of the PLA, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* (*Bingfa*) is elevated to a special status. Since Xi took over, increased attention has been paid to Sun Tzu. While PLA researchers also study other Chinese military classics, they are criticized for their excessive attention to moral issues and overemphasis on the defensive posture as a result.[139]

The Art of War contains ideas supporting indirect means of warfare. Imperatives such as "subdue the enemy without fighting", "know yourself and the enemy", and "seize the initiative to impose your own will on the enemy" embrace approaches known in China as "indirect methods" (*qi*). These include an effective intelligence-gathering system, as well as the deployment of non-military means to target military as well as civilian targets.[140]

In general, classical Chinese strategic thinking emphasizes the psychological condition of not only the opponent, but also oneself.[141] In the view of the CCP, China provides the world with a better system of governance than liberal democracies. This view is in line with the Han-centric assumption of Chinese innate superiority. Concurrently, due to the increasing influence of *The Art of War,* Han-centrism leads to a perception whereby the Chinese appear more cunning than their adversaries. This in turn leads to a culture that favours manipulative, indirect, and asymmetric surprise strategies.[142]

While Chinese strategic culture and history are filled with advocates of indirect philosophies (Sunzi, Maoist/Leninist concepts of "people's war", "united front", and more recently the PLA's "three warfares"), the concept of hybrid threats or hybrid warfare is relatively new in the Chinese security discourse. Currently in this discourse, mixed war (*hunhe zhanzheng*) is used to depict hybrid warfare. This is seen as a comprehensive use of political, economic, diplomatic, military, and public opinion tools, as well as military and non-military means. These include conventional and unconventional tactics that aim to better achieve their political objectives with minimal costs and risk.

In the Chinese hybrid warfare discourse, the warring forces include not only a state's standing military forces, but also irregular ones consisting of opposition forces, mercenaries, terrorist organizations, criminal gangs, and other violent groups. Both high-tech warfare and low-end irregular warfare are used, combining the use of high- and low-end tools in order to reduce the cost of warfare. Here, the emphasis is often on the need for the coordination, concentration, and combination of different

138 Alistaire Ian Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
139 Ghiselli, 'Revising China's Strategic Culture', 173.
140 Ghiselli, 'Revising China's Strategic Culture', 175–177.
141 Johnston, Cultural Realism.
142 See Friend and Thayer, How China Sees the World.

forces, as well as on quick and effective use. This is seen as full-spectrum warfare conducted simultaneously in the physical, information, and cognitive domains. In the discourse, hybrid warfare theories are seen to stem from the US and other Western powers, and Western-originated theories are seen to warrant careful study. According to the discourse, the US academic community has recently begun to actively develop "modern political warfare capability" to compete with state and non-state adversaries.

Accordingly, the US focus is seen to be on strengthening unconventional military operations, expeditionary diplomatic operations, and covert political operation capabilities in order to regain lost political prestige and international standing. Moreover, in the discourse, the US is seen to have used its comprehensive power and international status to pursue power diplomacy through control of global and regional international organizations such as the UN, in order to maintain US hegemony and strategic interests. Regarding Russia, the US is seen to use hybrid warfare to contain the country through various accusations and outright lies, which are seen to diminish the international image and influence of the US.

Thus, hybrid warfare, where China is the target, is seen to be accomplished through the development of high-intensity information and psychological confrontation. This includes subconsciously dividing political forces, confusing the opponent's psychology, softening the will to confront to achieve the effect of attacking the heart and mind, causing disintegration from inside out, and reducing psychological sensitivity to the implementation of hybrid warfare.

The understanding of China as a target country of hybrid warfare emphasizes the role of the "fifth column",[143] which actively supports local forces on the covert front to carry out guerrilla warfare, intelligence warfare, and other irregular warfare. These forces are seen to potentially use the pretext of protecting democracy and human rights to conceal military interventions, enhancing the concealment and legitimacy of operations and making it difficult to respond in a timely and effective manner. Domestic political crisis and serious divisions in popular consciousness are seen as major risks.[144]

In Chinese strategic thinking, the US is furthermore seen as skilful at using its dominant position in global public opinion to carry out clandestine information, public opinion, and psychological warfare. In recent years, in the context of "America First", the US is also seen to be engaged in economic warfare against all who challenge its hegemony. Moreover, the US is seen to be able to overthrow any ruling authorities, take control of the country's power and economic lifelines, and, if necessary, occupy territory in the name of peacekeeping operations. In particular, the colour revolutions are seen in Beijing as an extension of US post-Cold War policy and hybrid warfare. Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan are seen as victims.[145] These approaches to hybrid threats are summarized in Table 8.

143 The fifth column as "domestic actors who work to undermine the national interest, in cooperation with external rivals of the state". See Mylonas, Harris; Radnitz, Scott, eds. *Enemies Within: The Global Politics of Fifth Columns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

144 See e.g. Jun Tan (2021) *Toushi hunhe zhanzheng jiben texing* [Insights into the basic characteristics of hybrid warfare]. *Jiefangjun bao* (PLA Daily). 007 *Dì 007 ban junshi luntan* (7th edition military forum).

145 See e.g. 许三飞 Xu Sanfei (2021) Shi xi hunhe zhanzheng jiben goucheng [Experimental analysis of the basic components of hybrid warfare]. *Jiefangjun bao* (PLA Daily). 007 *Dì 007 ban junshi luntan* (7th edition military forum).

Table 8. Hybrid threats in Russian and Chinese strategic cultures

FACTOR	RUSSIA	CHINA	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST
Hybrid threats in strategic thinking	• Seen originally as a Western concept • Perceived to be used in overthrowing regimes • The West seen as more advanced in hybrid threat tools • Psychological, indirect, sub-threshold tools built into own strategic thinking	• Seen originally as a Western concept • Perceived to be used in overthrowing regimes • The West seen as more advanced in hybrid threat tools • Psychological, indirect, sub-threshold tools built into own strategic thinking	• Projection of "cunning" mentality to Western counterparts • Both countries heavily investing in internal security forces

Conclusion

China's foreign policy and related grand strategy are built around the strategic vision and concepts of the CCP party elites. It would appear, however, that the strategy itself is ambivalent and in a constant state of change.[146] The central aim for this strategic vision is to maintain CCP legitimacy. The supportive goals are to expand China's global economic and political position, and to increase the influence of Beijing. The strategic culture in China, however, is built on a combination of superiority, vulnerability and grievance, coalescing into a culture of rivalry. Russian strategic culture, on the other hand, appears to stem from a broad sense of insecurity among Moscow elites, as well as from the economic insecurity of the population at large.[147]

Common to both regimes, however, is Othering of the West and more specifically the US. What is more, common to the strategic cultures of both Russia and China is the idea of an ethnic and cultural civilization; a grand vision of national greatness. This vision grants control to both regimes over nearby territories and neighbouring countries as the sole defender of the civilizational culture. Both regimes also view their countries as global major actors.

Nuclear weapons play a central role in the military doctrines of both regimes. However, where Moscow tends to have a low threshold regarding the use of force, Beijing applies force only after a more careful cost-benefit calculus. When the right criteria are met in this regard, however, there are no other constraints on Beijing's use of force.

Russia and China share the long-held view of the West as a systemic rival. As far as both regimes are concerned, hybrid tactics and warfare are applied by the West in general, and the US in particular. Furthermore, Beijing is concerned about Western "infiltration", that is, Western liberal values proliferating in China. The Party sees China as coming under attack through the promotion of democracy. From Beijing's perspective, this is initiated, supported, and driven by the US. Also of importance in this respect is the fact that China perceives the EU merely as a puppet of the US.

146 Ionut Popescu, 'Grand Strategy vs. Emergent Strategy in the conduct of foreign policy', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol 41, Issue 3, (2017): 438–460.

147 See https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/russia-does-not-have-a-grand-strategy/.

Aligning/non-aligning interests, and vulnerabilities

Foreign policy alignment and partnering can be rooted in shared diplomatic interests and foreign policy choices, regime characteristics, as well as incidences of the exertion of direct state power over other states. Foreign policy similarities between states are influenced by institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural affinities; parallel problem-solving processes; and economic, diplomatic, and military linkages.[148]

For Moscow, alliances are an important part of the aspired great power status. On the one hand, alliances secure the country's borders while deterring military incursions into Russian territory. On the other, they enable power projection on a global scale and the strengthening of international influence. The political and military alliances in Russia's neighbourhood are characterized by significant asymmetry. All of Russia's allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO),[149] as well as other state and quasi-state entities (e.g., South Ossetia, Abkhazia, the People's Republics in Donbas before annexation) wield smaller military capability, thus relying heavily on Russia to provide security. For the Kremlin, these alliances confirm the leading role of Russia in its proximity. They also allow some degree of control to be exercised over the foreign and security policy of the respective states, hampering any undertakings that could undermine Russia's position and influence. In other words, these alliances confirm Russia's great power status and its special role in the Eurasia region, while providing a response to the key element in Moscow's threat perception.[150] Basically, as Russian security thinking often follows the logic of the "besieged fortress syndrome", the belt of friendly, subordinated allied and satellite countries (security buffer zone) also eases Moscow's anxieties regarding third country bridgeheads against Russia.

Globally, alliances serve a somewhat different purpose and, again, are an important part of Russia's great power status. Russian military support for Syria and its economic and military engagement through private military companies in Africa and South America are a clear confirmation of Moscow's global reach and status. Due to these overseas power projections and political engagements, Russia positions itself as being on a par with the US.[151] In the same vein, cooperation with China (e.g., joint military exercises, political cooperation within international organizations) supports Russia's great power identity. Furthermore, by expanding and diversifying military, economic, and political alliances and networks, Moscow seeks to build an international system, which may serve, at least to an extent, as an alternative to the Western-dominated world order.

148 Georg Struver, 'What Friends Are Made of: Bilateral Linkages and Domestic Drivers of Foreign Policy Alignment with China', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 12, (2016): 170–191.

149 The Collective Security Treaty Organization is an intergovernmental military alliance in Eurasia consisting of six post-Soviet states: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.

150 Nikolai Silayev & Andrei A. Sushentsov, 'Russia's Allies and the Geopolitical Frontier in Eurasia', 18.05.2017, Russia in Global Affairs, https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russias-allies-and-the-geopolitical-frontier-in-eurasia/.

151 Nikolai Silaev, 'Russia and its allies in three strategic environments', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2022, vol. 74, no. 4, May 2022, 598–619.

Thus, these alliances can also be explained through economic interests. While the "besieged fortress syndrome" explains behaviour from a realist perspective, Moscow also has cooperative reasons to form alliances with neighbouring countries in advancing its economic interests. In effect, Russia has needed friendly markets and access to capital to develop its high-tech industry and machine industry in pursuing technological and economic sovereignty.[152]

In the case of China, the CCP does not operate by itself in advancing China's foreign policy goals. A key feature of China's international conduct is aligning and cooperating with other states. In fact, the Party has coordinated policy positions and jointly enhanced diplomatic leverage by using international organizations specifically to align with emerging countries. These include the BRICS group (of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), the BASIC country group (of Brazil, South Africa, India and China), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the "14+1 format", and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Often, however, these institutions have only provided China with a framework for bilateral interactions with likeminded states. On the other hand, the institutions play a part in the CCP's overall goal of building an institutional global ecosystem to compete with the Western-led one. For these reasons, this alignment policy has witnessed only varying degrees of success for the CCP.

Instead, China builds alignment with economic incentives as well as coercion. This grants the Party an economic tool with which to create shared interests. However, China does not have any formal alliances with any nation, outside of North Korea, and only Pakistan and North Korea are long-term partners. At the same time, Beijing has forced countries to choose between recognizing the Mainland and Taiwan.

All this means that China lacks and has lacked "natural" or "organic" cooperation partners and alliances. Beijing in general appears unwilling to build alliances. This can be traced back to the overall framework that dictates China's foreign policy: in effect, the hierarchical worldview and Chinese exceptionalism hinders alliance-building. This is not surprising given China's cultural hubris in addition to its cultural distance from potential foreign allies. In fact, regionally in East Asia, where Beijing would enjoy cultural affinity with its neighbours, historical relations have created mutual mistrust to the extent that only North Korea remains an ally of sorts.

Overall, given China's past and present aggressiveness, there appears to be willingness in Beijing to reconstruct its past empire. This does not, however, include the building of alliances, unless the immediate situation calls for an interim solution.

There are several interests between Moscow and Beijing that may or may not align. Starting before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a policy discussion has been taking place regarding the alignment between the two countries. The debates centre around the issues of whether the alignment is growing stronger or weaker and to what extent, and in which ways Moscow and Beijing can work together to challenge the US, the EU, NATO, and the Western-backed liberal world order. The cooperation between Russia and China has been called a "limited entente",[153] a "strategic straddle",[154] an

152 See e.g. https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88698.

153 See https://www.wiley.com/enus/America%27s+Great+Power+Opportunity%3A+Revitalizing+U+S+-Foreign+Policy+to+Meet+the+Challenges+of+Strategic+Competition-p-9781509545537.

154 See https://www.prcleader.org/medeiros-1.

"emerging alliance/eternal rivalship",[155] and a "limited no-limits"[156] relationship, to name just a few.

This section taps into these debates and discusses the shared and non-shared interests of both actors. While the focus is on global and transatlantic perspectives, the section is divided into thematic subsections that discuss aligning and non-aligning interests. The former consist of aims to diminish US influence and seek multipolarity. The latter include the limits to a Sino-Russian partnership, which are placed in a framework of contested geopolitics, that is, various regional issues. The section also investigates the vulnerabilities of Moscow and Beijing through both domestic and international lenses.

Aligning interests

For both regimes, it is vital to appear strong and in control. Ultimately, the domestic legitimacy of both depends on maintaining a powerful appearance. In both cases, in effect, all other interests can be said to serve the core interest of regime preservation.

The view shared by Moscow and Beijing is that despite Western democracies being in decline, Western liberalism still presents a threat to Russian and Chinese internal stability and regime legitimacy. Both authoritarian states, thus, view the value basis of liberal democracy (e.g. rule of law, human rights) as an existential threat. Hence, Moscow sees Beijing as a viable alternative partner to Euro-Atlantic states, whereas for China, Russia provides important support in competition against the US. It is in the interests of both states to argue and show that democracy is a weak and unstable system of governance. Both also appear equally dissatisfied with the current Euro-Atlantic security regime and, more generally, the current Western-led international order.

In addition, the main objective of Moscow is to strengthen Russia's position as one of the new influential global power centres. The Chinese defensive posture is also built on a perception of the current international system favouring the democratic West in general, and the US in particular. The shared aim of Moscow and Beijing, therefore, is to change the international order from within to make it serve US interests less, and Russian and Chinese interests more.[157]

Diminishing US presence and influence

Russian authorities assess that a global power shift is taking place in the world. New economic and political forces are emerging, leading to changes in the structure, systems, rules, and principles of the world order. This intensifies the struggle for spheres of influence among the emerging powers.[158] In this context, one of Russia's main goals on the international scene is to diminish the role and influence of the so-called "collective West".

155 See https://books.google.fi/books/about/Russia_China_Relations.html?id=T591EAAAQBAJ&source=kp_book_description&redir_esc=y.

156 See https://www.cnbc.com/2022/09/16/china-russia-ties-unequal-partnership-as-xi-putin-meet-says-prof.html.

157 For instance, in recent years China has been working within the UN to increase the number of Chinese personnel and pro-Beijing decisions.

158 Ahmet Sapmaz, 'The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy of 2021: The Increasing Importance of Internal Security', 27 Jul 2022, https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/70118/the_russian_federations_national_security_strategy_of_2021_the_increasing_importance_of_internal_security.

Moscow contends that the US-led West aims to maintain its hegemony and contain other powers, especially Russia. Therefore, the US is perceived as posing the greatest obstacle in terms of preventing Russia from reaching its full potential as one of the pillars of the new world. The Euro-Atlantic alliance, which dominates Russia's agenda, is characterized by Moscow as hostile. Here, the EU (economic and political realm) and NATO (military realm) are seen as US pawns. To contain Russia, the US and its minions are determined to weaken it militarily, technologically, economically, and even spiritually.

At the same time, however, Moscow argues that Western democracies are weak and in decline. From this perspective, the US defends the old-world order, which is perceived to be collapsing. Therefore, Moscow attempts to seize the current opportunity and accelerate the fall of the West in general and the US in particular.

The overall strategic interests of Beijing centre around several focal points: from the perspective of the CCP, the Party will produce a well-governed China by 2050 which, according to the official discourse, entails building a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious. This includes ensuring social stability, economic prosperity, advanced technology, and a powerful military.

Becoming a de facto leader of the Global South and becoming the leading great power globally are seen as vital for regime preservation. Reaching out to the "third world" stems from the communist doctrine of Mao but serves the overall interest of undermining the West and competing with the US. To "overthrow" US hegemony and build a Chinese one, Beijing needs the support of the Global South.

These goals bring China into competition, crisis, and conflict with the West. In fact, in a geopolitical sense, the priority for the CCP is to establish a regional hegemony. This means that Beijing must 1) have military access through the first island chain, referring to the first chain of major Pacific archipelagos out from the East Asian continental mainland coast, 2) increase influence over the security and economic policies of other regional actors, and 3) interfere with US alliances in the Pacific and diminish US military influence in the region.[159] Achieving regional dominance is essential for Beijing's plan to build a global hegemony.

Accordingly, while Beijing's current aim is to maintain stability vis-à-vis the West, at the same time, the Chinese political apparatus and society at large are harnessed to gain a competitive advantage over the US.[160] In many respects, the long-term ambitions of Beijing entail not only outcompeting, but also displacing the US. This includes dealing with threats to regime legitimacy that stem from this competition, while not jeopardizing economic interaction with the West, which is important for current domestic stability.[161]

What is important in this respect is that both Russia and China perceive the EU and NATO merely as puppets of the US. Both, however, simultaneously hedge the EU against the US. It is not only in the interests of Russia, but also of China, to divide the Euro-Atlantic community. This includes disrupting alliances that are either

159 See https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/22/china-has-two-paths-to-global-domination-pub-81908.
160 See https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/20210616_Hybrid_CoE_Research_Report_1_China_as_a_hybrid_influencer_Non_state_actors_as_state_proxies_WEB.pdf.
161 See https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2798.html.

US-led, that include the US, or that work closely with the US, including the alienation of bilateral US alliances in both the Asia-Pacific and Europe, as well as supporting the EU-wide project of "strategic autonomy". In effect, a more aggressive Russia and a divided Euro-Atlantic community benefit China, while Russia benefits from a Chinese challenge to the US military hegemony.

Decoupling the economic and societal systems (moral/ideological interests)

One of the strategic objectives of Russia, next to the weakening of US global dominance, is to strengthen global multipolarity. To this end, Russia is strategically moving away from the West by detaching itself from Western security, legal and economic influences. At the same time, Russia is developing and intensifying its foreign relations with other rising global powers, including China and India, as well as various blocs, such as BRICS and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).[162]

On the one hand, this serves to build alternative power centres and strengthen multipolarity; on the other, the aim is to limit, to the maximum extent possible, US influence (e.g., Russia's activities in Venezuela/Iran/Syria). To consolidate its position as one of the centres in the new multipolar world, Moscow has been rebuilding Russian economic, political, and military influence in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[163]

In the pursuit of a multipolar world, Russia portrays itself as a promotor of a coherent value system, which is presented as an alternative to the hypocritical and "rotten" Western world. The core of this system is a moral leadership based on traditional Russian spiritual values, culture and history. These are represented, for instance, by the Russian Orthodox Church as a depository of norms and beliefs. The whole narrative is reinforced by the revived Cold War narratives of alleged US imperialism and Russia's promotion of anti-colonialism.

Moscow contends that the West is in crisis, and thus unable to attract other countries. Moscow, therefore, strives to provide a new type of leadership with traditional values regarding the state and society. Here, Russia is seen to effectively represent everything that the liberal West endangers, moral norms, traditional institutions, and social structure with a strong patriarchal leaning. As a result, in the latest national strategy, Moscow emphasizes the importance of Russian cultural sovereignty, which must be protected against Westernization and colour revolutions.[164]

In other words, by promoting Russia as the champion of traditional values, Moscow tries to build a wider coalition of countries to oppose the perceived threat from the West. In this view, then, the confrontation with the West is given a new cultural dimension. The Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) is portrayed as a civilizational project, expected to attract other

162 Håkan Gunneriusson & Sascha Dov Bachmann, 'Western Denial and Russian Control. How Russia's National Security Strategy threatens a Western Based Approach to Global Security, the Rule of Law and Globalization', *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, Volume 46, Issue 1, (2017): pp. 9–29.

163 Hannes Adomeit, 'Russia's Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China?, in *Russia-China Relations. Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?*, *Global Power Shift 2022*, pp. 27–32.

164 Ahmet Sapmaz, 'The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy of 2021: The Increasing Importance of Internal Security'.

countries. That said, Moscow's civilizational argument has limited use in foreign policy. Countries such as Mali, Syria, Central Asia, and Venezuela, among others, are not necessarily committed to, nor interested in, *Russkiy Mir*. For them, Russia offers resources without moral or ethical strings attached, support for their authoritarian regimes, and the ability to balance between great powers and thus to negotiate support from multiple actors.

Regarding China, Beijing's aim is to make China less dependent on advanced economies, while making these more dependent on China. Beijing uses economic and diplomatic power to change norms and standards per se, duly shaping an environment favourable to Chinese interests. This concept can be observed, for instance, in the Made in China 2025 policy in general, and in the dual circulation policy. In fact, these policies work towards technological self-containment.[165] Beijing's objective is to dominate the Asian economy and, in terms of high-tech and high-value segments, to decouple the Asian economy from the US markets.[166]

If Beijing has learned any lessons from Russia's war in Ukraine, these relate to economic connectivity and Western capabilities to introduce harm through economic statecraft. For this reason, while Beijing has thus far sought to expand China's economic and financial presence through the Belt and Road Initiative, it is now seeking to provide alternatives to the Western financial system by challenging the dollar economy. The aim here is to protect China from economic sanctions. In other words, Beijing increasingly seeks decoupling as protection against Western economic sanctions, especially in the case of an invasion of Taiwan.

Regarding China's pursuit of global hegemony, the CCP is also intent upon improving ties with the Global South. Here, the Party sees the potential for achieving a strategic advantage against the West. Thus, Beijing attempts to generate solidarity between China and Africa but also in Latin America. The aim is to build opposition against the US-led, Western-originated international order, that is, international institutions and the related value base.[167] Thus, the Global South is a key area for China in an economic and a normative sense. Beijing has ambitions to develop a global environment that is safe for authoritarian regimes. There are fears that constant external criticism might influence the internal dynamics in China to such an extent that it would lead to delegitimization of the Party.

Western-led globalization is also seen to promote false universal values and outright immoral behaviour. To counter the influence of decadent Western values and institutions, the Party aims at strengthening Chinese national and cultural identity. Chinese strategy is simultaneously to condemn the present US-led liberal hegemony as disrespectful of the Global South, while building legitimacy for a China-led non-liberal hegemony. At the same time, the Party portrays Chinese cultural identity as a vulnerable victim under attack from Western values and institutions. In effect, Beijing positions

165 See https://www.ft.com/content/6673622f-14a5–4644–9391-fe9b589d201c.

166 See https://www.hudson.org/research/18179-transcript-chinese-economic-decoupling-strategy-against-the-united-states.

167 See https://www.prcleader.org/medeiros-1; John Seaman, 'Towards a more China-centred global economy? Implications for Chinese power in the age of hybrid threats', 2021, Hybrid CoE Paper 9.

China as a soft power, while the US is portrayed as a hard power.[168]

Hence, Russia and China share the long-held view of the West as a systemic rival. Thus, in addition to regime preservation, a central interest for both is not only to diminish the US global influence and reach, but also to present an alternative to the Western-led normative and cultural world order. What Russia and China bring to the table are not only traditional values regarding the state and society, but also a no-strings-attached economic proposal.

Non-aligning interests (limits of cooperation)

Despite the many aligning and shared interests between Moscow and Beijing, there are some that do not align. First of all, in line with their capabilities, the ambitions of Beijing appear to run deeper than those of Moscow. The CCP thus finds itself in a dialectical and reflective relationship with the status of the US as the sole global hegemony; given the economic successes of China, the overall goal of the Party has been shifted from that of building a multipolar world to a Chinese hegemony. In comparison, Moscow's aim remains to maintain Russia as one of the pillars of a multipolar world governed by several major powers. Here, the standard mode is the 19th century Congress of Vienna type of arrangement where Russia was one of the key powers, and where their spheres of interest were recognized.

These differences in worldview may potentially create friction between Moscow and Beijing, given that Moscow is already concerned about the growing power asymmetry between Russia and China. China's superpower status in replacing the US poses a threat to Russia. Thus, Moscow tries to contain Chinese influence in several contested regions (e.g. the Arctic, Central Asia) so as not to undermine any pillars of the multipolar world. At the same time, the question is whether there will be a point at which Russia becomes a threat to China in terms of reputational damage. In the future, these reservations might negatively influence Chinese and Russian cooperation and, in effect, China appears to have launched a new "charm offensive" at the beginning of 2023 to win back the West.[169]

Contested geopolitics

The fundamental differences in the desired trajectories between the visions of Moscow and Beijing manifest themselves in global key regions. More specifically, and primarily, this concerns Ukraine, where the Russian invasion has created a dilemma for China. The prolonged conflict has been called a "trilemma" for China, given that Beijing now needs to strike a balance between supporting Russia, and maintaining credibility in its core principles of territorial sovereignty, while maintaining stability with the West.[170]

Due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sino-Russian cooperation is now both stronger and weaker at the same time. On the one hand, due to the invasion, Russia is currently more dependent on China, and on the other, the longer the conflict lasts, the more reputational damage China has to endure.[171] Thus far,

168 See https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12140–019–09323–9.
169 See https://www.ft.com/content/e592033b-9e34–4e3d-ae53–17fa34c16009.
170 See https://www.prcleader.org/medeiros-1.
171 See https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/08/18/paradox-of-russia-china-relationship-pub-87695.

China has blamed the "eastward expansionism" of NATO for the conflict. Beijing has also publicly discussed ways in which to decouple from the dollar economy in cooperation with Russia in order to strengthen both countries vis-à-vis Western economic sanctions. However, it is difficult to judge where Beijing will draw a red line in estimating that the war creates more threats than it resolves.

Two regions in particular seem to draw the attention of experts regarding the potential confrontation between Russia and China – namely the Arctic and Central Asia. As far as Moscow is concerned, a strong position in the Arctic confirms Russia's status as one of the leading great powers. Against this background, strengthening Russia's position in the region and controlling its most important military and economic developments remains a state priority. The CCP, for its part, has expressed aspirations to be involved in Arctic affairs, while underlining the importance of the region to China (China as a "near-Arctic state"). Its increased ambitions regarding the Arctic seem to develop in tandem with its rising political clout, and are aimed at confirming its position as an emerging world superpower. Indeed, China is present in the region through different channels.

The Russian authorities, however, are aware that the geopolitical importance of the Arctic will only rise along with the melting icecap and opening of the region to international shipping and exploration. Thus, Russia is not interested in opening the region to external actors, be they the EU or China. If Moscow is in control, and has a decisive say, it will support Chinese presence in the region, for instance, by including its companies in Arctic energy projects, research activities or regional studies.

While Moscow hopes to see China as an Arctic customer, it denies any suggestion of internationalizing Arctic waterways. In this context, China's rhetoric about the region and its visibly rising ambitions are a potential source of contention. For Russia, any strengthening of a third actor in the Arctic, in addition to the US and NATO, will be considered a threat to its national security, and as an encroachment on its perceived privileged zone of influence and buffer zone. Having said that, given the ongoing war, Russia may not be in a position to negotiate with China regarding the Arctic.[172]

Central Asia is another key region for Russia. Similarly to the Arctic or post-Soviet countries in Europe, Russia regards Central Asia as an area of its privileged interests and as a security buffer zone. Hence, it is ready to employ all means available to protect its position there. Russia's geopolitical influences in Central Asia are also an important confirmation of the state's great power status. However, as Russia lacks meaningful economic tools to solidify its position in the region, it mostly refers to hard power, namely military bases, weapons deals, and counterterrorism cooperation.

The emergence of China as the dominant economic actor in Central Asia may inevitably cause conflicts between Moscow and Beijing. Thus far, both countries have managed to de-conflict their overlapping interests: China engages almost exclusively in the economic domain, while Russia's focus is on security aspects. In addition, China's goals in Central

172 See https://jamestown.org/program/finland-and-the-demise-of-chinas-polar-silk-road/.

Asia, which focus on economic development, political stability and keeping the West out of the region, either coincide with Russia's agenda or at least do not contradict Russia's short- to medium-term interests.[173] Nevertheless, in the long term, these economic and political dynamics may easily collide. Russia's aggressiveness towards Central Asian states may further increase if Moscow considers its interests jeopardized. This, in turn, may endanger China's economic activity, forcing Beijing to act in order to secure its economic interests.

Vulnerabilities

A common vulnerability for Russia and China is primarily something that could be referred to as overstretch. This means that Moscow and Beijing are active in an ultimately infeasible number of domains, geographical locations, and ways, both domestically as well as internationally.

Domestic structures

Both Russia and China face internal challenges and structural problems. Moscow and Beijing appear to be aware of these, given that they share an interest in projecting a strong, capable, and thus legitimate image of their respective regimes. The internal weaknesses seem moreover to have led both countries to increasingly apply totalitarian domestic policies.

When it comes to the Russian authoritarian system, it is strongly centralized. Decisions of any significance cannot be made without the participation and consent of the Kremlin.[174] Therefore, any changes in the power structure (new president, new minister, new head of the biggest oil company, etc.) shake up the structure and make it unstable. As the system is based on personalities and strongmen, in the case of replacements, time is needed to adjust, recalibrate, and establish a new balance, before acting again. There are no democratic processes and regulations that would make the transition process easy and smooth, leading to clashes between different forces and centres of power.

The Russian economy is also based for the most part on the exploration and export of raw materials. As income from oil and gas sales comprises a large part of state revenue, Moscow is constantly dependent on market behaviour and abrupt price changes, while highly vulnerable to energy sanctions, which since the invasion of Ukraine have significantly reduced government revenue from energy sales. Moreover, the dominance of state-owned big energy companies tends to dampen most of the efforts towards modernization and innovation, especially in terms of green energy, which has given a transformational boost to the EU economy. This, in turn, translates into high dependence on foreign-based technologies in nearly all critical sectors of the economy (e.g., energy/military/IT/machine industry).

For Beijing, the decision to reform the economy in the 1980s was consequential, creating not only prosperity and influence but also perceptions of threat. The raising of living standards was necessary from the perspective of regime legitimacy, while opening up meant the risk of "spiritual pollution" in the form of liberal ideas spreading from the West. Thus, the Party

173 Paul Stronski, Nicole Ng, 'Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic', Brief (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018).

174 Hannes Adomeit, 'Russia's Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China?, in *Russia-China Relations. Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?*, *Global Power Shift 2022*, p.18.

Table 9. Vulnerabilities of Russia's and China's domestic structures

FACTOR	RUSSIA	CHINA	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST
Vulnerabilities in the domestic structures	• State structure based on strongmen: rigid and unstable • Economy based on export of raw materials • State-owned companies dampening modernization and innovation • Discontent over information control	• Balancing between economic reforms and suppressing external influences • Fragile food chains, climate change challenges, demographic problems, housing • Discontent over information control	• High dependency on Western-based technologies, markets, financial system • Projecting a strong, capable, legitimate image • Opportunity in supporting media pluralism in Russia and China

has had to balance between economic reforms while suppressing threatening external influences.[175] As discussed, this has largely been accomplished by promoting a narrative of Party policies as an economic miracle, while at the same time Othering the West and painting a picture of China as the victim of colonial humiliation.

At the same time, however, China is still dependent on the Western markets and financial system as many Chinese technological products cannot yet be exported to developing countries in the Global South. In fact, the reliance of China on international markets and technology has created threats from the Party's perspective. Given that the CCP sees a link between economic growth and regime stability, economic opening up has in Beijing's view exposed China to foreign economic developments.

Thus, the Party must control the relationship between opening up, self-reliance, and national economic security.[176] In other words, overreliance on economic growth on the part of the CCP creates vulnerabilities for China. In fact, China's domestic markets also suffer from fragile food chains, challenges posed by climate change, as well as demographic problems, creating further structural vulnerabilities. Whether the capacity of the CCP to adapt to sudden changes is as good as that of a democratic system remains unclear. In any case, China is more dependent on foreign trade and capital than Russia. Thus, the current sanctions game is being closely observed in Beijing.

In both Russia and China, the applied extreme total state control of the information domain is likely not a durable solution. In all probability, discontent will eventually arise, maybe sooner in Russia than in China, given that it is not possible to control information indefinitely. VPN services in both countries already allow access to Western news and popular culture content. Presumably, there is willingness to learn within the populations at large in both countries, and, inevitably, this will fuel discontent. This is a vulnerability that external actors can exploit by supporting media pluralism, especially in Russia and to an extent in China. The domestic vulnerabilities are summarized in Table 9.

International positions

In international terms, both regimes display a certain opportunism that may backfire. Moscow, in particular, appears to adhere to opportunistic moves, which is evident regarding the current war in Ukraine, as well as previous

175 Aaron Friedberg, 'Globalisation and Chinese Grand Strategy', Survival Vol. 60, Issue 1 (2018): 7–40 (pp. 14–16).
176 Ibid.

Table 10. Vulnerabilities of Russia's and China's international positions

FACTOR	RUSSIA	CHINA	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST
Vulnerabilities in international positions	• Opportunistic behaviours in international relations • Zero-sum game logic dominating strategic thinking • Political paranoia regarding the West	• Lack of understanding on how Western institutions work • Underestimating NATO in the Pacific context • Inconsistent messaging often tailored for the domestic audience, leading to a general distrust of China	• Signs of diminishing influence in the West (not necessarily in the Global South)

aggressions in Georgia and elsewhere. The underlying motives for engaging in a conflict, as discussed above, may be widespread and long term, but the decision to start kinetic warfare can be viewed as an opportunistic strategy and opportunistic thinking that leads to a backlash. Beijing, for its part, is widely seen to adhere to long-term strategies, but often reacts to provocations, for instance, in an emotional way.

Both regimes also display certain vulnerabilities in their interactions with Western institutions, such as the EU and NATO. For Beijing, a lack of understanding on how the West and its institutions work creates difficulties. Underestimating NATO and other Western organizations and the ability of NATO to work in partnership across the globe (including in the Asia-Pacific) seems to be challenging for Beijing. What is more, wanting to influence institutions in an undemocratic way also often creates backlashes for China.[177] In the case of Russia, the zero-sum game logic followed by Russian authorities distorts the truth about the West and its motivations. It makes it very difficult to understand how the West is working when every move is interpreted as hostile and every action as having an ulterior motive ("political paranoia"[178]). Assessing everything through the lens of geopolitics and the great struggle between superpowers completely disregards other forces or impulses behind the behaviour of the West and its societies.

What is more, Beijing's political messaging does not appear to be tailored, and often displays inconsistencies instead. Given that the regime is dependent on China's internal public opinion, the messages of Chinese diplomats are also directed more towards home audiences, not international key stakeholders. This has created further distrust of China internationally. Indeed, at times, the CCP also plays the Global South card too hastily, leading to a backlash. By way of illustration, for years in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Beijing claimed that due to a shared socialist past, CEE countries would belong to the Global South. After promises of economic cooperation with China largely fell through, talk of the Global South had a negative impact on China's image.[179]

In essence, cultural differences between China and the rest of the world are often overlooked by Beijing. This is partly the result of an ideological shift with regard to the current leadership, who appear to pursue less pragmatism

177 See e.g. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/leaked-emails-confirm-un-passed-info-to-china-in-name-sharing-scandal/2114163.

178 Robert S. Robins, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (Yale University Press, 1997).

179 See e.g. https://www.merics.org/en/short-analysis/how-china-lost-central-and-eastern-europe.

and more ideology. As a result, there are signs of China's diminishing influence in the West. In a related development, Beijing's attitude is increasingly being contested by China's regional neighbours as well. The international vulnerabilities are summarized in Table 10.

Conclusion

Common to both regimes is the desire to appear strong and in control. They also view liberal democracy, and the values thereof, as an existential threat. The shared aim of Moscow and Beijing, therefore, is to change the international system and diminish US influence and presence. This common goal and the shared threat perception is the foundation of the current Sino-Russian cooperation. As long as this binding force is in place, both countries are likely to strengthen their cooperation while downplaying differences that might potentially divide them (e.g. the Arctic, Central Asia).

Both China and Russia consider that democracies are weak and in decline. While the perspective in China is that the era of Western democracies is over, Moscow's aim is to violate the Western order and slow the process of Russia's diminishing great power status. In other words, while China seeks to develop a different rules-based system, Russia can be seen as a mere disruptor. In any case, both present an alternative to the Western-led normative culture and international order. What they bring to the table are not only traditional values regarding the state and society, but also a no-strings-attached economic proposal.

While both countries display severe strategic vulnerabilities, such as dependencies in critical technologies, dwelling on their vulnerabilities may also imply that the West is overestimating its abilities. There is currently a rapid rise in cooperation between Russia and China, not only in the shift away from the dollar economy, but also in high and dual-use technology.[180]

180 See https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-97012-3.

Conclusions

This Hybrid CoE Research Report has highlighted contemporary Russian and Chinese hierarchical worldviews, sustained by long-standing domestically driven self-other dynamics vis-à-vis liberal democracies. In this regard, Russia and China are remarkably similar, even if there remain notable differences between them. The report contends that commonalities in Russian and Chinese identities, worldviews, threat perceptions, use of force, and vulnerabilities provide justification for the use of instruments that can be termed hybrid threats. At the core of this justification is a paradoxical identity of superiority/inferiority in relation to liberal democracies. The concluding factors are summarized in Table 11.

Domestic factors affecting behaviour

- Moscow suffers from a "heavy burden of history" and the lack of a "clear break with the Soviet past". Russian strategic and political culture has not yet made a clear break with the Communist legacies or tsarist legacies, including the Orthodox Church. Together, these legacies have brought about disrespect for law, submission to central authority, and hostility towards the West.[181]
- In China, Han-centrism supports domestic exceptionalism, while past encounters with the West bring about feelings of inferiority and insecurity. Given the collective-level affinities, it is easy for Beijing to tap into populistic discourses of past Western wrongdoings and current Chinese economic exceptionalism in seeking to justify CCP totalitarian rule.

Table 11. Key similarities and differences between Russia and China

Domestic factors	IDENTITY	WORLDVIEW	THREAT PERCEPTIONS	USE OF FORCE	VULNERABILITIES
Russia	Exceptionalism	Insecure	Western ideals	Totalitarian	Strongman regime
China	Exceptionalism	Insecure	Western ideals	Totalitarian	Economic legitimacy
International factors					
Russia	Great power status	Authoritarian expansionism	Regime non-recognition	Low threshold	Opportunistic thinking
China	Great power status	Authoritarian morality	Regime non-recognition	Calculated	Cultural ignorance

181 Richard Pipes, 'Is Russia Still an Enemy?', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 5, (1997): 67–78.

- Moscow and Beijing seek popular support for their respective national narratives. Both regimes are aware of their legitimacy being dependent on the will of the people and domestic populist discourses. For both, these bring about systemic and structural vulnerabilities. The Russian system is based on strongmen and narratives tied to the charismatic leadership of the Kremlin. This makes the regime non-resilient to changes. The rule of the CCP is based on the economic success narrative, which may or may not be long-lived.

Strategic culture elements in the international dimension

- The key influence on Russian and Chinese behaviour is their persistent quest for great power status. While for Moscow, authoritarian expansionism plays a central role, for Beijing, in addition to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea, authoritarian expansionism is carried out more in the information domain.
- Both are active in international organizations, like the UN, where through legislative proposals and diplomatic efforts they aim to carve out moral and ethical space for authoritarianism.
- Both seek to secure rule over nearby regions for geopolitical and symbolic reasons.
- International recognition is of paramount interest to Moscow and Beijing. Should this be lacking, recognition is sought through alternative and informal institutions, as well as regional arrangements with like-minded states.
- While cognitive and psychological warfare is important for both regimes domestically, regarding kinetic use of force, the threshold for using force is domestically low in both Moscow and Beijing. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Chinese activities in the South China Sea and Taiwan underline a fundamental difference; Beijing appears to use force in a more calculated manner than Moscow, which is more shortsighted and opportunistic, leading to vulnerabilities for Russia internationally.

Russia's and China's global self-awareness

- Emphasizing Russian and Chinese autocracy may overlook important sources of contestation within their political systems. However, Russian and Chinese historical and institutional distinctness does differ fundamentally from Western-style democracies.
- Russian and Chinese interests and stakes within the international system appear as a zero-sum game, not accommodating much more than authoritarian expansionism. For both regimes, the offer to join the liberal international system has been placed on the table; both, however, have been adamant about not accepting or embracing it.
- While the discourses of imperial hierarchy and Marxist-Leninist civilizing missions took more modest forms during the post-communist era in both Russia and China, in recent years these have yet again surfaced in the more assertive foreign policy stance of Beijing and Moscow.

- Moscow and Beijing have produced a discourse that is quasi-liberal, rational in an economic sense, and responsible in the sense of international legality. Yet the actions and behaviour of both regimes underline their utilitarian function to support and justify imperial and Soviet hierarchical notions and rule over spheres of privileged interests.[182]
- Due to their global self-awareness, both Russia and China pursue an expansionist foreign policy, where authoritarian culture is the cause of – at the same time – regime confidence and insecurity. In a well-functioning Western-style democracy, the role of institutions is to moderate national-level traumas and hubris, while defending traditional state interests. This is the difference between Russia/China and Western-style democracies.
- The CCP uses post-colonial narratives to highlight Chinese grievances and victimhood. This provides legitimacy for authoritarian rule domestically, as well as for coercive measures internationally.
- In Beijing's worldview, China is not facing a military threat per se, but an existential threat that is cultural, civilizational, and political. Globalization is perceived as Western-originated and as threatening Chinese cultural identity, as defined by the CCP. Not following Western liberal values is seen as a threat and a potential trigger for the US or NATO to militarily intervene.
- Moscow and Beijing project great power competition into the thinking of Western elites. Thus, they are strategically insecure and fearful, and apply sub-threshold tools to maintain legitimacy. The military-technological and, to an extent, economic advantage possessed by the West feeds feelings of insecurity in Moscow and Beijing, influencing their domestic and foreign policy behaviour. It is difficult to assess what would have to change in Moscow and Beijing in order for this not to happen.

Intentions vs. capabilities

- Lack of capabilities is the main limiting factor for both Moscow and Beijing regarding traditional kinetic use of force. This conclusion is inevitable in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and it seems equally inevitable in the case of CCP ambitions towards Taiwan.
- When an authoritarian actor is incapable of threatening with or using kinetic force, the next best option is to weaken and derogate the opponent. In the case of both Russia and China, strategic planning brings together state security and national economy. Weaponization of the economy and domestic markets has already been used by both Moscow and Beijing.
- Regarding operational capabilities, in the Russian doctrine, asymmetry has been defined in the context of US strengths and weaknesses.[183] Regarding indirect operations, in various conflicts Russia has used

182 See also Kevork Oskanian, 'A Very Ambiguous Empire: Russia's Hybrid Exceptionalism', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 70, no. 1, (2018): 26–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1412398.

183 See Juha Kukkola, 'Oveluuden lupaus. Asymmetria, epäsuoruus ja ei-sotilaalliset toimenpiteet uuden venäläisen sotataidon kiintopisteenä' [The promise of cunning. Asymmetry, indirectness and non-military measures as a focal point of the new Russian military art], Research Report (National Defence University, 2022), https://www.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/186010/Oveluuden%20lupaus_Kukkola_verkkoversio.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

mercenaries, special forces, cyber and information operations, and criminals. The CCP has a long tradition of using similar methods in its indirect domestic and international coercion (e.g. "little blue men", weaponized fishing vessels). These measures are justified by the Russian and Chinese hierarchical worldview that is sustained by a long-standing domestic self-other dynamic surpassing any personal sense of leadership.

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