

**Russian and Chinese historical identity effect on their foreign policy and how that pertains to U.S. GCP  
grand strategy**

SOS 22B, F71 Tigers

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### **Abstract**

The Rise and Fall of empires over the course of a millennia forged the Russian and Chinese cultural identity. These historical identities have cemented foreign policies decisions and continue to impact the decision making in both of these nations. While Russia is attempting to grasp at former glory, China has a disillusioned manifest destiny to exert power and usurp the established world order over their peers, the U.S. must adapt to a new multi-polar landscape. The Department of Defense must embrace economic and political information warfare and re-direct the use of Special Operation Forces (SOF) to advance the U.S. Great Power Competition (GPC) strategy by employing psychological operations and embracing cyber warfare.

### **Russian Historical Identity and Foreign Policy Implications**

Russian historical identity and foreign diplomatic practices can be traced to their origins starting with the introduction of the Kyivan (Kievan) Rus, a loose federation of East Slavic, Baltic and Finnish tribes that formed in the late 9th century comprising of the modern nations of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. (“Why Putin Has Such a Hard Time Accepting Ukrainian Sovereignty,” n.d.). The first rules of the Kyivan Rus dynasty originate from Varangian princes of Novgorod. Ivan III continued to expand the Russian empire by gaining control of the areas surrounding the Crimean Khanate after defeating the Golden Horde. The Tsardom of Russia sustained centuries of conquest by expanding into Siberia and reaching the Bering Strait. Arguably the greatest of Russian royalty, Peter the Great ushered Russia into the modern world by enforcing sweeping reforms and expanding Russian territory via conflicts with the Kingdom of Sweden, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Ottoman Empire. The Russian Empire eventually reached its zenith through Catherine the Great and Alexander II; during this time period Russia continued to

acquire territory in Finland, the Balkans and Alaska. Additionally, Russia clashed with the British Empire in Afghanistan and neighboring territories culminating in the “great game.” At its peak in 1895, the Russian Empire was the third largest empire in the history of humanity, having amassed control over 16.92% of Earth. (“Largest Empires in History” 2021).

The world order has seen a renewed rise in a new Russian Empire led by President Vladimir Putin. Deteriorating relationships with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) beginning in February 2007 and reaching its peak aggression in 2013 with the annexation of Ukrainian Crimea, as well as an unofficial Russian invasion of the Donbas region in Ukraine, has capitulated Europe to a precedent not seen since World War II. Europe stands on the precipice of a war as President Putin has mobilized Russian forces near the Ukrainian/Russian border and through Belarus. President Putin’s justification for a possible invasion of Ukraine stems from the NATO’s possible inclusion of another former Soviet country, the Ukraine. President Putin’s aggressive foreign policy towards Ukraine and the West originate from a lack of recognition of Ukraine’s sovereignty. In a recent manifesto, President Putin claims that “Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole.” President Putin’s declaration in July 2021 lays out a clear indication and justification for his recent foreign policy decisions and potential incursion into Ukrainian and possibly other Baltic States sovereignty. In July 2021 President Putin states

“Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov were bound together by one language, economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and after the baptism of Rus the Orthodox faith.”

Finally, it can be argued that President Putin’s aggressive foreign policies and pivot to military action in Ukraine stems from a reference to historical statement by Prince Oleg of Novgorod when he stated the following words about Kyiv “let it be the mother of all Russian cities.”

(“Putin and Ukraine” n.d.). Furthermore, President Putin appears to admonish the predecessors of modern NATO members such as Poland and Lithuania, stating that their occupation of Ukraine was a suppression of Russian social and religious freedoms. (Putin 2021). Thus, adding context to a potential additional invasion of Baltic states citing a historical tie to the lands occupied by the Russian Empire. President Putin’s current foreign policy and historical justification for its invasion of Ukraine should alarm the U.S. and NATO and signal an indication to return Russian prominence to the state of the Russian Empire/Soviet Union in its pinnacle of power and influence.

### **Chinese Historical Identity and Foreign Policy Implications**

Contrary to the Russian Empire and its predecessors, Chinese historical identity has been forged from continuous warfare, the rise and fall of numerous dynasties, the great Mongol invasion and suppression from European colonialism. However, at the peak of Chinese dominance under the Qing Empire, its landmass occupied 10.91% of Earth. (“Largest Empires in History” 2021). Yet, its influence reached much farther than any territory gained by the Qing dynasty via the famed Silk Road. This legendary trade route was built upon previous trade routes from the Romans, Greeks and Persians to encompass East Asia, Southeast Asia, Persia, the Arabian Peninsula, the Near East, East Africa and Southern Europe. Simultaneously, a maritime silk road spread Chinese religion, ideas throughout Sri Lanka, India, Korea, Japan and the Philippines, contributing to the development of each of these civilizations. The Qing Empire also benefited from a vast network of tributary states such as Laos, Vietnam, Tibet, Korea, Japan, Burma, Nepal and Xinjiang, substantially increasing the economic sphere of the Empire and establishing Chinese authority over the grand majority of Asia and Southeast Asia. However, the Qing Empire’s sphere of economic influence substantially decreased during the rise of European

imperialism via the British East India Trading Company, Dutch East India Trading Company and other European powers. The Qing Empire also suffered from successive defeats to European powers in the Opium Wars and subsequent rebellions, the final blow being the Boxer Rebellion which eventually led to a deterioration of the dynasty's hold on the Chinese people.

Subsequent Civil War and the rise of the Chinese Communist Party has given creation to the People's Republic of China (PRC). The PRC has predominantly retained the majority of the historical extent of the Qing Empire with the grand exception of the island of Formosa, more commonly known as Taiwan. Spurred by a sense of nationalistic renewal, President Xi Jinping has committed to mass propaganda of the "Chinese dream," a global initiative that calls for Chinese military and economic dominance by 2049. ("China's New Silk Road: Tactics, Overstretch or Grand Strategy?," n.d.). This objective includes the reunification of the rogue state of Taiwan. President Xi plans to obtain not only economic dominance and influence in Asia, but to displace the U.S. as the global economic power and disband the world order set after WWII. President Xi has used the historical precedence set by the Ming and Qing Empire to re-establish a New Silk Road and has dictated PRC foreign policy to use predatory economic tactics to gain influence over less developed nations in Asia and Africa. Unlike the historical empires that the Silk Road used to span, the New Silk Road initiative calls for Chinese state-owned corporations to absorb and develop for military purposes key strategic locations in underdeveloped countries that default because of the high interest rates. ("America's Great Power Conundrum: Competition or Confrontation?" 2021). President Xi has also used the physical boundaries and tributary states of the historic Qing Empire to harass and intimidate Democratic Taiwan, as well as traditional American allies like the Philippines. It is evident that President Xi is intent on reinstating re-establishing the historical influence of Qing's Empire

reach by excluding the U.S., India and Japan (3 out of 4 members of the QUAD) from the New Silk Road Initiative. He believes that by doing so it would displace American supremacy and establish themselves as the sole world power. Finally, President Xi aims to expand Chinese military operations without the use of traditional warfare practices in order to establish an order that is created to bring the West to its knees much like the Qing Empire did during European colonial expansion and imperialism. President Xi's intention will usher in the era of the dragon without a single bullet being fired by 2049.

### **United States Response to Chinese and Russian Identities in Pursuit of GPC**

The U.S. is facing a critical moment in its post-cold war supremacy. Chinese and Russian counterparts, have sought ways to reap the political and territorial gains of military victory without crossing the threshold of overt warfare. Knowing that they can't match the U.S. in conventional warfare, our adversaries have developed a "gray zone" in which powers can exercise aggression and coercion without exposing themselves to the risks of escalation and severe retribution, a form of "guerrilla geopolitics." ("Neither War nor Peace" 2018). China and Russia believe that they have a pre-ordained destiny to return to greatness, and the U.S., when compared to these two great civilizations, is a blip in the radar. As such, the U.S. must dust off the proverbial gloves of the cold war and return to the practices that proved were so successful. The goal of American intelligence, cyber, and SOF should pivot from precise and lethal military operations to psychological operations that are aimed to sow discord between Russia, China and its allies; discredit those who cooperated with China and Russia; undermine and weaken their intelligence services and expose their personnel; and create a favorable environment for the implementation of American foreign policy. The U.S. should take advantage of Russia and China's historical conquest to form a wedge between Slavic Russians and Han Chinese and their

ethnic minorities. Using a combination of cyber and psychological “gray warfare,” the U.S. could attempt to radicalize independence movements similarly seen in Spain with Catalonia and Basque citizens. Additionally, the U.S. could pivot to propaganda and social media to highlight atrocities in China’s Xinjiang province, bringing to light the concentration camps that Uyghur minorities are living in. In order to do this, the U.S. must take to heart former Navy Secretary Modly’s statement:

“[T]here is a larger strategic context, one full of national security imperatives, of which all our commanders must all be aware today. While we may not be at war in a traditional sense, neither are we truly at peace. Authoritarian regimes are on the rise. Many nations are reaching, in many ways, to reduce our capacity to accomplish our national goals. This is actively happening every day.” (Dunlap & J.D., 2020).

Specifically, the U.S. can use SOF, in coordination with cyber units, to conduct strategic raids might be used to neutralize key aspects of an enemy A2/AD network, thereby allowing a larger force to operate with increased freedom. (“The Use of US Special Operation Forces in Great Power Competition: Imposing Costs on Chinese Gray Zone Operations” n.d.). They could also be used to eliminate a target that would otherwise consume large numbers of scarce munitions. This specific deterrence can be especially effective at eliminating China’s A2/AD network along the South China Seas and coastal areas that overlap with Korea and Japan. (Id.). Moreover, in a GPC, the U.S. can deploy SOF to establish relationships with non-state and irregular forces. Partnerships with non-state actors like Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who have limited Russian influence in northeastern Syria as well as in preventing an ISIS resurgence. (“SOF and GPC in the 21st Century” n.d.). Knowing the countries discussed in President Putin’s manifesto concerning Ukraine, and the Baltic nations that have ties to the ancient Rus, the U.S. can build new partnerships, perhaps with irregular forces that oppose the expansion of Russia. Similarly, the U.S. can build partnerships with former Qing Empire tributary states like Burma, Laos and

Vietnam, as well as in addition to ethnic minorities suppressed by Chinese influence. The U.S. should look to the lessons learned from the Korean War, in which studies examining psychological warfare concluded it was an inexpensive, effective weapon that is bound to prove more effective as we continue to learn to perfect our technique. The use of psychological, cyber and social media platforms should transform the SOF in a mental scalpel aimed at modifying human behavior. (Maurer, November 4, 2021). Russia itself is prone to subversion considering that Chechnya, Tatarstan, Siberia, Ural and Karelia at one point in history declared independence. The U.S. should weaken the Russian Federation by conducting PSYOPs to counter recently introduced Kremlin law that makes “incitement of any action undermining Russia’s own territorial integrity” an offense. Correspondingly, Similarly, the U.S. should target autonomous regions in China like Mongol, Zhuang, Tibetan, Hui, in addition to the previously mentioned Uyghur region.

Furthermore, the U.S. should take full advantage of the recent protest in the administrative region of Hong Kong to show the full effects of what a communist state would summon to a democratic state or nation, like Taiwan. Such an action could steel the resolve of citizens facing the barrel of these two authoritarian states and would act as a deterrent for any nation believing that an invasion is feasible without high attrition rates. Whether in Europe, Pacific or Latin America, Russian and Chinese aggression can be countered by SOF training, intelligence gathering, in combination with an aggressive cyber and social media platform. Understanding that China and Russia have already provided a historical textbook of where they want to exert their influence, the U.S. must now fully commit to the concept of “gray warfare” and use our SOF, cyber and PSYOPs units to strike hard and unrelentingly in order to achieve our GCP grand strategy.



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