

## **U.S. Strategy Through an Infinite Lens – Reconsidering Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## **Abstract**

*The United States faces a myriad of threats in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Russia is one of the largest and most dangerous and is desperate to regain a position of power on the world stage. The United States is fully capable of maintaining, and extending, the relative advantages she enjoys. However, the U.S. must adopt an infinite mindset with regard to competition and focus predominately on developing her own strength, rather than power over other nations. This can be most readily accomplished via alliances and mutually beneficial competition rather than armed conflict. Given such an approach, each of the traditional instruments of power will play a critical role in the ongoing success of the United States.*

## **Main Body**

In early 2020, Russia launched Cosmos 2543, an “inspector” satellite which successfully maneuvered into an advantageous position from which to observe US 245, a United States KH-11 spy satellite (Hitchens, 2020). Later that year, the same Russian satellite launched a smaller object at a relative velocity of 250 kilometers per hour. Many analysts believe this to be a clear demonstration of a new Russian anti-satellite technology (Space Command, 2020); Russia has denied the claims. Such ambiguous and complicated actions are becoming commonplace for Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they seek to regain a position of prominence in world politics. The U.S. must consider events like these as well as potential courses of action through an infinite mindset in order to appropriately respond.

The idea of finite and infinite games was described by Dr. James Carse in the mid-eighties in his book *Finite and Infinite Games*. The thrust of his work has been carried forward and popularized by Simon Sinek in his recent work *The Infinite Game*. According to Dr. Carse, finite games include known players, agreed upon rules, and measurable victory condition(s); football is a common example. Conversely, infinite games include both known and unknown players, rules which are ill defined and subject to change, and have no clear end (Sinek, 2018). As a result, infinite games do not have a winner. Players may choose

to quit when they have exhausted their resources or the desire to play. Additionally, new players may join the game at any time. The goal of players in an infinite game is to perpetuate the game. The recently concluded operation in Afghanistan provides an excellent example of an infinite conflict. Although the U.S. surpassed the Taliban's capabilities on nearly every metric, the conflict was not finite. The removal of any subset of enemy leaders would not result in a U.S. victory as the Taliban were waging an ideological campaign. This nuance was succinctly captured by a Taliban spokesman stating "NATO has all the watches but we have all the time" (Syed, 2016). Rather than defeating the U.S. with superior strength, the Taliban exhausted the U.S.' desire to continue playing. Understanding which game is being played is critical. The player who realizes they are engaged in an infinite game holds an advantage as their play is "not bound by the rules of a finite game" (Donohue, 2020).

Relations between the United States and Russia provide fertile ground to consider finite versus infinite thinking and the implications for U.S. strategy. Assuming the conflict between the U.S. and Russia is infinite in nature, what is the desired outcome? At a minimum, the U.S. must perpetuate her existence thereby preserving her values. This is mirrored closely by Joint Doctrine which lists vital interests as the "security of the home territory, safety of citizens at home and abroad, economic prosperity, and preservation of the national way of life" (JDN 1-18, 2018). Ideally, the U.S. will increase in strength through continual self-improvement. Russia should factor into U.S. strategy only as a potential obstacle to the preservation of American security. Further, Russia has the ability hinder U.S. efforts at developing national strength, though this is largely dependent on how the U.S. chooses to engage with Russia. However, before examining potential strategies to achieve these goals it is important to understand the current state of Russia. The 2021 Russian National Security Strategy now lists "saving the people of Russia and the development of human potential" (Cooper, 2021) as the top priority while defense has been demoted to second priority. Additionally, numerous metrics from the previous NSS are missing including per capita GDP, investments in science and education, and life expectancy. Such actions indicate Russia is unwilling

to openly admit shortcomings. Instead, they claim to enjoy competitive advantages in “aviation, shipbuilding, missile-space industry, engine building, nuclear power, and information-communication technologies” (Cooper, 2021). Overall, Russia’s NSS gives the impression of a former superpower desperately seeking to regain such a status.

Conversely, Russia has found success operating within the gray zone. This grey zone has been defined as an area of state competition “where antagonistic actions take place; however, those actions fall short of the red lines that would normally result in armed conflict between nations” (McCarthy, Moyer and Venable, 2019). Examples include disinformation and propaganda campaigns, proxy wars, cyberattacks, and economical manipulation. These actions indicate Russia appreciates the infinite nature of geopolitics and is ingeniously changing the rules to create advantages. Meanwhile, America’s tendency to view conflict as black and white with a finite mindset has led to inaction thereby eroding our credibility and decreasing our influence on the world stage. General James Holmes, former commander of Air Combat Command openly acknowledged that the U.S. is in an infinite game further stating that hubris kills (Tirpak, 2018). Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville mirrored this sentiment in his paper *The Army In Military Competition* stating “the joint force needs to expand the competitive space horizontally by creating more low and medium-risk and cost options for policymakers to choose from” (CSA, 2021).

How can the U.S. leverage an infinite mindset and what concrete steps can be taken? First, the U.S. should cease referring to Russia as a “near peer.” Though seemingly inconsequential, such language is dangerous as it leads to complacent thinking and a superficial understanding of our comparative strengths and weaknesses. Given that geopolitics is an infinite game, terms like “near peer” are meaningless; there are no agreed upon metrics or timeframes upon which to make such overly simplistic comparisons. Rather, accepting Russia as a peer forces leadership to more carefully consider our position and where we as a nation might best focus our efforts to improve our strengths as a country. Additionally,

the U.S. should utilize the DIME model (an acronym for Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economy) through the lens of infinite politics in order to better explore potential courses of action.

Diplomacy must be the primary instrument of power when engaging with Russia. Despite the political tensions of the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR, countless sanctions and 75 years of finger wagging by the U.S., Russia is still much the same due to their underlying belief and value system. Rather than continual political shaming, the U.S. can engage in quiet diplomacy on targeted issues of common ground. These areas are numerous and include nonproliferation and nuclear security, building stability throughout the Middle East, and continued exploration of space (McCarty, 2019). Initially, the U.S. should work to reset diplomatic staffing to the level prior to the Presidential Election of 2016, after which both countries expelled numerous representatives. The U.S. can also push NATO towards rebuilding similar relations with Russia which were damaged after the annexation of Crimea. By reestablishing open lines of communication, the U.S. can engage with Russia thereby ensuring a mutual understanding of national priorities. Such communication is directly connected to other instruments of power which can further strengthen the U.S. and her position with respect to Russia.

The second instrument of power is information. Traditionally, the information instrument focuses on “creating, disrupting, and exploiting knowledge” (JDN 1-18, 2018). One area which has become a liability in recent years is the U.S.’ susceptibility to disinformation campaigns. This was the topic of study for two major investigations which found that the Russian government attempted to interfere in both the 2016 (Senate, 2016) and 2020 (NIC, 2021) U.S. Presidential elections by decreasing trust in candidates, institutions, and processes. Thus, information assurance is a critical weakness which must be addressed in the near term, both to prevent future tampering as well as to rebuild the trust of the public. Conveniently, investments into information assurance and cyber capabilities strengthen the United States with respect to all nations, not solely Russia.

The U.S. economy continues to thrive despite the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic. Utilization of foreign aid, economic sanctions, and trade have all been effectively utilized in tandem with other instruments of power to influence both allies and enemies. One of the biggest challenges for the U.S. is the ever increasing national debt. As this debt continues to grow it becomes an increasingly large and potentially catastrophic threat to the long-term security of the nation. If the minimum intent given an infinite mindset is to perpetuate the existence of the U.S., tackling the issue of national debt should occupy a larger portion of the national discourse. Unfortunately, the short-termed nature of politics makes it easier to simply defer the threat by continually raising the debt ceiling and leaving the issue for future leadership to address. A second area for consideration is the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act which was signed in 2017. As the name implies, the law increases sanctions against Russia and other adversarial nations. Although the law has had the desired effect, many European nations have suffered an estimated loss of nearly \$100B (McCarty, 2019) as their economies are closely tied to Russia. Thus, although sanctions have proven an effective tool, the U.S. must exercise caution and work together with allies to ensure the full implication of future legislation is understood to avoid undue friction with partner nations.

The military is the final historic instrument of power. Investing in nuclear deterrence and continual technological advances has maintained our military dominance thus far. Although the U.S. must continue to invest in R&D, it would be expedient to focus on building and exercising capabilities alongside NATO and other allies. Many NATO countries continue to maintain a defense expenditure below the recommended 2% of their respective GDP (NATO, 2021). The U.S. must push partner nations to invest while taking the lead in developing coalition capabilities through large scale exercises. Such action will increase the size and efficacy of deterrence against Russian aggression while simultaneously allowing the United States to increase in both influence and leadership.

## Conclusion

The United States has been a world leader for nearly a century across numerous metrics. Maintaining (or further improving) these strengths and others is well within the realm of possibility. However, the U.S. must not fall into zero-sum, finite minded traps with respect to allies, competitors, and especially adversaries like Russia. By seeking common ground or friendly competition with Russia the U.S. will continue to increase in strength. Coincidentally, this this approach most often results in both intentional and unintentional competitive advantages relative to other players. This infinite mindedness is the key to ensuring our long-term goal of protecting the freedoms and prosperity we have enjoyed while simultaneously advancing our cause(s) throughout the world.

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