



Research Paper 04 /2025

Russia and its military instrument

**A geopolitical, strategic and operational
view of Russian military power**

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vision of Russian military power***

Work included in the Annual Research Plan of the Higher Centre for National Defence Studies (CESEDEN) for the year, as a Working Group for the Research Document "Russia and its military instrument", assigned to the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE)

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**Organism requesting the study:
Higher Centre for National Defence Studies (CESEDEN)**

**Higher Centre for National Defence Studies
(CESEDEN)**



**Layout work, September 2025, by the Spanish Institute for
Strategic Studies (IEEE).**

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Russia and its military instrument

A geopolitical, strategic and operational view of Russian military power

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Summary:

This paper addresses the geopolitical, strategic and operational vision of Russian military power in a competitive environment characterised by the increasing importance that some states, Russia in particular, attach to an instrument with the capacity to deter and impose.

This research paper will study Russia's role in international relations and geopolitics, from both a Western and an indigenous perspective, continuing with Russia's general and military strategy, taking into account the transatlantic and Russian perspectives, and concluding with an analysis of the military instrument from an operational standpoint, conceptualising the instruments that characterise it, such as deep battle, deep operations, the concepts of maskirovka, desinformatsia and reflexive control, and its nuclear capability, in order to offer a complete view of a military power that is key to Russian influence in international relations.

Keywords:

Russia, instruments of power, military power, international relations, geopolitics, strategy, operational art.

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Russia and its military instrument
A geopolitical, strategic and operational vision of Russian military power

Abstract:

This paper addresses the geopolitical, strategic, and operational vision of Russian military power, in a competitive environment characterised by the increasing importance that some states, Russia in particular, place on an instrument of power capable of deterrence and imposition.

The research will study Russia's role in international relations and geopolitics, from both Western and indigenous perspectives, continuing with Russian strategy, general and military, from the transatlantic and Russian perspectives, to conclude with an analysis of the military instrument from its operational art, conceptualising its key instruments, such as deep operations, concepts such as maskirovka, desinformatsia and reflexive control, and its nuclear capability, to offer a comprehensive view of a military power that is key to Russian influence in international relations. deep operations, concepts such as maskirovka, desinformatsia and reflexive control, and its nuclear capability, to offer a comprehensive view of a military power that is key to Russian influence in international relations.

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1 Introduction

C As the victor of the Second World War and one of the "Big Five", Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power; one of the five nuclear powers with a significant arsenal; a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; and a member of: G-20, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organisation and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe². Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, described by Russian President Vladimir Putin as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (Burbank, 2022) Russia, with socio-cultural and religious dynamics that give it a unique social capacity, is trying to reverse what its elites consider a tragedy by developing its instruments of power: diplomatic, intelligence, economic and, most notably, military³, with which to regain its influence in the former Soviet sphere. In Asia: Armenia and Georgia; in the Caucasus, and Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia; and in Europe: Belarus and, above all, Ukraine, have been the targets of these attempts.

The military instrument allows a state *to impose* and *deter*, and Russia has demonstrated remarkable ability in its use to influence global competition, in conflicts such as Georgia in 2008, Syria from 2015 onwards, Africa, either directly or through *proxies*⁴, such as mercenary companies (Ruiz-Cabrera, 2022) and, above all, Ukraine, following the *Euromaidan* revolution of 2014 (Kuzio, 2018) and, especially, following the invasion that began on 24 February 2022, which has revealed to the world the power of a Russian military instrument, with outstanding conventional and nuclear capabilities, employed with clear political will, in combination with other instruments of power.

The open use of this military instrument in its most brutal form

²Source: MAEC (2024). Country profile: Russian Federation. Available at: https://www.exteriores.gob.es/documentos/fichaspais/rusia_ficha%20pais.pdf [Accessed: 20 January 2025]

³ According to EMAD (2024). PDC-01 (B). Doctrine for the Employment of the Armed Forces. Spanish Defence Staff, the instruments of power of a state are diplomatic, intelligence, military and economic (DIME), to which is added its social capacity, which integrates dynamics such as those mentioned above (for this reason, some authors refer to DIME+ when defining these instruments of power).

⁴ Author's note: a *proxy* (plural, *proxies*) is a delegated adversary, i.e. an actor motivated by the will of another actor who guides their actions according to their interests.

in the competition has awakened the most atavistic fears of the international community and, in particular, of the West, as evidenced by the EU's *Strategic Compass* of March 2022 and NATO's strategic concept promulgated in Madrid in June 2022, showing that war, in the most traditional sense of the word, has not only not disappeared from the dynamics of competition between powers, but continues to be an element to be taken into account when influencing an increasingly hyperconnected world. Russia, with limited diplomatic, information and economic capabilities, but with a resilient social capacity, achieves its influence through real or potential *hard power* actions, through military power that we will analyse throughout this work, and which in turn is based on a military thinking that, according to Thomas (2019), Russia "builds on the past to win its future", as a key element for its development, within its approach to international relations. This thinking is based on high technology, to whose development Russia contributes decisively. It is a way of thinking that is difficult to interpret from a Western perspective, with terms that are ambiguous. It does not conceive of a clear boundary between war and peace, and it is articulated in a coordinated and synergistic manner with other instruments of power and with its social capacity to achieve success in different competitive environments.

In this study, we will attempt to identify the main influences on Russian military thinking, both indigenous and *foreign*, detailing the concepts on which this military thinking is based, and unravelling the relationship between these concepts and its technology and material resources, in order to discover that Russian military thinking is a tool based on geopolitics and Russian idiosyncrasy, which guides and directs its conceptual and material developments and has enabled Russia to develop its own conceptual approach to the use of its military instrument in its international relations.

In this regard, we will analyse the geopolitical, geostrategic and international relations dimensions of Russia through the works of classic Western authors such as Mahan (2011), Mackinder (1942), Spykman (1944, 2017) and Kennan (1947), and contemporary authors such as Huntington (1996) and Brzezinski (1998). Mearsheimer's (2003, 2014) vision, from the school of *offensive realism*, is significant; likewise, Baqués' (2023) integrative vision, which analyses different authors and schools, is considered highly useful.

As for Russian authors, Alexandr Dugin stands out in particular. He is a nationalist author who can be classified as an offensive

realist, both through his main work, *Foundations of Geopolitics* (Dugin, 1997), and as seen in secondary sources such as Málishev, Mijail and Sepúlveda (1997), Krastev (2010), Martínez (2012), De Pedro (2012) and Burbank (2022), and especially in the analysis of his work by Ingram (2001). We also highlight the figure of Yevgeni Primakov, a prominent thinker, politician and diplomat, whom we will analyse through the works of the aforementioned authors, and Rumer (2019), and various publications by Tskygankov (2003, 2021, 2024) and Karaganov (2015, 2021, 2022 and 2023).

With regard to Russian strategic thinking, we have the *national security strategy of the Russian Federation*⁵ and the *fundamentals of the Russian Federation's state policies on nuclear deterrence*⁶, to which we can add, in the specific area of military strategy, *the military doctrine of the Russian Federation*⁷, as well as the works of Leites (1963, 2021 and 2021b), Thomas (2004, 2011, 2016 and 2019), Covington (2016) and Lambeth (2021), and in Spain, those of Pardo de Santayana (2018) and Colom-Piella (2019, 2022, 2023). As for Russian authors, we highlight Svechin's monumental *Strategy* (2004) and Gerasimov's publications (2016, 2017 and 2019).

Regarding Russian *operational art*, we address the Western view from Glantz (1987, 1989, 2001, 2012, 2017 and 2022), Harrison (2001), Vego (2017, 2025), Thomas (2020), the contributions of Menning and Kipp in the framework of the work *Historical Perspectives on Operational Art* (2022), Bihan and López (2023) and Çakıroğlu (2024). Specifically, on *maskirovka, desinformatsia and reflexive control*, Chotikul (1989) and Vasara (2020) are relevant, and in Spain, General Carlos Frías (2016, 2018, 2020, 2022 and 2024) and Campos (2023), to whom we add, on *reflexive control*, Martínez Pontijas (2020), the Russian view, in which we highlight Isserson (2013) and Triandafilov (1994), close to the Tujachevski circle, which would produce the *provisional campaign regulations for the Red Army in 1936* (PU-

⁵ Presidency of the Russian Federation (2021). *On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*. Decree No. 400 of 2 July 2021. Available: [nss_rf_2021_eng_.pdf](#) [Accessed: 19 January 2025].

⁶ Presidency of the Russian Federation (2024). *Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, Approved by Executive Order No. 991 of 19 November 2024. Available: [Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation](#) [Accessed: 19 January 2025].

⁷ Presidency of the Russian Federation (2014). *The military doctrine of the Russian Federation*. Approved by Decree No. Pr.-2976 of 25 December 2014. Available: [mildoc_rf_2014_eng.pdf](#) [Accessed: 19 January 2025].

36)⁸, the work of Vladimir Lefebvre (2001, 2010), an author who later became a naturalised American citizen and creator of the concept of *reflexive control*, and on nuclear capability, we highlight authors such as the aforementioned Karaganov.

For this analysis, we have used the analytical method, which we define (Calduch, 2014) as "the general description of a reality for the distinction, knowledge and classification of its essential elements and the relationships between them", for which we will rely on the study of different sources, both primary and secondary, from different origins, to discover the different causal relationships between the various events analysed, and reach valid conclusions, carrying out qualitative research (Sampieri, Collado and Lucio, 2010), based on unstructured observation and review of documents from primary and secondary sources, also applying the author's personal experience.

1.1 Interest in Russian military power

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. This was an abrupt awakening to reality for the collective consciousness of Western societies (though not for their leaders), marking 'the end of a strategic holiday that had begun with the fall of the Berlin Wall' (Colom, 2022).

Although there had been some earlier indications, such as Russian intervention in the Kosovo crisis in June 1999 (Brudenell, 2008), the position taken by the Russian delegation at the 2007 Munich Security Conference (Ibisate, 2007) marked the beginning of a shift in trend which, between 2008, with the onset of the Georgia crisis, and 2022, with the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, led to an increasingly assertive attitude on the part of a Russia that was placing greater and greater trust in its military instrument. Constant improvements in both conventional and nuclear capabilities transformed this instrument, with its capacity to both *impose* and *deter*, into the cornerstone of its international relations and, therefore, of its capacity to influence the world (Klein, 2016), as reflected in the various national security strategies, nuclear deterrence policies and military doctrines issued by the Russian Federation, the latest revisions of which date from 2021, 2024 and 2014,

⁸ US FOREIGN BROADCAST INFORMATION SERVICE, FBIS (1986). USSR Report JPRS-UMA-86-031 12 June 1986. *Provisional Field Regulations for the Red Army PU 36*. Available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA361873.pdf> [Accessed: 26 January 2025].

respectively.

The implementation of these policies and strategies by Russia has had a significant impact beyond its borders, on an environment that has come to perceive it as a threat. Thus, chronologically, the Spanish National Security Strategy, approved at the end of December 2021⁹, makes eight references to Russia, highlighting its growing military power, both nuclear and conventional, and its increasing assertiveness in a competitive environment in which it aspires to be a global player. In turn, on 21 March 2022, the European Council issued the document *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*¹⁰, which mentions Russia nineteen times, highlighting its role as an aggressor in conflicts such as Georgia and, especially, in its war against Ukraine, placing particular emphasis on the expansion of its military power, both nuclear and conventional, which it uses extensively, including hybrid warfare activities.

Similarly, on 29 June 2022, following the summit held in Madrid, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) published its *Strategic Concept 2022*¹¹, which refers to Russia fourteen times, alluding to its aggressiveness and the renewed capabilities of its military instrument, both nuclear and conventional. For its part, on a new *National Security Strategy*¹², which mentions Russia seventy-one times, highlighting its aggressive stance and the use of its military capabilities through "strategies in the military (land, air, sea, cyberspace and space) and non-military (economic, technological and information) domains"¹³.

Finally, in March 2023, the United Kingdom issued its update to the integrated review of its 2023 security and defence strategy¹⁴

⁹ Royal Decree 1150/2021, of 28 December, approving the 2021 National Security Strategy. Available at: <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rd/2021/12/28/1150> [Accessed: 19 January 2025].

¹⁰ Council of the European Union. *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*. Brussels, 21 March 2022. Available: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf> [Accessed: 22 January 2025]. Title translated by the author.

¹¹ NATO 2022 *Strategic Concept*. Available: [290622-strategic-concept.pdf](#) [Accessed: 19 January 2025].

¹² *National Security Strategy October 2022* Available: [Biden-Harris Administration's National Security Strategy.pdf](#) [Accessed: 19 January 2025].

¹³ Translation by the author. As we can see, the definition of domains varies according to different sources.

¹⁴ *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World*. Available at

, which refers to Russia fifty-five times, describing the country as "the most serious challenge to the security of the United Kingdom"¹⁵.

In short, it is clear that the Russian military instrument and, in particular, the military thinking that informs it, is a subject of interest for study, which justifies the necessity, timeliness and relevance of the work we are now embarking upon.

1.2 The Russian military instrument in international relations theories

Realist theories of international relations consider states to be the central actors in competition and security (Baqués, 2023). Complementing the above, the Copenhagen School, from a constructivist perspective (Baqués, 2023), developed the *theory of securitisation*, which provides a conceptual framework for understanding how certain problems can be transformed into security issues (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde, 1998), a context in which states develop their instruments of power as tools to influence the international system and guarantee their security and survival, and which will constitute our analytical framework.

Another possible approach to the study of Russian geopolitical, strategic and operational thinking can be made through this constructivist theory of international relations, which emphasises the role of identities and discourses in shaping the international system. In this case, the *identitarianism* of Russian nationalism, prefigured by authors such as Lev Gumilev (Titov, 2005), with his writings on *passion* in state-building, *ethnogenesis* and, ultimately, the revitalisation of *Eurasianist* theses, would have given rise to the construction of a discourse that has informed the development of a military thinking of its own as the foundational basis of its military instrument. Unlike what is postulated by realist authors, for constructivism, anarchy is not a constant element in the system of international relations. In the words of Wendt (1999), "anarchy is what states make of it"; thus, narrative and discourse are capable of shaping alternative realities that different actors internalise and subsequently construct. This approach coincides, *broadly speaking*, with the construction of discourses via *reflexive control*, characteristic of the Soviet and Russian military

[11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf](#) [Accessed 29 January 2025].

¹⁵ Translation by the author. Original: 'Russia is the most acute threat to the UK's security'.

instrument and the thinking that underpins it, which we will analyse in our work.

Specifically within security studies, the aforementioned analytical framework of the instruments of power: diplomatic, information, military and economic (DIME)¹⁶, complemented by social capacity (DIME+), where sociocultural and religious elements influence, well known and established in Western strategic literature¹⁷, will be a constant reference throughout our work, as a methodological approach to the capabilities of states that, we understand, are the true protagonists of competition in international relations.

With regard to our analysis of the instrument of military power, we will carry it out, as we have explained above, considering that it has an intellectual component, a moral component and a physical component¹⁸, which we can summarise with the verbs *to know*, *to want* and *to be able to*. (Logroño, 2022) focusing our work on the study of the intellectual component.

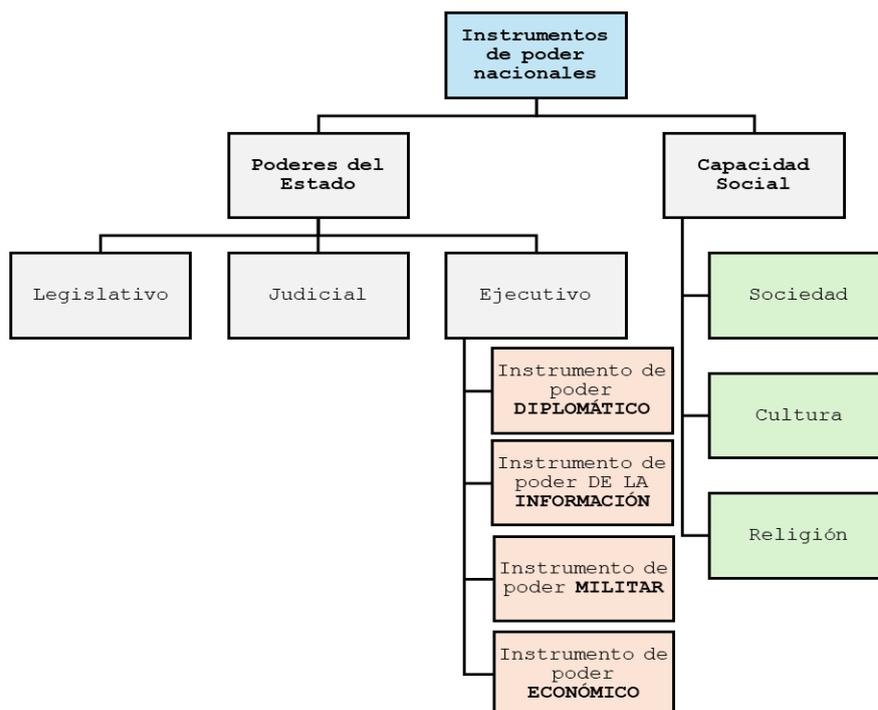


Figure 1. Instruments of power. Own elaboration based on EMAD (2024) PDC 01 (b): 9.

¹⁶ EMAD (2024). PDC-01 (B), and NATO (2022b). AJP-01 Ed F, Ver 1. Allied Joint Doctrine. They use the same categorisation.

¹⁷ This framework is not as clearly identifiable in Russian thinking, which, as we shall see, employs all these instruments in a coordinated and synergistic manner. Nevertheless, it is considered an essential element for our analysis.

¹⁸ EMAD (2024). PDC-01 (B): 50.

1.3 Delimitation of the subject of study.

A double delimitation of the subject under study has been established.

Firstly, a temporal delimitation, in which we have analysed the main authors who have contributed to informing the thinking that constitutes the intellectual support of the Russian military instrument, in a period that has its origin in the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, passes through the doctrinal developments that began in the First World War and, through the Russian Civil War, and following a process of fusion between revolutionary thinkers and the contribution of military specialists from the former Tsarist imperial army (*voenspetsy*, in Russian), reaching the great stage of conceptualisation in the 1930s, with concepts such as *battle in depth*, *deep operation*, *operational level* and *maskirovka*, which ended with the great purges of 1937-1938; It continued with the period of the Second World War and the Cold War, which saw important developments in the strategic field, especially nuclear, and in the cognitive environment, with the concepts of *desinformatsia* and *reflexive control*. and reaches the present day, with the application of these concepts in the use of Russian military instruments in current competitive environments, with approaches such as *gibridnaya voyna* or the Russian interpretation of hybrid warfare, materialised in *sixth-generation wars* that complement the previous concepts and have been used in conflicts such as that in Ukraine.

Secondly, a conceptual delimitation, in which, based on the framework provided by the different theories of international relations, and especially those of offensive realism and constructivism, we will analyse the contributions to the study of Russia in the field of geopolitics, with the study of both international and Russian authors, to continue with a vision of the authors who have contributed to its strategic and operational thinking, analysed from both a historical and current perspective, in which we define the main concepts that inform the currents of thought that characterise this Russian military instrument.

2 Historical genesis of Russia

The history of what we now call Russia began in the Principality of Moscow, a small town in the Principality of Vladimir-Suzdal, founded around 1130 and donated in 1236 by Prince Yuri II of Vladimir to his son Vladimir Yuryevich as *an appanage*. (Wickham.

2016). This principality emerged when the *intermarum* continuum had already been severed by the incursion of the Pechenegs and, later, the Khazars on the shores of the Black Sea, causing the centre of power in what is now Russia to shift from the south, in present-day Ukraine (Principality of Kiev), to the north (Republic of Novgorod).

The Principality of Moscow was affected by the great catastrophe that ravaged Kievan *Rus*, the Mongol invasion, with its capital destroyed in 1238, but to a lesser extent than other centres of power in *Rus*, especially those located in present-day Ukraine, which were completely devastated (Bushkovitch, 2016). and this principality ended up becoming a collaborator with the Mongol power, beginning its rise in 1283 with Daniil Aleksandrovich, son of Alexander Nevsky, the hero of Novgorod who had held back both the Mongols and the Teutonic Crusaders, giving rise to the House of Rurik (Bushkovitch, 2016, Figes, 2022).

His son Ivan Danilovich intensified collaboration with the Mongol invaders, organised in the *Golden Horde* Khanate (Hosking, 2014), as a tax collector, with the nickname Ivan Kalita (Ivan the Tax Collector), getting his masters to force the Patriarch of Kiev and spiritual head of the Orthodox Church in the lands of *Rus* to settle in Moscow from 1325 onwards (Wickham, 2016), and imposing himself with his help on other rival principalities.

Despite timid attempts to shake off the Mongol yoke by Dimitri Donskoi (1350-1389) and his successors Basil I and Basil II, the first Muscovite sovereigns who dared to reign without seeking the approval of the Khans of the Golden Horde, it was not until the reign of Ivan III (1462-1505) that Moscow's full autonomy began, when he refused to pay tribute to the Horde in 1480 (Bushkovitch, 2016). This event, known as the 'Great Uprising', culminated in the Battle of Ugra, which marked the end of Mongol rule over Muscovy.

In 1472, Ivan III married Sophia Palaiologina, a member of the last dynasty to rule the Eastern Roman Empire, seeking to connect himself to the imperial tradition and presenting himself as the legitimate heir to a Byzantine legacy that had just come to an end after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans on 29 May 1453. Once he had consolidated the core of Russia under his rule, he became the first Muscovite ruler to adopt the titles of Tsar and "Ruler of All *Rus*", despite the fact that at that time most of the lands of this ancient Kievan *Rus*' were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which had absorbed the Principality of Galicia-

Volhynia, the last direct descendant of Rus', at the end of the 14TH century and would soon join forces with Poland in the *Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* (Bushkovitch, 2016).

In 1547, Ivan III's grandson, Ivan IV (*Ivan the Terrible*), became the first Russian ruler to officially use the title of tsar, a term derived from "Caesar" which, commonly used by Slavic powers with imperial ambitions, symbolised the elevated and autonomous monarchical status of a power that, having rejected Mongol rule, was beginning its imperial expansion across Eurasia (Bushkovitch, 2016). Gone was the marginal state located on the periphery of Rus' power, first, and then collaborator with the *Genghisid* khanates. Russia claimed the glorious legacy of Kievan Rus' and the Orthodox Roman Empire of Constantinople and began its journey as a global power.

Russia began its Eurasian expansion during the reign of Ivan IV. In 1582, Ermak, with a few hundred Cossacks and Russian veterans, defeated the Siberian Tatars to conquer Siberia (Ziegler, 2009). In 1689, after clashing with the Chinese army on the border with Manchuria, the Russians signed the Treaty of Nerchinsk, which defined the Chinese-Siberian borders (Frank, 1947), and in 1697, the Danish explorer Vitus Bering, in the service of Russia, carried out the first expedition to Kamchatka (Figes, 2022).

But for Russia to become an empire, it had to cease being an exclusively continental power and turn towards the sea. It would achieve this in successive phases, notably its victory over Sweden in the Great Northern War (1700-1721) under Peter I *the Great*, the first Russian monarch to proclaim himself Emperor of All the Russias, and the conquest of Crimea and Cherkasia, completed in 1783 under Catherine II *the Great*, at which point, *roughly speaking*, Russia (not the Russian Empire, which would continue to expand) would reach (Figure 1) its current size¹⁹ (Ziegler, 2009).

¹⁹ Significant additions to its current territory would be those corresponding to the treaties of Aigun (1859) and Beijing (1860), which we will describe later. Most of the rest of the territories acquired by the tsars would be lost either after the Revolution and subsequent civil war (1917-1922) or after the fall of the USSR.



Figure 2. Russian expansion in Europe. Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica. [Russia - Rurikid, Muscovy, Expansion | Britannica](#)

At the end of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century, Russia would incorporate a series of territories throughout Eurasia (Figure 2) which, after the catharsis of the Bolshevik Revolution, would mostly become autonomous republics integrated into a state that would seek to be the political entity that would bring about real socialism: the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the communist regime in the early 1990s, these additions would once again become independent, leaving Russia basically reduced to the borders established in the middle of Catherine II's reign (Figes, 2022).



Figure 3. Russian expansion in Asia. Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russian-Empire>

The period between the end of the reign of the latter monarch and the fall of the Tsars would be marked by numerous conflicts which, on the one hand, would affect the political, economic and social structure of Russia and, on the other, would contribute to the development of its military instrument, including its conceptual development in the form of military thinking: Napoleonic Wars; 1805–1815; wars against the Ottoman Empire, 1806-1812, 1828-1829, and 1877-1878; Crimean War, 1853-1856²⁰, and Caucasus wars, 1817-1864, which were also joined by various expeditions that culminated in the annexation of the Central Asian khanates.

In this context of the Russian Empire's expansion in Asia, we would particularly highlight the annexations carried out at the expense of Qing China, ratified by the *unequal treaties* of Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860), which granted Russia the areas south of the Amur River of its current territory (Primorsk), along with some territories in the Altai, forming the current Russian-Chinese border. As we shall see, these treaties are a potential source of possible irredentist conflict between China and Russia

²⁰ Author's note: Formally, the Crimean War also took place between Romanov Russia and the Ottoman Empire.

in Northeast Asia (Figure 3).



Figure 4. Treaties of Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860) Own elaboration based on Harvard.edu. <https://russiaglobal.omeka.fas.harvard.edu/items/show/23>

The 20th century would begin with two other conflicts: the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905, and the First World War, 1914-1918, which would have their corollary in the revolutionary process that, after the Russian Civil War, 1917-1922, would replace the Russian Empire with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

The early Soviet period was not without conflict either, which would drive the development of an instrument based on original military thinking, influenced both by Russian military tradition and the Marxist thinking of its political regime. The Russo-Polish War, 1919-1921, which coincided with the revolutionary process, would be the catalyst for a change in the way of conceiving the use and characteristics of the Soviet military instrument (Logroño, 2022) which, although abruptly interrupted by the great purges of 1936-1938, would see its development successfully culminate in the Second World War, 1941-1945.

The USSR emerged from this last global conflict as a geopolitical giant, with highly developed strategic and operational thinking that drove its military power, with characteristics that set it apart from other players on the international stage. However, after remaining one of the two global superpowers for almost half a century, contending for world supremacy with the United States, in the 1980s the USSR

entered a period of economic, political, social and military crisis that culminated in its formal dissolution on 25 December 1991 (Figure 4), following the lowering of the red flag at the Kremlin and Mikhail Gorbachev's televised resignation as president of the USSR (Remnick, 1994).



Figure 5. The USSR and its successor states. Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/the-collapse-of-the-Soviet-Union/The-end-of-Soviet-communism>

3 Russia in international relations and geopolitics

When analysing Russia as a state, its *uniqueness* stands out, the result of a historical evolution that is reflected in its international relations, geopolitics and strategy, as we analysed earlier when discussing the historical origins of Russia.

The geopolitical and strategic heir to both the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union, Russia is currently the largest state in the world. Following the territorial losses suffered after the fall of the USSR, the Russian Federation has a land area of just over 17 million square kilometres and borders 14 countries. Its population is around 143 million, a figure that, while significant, shows a relative decline in percentage terms, as it has gone from accounting for more than a tenth of the world's population at the beginning of THE 20TH century to currently accounting for around two per cent of it²¹.

²¹ Source: MAEC OID. Russia. Available: [RUSIA_FICHA PAIS.pdf](#) [Accessed: 23 January 2025].

In the second half of the 1990s and throughout the first decade of the 21st century, the West turned its back on Russia, treating it, at best, with a mixture of disdain, condescension and ignorance, with statements such as those made by US President Barack Obama in September 2014, in the midst of the Crimean crisis, in which he stated that Russia "was a regional power" (El Mundo, 2014) and considered that Russia, given its low gross domestic product and, consequently, its insignificant defence budget, did not pose a credible threat (Campbell, 2018)²². However, Russia has always maintained its ambition to be considered a great power, on a par with the United States and China (Baev, 2022), demonstrating this ambition to the world with its invasion of Ukraine.

Russia sees itself as a *vulnerable* state, surrounded by enemies (Murphy, 2016), which has had territories that, like Ukraine, were part of its historical heritage taken away from it. In the words of President Putin (Russia Today, 2012), "Russia must not tempt anyone with its weakness, and under no circumstances should it neglect its strategic deterrence capacity²³," considering that only its military power has preserved the country.

With this context in mind, we begin our analysis of Russia as a geopolitical actor and in international relations, in the light of Western thinkers, both classical, such as Mahan (2011), Mackinder (1942), Spykman (1944, 2017) and Kennan (1947), and contemporary, especially Huntington (1996) and Brzezinski (1998), and the perspective of Russian authors such as Dugin (1997), Tsygankov (2003, 2024) and Primakov, the latter of whom we will analyse through various secondary sources.

3.1 The Western view of Russia in international relations and geopolitics

In 1904, Halford Mackinder described the concept of the "geographical pivot of history" (Scott and Alcenat, 2008), referring to the area that coincides with Central Asia, which he would expand in 1919 (Mackinder, 1962), giving rise to the concept of "*heartland*" (Bassin and Aksenov, 2006). This protected region allowed for the development of the Russian

²² Probably, if an analysis of Russia's economic capacity had been carried out on the basis of its gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity (PPP) values, the assessment would have been different.

²³ Translation by the author. Original (in English): *This means that we should not tempt anybody with our weakness. This is why we will under no conditions give up our strategic deterrent capability.*

Empire and was exploited by the Soviet Union from a power perspective. For Mackinder, controlling the heartland is key to dominating the "World-Island" (Europe, Asia and Africa) and, therefore, to exercising global influence (Baqués, 2023), and its control formed the foundation of Russia as an empire, since the campaigns of Ermak, which began the conquest of Siberia in the 16TH century.



Figure 6. Mackinder's "geographical pivot" expanded in 1919. Source: Encyclopædia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/pivot-area>

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Mackinder's arguments have been used to justify the existence of a "new Cold War". To paraphrase Baqués (2023), the "heartland" and, therefore, Russia, is a natural geostrategic fortress²⁴, allowing Russia to project its power to the rest of the *World Island*, i.e. to the rest of Europe and even to China (Baqués, 2018). In other words, Mackinder's geopolitical vision continues to influence the way many analysts try to understand Russian foreign policy and its strategic position in Eurasia.

These arguments are joined by a lesser-known *Mackinderian* concept: that of *Lenaland*, the lands of the Lena Valley, which constitute (Mackinder, 1942): a border area, sparsely populated and exploited due to its climate, separating the heart of Russia from its more populated and richer eastern Siberia, which has

²⁴ Paradoxically, as we shall see later, Russia's self-perception is precisely the opposite. Russia considers that it has no strong natural borders and considers itself *strategically vulnerable*.

great potential in a new environment of climate change competition, in which the populations of the south, which will be more arid in the future, could migrate to a north with a potentially milder climate.

Alfred Thayer Mahan is known for his contributions to naval and geopolitical theory in the late 19TH century (Baqués, 2023). His work "*The Influence of Sea Power upon History*", published in 1890, addresses the importance of maritime power in geopolitics (Siebert, 2016). For Mahan, "the sea has always been, still is, and will continue to be the easiest and cheapest route" (Baqués, 2018b).

In the case of Russia, a geopolitical view from Mahan's perspective would highlight the importance of the country's geography and geostrategy, for which he invokes, in a way, Mackinder's paradigm: Russia, with its vast territory stretching across Eastern Europe and Northern Asia, has a long coastline, most of which is unsuitable for navigation and therefore difficult to access the open sea. so, from the perspective of *naval power*, Russia's security and prosperity depend largely on its ability to control and protect its maritime borders and its access to warm seas that allow for strategic projection, a trend that has continued since the time of Peter *the Great* in the early 18TH century.

Mahan advocated controlling key sea lanes and building a powerful fleet to ensure security and global influence (González Martín and Aznar, 2013), and although Russia is not a maritime power in the traditional sense, its position in the Black Sea, the Baltic and the Arctic gives it a strategic interest in controlling certain key choke points (*choke points*) for access to these seas, particularly the approaches to the Baltic (Danish straits), the Black Sea (Bosphorus and Dardanelles) and the Arctic/White Sea (Danish strait/Jan Mayen/North Cape area) in order to control its sea lanes, which requires the expansion of its naval presence. The *maritime power* perspective does not contradict Mackinder's, but rather complements it: Russia could focus on the importance of securing its maritime borders and the need to maintain a strategic presence in the aforementioned key areas to protect its interests and project its power.

Nicholas Spykman developed his ideas along the same lines as Mahan, but with a broader, more continental approach that complemented *Mackinder's* vision, in what some authors call a hybrid theory of geopolitics, between Mackinder's land power and Mahan's sea power (Baqués, 2023: 331-332), addressing

geopolitics from both a land and sea perspective (Rubio, 2016). His works *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, published in 1942, and *The Geography of Peace*, published in 1944, had a major influence on US foreign policy during World War II and thereafter (Zajee, 2016).

For Spykman, Russia occupies a central position in Eurasia, which makes it a key player in his concept of *the heartland* of Eurasia (Baqués, 2023: 344), an area he considered critical for global domination. Although Spykman focused more on containing the expansion of the Soviet Union, his ideas remain relevant for understanding Russia's position in current geopolitics.

According to Spykman, control of the Eurasian *rimland*, with the coastal regions of Eurasia, and a significant Russian presence, especially in Eastern Europe and Northern Asia, was essential to prevent domination of *the heartland*. He therefore argued that, in order to maintain the global balance of power, the United States should seek allies and maintain its presence in this *rimland* to counter any attempt at unification of *the heartland*, giving rise to the *strategy of containment*, which we will analyse later with George Kennan.

Russia's position in the *rimland* gives it significant influence in regional geopolitics and, to maximise that influence, Russia must gain control of Ukraine, access to the Black Sea and influence in Eastern Europe, as well as projecting its power in the Arctic and the Baltic. Therefore, the context of geopolitical competition would focus on these areas of *the rimland* so that Russia can project its power from the *heartland*. Russia is thus a central player in the Eurasian *rimland*, and this view helps to understand its role in the competition. In the context of climate change, we could (and should) add Mackinder's *Lenaland* to this context, which would serve as a link to eastern Siberia and *Primorsk* (Russian territory south of the Amur River).



Figure 7. 'Heartland', 'Rimland' and *containment*. Source: <https://teoriaonline.com/teoria-rimland/>

In line with Spykman's ideas, George Kennan formulated, in a document known as the 'long telegram', published in summary form and under a pseudonym in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947 (Kennan, 1947), the foundations of what would come to be known as the *strategy of containment*²⁵, whereby the United States should prevent the Soviet Union from controlling Spykman's *rimland*. Kennan proposed (Rubio, 2016) that the United States should implement "far-sighted policies" to contain Russia's expansionist tendencies, always "in the long term, patiently and vigilantly" (Kennan, 1947), in order to achieve what came to be known as the *containment strategy* which, going beyond the anti-communism of the *Truman Doctrine*, addressed Soviet expansion based on Russian geopolitical tradition, where the USSR already controlled much of *the rimland* to project its power, particularly Ukraine, Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, and it would therefore be necessary to prevent it from controlling access to the Black Sea, the Baltic and the Arctic and to dispute its control of the aforementioned areas of *the rimland*.

Following the collapse of Soviet power in the 1990s, Russia, the main *successor* state to that power and its geopolitical heir, became the subject of works by leading geopolitical theorists. Samuel Huntington, in *The Clash of Civilisations* (Huntington,

²⁵ United States Department of State. Office of the Historian. Kennan and Containment, 1947. [Milestones: 1945-1952 - Office of the Historian \(state.gov\)](https://www.state.gov/history/1945-1952-milestones/kennan-and-containment-1947/) Accessed 16 February 2024.

1996), considers it an important power that assumes the leadership of *Orthodox civilisation*, highlighting its duality as both a European and Asian country with its own unique identity, whereas the Soviet Union was a superpower with global interests.

Huntington (1996: 163-168) addresses the relationship between Russia and its 'near *abroad*' and, in particular, its relationship with Ukraine, which he considers a '*cleft country*', and proposes three possible scenarios for this relationship: first, the establishment of a pro-Russian regime, which would guarantee regional stability; second, the split of Ukraine into a western, independent part and an eastern part that would join Russia; and a third option, which he considers less likely, whereby Ukraine would remain a federal republic within the USSR. the division of Ukraine into an independent western part and an eastern part that would join Russia; and a third option, which he considers less likely but more dangerous, in which an armed regional conflict would break out between Ukraine and Russia. For this reason, he recommended that Ukraine should not relinquish its nuclear arsenal, inherited from the Soviet Union, as a deterrent against possible Russian aggression, which, as we know, has ultimately materialised.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US National Security Advisor during the Jimmy Carter presidency (1977-1981), considered in *The Grand Chessboard* (Brzezinski, 1998: 105) that Russia, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, should be considered a key Eurasian power and that relations between Russia and the West should be based on cooperation rather than confrontation. In his view, Russia could take one of the following strategic options from a geopolitical perspective: first, to ally itself with the United States as a way of overcoming the mutual distrust that had arisen from the Cold War, which, in retrospect, it failed to do; second, to increase its influence in the nations of the former Soviet sphere of power, its 'near abroad', something which, as we know, it achieved with mixed results; and thirdly, a Eurasian alliance against the United States and the West, an option that would require it to move closer to China, despite their potential rivalry, which would be materialising in the context of the war in Ukraine, with at least tacit support from *Beijing*, without which Russia could not have initiated and sustained this conflict.

To prevent Russia from adopting this last course of action, Brzezinski advised against NATO's eastward expansion, which could be perceived as a threat, preventing Russia from feeling encircled and *strategically vulnerable*, advocating a policy that recognised its legitimate interests while promoting democratic

values and respect for human rights in the Eurasian giant.

To conclude our geopolitical approach to Russia from a Western perspective, we will address the thinking of an author whose work belongs more to the field of international relations than to that of geopolitics, but which we consider important given its contribution to our analysis of today's Russia. We refer to John Joseph Mearsheimer, one of the leading thinkers of the *offensive realism* school in international relations, whose postulates coincide, to a large extent, with those we have just analysed in Brzezinski's vision.

For this American author, Western leaders made a mistake in trying to turn Ukraine into a Western bastion on the border with Russia:

"(...) the United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis. The main root of the problem is NATO enlargement, the central element of a broader strategy to pull Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West. At the same time, the EU's expansion eastward and Western support for the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine are also critical elements." (Mearsheimer, 2014: 3)²⁶

Additionally, these leaders asserted that Russia is a regional power and not a global one (El Mundo, 2014), which pushed Russia, in an approach of *offensive realism*, to maximise its power at the expense of its neighbours. Mearsheimer states (2014: 9) that "most Western leaders continue to deny that Putin's behaviour may be motivated by legitimate security concerns, and it is not surprising that (Putin) has tried to change this view by redoubling his efforts" (²⁷).

Russia has also developed a *de facto entente* with China, which in a way, and for reasons that we will explain later, when we analyse Russian geopolitical thinking, is *unnatural* (since this country is a geopolitical rival to Russia), implemented within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in which the Asian giant acts as a *balancer* in the international arena of competition over the Ukrainian crisis, to counteract possible Western interference (from the Russian point of view) in the crisis²⁸. In turn, the United States would act as an *offshore balancer* for Russia with regard to China (González, 2021: 162-

²⁶ Translation by the author.

²⁷ Translation by the author.

²⁸ This can be seen in the assertive positions held by China and, conversely, the conservative positions held by Russia within this organisation.

162), which would prevent China from gaining an advantage over Russia in the East.

The solution proposed by Mearsheimer is to end the competition at Russia's borders, abandoning plans to westernise Georgia and Ukraine and transforming these states into buffer states, thus consolidating their status as *cleft countries* in what would be a purely *Huntingtonian* approach.

3.2 The Russian view of Russia in international relations and geopolitics

Russian strategic thinking has its own centuries-old tradition and its own schools that approach geopolitics from a national perspective. Russia does not want to be like the West nor does it trust it, and to its historical *uniqueness* it adds a *geopolitical uniqueness* that gives it a *singular* character in international relations. Consequently, most Russian thinkers do not generally seek to join the West, but rather to free themselves from it. This is the basic idea behind the concept of "sovereign democracy" promoted by the Kremlin (Tsygankov, 2003), reflected in President Putin's popularity, as evidenced by his successive re-elections (Krastev and Wilson, 2010: 18).

Within Russian thought, *Eurasianism* stands out in particular, a concept that emerged among émigrés after the civil war in the early 1920s, with authors such as Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Pyotr Savitsky (Malishev and Sepúlveda, 1997:559-573), who advocated the existence of a cultural and geopolitical entity called *Eurasia*, with imprecise boundaries, which would include the continental mass of Europe and Asia, arguing that there is a common bond between the peoples who inhabit it, and whose interests are different from those of the East and West. *Eurasia*, as a distinct entity, should be constructed autonomously from the Atlantic world, emphasising the traditional values of its peoples, based on cultural conservatism and the rejection of the corrosive influence of Western liberal values. The idea of *Eurasia* (De Pedro, 2016: 2) reinforces Russia's hegemonic position, both from a geopolitical and a cultural and ideological point of view, appearing as a third continent.



Figure 8. Eurasia. Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica.
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Eurasia>

The concept of *Eurasia* and the *Eurasian* thinking that promotes it resurfaced strongly as *neo-Eurasianism* in the post-Soviet context (Burbank, 2022), as a Russian school of thought that does not seek to rebuild the Tsarist empire, but rather *Eurasia*, around its natural *hegemon*, Russia (Florentín, 2014). In the words of Vladimir Putin, Russia "must be the leader and centre of attraction of the Eurasian continent" (Martínez, 2012). In other words, Russia, as the heir to Rome through the Palaiologos dynasty and guardian of the one true Orthodox faith, is a messianic power called upon to build around itself a world free from Western influences.

Neo-Eurasianist thought is characterised by its traditionalism, ultra-nationalism and fascist bias, and its best-known figure is the thinker Alexandr Dugin (De Pedro, 2013:2), whose influence in the circles of power in post-Soviet Moscow skyrocketed after the publication, in 1997, of *The Foundations of Geopolitics, The Geopolitical Future of Russia* (Dugin, 1997), in which he begins to outline the main ideas of his thinking (Burbank, 2022), and which has served as ideological legitimisation of Russian aspirations in post-Soviet spaces (although its actual acceptance by the Russian *intelligentsia* is questionable).

Dugin's contribution to the field of international relations bears similarities to Mearsheimer's *offensive realism*. In the field of geopolitics, Dugin, like Mackinder and Brzezinsky, *mutatis mutandis*, posits that the centre of the world is *Eurasia* and that whoever controls the heart of *Eurasia* (the Mackinderian "pivot") will control the world (Ingram, 2001). In his view, Russia is an

empire, in Huntington's civilisational sense, with a multicultural and multi-ethnic base, which must seek cooperation with other neighbouring empires, such as Germany, Iran or Japan, to free *Eurasia* from American influences and ambitions, first and foremost, and Chinese ones, secondarily.

For Marcu (2007), Dugin is the main advocate of post-Soviet Russian expansionism. In his view, *Eurasia*, which includes Europe, Asia and the Middle East, is the centre of the world, and Russia is the centre of *Eurasia*, which, in a *pars pro toto* argument, would make Russia the centre of the world. According to Dugin (1997), the Russian Federation is not Russia, just as the Soviet Union was not Russia, but the Russian people are a unique, messianic people with a spirit of expansion that brings together and includes other "minor" peoples, around which a purely Russian imperial state must crystallise, which would then constitute a true Russia, multi-ethnic and multi-religious.

In the field of international relations, Dugin considers China to be a competitor and probable geopolitical and strategic rival, especially in Mackinder's *Lenaland* (Dugin, 1997) and in the territories of eastern Siberia seized from China's sphere of influence by the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) and Primorsk, which was separated from China by the *unequal treaties* of Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860). China will likely try to recover these territories in a context of climate change (see Annex A), demographic expansion and competition for resources. Therefore, in his vision of *Eurasia*, Dugin considers it necessary to take actions that could weaken China in the face of possible competitive environments.²⁹ To this end, he proposes the creation of alliances with Germany, Iran and Japan, which would constitute what he calls "three special projects": pan-European (Germany), pan-Arab (Iran) and pan-Asian (Japan).

In the words of Burbank (2022), for Dugin, the Russian people are an imperial people and Russia is a *unique* empire, in which the role of Orthodoxy stands out in contrast to Western Christianity, and that, after the "betrayal of the 1990s", Russia will be able to revive itself to become a global empire. It is not surprising that, in *Dugin's* conception, an independent Ukraine is nothing more than an obstacle to the constitution of his projected *Eurasia*. In his words, transcribed by Burbank (2022), Ukrainian sovereignty represents an "enormous danger to the whole of Eurasia". Russia perceives itself as *vulnerable*, and total military and political control of the entire northern coast of the Black Sea is therefore

²⁹ Author's note: Iran is a Muslim (Shiite) state, not an Arab one.

an "absolute imperative" of Russian geopolitics, where Ukraine must become "a purely administrative sector of the centralised Russian state", since without it, Russia would cease to be a European power and become a merely Asian actor, which would undermine the foundations of *Eurasianism*.

Other Russian thinkers, such as Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Russian Communist Party since 1993, and Nikolai Nartov, share both Dugin's *Eurasianist* approach, with its messianic vision of Russia as the Third Rome, and its *offensive realism*, based on a powerful military instrument, without which Russia would be *vulnerable*, although they disagree in their analysis of China, which, although a rival, is not on the same level as the West (Marcu, 2007). This view is also shared, *broadly speaking*, by Andrei Tsygankov (2003, 2021, 2024). Other authors, such as Sergei Karaganov (2015, 2021, 2022, 2023), go further, conceiving of a *Eurasianism* based on the Russian nuclear umbrella (the *weapon of God*), which we will discuss later, with the entire former Soviet sphere of influence under Russian aegis and, in Karaganov's particular case, a China that is not a rival but an ally.

The contribution to Russian geopolitics of Yevgeny Primakov, former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Russia between 1996 and 1999 during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, and an influential thinker who can be ascribed to *Eurasianism*, is also key. As a *politician*, Primakov was known for his opposition to NATO expansion, criticising the Alliance's actions in the Yugoslav wars. The so-called *Primakov Doctrine* (Rumer, 2019: Milosevich-Juaristi, 2023) aims to restore Russia's lost power status and has guided the Kremlin's foreign policy since 1996.

To achieve his goals, Primakov argued that maintaining "zones of privileged interest" in the post-Soviet space and the "strategic triangle" between Russia, China and India would be essential because they would diminish the power of the US and enable a multipolar world order. For this reason (Rumer, 2019: 5), the *Primakov Doctrine* has as its main objectives the promotion of multilateralism, seeking to improve relations with regional powers in *the near abroad* such as Turkey, China, India and Iran, and actively seeking to restore Russian influence in the former Soviet republics, both European and Asian, from the bilateral to the regional level, by strengthening regional cooperation structures and bodies.

According to Marcu (2007), Primakov is an offensive realist who believes that the West is attempting to marginalise Russia as

a potential superpower in the international system and is infiltrating Russia's traditional sphere of influence, thus constituting its main threat. The successor states of the former Soviet Union are viewed with hostility and must be brought back, willingly or by force, into the Russian sphere.

As a final reflection on this section, the thinking of Dugin and Primakov, together with other authors such as Ziuganov, Nartov, Tsygankov and Karaganov, constitutes an essential contribution to the understanding of Russian geopolitics as seen from Russia. Of particular note is Dugin's vision, from a conservative and nationalist perspective, of a Russia that views the West with suspicion, advocates taking measures to protect Russian geopolitical interests, by force if necessary, and promotes a *Eurasianist* approach in which Russia is a bridge between Europe and Asia, with a unique identity and destiny, to promote which an alliance of independent Eurasian states must be established, excluding the United States from this *Eurasian* sphere, in a multipolar world.

4 Russia's strategy

Before beginning this section, let us clarify what we mean by *strategy*, a concept that we must contextualise before continuing our analysis.

Georges Clemenceau is credited with the quote, "*La guerre est une chose trop sérieuse pour être confiée à des militaires*" ("war is too serious a matter to be entrusted to the military"³⁰). In this sense, *strategy* transcends the purely military sphere to become an *art* that affects the very essence of states. For the purposes of this paper, we will consider strategy to be the *art* of applying the various instruments of state power to achieve (strategic) objectives, enabling that state (or alliance/coalition) to reach the desired end state (³¹). Along these lines, we can differentiate between a *general* or political *strategy*, with which the (political) decision-maker directs the use of these instruments of power³², and a *military strategy* that guides the way in which the military instrument contributes to achieving these *general strategic*

³⁰ Translation by the author.

³¹ Author's definition, according to: National Security Strategy 2021; EMAD (2024) PDC-01 (B); NATO 2022 *Strategic Concept*; NATO (2022b). AJP-01 Ed F, Ver 1 and *EU Strategic Compass*, already cited.

³² EMAD (2024) PDC-01 (B): 19.

objectives³³.

In this chapter, we will analyse both strategies: *general* (or political) and *military*, as a whole, paying special attention to nuclear strategy, which is a key element in Russian military power, which we will address from both the Western perspective and Russian thinking itself.

4.1 Russia's strategy from a Western perspective

The West perceives Russia as a threat. The war of aggression against its neighbour Ukraine has, as we have explained, influenced the different strategic concepts and national security strategies, with a more pronounced character the closer a particular actor feels Russia's action is to a threat to its security.

Thus, the aforementioned *NATO Strategic Concept 2022* identifies Russia as "the greatest threat to Allied security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area", while the Alliance does not perceive itself as a threat to its Russian counterpart. This strategic concept places particular emphasis on Russia's assertive stance as a strategic actor, based on its rhetoric and willingness to use its military instrument to achieve its political ends, stressing that it uses this instrument, in conjunction with the rest of its instruments of power, through coercion, subversion and aggression, i.e. across the entire spectrum.

According to this *strategic concept*, Russia seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control, and uses both conventional and cyber hybrid capabilities to achieve this. The country is also modernising its nuclear capabilities, which it can also use in a conventional manner, and is developing capabilities that allow it to destabilise states in the Alliance's immediate vicinity, as well as to act in the Mediterranean, Black Sea, Baltic and North Atlantic areas (NATO, 2022: 4).

For the European Union, Russia stands out as an aggressor state, particularly in its war against Ukraine, which violates international law, threatens global peace and stability, and seeks to create spheres of influence in its immediate surroundings, such as Georgia and Ukraine, or opportunistically in unstable states such as Libya, Syria and Mali. It deploys its military capabilities in post-Soviet states such as Moldova (in the

³³ *Ibid.*, page 21.

internationally unrecognised republic of *Transnistria*) and Belarus, and conducts hybrid warfare campaigns, using disinformation, manipulation and interference, as well as cyberattacks, to undermine stability and democracy in the states it attacks. Furthermore, the expansion of its nuclear arsenal, together with the erosion of arms control and non-proliferation mechanisms, makes Russia a growing threat to European security³⁴.

For the United States, in its national security strategy, issued in October 2022 by the previous Biden administration³⁵, Russia also constitutes a threat. Although the position of the current Trump administration remains to be seen, which *a priori* would focus more on competition with China, leaving Russia (and Europe) in the background, the document analysed, currently in force, devotes an entire section to the analysis of Russia as a threat and states that this country "has chosen to pursue an imperialist foreign policy with the aim of subverting key elements of the international order"³⁶, subsequently referring to its actions in Ukraine, Syria, its attempts to destabilise neighbouring states through actions in cyberspace or intelligence, and the increase in its nuclear capabilities.

For the United Kingdom, in its March 2023 update of its integrated review of its security and defence strategy³⁷, Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, its use of energy and food supplies as weapons, and its irresponsible nuclear rhetoric are a serious security risk, particularly in terms of its military power, especially in the land and space domains of the multi-domain. The United Kingdom has traditionally been concerned with maintaining balance on the continent and views any possible hegemonic position, in this case that of Russia, with concern.

Spain's position is officially set out in the 2021 National Security Strategy (ESN 21)³⁸, cited above, which highlights Russia's interest in gaining recognition for its 'uniqueness' by seeking to increase its area of influence through an expansionist policy reflected in its actions in Syria and Libya (the document is from December 2021, i.e. prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine), and in its rapprochement with powers such as Turkey and Iran.

³⁴ [EU Strategic Compass \(2022\)](#), cited.

³⁵ [National Security Strategy October 2022](#), cited.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, page 25; translation by the author.

³⁷ Cited above, page 2.

³⁸ [ESN 21: 7-8](#), cited.

In summary, we can say that the Western perception of Russian strategy, both general and military, characterises it as an aggressive actor that combines its various instruments of power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic—in a synchronised, coordinated, and integrated manner to degrade and subvert its adversaries. and, in the exclusive sphere of the use of its military instrument, i.e. military strategy, acting across the entire spectrum of operations through *multidomain* actions³⁹ to achieve a position of advantage that allows it to contribute decisively to the realisation of its strategic objectives, both general and strictly military.



Figure 9. Domains and multi-domain operations (MDO). Source: EMAD (2024) PDC 01 (b):58.

4.2 Russia's strategy from the Russian perspective

In the previous paragraphs, devoted to Russia's origins, its geopolitics and its international relations, we highlighted that Russia perceives itself as *unique* and *vulnerable*. We will find new characteristic features of its approach, that is, the ways in which it uses the instruments available to achieve its objectives, when analysing its strategic vision. Within this *uniqueness*, we will first analyse the *general strategy*, or *grand strategy*, of the Russian Federation, and then move on to its *military strategy*, as a key element of thinking, in the form of creative and coherent *operational art*, with features that are clearly distinctive from its Western counterparts.

³⁹ EMAD (2024) PDC 01 (B): 50, defines *multi-domain* as 'a highly complex environment of action, encompassing all domains of operation, with a high degree of interdependence and interaction between them (whether physical or non-physical)'. For clarification, the domains of action, according to this publication, are land, sea, air, space, cyberspace and cognitive.

This national security strategy of the Russian Federation (ESNR 21)⁴⁰ shows continuist and distinctive features with Russian strategic thinking, such as the aforementioned Primakov doctrine, and links to a tradition that, as we shall see, dates back to the beginning of THE 20TH century, which we will analyse.

According to Covington (2016),

"(...) Russian military leadership is very aware of its culture of strategic thinking, and the Russian army as a whole has a common understanding of what this strategic culture is based on. The role of the General Staff as the 'brain of the army', the General Staff Academy and other academies is to institutionalise this strategic culture (Covington, 2016:3)".

According to this same author (Covington, 2016), Russian strategic culture is characterised by four interrelated elements: ***Strategic singularity***, in line with the *singularity* we had detected in previous points: Russia perceives itself as a singular actor in a globalised world, with its own character and a messianic self-concept that makes it unique; ***Strategic vulnerability***: as we have explained, Russia perceives itself as vulnerable, without clear natural obstacles to aid its defence, and threatened by a host of diverse actors, equipped with greater means and resources, who aspire to control it as a way of controlling *the heartland*. Due to this ***strategic singularity*** that makes Russia a unique actor, and the ***strategic vulnerability*** in which this actor perceives itself as permanently threatened and at a competitive disadvantage, Russia considers that war with Russia must necessarily mean ***going to war with the whole of Russia*** and, finally, as a result of the national trauma of the German surprise in 1941 (and, secondarily, the French surprise in 1812), Russia attaches ***decisive importance to the initial period of the war***.

We will use these four elements in our analysis of the Russian Federation's 2021 National Security Strategy, approved on 21 July of that year, which, according to Laborie (2021), constitutes "a manifesto for confrontation with the West". Likewise, at the military strategic level, which we will explore in greater depth later, we will incorporate into the analysis some aspects of its 2014 Military Doctrine (Russia 2014 Doctrine) in light of the four elements described above:

Strategic singularity. In the words of Covington (2016), this element is characterised by the view that Russia's strategic position is unique, in line with the historical, geopolitical and

⁴⁰ Cited work.

international relations analysis we carried out in previous chapters, as clarified by ENSR 21 (ENSR 21: 5) when it refers to 'strengthening fraternal ties with Belarusians and Ukrainians'⁴¹⁴² or 'countering attempts to falsify history (...) protecting historical truth'. For this reason, its strategy must also be unique, based on special capabilities, but also on a strong conventional and nuclear component: '*Little Green Men, Big Green Tanks, and Bigger Green Missiles*' (Covington, 2016:7), i.e. a unique combination of nuclear, conventional and unconventional capabilities that allows it to operate across the entire spectrum of conflict (Russian Doctrine 2016:1). (Covington, 2016:7), that is, a unique combination of nuclear, conventional and unconventional capabilities that allows it to operate across the entire spectrum of conflict (Russian Doctrine 2014:5).

Strategic vulnerability. As we have already seen, Russia perceives itself *as vulnerable*. Russian doctrine (Russian Doctrine 2014: 5) considers one of its risks to be the disruption of its political and strategic command and control capabilities, including those of its nuclear forces, and as a solution, it emphasises an increase in the mobility of such strategic command and control, coupled with greater strategic and operational flexibility (Covington, 2016: 13-25). Russia considers itself threatened by a West that it recognises as having superior technological and economic capabilities and must avoid strategic surprise at all costs (ENSR 21:4). In the words of Gerasimov (2017), '(...) let us remember that there is no definition of war in any official international document'.

Going to war with all of Russia. Perhaps this is the key aspect of Russian strategy, as a solution to the two previous elements, conceiving the conflict as a non-linear transition between the grey zone and open conflict, with unrestricted use of the instruments of power, in line with the idea of the *primacy of politics over strategy* that we find in Svechin. In other words, Russia does not conceive of limited conflicts, but develops integrated strategies even at the lowest levels of competition (Covington, 2016: 34).

The decisive nature of the initial period of war (Kofman *et al*, 2019) Russian strategic thinking is obsessed with avoiding a new *great patriotic war* (Colom-Piella, 2020). Russia perceives itself *as strategically vulnerable and*, for this reason, envisages a future conflict characterised by its speed, in which Russia must

⁴¹ In reference to the special operations units that, disguised as civilians, destabilised Ukraine in 2014.

⁴² Translation by the author.

establish its military position in peacetime (Pardo de Santayana, 2018:11; Covington, 2016: 44). In this regard, its military doctrine emphasises (page 14) the importance of the 'preparedness and readiness for mobilisation' of all its instruments of power, and of Russian society as a whole, that is, 'going to war with all of Russia' (which does not exclude a gradual activation of its capabilities, as we have seen in the conflict in Ukraine, where general mobilisation has not been decreed, although other *war* measures have been adopted in different areas. We will see later that this concept informs its *operational art*, through developments such as *battle in depth*, *deep operations*, *dezinformatsia* or *reflexive control*.

In the study of Russian strategic thought, the aforementioned figure of Alexandr Svechin is of paramount importance. His work, *Strategy* (Svechin, 2004), first published in 1923 and revised in 1927, was a milestone in the evolution of this thinking, both in terms of *general strategy* and *military strategy*, to the extent that, in the words of Andrei Kokoshin, former Russian Deputy Minister of Defence, in his preface to the 2004 edition of the work (Svechin, 2004:15), "until the appearance in 1962 of the book *Military Strategy*, under the direction of Marshal Sokolovski (Sokolovski, 1981), no work on this subject was published in the Soviet Union".

Svechin considers general strategy, or *grand strategy*, and *military strategy* to be part of a single whole, *strategy*, which he defines, considering both levels, as:

"(...) the art of combining preparations for war and grouping operations that enable the Armed Forces to achieve the objectives set for that war. Strategy decides both on matters relating to the use of the Armed Forces and on all the resources available to a nation to achieve its objectives in war (Svechin, 2004: 89)".

Svechin's contribution to Russian military thought is immense and forms the conceptual basis on which we can identify much of its current approach to this subject. Among the concepts he develops, we can highlight that (Svechin, 2004), in line with Lenin's analysis of Clausewitz's work (Lenin, 1915: 235), *strategy*, which, we recall, does not distinguish between *general strategy* and *military strategy*, is an extension of politics, and "war is a component of political conflict" (Svechin, 2004: 106).

In his view, there is no clear boundary between war and peace (Svechin, 2004: 108), which are merely phases of a single political conflict; therefore, military objectives must contribute, in

conjunction with other instruments of power, to the achievement of political objectives. (Svechin, 2004: 95,105), for which all resources and capabilities must be mobilised gradually, relying on "economic power" that requires a military-industrial complex to achieve "technological surprise" (Svechin, 2004: 154). In short: the economy is the basis of *strategy* and, on the other hand, *strategy and technology inform each other*.

Svechin also analyses, in this case in the area that for us would fall within the general strategy, the importance of having "diplomatic power" that allows for the development of "offensive diplomacy" to achieve surprise and "defensive diplomacy" to prevent adversaries from surprising Russia. At the political level, he considers that the selfishness of states is the driving force behind international relations (Svechin, 2004:165), in a competitive environment made up of 'great powers and small allies', which makes him, from the point of view of international relations theory, a *realist* (Svechin, 2004:168).

In the specific field of *military strategy* (which, we insist, does not formally differ from *general strategy*), Svechin conceives of military operations as a succession of combat actions, requiring the implementation of what he defines as *operational art*, which acts as a bridge between strategy and tactics, forming a coherent continuum with these two levels without establishing clear boundaries. He is a pragmatist who shuns dogmatism and encourages adaptability, considering that victory can be achieved through *destruction*, by means of *offensive* actions, or through *attrition*, by means of *defensive* actions, both options being valid if they achieve the desired results (Svechin, 2004:82).

In his work, Svechin establishes a constant in Russian strategic thinking: 'strategy must make a comprehensive effort to predict the future' (Svechin, 2004: 100). We find this same concept in the works of authors such as Korotkov who, in 1980 (Thomas, 2019: 16), stated that "the goal of military thinking is to discover the nature of future conflict" or, more recently, Gerasimov, who titled his famous 2013 article "The value of military science lies in predicting the future" (Gerasimov, 2016). In other words, military thinking shapes the military instrument in its three components: physical, guiding new technological and organisational developments; intellectual, informing doctrine and procedures; and moral, promoting resilience and fighting spirit.

In this regard, Gerasimov (2016: 24) states that "the rules of war themselves have changed, and the role of non-military means

in achieving political and military objectives has increased," adding that the use of military force in isolation is no longer conceivable and must be carried out in conjunction with diplomatic and economic instruments⁴³, together with measures of any other kind, which will predominate especially in the initial phases of the conflict (Gerasimov, 2016:28), in combination with increasing intervention by military capabilities such as *reconnaissance and attack complexes* or *reconnaissance and fire complexes*⁴⁴ (Gerasimov, 2019: 5). In other words, Gerasimov, in his writings, does not make a clear distinction between *general strategy* and *military strategy*, addressing both in an integrated manner as a single whole, implicitly reminding us that going to war with Russia means *going to war with all of Russia*.

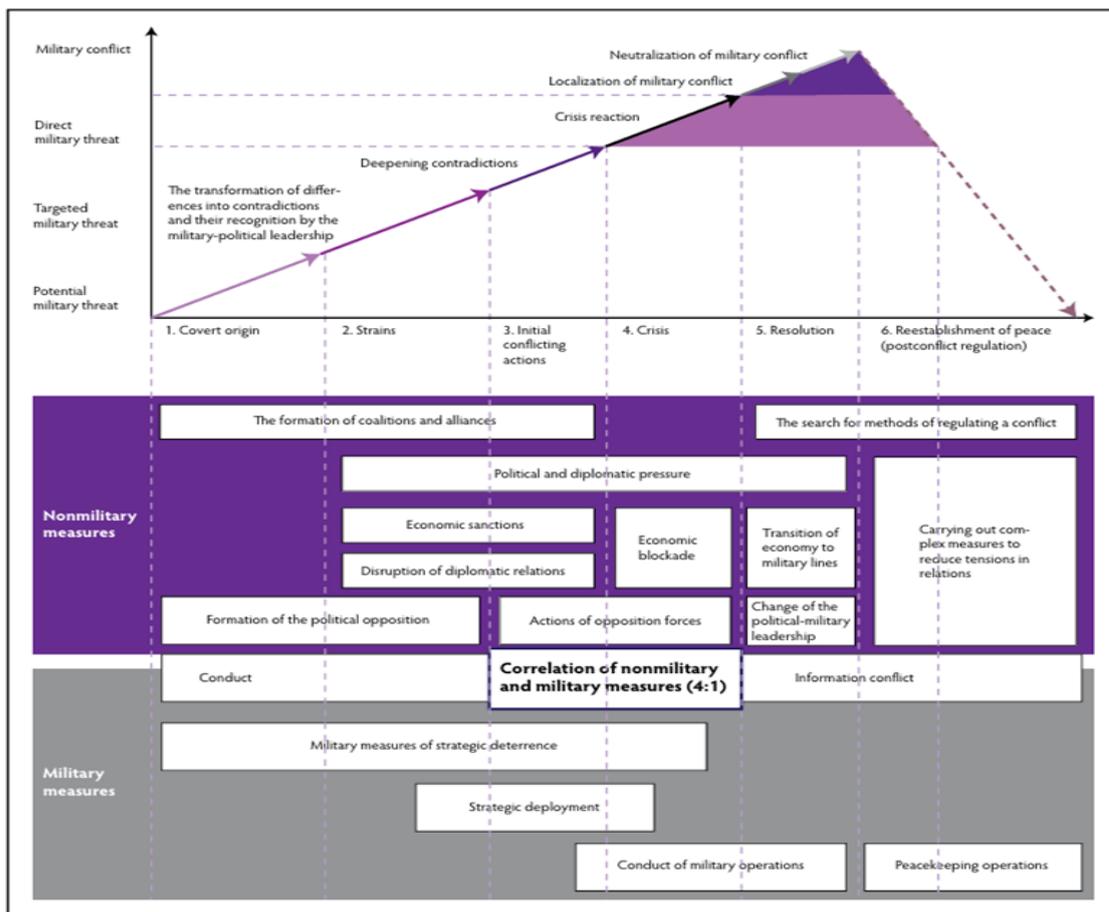


Figure 10. Role of non-military instruments in the conflict spectrum. Source: Gerasimov (2016)

Reinforcing the above, and now in an official and normative document, his military doctrine establishes that military force must be combined with 'political, economic, informational and

⁴³ Gerasimov (2017) reiterates this by stating that "non-military methods and means of conflict have undergone unprecedented development".

⁴⁴ Known in the West as anti-access/area denial (A2/AD).

other non-military measures', that is, with all instruments of power, in an approach similar to what we in the West call a 'comprehensive approach'⁴⁵ .

⁴⁵ EMAD (2024). PDC-01 (B), cited. This concept is known in English as *comprehensive approach* (NATO, 2022, AJP 01).

5 Russia's operational art

Operational art is a tool that allows for the synchronisation, prioritisation, coordination and integration of capabilities, from a comprehensive approach, of all instruments of power, and *across multiple domains* (land, naval, maritime, air, space, cyberspace and cognitive), where actions are executed at the tactical level to achieve effects at the operational and strategic levels. We can define it as "the use of critical and creative thinking in the employment of military and civilian capabilities to achieve strategic and operational objectives through the design, organisation, integration and conduct of campaigns and operations" (EMAD, 2024: 73)⁴⁶.



Figure 11. Instruments of power in the multi-domain. Source: EMAD (2024) PDC 01 (b), 41.

Russia, following in the footsteps of its predecessor, the Soviet Union, has developed its own strategic and operational culture based on highly evolved military thinking that establishes, unlike its Western counterparts, a continuum between war and peace, passing through a broad grey area, combining its different

⁴⁶ EMAD (2024). PDC-01 (B), cited above.

instruments of power at different levels, and which has endowed it with capabilities that allow it to apply its critical and creative thinking in the form of an operational art whose most characteristic elements we will try to identify below.

One of the characteristic elements of this strategic culture and *operational art* is that, also unlike its Western counterparts, and as we have seen in authors such as Gerasimov (2016), military thinking shapes military means, and military means shape military thinking, in a kind of helical paradigm that, cyclically and iteratively, contributes to their mutual development. Once again, *Russia goes to war with all of Russia*, and below we will analyse some of the concepts that characterise this operational military thinking.

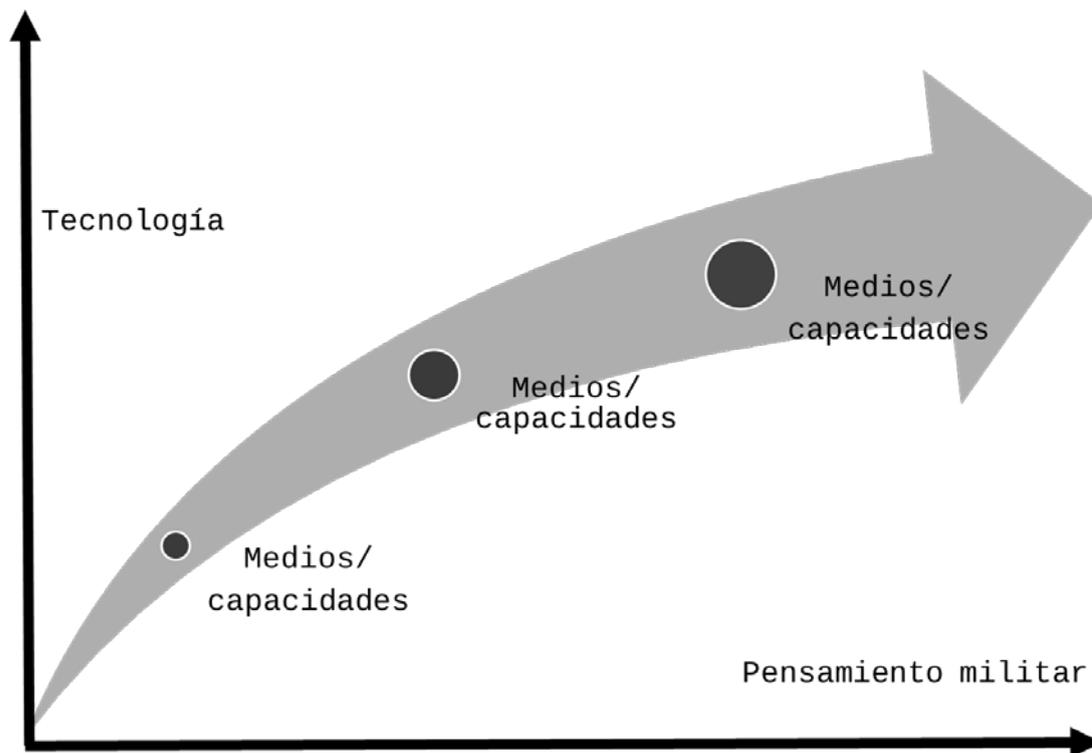


Figure 12. Military means, technology and thinking. View of one of the cycles. Own elaboration.

5.1 Battle in depth and deep operations

The military instrument applies its capabilities through a series of operational factors, which are: force, space and time, with the addition of a fourth factor: information (Logroño, 2022).

In this regard, we explained that as early as 1923, the newly

created *Red Army of workers and peasants*⁴⁷ considered that victory could be achieved through *destruction*, i.e., preferably through offensive activities, or through *attrition*, preferably through defensive activities, giving preference to the offensive but not ruling out the defensive if necessary (Svechin, 2004: 82), as we can see in conflicts such as that in Ukraine (Baev, 2022; Çakıroğlu, 2024).

Triandafillov's works in 1929 established, as early as the 1920s and 1930s, the decisive nature that Russian strategy attaches to *the initial period of war*, creating a concept, that of *deep battle*, in which force would be applied in space and time through large-scale *manoeuvre warfare* actions⁴⁸ (Figure 6) carried out simultaneously across the entire depth of the adversary's forces, reaching tactical objectives in their operational rear (Triandafillov, 1994).



Figure 13. Manoeuvre warfare. Own elaboration based on NATO (2019). AJP-3 Ed C, Ver 1.

Triandafillov conceived this force as being organised into four echelons: a first echelon with air capabilities for both superiority and attack and deep firepower, capable of striking at sustainment capabilities, command and control assets, and achieving interdiction between the enemy forces in contact with the target of the attack and the reserves intended to reinforce them; a second echelon, for attack and breakthrough, composed of combined tank and infantry forces, with fire support and high

⁴⁷*Raboche-krestyanskaya Krasnaya armiya*: RKKA, name of the Soviet Union's army between its creation and the end of the Second World War.

⁴⁸ NATO (2019). AJP-3 Ed C, Ver 1. *NATO Doctrine for Operations*. NATO. Standardisation Office. Author's note: manoeuvre warfare is characterised by creating a series of dilemmas for adversarial decision-makers, thereby collapsing their decision cycle. Manoeuvre itself is achieved by combining force, space and time to gain an advantageous position.

combat power, which would break through the front line of the enemy's defences; a third echelon, for exploitation, composed of highly mobile tank and airborne forces, which would reach the enemy's operational depth, already degraded by deep fire and air actions; and a fourth echelon, consisting of reserves, to deal with possible contingencies (Triandafillov, 1994).

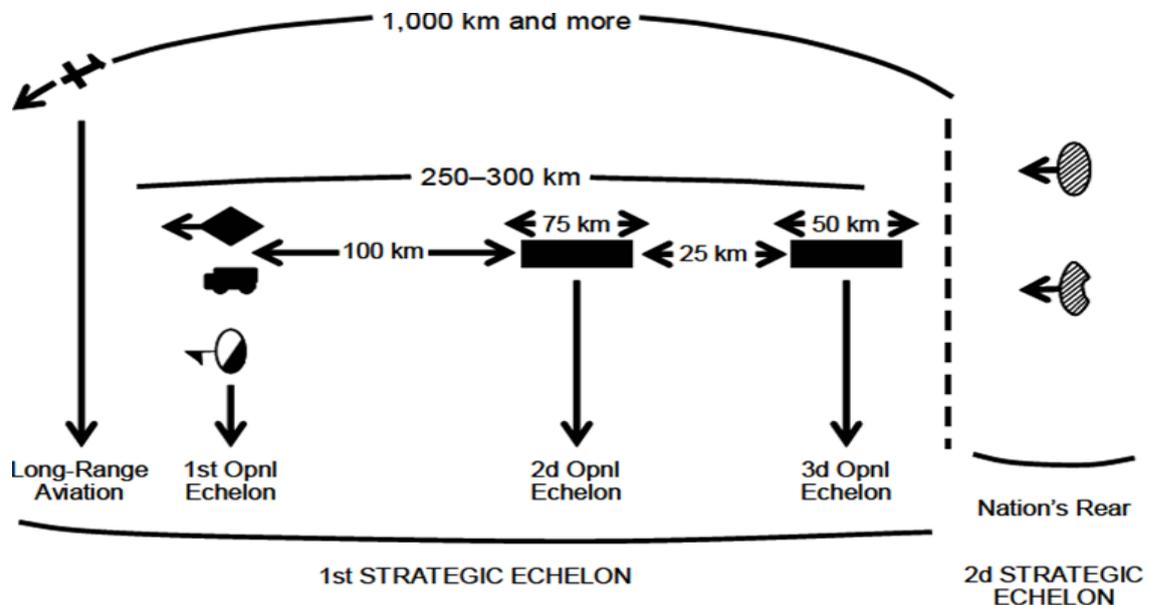


Figure 14. The deep battle. Source: Isserson (2013): 64

The deep battle focuses particularly on the chain of different actions, executed simultaneously (and not sequentially, as had been the case until then), so that the combination of a significant number of forces carrying out different actions coordinated in time and space, and executed phase by phase, allows the planned objectives to be achieved (Triandafillov, 1994). The terrain, and the decisive points based on it, thus lost value in favour of other decisive conditions based on achieving effects on an adversary considered as a system.

Likewise, and unlike previous doctrinal concepts, in which the most relevant factor in operations was key terrain, the concept of deep battle seeks, as we have said, to analyse an adversary system composed of different subsystems, detecting its critical capabilities and critical vulnerabilities, and acting on the centre of gravity, either through these critical capabilities (direct approach) or through their critical vulnerabilities (indirect approach), thus achieving the degradation of the adversary system.

Developing this concept, Isserson, in 1932 (Isserson, 2013), would develop *deep operations*, which he conceived as "a vast sea of fire and combat" (Isserson, 2013:74), in which, beyond Triandafillov's *deep battle*, multiple efforts would be developed,

combining force, space and time over the entire adversary's device, managing to create advantageous situations by repeatedly reaching its operational depth in successive operations and battles that would form a campaign that would affect the entire strategic depth of said adversary, thus nullifying its will to win and achieving victory.

The attacker would articulate its force in two operational echelons: an attack echelon, which would break through the front in a *deep battle*, and a *breakthrough echelon*, which would rapidly progress towards the strategic depth where it would either carry out a successive operation or initiate operational exploitation. The adversary, attacked in different efforts that would take different directions, across the entire front and depth of its device, with these *deep battles* operationally articulated in *deep operations*, would collapse, since every time it tried to contain any of the actions, a new action would arise, different in space and time, which would progress where it encountered the least enemy resistance, achieving the desired *operational shock effect (удар)* on the enemy's will to resist.

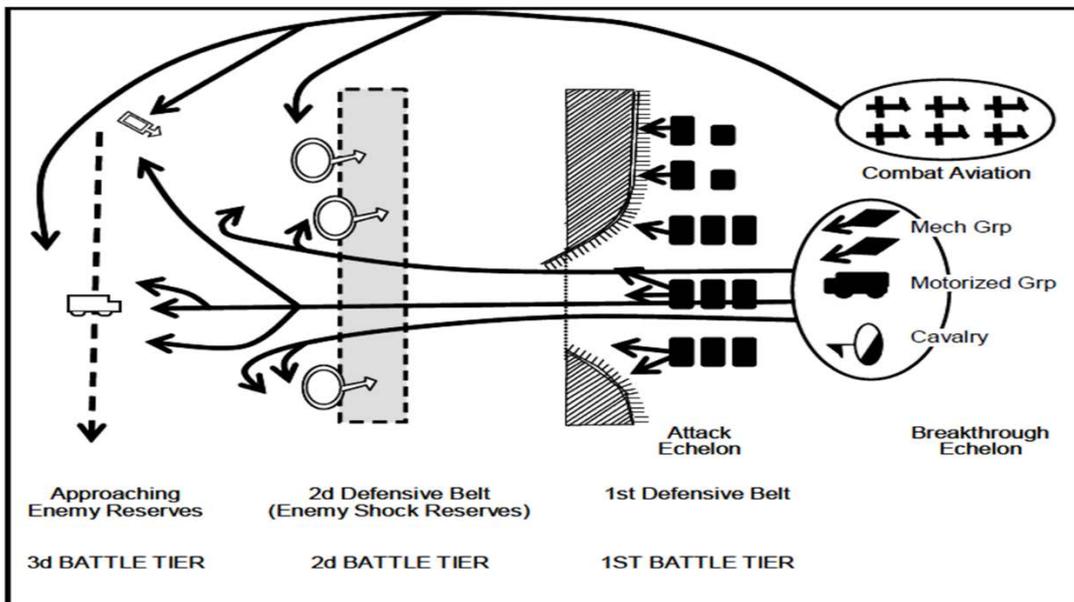


Figure 15. The deep operation. Source: Isserson (2013), 67

The works of these thinkers, Svechin, Triandafillov, Isserson, together with those of others such as Varfolomeev and Tujachevski, would be reflected in the *Provisional Campaign Regulations of 1936 (PU-36)*⁴⁹, a publication that would synthesise the concepts of *deep battle* and *deep operations*, which, despite being declared counter-revolutionary and banned in 1938, after the purge that led to the execution of many of its

⁴⁹ FBIS (1986), cited.

developers, would form the basis of the operational concepts that would lead to the development of a powerful military instrument with which the Soviet Union would achieve victory in the Second World War and which, with the modifications we will see below, it has continued to use in conflicts including the one currently underway in Ukraine (Klug, 2024).

The development of Russian operational military thinking would be largely interrupted by the decisive role given to nuclear weapons in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, in which, while maintaining the concepts expressed above, they were overshadowed by the capabilities of a new weapon, control of which was retained at the highest levels, and which forced a reduction in the size of tactical and operational formations to make them more efficient in the decisive *initial period of the war*, during Zhukov's reforms in the 1950s, a process that would continue in the 1960s (Glantz, 1987).

During the 1970s, under the aegis of the then Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the USSR, Nikolai Ogarkov, the *military-technological revolution* known as the *Ogarkov doctrine* (FitzGerald, 1987) began to develop, whereby new technological developments allowed conventional precision weapons to replace nuclear weapons in their deterrent role. Likewise, these new precision capabilities were added to the concepts of *deep battle* and *deep operations*, allowing for precise and lethal actions against the enemy's rear, with an approach very similar to the contemporary American *air-land battle*.

This *Ogarkov doctrine* has guided the development of Russian military capabilities to the present day, promoting the development of vectors such as electronic warfare, hypersonic weapons, and resources of influence, giving rise to the basis of the concepts and capabilities currently available to the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, with which they are fighting in conflicts such as Ukraine, conflicts for which they apply all their instruments of power, across the entire spectrum of conflict, complemented by approaches such as *hybrid warfare* (*gibridnaya voyna*), developed from Western hybrid warfare (), which it develops in greater depth (Thomas, 2016, Fridman, 2017; Göransson, 2021), leading to the concept of *sixth-generation warfare*. This concept illustrates the Russian vision of the evolution of the art of war (Figure 12).

Generación del arte de la guerra	Medios principales	Niveles de planeamiento y conducción principales	Objetivos de la guerra
Primera	Armas de acero	Táctico	Destrucción del adversario, posesión de sus recursos y su territorio.
Segunda	Armas de pólvora de ánima lisa	Táctico y operacional-táctico	Destrucción del adversario, posesión o control de su territorio
Tercera	Armas rayadas de alta capacidad con gran cadencia de fuego	Operacional-táctico y operacional	Destrucción de las capacidades principales de las fuerzas armadas, establecimiento del control sobre territorio y recursos
Cuarta	Armas automáticas, carros, aviación, medios de transporte de alta capacidad	Operacional-estratégico	Destrucción de las fuerzas armadas del adversario, destrucción de su poder militar y económico
Quinta	Armas nucleares y armas de destrucción masiva	Estratégico (y operacional-estratégico)	Destrucción de las fuerzas armadas del adversario, destrucción de su economía y sustitución de su sistema político
Sexta	Armas de precisión, basadas en plataformas aéreas, navales y terrestres. Dominio de la información.	Estratégico, operacional-estratégico y operacional	Conquista o control sobre los recursos mundiales clave y establecimiento de regímenes leales en los estados que disponen de dichos recursos. Control de la consciencia colectiva de los pueblos y grandes grupos humanos.

Figure 16. The six generations of the art of war. Own elaboration based on Kofman (2021:6).

The conceptual approach of the doctrine of deep operations, revised in light of *Ogarkov's doctrine* and the concept of *gibridnaya voyna*, in the form of *sixth-generation warfare* (Figure 10), stands out for its blurred lines between peace, crisis and conflict, and emphasises the development of non-linear actions, i.e., not contiguous in space and/or time⁵⁰, in the cognitive domain to influence certain audiences (Figure 13).

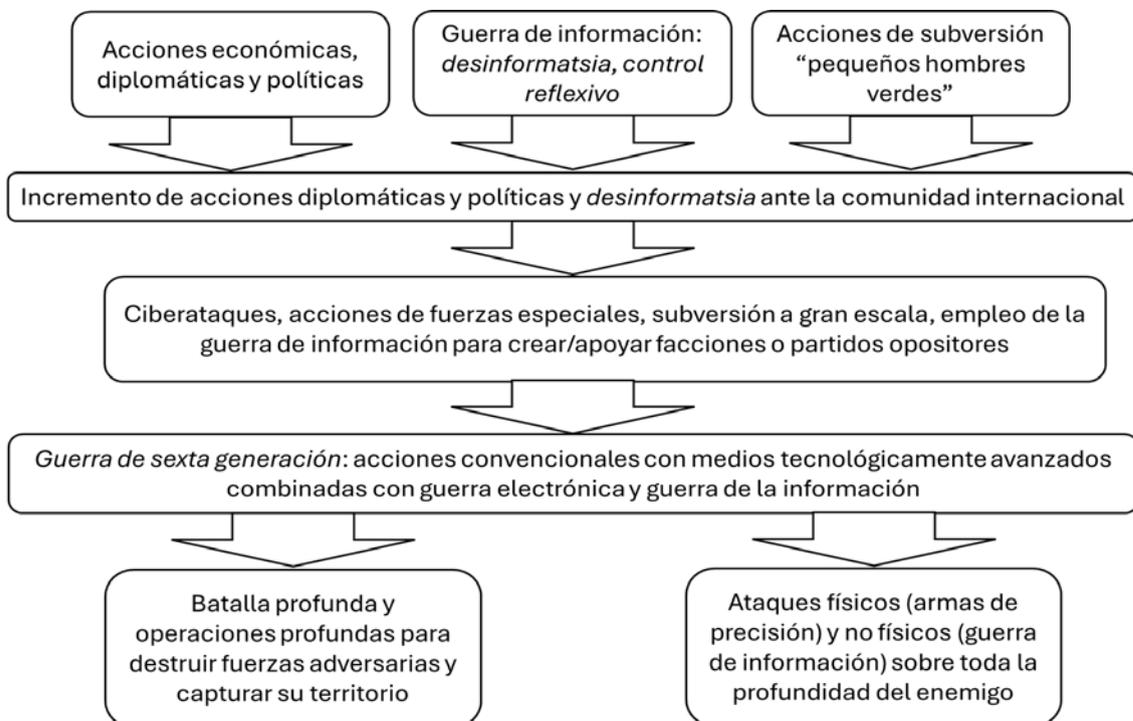


Figure 17. *Gibridnaya voyna* and sixth-generation warfare. Own elaboration based on Thomas (2016) and Göransson (2021).

⁵⁰ Unlike *linear actions*, which are contiguous in space (and usually continuous in time).

5.2 Maskirovka, disinformation and reflexive control

One of the characteristics of Russian military power is its use of *the multidomain*, and in its approach to the cognitive domain, we highlight the concept of *maskirovka*, developed in the 1930s and applied during the Second World War (Glantz, 1989), and its subsequent evolutions: *disinformation* and reflexive control.

Maskirovka (Maier, 2016; Campbell, 2018) corresponds, *broadly speaking*, to what we in the West know as *deception*: a set of measures designed to confuse and mislead the adversary into acting contrary to their interests⁵¹, using all instruments of power to this end, accompanied by other measures designed to protect key elements of one's own information and preserve operational security (operational security, OPSEC), which, on occasions, such as in the Ukrainian conflict, can have adverse effects on one's own forces by preventing certain key information from reaching some essential levels.

This concept evolved into that of *desinformatsia*, disinformation (Campbell, 2018), understood as a series of active measures which, through the creation of different narratives containing false, incomplete or biased information, seek to mislead adversarial decision-makers, increasing the scale of *maskirovka* deception to strategic and strategic-political levels.

Reflexive control (Chotikul, 1986; Vasara, 2020; Martínez Pontijas, 2020) is perhaps the most prominent technique used within this *desinformatsia*. This technique was developed by authors such as Lefebvre in the 1970s (Lefebvre, 2001) to influence the cyberspace and cognitive domains of *the multidomain*. Based on mathematical algorithms, it seeks to induce conditioned reflexes in its target audiences through specific *disinformation*, so that they themselves make decisions favourable to their adversary based on the confirmation biases created, thus destabilising adversaries through influence actions⁵² based on *gibridnaya voyna* operations such as those described above.

This concept makes it possible to affect the operational and strategic depth of the adversary, conceptually linking with the

⁵¹ AAP 6. NATO glossary of terms and definitions

⁵² From a national perspective, these activities are considered part of the *joint information function* (EMAD PDC 01b, 2024), as a set of activities that allow for "promoting perceptions, attitudes and behaviours favourable to one's own operations among certain audiences and influencing human or automated decision-making".

developments of *deep operations in sixth-generation warfare* (Esteban, 2023) that combine linear and non-linear actions, carried out with lethal and non-lethal means, in many cases without contact, to ensure the *shock effect* (Figure 14).

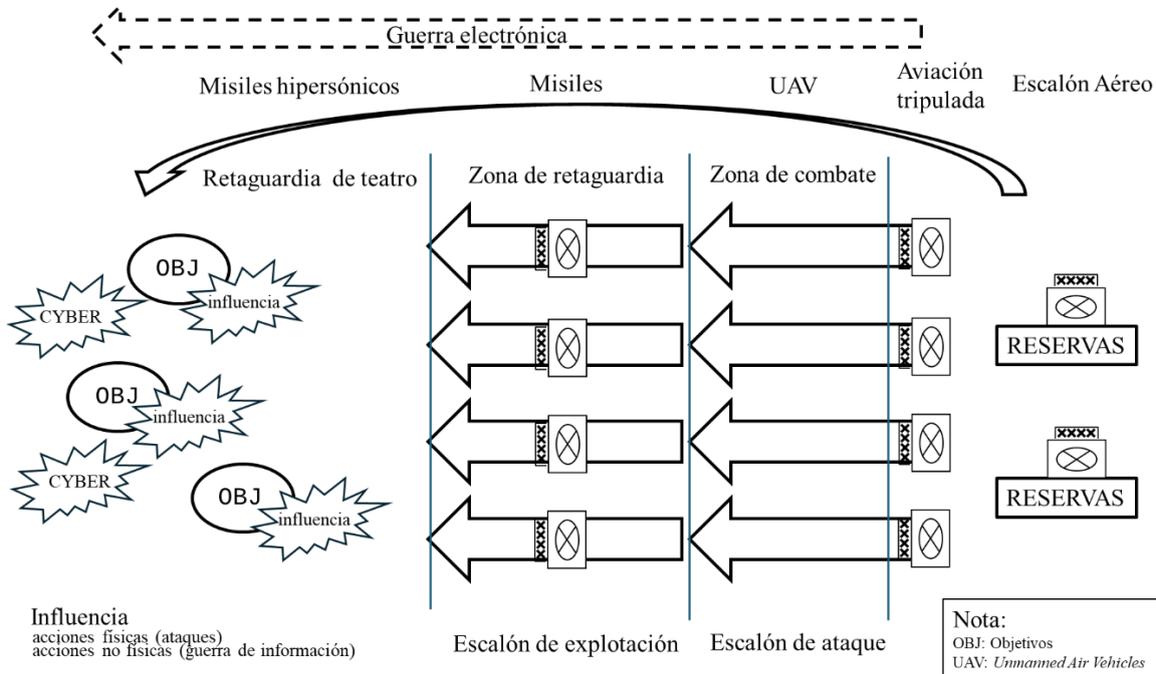


Figure 18. *Sixth-generation warfare*. Author's elaboration based on by Isserson (2013) and Kofman (2017)

These techniques are a good example of Russia's *strategic uniqueness*, which employs all its instruments of power across the entire spectrum of competition and not just in open conflict. Going to war with Russia means *fighting with all of Russia*.

This *gibridnaya voyna* approach, in the form of *sixth-generation warfare* combining linear and non-linear actions, carried out with lethal and non-lethal means, could be observed at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in an *initial period of the war* in which Russia maintained the initiative, adopting an offensive stance until, having exhausted its capabilities, it reached its peak and was forced to adopt a defensive stance, initiating a phase of *attrition*. Figure 15 shows this initial offensive approach, in which the *destruction* of Svechin has been replaced by *influence*; the multiplicity of efforts, without a clear main effort, to achieve *shock/udar* on the adversary; and the prioritisation of strategic-military objectives over strategic (general) objectives, in order to achieve the final situation desired by Russia.

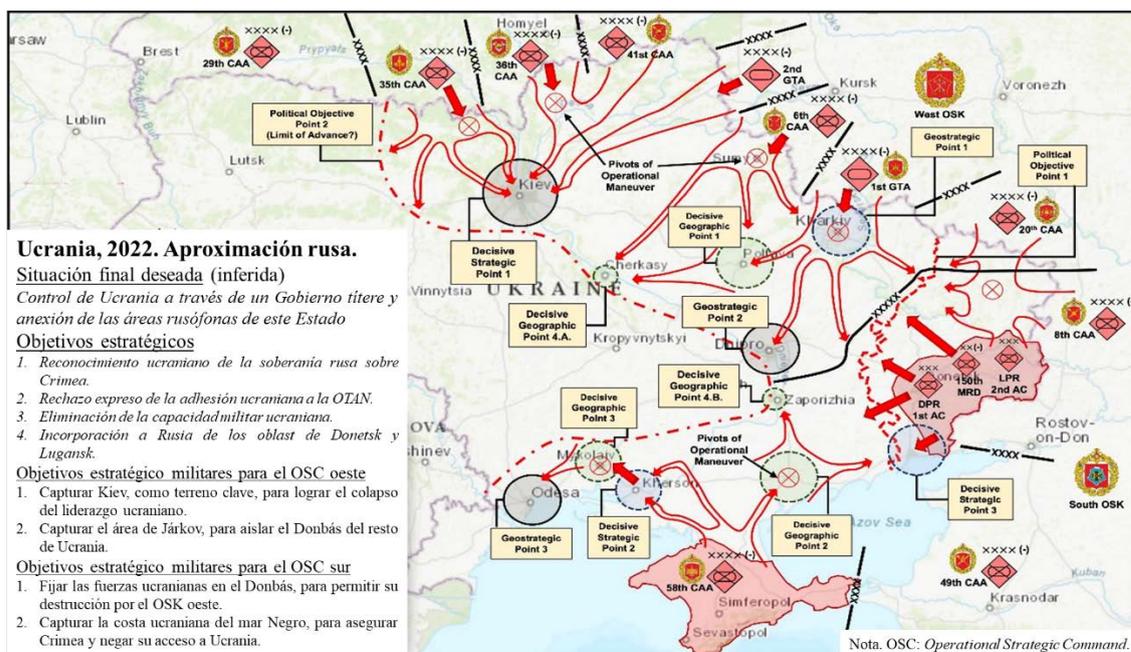


Figure 19. War in Ukraine. Initial (offensive) Russian approach. Prepared by the author based on López Campos (2022) and <https://twitter.com/jominiw>

5.3 God's weapon

Russian military power stands out for the synergistic interaction between its nuclear and conventional capabilities. As we explained earlier, some of the characteristics of Russian strategic culture are its *strategic uniqueness and vulnerability*. Russia is aware of the weakness of its conventional forces and compensates for this with a highly advanced nuclear capability (Bruusgaard, 2021), which is the cornerstone of its deterrence, given that, in its strategic culture, war is total: Russia goes to war *with all of Russia*.

Russia considers the *weapon of God* (Karaganov, 2023) to be a key element of its military arsenal and has stated its willingness to use it whenever any existential threat arises, including action against a critical capability of its conventional forces (Presidency of the Russian Federation, 2024⁵³).

Russia has developed a series of conceptual instruments for its use, which should be reviewed, albeit briefly, although their development would require a specific analysis that would go far beyond the spatial and conceptual framework of this work.

Firstly, the Russian leadership is aware that the threshold of *unacceptable damage* for Western societies is much lower than that for Russian society (Frías, 2016). Furthermore, within the

⁵³ Presidency of the Russian Federation (2024) Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence, cited.

framework of the *Ogarkov doctrine*, given the *decisive nature of the initial period of the war*, Russia's rapid advance on enemy territory would prevent the use of nuclear weapons by Russia's enemies, as this territory would belong to allied states that Russia would seek to protect, thus bringing the use of these weapons within the concept of *unacceptable damage* mentioned above. As a development of the above concept, Russia could *escalate in order to de-escalate* a conflict (Castro, 2020:7): make first use of nuclear weapons to show willingness to use them and firmness, knowing that its adversary is aware of the different thresholds of *unacceptable damage*, and then *de-escalate* the conflict away from the nuclear path, in accordance with the *Ogarkov doctrine*, thus placing itself in an advantageous position in negotiations.

Russia establishes, within its *state policies for nuclear deterrence*⁵⁴, the possibility of using the *weapon of God* in an increasing number of situations, demonstrating an increasing confidence in it, as shown in Figure 16, which compares the assumptions set out in official Russian documents from June 2020 and November 2024.

Condiciones para el empleo de armas nucleares por la Federación Rusa	
2020	2024
Recepción de información contrastada que indique el lanzamiento de misiles balísticos contra Rusia o sus aliados	
Empleo de armas de destrucción masiva contra Rusia o sus aliados	Empleo de armas de destrucción masiva contra Rusia, sus aliados, o contra fuerzas militares rusas
Acciones adversarias que puedan poner en riesgo la posibilidad de una represalia nuclear rusa	
Agresiones convencionales contra Rusia que puedan poner en riesgo la existencia del Estado.	Agresión convencional contra Rusia o Bielorrusia que supongan una amenaza crítica para su integridad territorial o su soberanía
	Lanzamiento de ataques aéreos o espaciales, incluyendo drones, contra la Federación Rusa

Figure 20. Assumptions for the use of nuclear weapons (Russia). Own elaboration based on cited sources.

In short, nuclear weapons are another means of Russian military power (Campos, 2018a); a military power that is increasingly dependent on this capability (Bruusgaard, 2021) and which considers its use to be normal in the context of competition, as its most critical capability, whose development is constantly evolving, and in which it has an increasingly clear confidence.

⁵⁴ Cited publication.

6 Conclusions

In our work, we have seen how today's Russia, which sees itself as the successor to the Eastern Roman Empire, *the third Rome* and the guardian of Orthodoxy, perceives itself *as unique* and *vulnerable* and has developed a powerful military instrument with which to exercise its capacity to *impose* and *deter*.

In our analysis, we have examined Russia as an actor in the competitive environment, through the prism of geopolitics and international relations, first, in the view of Western authors such as Halford Mackinder, Alfred Mahan, Nicholas Spykman, George Kennan, Samuel Huntington, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and John Joseph Mearsheimer, from which we have concluded that Russia, due to its geography as a land power, is destined, as the core of Mackinder's *world island*, to be the *heartland*, projecting its power over its immediate surroundings, Spykman's *rimland*, over which it has lost direct control of a large part of the areas that constitute it, over which it is trying to regain its influence, especially in its *near abroad*, in an environment of competition with the United States and China, in which its instrument of military power stands out.

However, it would be a mistake to analyse Russia exclusively from the Western perspective. If we want to understand Russia, we have to analyse it from Russia's perspective, with its own way of thinking which, as we have said, does not generally seek to join the West, but rather to free itself from it. In this sense, we studied Russia's particular vision in relation to geopolitics, analysing *Eurasianism* through its current formulation, *Neo-Eurasianism*, which refers to Russia's hegemonic position, both from a geopolitical and cultural and ideological point of view, and seeks to conceptualise *Eurasia* as a third continent clearly differentiated from Europe and Asia, and in relation to which we highlighted, among others, the figures of Aleksandr Dugin and Yevgeny Primakov.

From the geopolitical thinking of Dugin, considered *the leading ideologue* of the Russian *intelligentsia*, we highlighted his view that the centre of the world is *Eurasia* and that whoever controls the heart of *Eurasia*, i.e. Russia, must control the world. For this reason, Russia, in his view, is a great empire, in Huntington's civilisational sense, with a multicultural and multi-ethnic base, which must seek cooperation with other neighbouring empires, such as Germany, Iran or Japan, in order to free *Eurasia* from American influences and ambitions, in the first place, and Chinese ones, in the second, and to resume, in an approach typical of

***offensive neorealism*, control of its near abroad in general, and of Ukraine in particular, which it denies the status of a sovereign state. As for Primakov, we highlighted his promotion of multilateralism, seeking to improve relations with regional powers in *the near abroad* such as Turkey, China, India and Iran, and actively seeking to regain Russian influence in the former Soviet republics, combining different instruments of power.**

The West considers Russia, as a strategic actor, to be an aggressive country that uses its various instruments of power in a coordinated manner: diplomatic, informational, economic and, most notably, military, to degrade its adversaries through actions across the entire *multi-domain* spectrum, and has become a state actor considered an atavistic adversary in various Western national security strategies and strategic concepts, especially those issued after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in which it has demonstrated the ability and willingness to use its *military instrument to impose its will*, while maintaining its *deterrence* capability at all times.

However, the Russian perspective on Russia, in the field of strategy, is different. Russian strategic culture has a long tradition and has established its own dynamics, which we have analysed, identifying as distinctive features its *strategic uniqueness*, based on its geopolitical, historical and cultural dynamics; its self-perception of *strategic vulnerability*; that *going to war with Russia means fighting the whole of Russia*, in a vision of competition characterised by its *comprehensive approach* and its synergistic use of different instruments of power across the entire spectrum of conflict, conceived as a continuum, and the *decisive nature of the initial period of the war*, which seeks to avoid a new *great patriotic war*. In the Russian conception, the economy is the basis of strategy, a strategy which, in turn, establishes a biunivocal relationship with technology in which both inform each other, in a kind of helical paradigm, and whose military doctrine, as cited, establishes that military force must be combined with "political, economic, informational and other non-military measures", which are applied seamlessly across the entire spectrum of competition, and without establishing a clear difference between *general strategy* and *military strategy* which, following the legacy of Svechin and Marxist thought, Russia simply treats as *strategy*.

This *strategy* is implemented, through its instruments of power, by means of *operational art*, in the context of operations that are no longer solely military, but which apply the different capabilities of the various instruments in a comprehensive

approach across all domains of *the multi-domain*, and which are executed, particularly in the military sphere, through actions at the tactical level that give rise to operational and strategic effects.

The *Russian operational art* approach prioritises offensive actions over defensive ones, in line with the *decisive nature of the initial period of the war* and aware of Russia's *strategic vulnerability*. and has developed concepts that allow its military instrument to decisively affect the operational rear of the adversary, with its doctrine of *deep battle* and *deep operations*, extended to the cognitive sphere, that is, to the deepest rear of the adversary: its heart and mind, in *sixth-generation wars*, which incorporate the concept of *gibridnaya voyna*, and in which Russia employs all its instruments in a synchronised and coordinated manner, considering that a war with Russia means *fighting with the whole of Russia*, but making particular use of its technologically advanced military power, according to the *Ogarkov doctrine*, and its intelligence power, which incorporates the capabilities of *maskirovka*, which seeks to confuse the adversary and preserve key elements of its own information; *desinformatsia*, through which it increases the scale of deception to strategic and strategic-political levels, and *reflexive control*, through which it injects messages to get audiences in adversary countries to react favourably to its interests.

We have also seen how Russian military power, both in its physical and non-physical domains, and in particular in the cognitive domain, where it influences political decision-makers and adversarial populations, is increasingly based on its nuclear capability, which is becoming more sophisticated and advanced, and less on its conventional capability, which is technologically backward. For this reason, Russia conceives of the use of *God's weapon* in multiple scenarios that could pose an existential threat to it, developing concepts that combine nuclear and conventional deterrence, such as *escalating to de-escalate*, with regard to a West whose deterrence is based on rationality and whose concept of *acceptable damage* is very different, given the different resilience of both societies.

As a corollary to our work, we can affirm that, in the preceding paragraphs, we have identified the main influences on Russian military thinking, demonstrating that it is an original development that combines concepts developed by its own idiosyncrasy, both in its strategy and in its *operational art*, having identified and analysed the main ones.

Likewise, we have been able to establish that Russian military thinking and the technological developments that provide the material means of its Armed Forces inform each other, in a kind of *helical paradigm*, in which they contribute to their mutual evolution in a deliberately synergistic manner.

We can therefore conclude, as we stated in our introduction, that *Russian military thinking is a tool based on Russian geopolitics and idiosyncrasy, which guides and directs its conceptual and material developments and has enabled Russia to develop its own conceptual approach to the use of its military instrument in its international relations.* a final conclusion that must be taken into account in any study of Russia and its military power, both now and in the future.

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