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Rose-Colored Glasses: *How Western Mirroring Could Result in Inadvertent Nuclear War with Russia*

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As the United States shifts national attention to peer and near-peer adversaries, a belligerent Russia, conducting threatening exercises on Ukraine's border, has the potential to destabilize the region. Though a second-rate economic power, Russia is the United States' only nuclear peer. Russian and American nuclear arsenals are over ten times larger than the next largest country, with over 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons.¹ Robert Jervis describes the danger of misperception in the following way "decision-makers tend to fit incoming information into their existing theories and information."² Many researchers warn of the dangers of Western tendencies to project Western views onto Russian thinking.³ These have contributed to the widely held belief that it is unlikely Russia will use nuclear weapons in a conflict with the West.

In fact, over the last decade, Russian strategists have increasingly incorporated nuclear tools in their planning, and Russian leaders are using coercive nuclear signaling during crises.⁴ When examined through the lens of strategic culture, history, religion, emerging culture, and the Russian view of war, a clear divergence from Western thinking about nuclear weapons emerges. In aggregate, these viewpoints paint a much bleaker notion; not only that Russia would be willing to use nuclear weapons against the West, but that cultural mirroring could result in the inadvertent escalation to full-scale nuclear war. Far from intending to "fear monger" or create panic, this assessment is intended to examine how culture influ-

ences Russian military strategy and conflict escalation, and aid in preventing future challenges for American senior leaders.

To the lay reader, it is first important to note that Russian leaders do not view nuclear weapons as "unusable," as they are often viewed in the West.⁵ To the contrary, as Ragland and Lowther point out, Russia has an asymmetric advantage through the development of a large arsenal of non-strategic or low-yield nuclear weapons.⁶ These are weapons for which the West is largely unprepared to respond to, certainly regarding the emblematic escalation to nuclear use. Likely, following a nuclear strike on any regional target, America's allies will demand a response in kind, having forgone nuclear research (or forfeited nuclear weapons in the case of Ukraine) in exchange for a "nuclear umbrella." This demand for a nuclear response, by default, can only be met with escalation, due to the current makeup of Western nuclear arsenals.⁷

— Strategic Culture —

To predict a likely operational scenario, it is useful to first examine Russian strategic culture. One misconception is the popular adage that Russia is "playing chess while the US plays checkers."⁸ This portrays a fumbling United States against a highly calculating Vladimir Putin, who has thought many moves ahead and planned for every contingency. In fact, a more appropriate (and apropos) analogy is that

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of judo. Putin is more akin to the fighter circling the ring, seeking to bait his opponent into action, thereby exposing a vulnerability to exploit.⁹ This contributes to Russia's unpredictability, as well as frequent miscalculations. The origins of this thinking are found in Russian strategic writings, starting with Genrikh Antonovich Leer.

Leer's writings laid the foundation for Russian strategic culture and demonstrate a clear divergence when compared with Western strategic culture. Both Western and Russian strategy are highly influenced by Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini, and these similarities often result in assumptions by Western strategists concerning Russia. Genrikh Leer, however, widely considered a fellow-father of Russian strategy, is still not well known in Western strategic circles.¹⁰ Leer's second premise of military strategy, (arguably first, since his first relates to the use of war to advance nations), focuses on the "art" of military leadership, including *glazomer* (the skill of military analysis and diagnosis) and the great value of decisiveness and quick action.¹¹ One can easily see how a strategy incorporating these elements can be viewed as "opportunistic" by Western military scholars.¹² This "opportunism" can result in an accelerated decision to use non-strategic nuclear weapons if it is perceived as advantageous at the time by Putin.

It is important to note that this "opportunism" is not historically limited to national norms or international law. In the words of Genrikh Leer, "there are no rules for action and there cannot be rules for action...one who simply bows to the rules does not respect the significance of the situation...one who respects the significance of the situation does not recognize the existence of rules."¹³ As a leader bent on returning Russia to its former glory once held by the USSR, Putin is not constrained by international norms regarding nuclear weapons use. In many ways he is incentivized to use them due to their taboo, and the strategic value of the resulting shock. To underestimate the Russian leadership's will to acquire respect on a global stage is to remain ignorant to evident truths.

— Russian Doctrine —

It is useful to have this baseline understanding of Russian strategic culture when examining their doctrine and public statements. By this measure, Russian doctrine is not made for Russian forces to follow; strategic decisions will be made by decision-makers when opportunity (or vulnerability) presents itself.

Such publicly released statements are contrived signaling, purposefully ambiguous with the intent to deter.¹⁴ Putin has been known to act contrary to stated international policy, often to his own chagrin.¹⁵ Regardless, it can be useful to pick apart doctrine to examine what messages are being sent by Russia to the world, and what can be expected in future conflicts.

It is helpful to first analyze generally accepted Russian truths regarding the optimization of the strategic environment desired, painted in the previous section. This reactive nature leads to a lingering fear of strategic surprise, and if perceived escalation is likely, Russia would prefer to act first.¹⁶ This results in many scholars adapting the term "escalate to de-escalate," regarding Russia's strategy, and is highly contentious.¹⁷ This is precarious when considering a force that is largely outmatched by the West for a conventional conflict in the region. The most likely avenue of achieving a decisive, escalatory victory militarily against Western forces is through the use of strategic or non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Another noteworthy difference from Western strategy is the desire for an intense, short-lived conflict. Due to Russian forces' conventional inferiority and limited economic ability to support extended hostilities, in a kinetic fight Russian forces hope to swiftly inflict a level of "unacceptable damage" to Western forces to capitulate their will to continue the conflict. Russia's current force structure has invested heavily in nuclear forces, like Eisenhower's "New Look," which hoped to provide security on a more economical nuclear backbone.¹⁸ With this in mind, there may be some assumption that this level of "unacceptable damage" would be achieved by non-strategic nuclear weapons.

It is also useful to focus on the Russian view of nuclear weapons, and how they generally differ from Western concepts. In fact, the Russian military is comfortable with, and expects any conflict with a great power will involve nuclear weapons.¹⁹ Putin was quoted saying, "In our concept of nuclear weapons use there is no preemptive strike. Our concept is a retaliatory-offensive strike (*otvetno-vstrechny udar*). For those who know, it's not necessary to say what that is; for those who don't know, I'll say again: This means we are prepared to, and will use, nuclear weapons only when we are convinced that someone, a potential aggressor, is attacking Russia, our territory." This statement was later scrubbed from official Russian-English translations. Clearly, Russia plans and expects to use nuclear weapons in a conflict with the West if it perceives an aggressor is attacking its

territory. This becomes troubling considering Russia's contested regions in Ukraine, as well as their widening concept of attack (war), discussed later in this paper.

Perhaps the most pointed doctrinal revelations regarding Russian nuclear forces are found by comparing the 2020 *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence* to the previous document from 2014. The changes include a focus solely on Western powers, the addition of "launch on warning" actions, and language stating, "This policy provides for the prevention of an escalation of military actions and their termination on conditions that are acceptable for the Russian Federation and/or its allies."²¹ This clearly describes a Russia fearful of the West, seeking to console neighbors using non-escalatory language, but articulating their bottom line; an acceptable result for the Russian Federation. This is clearly not a maintenance of the status quo.

— Culture —

The next section will focus on Russian cultural aspects that clash with our own Western thinking. As a culture deeply rooted in autocracy (imperial, Communist, or democratic), Russian people have a history of subjugation to national rulers. As a reflection of tribal culture, collectivism is celebrated, even if a government is perceived as injurious or damaging. In the words of Alexandra Fedorova, wife to Tsar Nicholas II, "Russia loves to feel the whip."²² Culturally, the modern-day relevancy is two-fold. In the case of Russian leaders, power is often wielded decisively and without restraint. Similarly, there is a deference by the Russian people to their leaders, with an honor attached to suffering on behalf of one's family, community, or nation.

This "honor in suffering" can also be traced to the Russian Orthodox Church's roots in Christianity. Saint Seraphim of Serov, one of the most revered saints in the church, was known to have said "The Lord will have mercy on Russia, and will lead it along the path of suffering to great glory."²³ Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians have seen the Church rise in esteem, especially as a tool of the government, the military, and most recently Russian nuclear forces.²⁴ A willingness to submit on behalf of the Russian nation and the greater good results in a high pain threshold; a fact that is not lost on Russian strategists. This knowledge perpetuates the calculation of gains and losses through nuclear exchange,

rather than outright avoidance, raising the likelihood of such a scenario.

One cultural illusion that some in the West maintain is that the Russian government holds the same fundamental morals and misgivings as any other culturally Christian nation. It is important to highlight that in such an autocracy, the decisions rest with the few. Machiavelli duly noted, "a prince...if freed from the control of the laws, will be more ungrateful, fickle, and short-sighted than a populous."²⁵ This is seen repeatedly in recent conflicts, with Putin undermining military effectiveness by engaging in the indiscriminate bombing of civilians.²⁶ From a moral or ethical perspective, it is not a far leap to imagine the use of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons, especially against military targets.

Mirroring leads many in the West to question whether the Russian people would allow such behavior from their government. Much of the Russian people's deference to their leaders is the result of a rich history of "village culture." These villages, faced with the tyranny of distance of the Asian continent, had to trust their village representatives as they traveled long distances to represent the populous. Whether under an imperial, communist, or now democratic regime, these representatives often enjoyed the trappings of their position far from their homes, a dynamic that came to be accepted, and magnified with each change in government. The result is a Russian populous that largely accepts the corruption and internationally antagonistic behavior by its government, including military actions in Georgia and Crimea, and potentially even more heightened tensions in Donbass.

The people of Russia can also be blinded or misled by the false or partial information presented by the government. This government control of information spiked following the 1917 Russian Revolution, when Lenin's newly installed government sought to shut down all narratives other than its own, labeled as "counterrevolutionary press."²⁷ The Bolsheviks committed extensive resources to propaganda, which was assigned a central place in national life, and regularly used to "touch-up" or distort reality.²⁸

Modern media has provided an even more insidious vehicle to manipulate the populous, as described in Peter Pomerantsev's *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*. Here Pomerantsev describes television as "the only force that can unify and (*sic*) rule and bind this country."²⁹ This history of domestic reality distortion has allowed Russia to master the art of information manipulation, a technique which has

become commonplace internationally as well. If the Russian populous is only fed a partial story, or is told untruths regarding tensions in the region, they can expect to have support for aggressive action, and possibly even rally a nationalist fervor. The West can expect these messages to increase in focus and dissemination as conflict escalates to justify whatever measures the government sees fit, including the use of nuclear weapons.

— Religion —

Religious mirroring is another lens in which the West often misperceives Russia. Images of ornately clad Russian Orthodox clergy swinging incense and chanting psalms harken a likeness to the Western religions preaching “do unto thy neighbor...” Unlike the West, Russia has never sought secularity, and the Church has remained a consistent tool of the state. Adamsky has observed that in Russian nuclear forces priests have been elevated to the vacant status of Soviet political officers, representing an even more elevated status of the church in Putin’s Russia.³⁰ Dmitry Adamsky proposes in his 2021 book, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, that this could result in an easier path to nuclear escalation, legitimizing belligerent political courses, and ensuring public support for it.³¹

Due to the Communist Party’s rejection of religion, there is a tendency in the West to perceive Russians as hyper-rational and methodical. A deeply spiritual people rooted in historical paganism, then Christianity, the Russian people have a deep appreciation for mysticism, symbolism, and art. Under the monarchy, the church, ever faithful to its Byzantine roots, remained loyal and generally stayed out of politics.³² This “mutual support” resulted in complementary messages from each, with the Church becoming a tool for the government to advance support for its own agenda.

The Bolshevik revolution brought many new messages by building on existing ones. While revolutionaries viewed religion as superstition that impeded modernization, they quickly realized this was not true for most of the population.³³ Rather than irradiate such practices, the Party sought to supplant religious practices with those representative of the new Communist government. “Red corners,” previously shrine-like portions of Russian homes dedicated to Orthodox icons were transformed into dedications to Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.³⁴ For many, this resulted in a cult-like following for the Party, one which could be leveraged to animate a populous as desired by the government.

With the fall of the USSR in 1990, a huge vacuum was left with the dissolution of the Communist Party. This vacuum was filled quickly by the Russian Orthodox Church, once again happy to remain subservient to the government.³⁵ In this role, the Church advances a nationalistic narrative wherever it might be received. One unexpected development is the mutual adoption between the Church and the Russian version of the Hell’s Angels, the Night Wolves.³⁶ This group of Harley-Davidson riding patriots paint the Church in a modern, relevant light, and give even more influence to both the government and the Church. As might be expected, the Church publicly supports the governments’ pro-nuclear stance and has never supported nuclear abolition philosophy or pacifist views.³⁷

In recent years, the Russian government has created a synergy between nuclear forces, nuclear industry and the Church, naming saints for each leg of the nuclear triad, consecrating nuclear platforms, and assigning “nuclear clergy” to posts that were once held by political officers in the Communist system. Adamsky points out the clergy’s assurance to nuclear forces of their “divine providence,” claiming they are shielded from potential harm and judgmental mistakes.³⁸ The danger of this overlapping of the Church and military nuclear forces is self-evident. A force with blind adherence and subjugation can be utilized brutally, including an irresponsible or inappropriate use of nuclear weapons to bring about the destruction of the globe.

— Gangster Surrealism —

The post-Communist era has brought with it a new, quickly evolving culture that echoes of past generations. Following the fall of communism, many rushed in to seize the power formerly belonging to the Soviet state. These individuals often employed “gangster” like tactics; the strong doing what they can, and the weak suffering what they must.³⁹ This hyper-aggression can be accelerated by misinformation campaigns, resulting in a perceived alternate reality and poor decision-making. “Strongman” behavior from state leaders not only results in the heavy-handed wielding of power—by Western standards—but also the very real threat of emotional retaliation for a perceived slight, including the use of nuclear weapons.

In the rush to gain power and influence in the new Russian Federation, some circles started “ahead of the curve” due to access to Soviet resources. One such group came to be known as the *siloviki* or

“strong people,” made up of Vladimir Putin and many of his cohorts from the Soviet security services. These individuals were able to cement themselves in positions of power, and to perform as gatekeepers to the oligarchy.⁴⁰ This gave them immense power, as evidenced by the “revolt” of one of the early oligarchs who challenged Putin, Mikhail Khodorkovsky. As one of Yeltsin’s oligarchs during the transition to a rising Putin, each were warned against politically challenging Putin. Following a brief political campaign, he was quickly sent to prison in Siberia for a decade.⁴¹ Observers understood the ramifications of challenging Putin publicly and fell in line to support his objectives.

One of the nuanced disharmonies with Western thought used regularly by Putin is that of ambiguous delegation. It is similar in nature to the Western ideal of *mission command*; the delegation of a task supplied with intent, and the empowerment to accomplish the mission as the subordinate sees fit. The discrepancy between East and West is intent, however, with the West intending innovation and creativity and the East exploiting the challenge of attribution. Putin has been known to broadly establish objectives and to hint at how he might like them accomplished; if successful one is rewarded, and if they fail, they are immediately disowned by the Kremlin.⁴² Such techniques could have resulted in the multiple international targeted killings suspected to have been perpetrated by the Russian government using chemical and radiological weapons. It is easy to observe how using a delegation of authority, or by claiming a “lost weapon,” Putin could execute a non-attributable way to accomplish a nuclear strike.

Another incongruous consideration regarding the Russian leadership in the twenty-first century is the second order effect of domestic information operations. Because leaders are constantly exposed to the “distorted” narratives resounded in their populations, they too may be affected and lose touch with reality. This, combined with the rapidly changing environment combine to form what Pomerantsev refers to as the “Surreal Heart of the New Russia.”⁴³ This surrealistic view can lead to disassociation with reality; including the effects of ones’ actions, likely increasing the acceptance of risk and degrading decision-making ability.

Finally, the West must consider the personality and tendencies of the autocrat himself, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. Many scholars have stated that he is much less of a maverick than perceived; that he will only “play” one when he believes he can predict the outcomes. This is highlighted by the continued

harassment of American planes and warships, with Putin trusting in the discipline and professionalism of American military personnel to avoid escalation.⁴⁴ It is clear Putin could certainly not count on this, nor the skill of his pilots to accomplish such a risky maneuver. In this example, Putin was creating the environment for escalation through a situation of his own making, which he could separate himself from easily if necessary. “Even fifty years ago, the streets of Leningrad taught me one thing; if a fight is inevitable, go and fight first.” Just such an attitude could result in escalation through a variety of means, including nuclear strike

— Russian View of War —

One of the most critical failings of Western perceptions of Russia regards the view of perceived aggressive behavior and what is considered an act of war. In several cases, to avoid escalation or perceived aggression, the United States advances what it perceives as partial escalation or even warranted behaviors, which are in turn perceived by Russia to be just the opposite. It is imperative that American leaders understand the view of certain activities through a Russian lens to make decisions that send the intended message.

It is useful to first deconstruct the Russian view of American sanctions against Russia since these are most often leveraged in response to aggressive behavior. The United States tends to view economic sanctions as a message to Russian leadership, short of war, to disincentivize the current behavior. Western leaders must understand this is perceived as the circus giant strongman swinging his barbells about. Following the initial invasion of Crimea, European and American sanctions were perceived as an act of war seeking to provoke regime change.⁴⁵ As nations proceed deeper into the conflict continuum, this type of miscommunication can have much more dire consequences resulting in kinetic or nuclear first strike.

The use of information and psychological operations both by and against Russians also provide a useful lens to observe discontinuity between Western and Russian viewpoints. A Western view of providing factual information to a naïve populous can be seen by Russian leaders as the psychological manipulation.⁴⁶ Building on the earlier revelations that a Russian culture of information distortion and tampering exists to create state stability, the introduction of contradictory information from an outside actor, true or not, is not well received. In the case of the color

revolutions, what American leaders perceived as populous empowering actions were seen by Russian leaders as war. Though nonviolent, these revolutions are seen by Russia as the West's main approach to the use of force.⁴⁷

These conflicting views are the result of the increasingly blurring line between peace and war. In what later became known as the Gerasimov Doctrine, General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation stated, "The very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness."⁴⁸ Without an agreed-upon defined line between war and peace, it becomes extremely difficult to ascertain when a conflict is escalating to kinetic (nuclear) means. Without this ability, there is a distinct and increased likelihood of unexpected nuclear escalation between Russia and the West.

Truthfully, these concepts have been echoing the halls of the Kremlin and bouncing around Russian expert circles for at least a decade. To many, they seem novel because the West has largely been inattentive to Russian military thought.⁴⁹ As focus shifts back to Russia from the Chinese threat, it is imperative that Western leaders understand how their actions may be interpreted, and more importantly, the Russian response. In an information-rich and economically unstable environment, any threats to Russia that could be viewed as existential to the regime will be interpreted as was war; kinetic or not.

— Solutions —

The solutions to stem these problems in the future are not out of reach. This rational dissonance can be attributed to almost a century of tension and bitterness between the West (particularly the United States) and Russia. In the near-term, it is critical that the West maintain a strong, credible nuclear deterrent. Non-proliferation ideals dictate that a nuclear deterrent be maintained, for fear that without assurances from the United States, allies will build their own nuclear forces. This also means setting clear red-lines in response to the use of nuclear weapons by any aggressor. These red-lines must be supported by unmatched, overwhelming capabilities such as the forthcoming B-21 Raider and the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent.

The Western powers must also place emphasis on the diplomatic instrument of power when dealing with Russia. Rather than high-level talks that often

escalate tensions and provide a very public discourse, lower-level diplomacy should be encouraged to develop empathy and mutual understanding. Diplomatic and military personnel exchanges would go a long way to reduce the divide through the creation of relationships between future leaders and influencers of each country. These relationships across varying levels and agencies will aid in the understanding of one another's cultures, and a more accurate perception of each's actions.

Arms control must be central to future discussions, with the caveat that China be included, lest the United States find itself in the same situation responding to a massive Chinese arsenal. As Michael McFaul predicted, without arms control, "we will go back to spending trillions on defense to deter a rogue state with thousands of nuclear weapons."⁵⁰ Most of all, to prevent a continued asymmetry and to maintain deterrence, arms control must address non-strategic nuclear weapons as well as strategic weapons.

While not a forgone conclusion, even considering the current escalating activities in the Ukraine, it is true that current Russian and Western views are based on misperceptions of one another and are escalating tensions. These misperceptions can lead to false assumptions about the motives and intentions of the adversary, or at their worst can lead to kinetic escalation. When considering Russian culture, nuclear doctrine, and its current view of war with the West, we find ourselves much closer to a nuclear brink than many Western leaders perceive. To remedy this, leaders must take an empathetic viewpoint when considering actions against a vulnerable and sensitive adversary like Russia.

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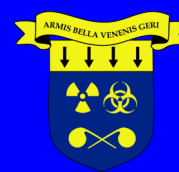
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