



Enigma Unveiled: Understanding Russian Strategic Mindset and the Implications for the Indo-Pacific



Introduction

The successor state of the former Soviet Union has always portrayed a strategic culture distinct from its Western counterparts. Russian discourse on characteristics of warfare have always been unique which led towards the coining of different terms and tropes referring towards the Russian strategic thought. The recent action in Ukraine demonstrates that the element of surprise is still present in the international relations. The consequences of the conflict are thereby far reaching as it has raised questions regarding the vitality of what we call rule-based order, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Even so, Indo-Pacific is a distant geopolitical field, yet it will be affected by the aftermaths of the war. The article therefore tries to understand the implications of Russian actions are far-reaching to the distant geopolitical fields. Indo-Pacific is a critical theatre in generating a response towards the Russian actions in

Ukraine. Biden's pledge to garner support from allies in generating a stiff response increases the vitality of the Asian allies. Despite the centrality of the European states in aiding Ukraine, they are vulnerable to Russia's arm twisting due to the overt dependence on natural gas. The situation therefore diverts US attention towards the Asian allies. The bilateral meetings between US, Japan and South Korea suggests that the Asian allies are important in making any responsive mechanism effective. Notwithstanding that Japan and South Korea plays an important role in the global supply chain, yet they are also the vigorous democracies. Hence, they are an important asset in US efforts to preserve the rule-based order in the face of growing authoritarian threats.

Russia is the largest landmass on the planet, with its limits stretching from Vladivostok in East to Kaliningrad in the West. Russia is a unique civilization, bridging the continents of Europe and Asia which has led many scholars to argue that Russian perception of war, history and politics is a complex puzzle distinct yet lying in its own interpretation of the events. Several books and articles have been written on the mysterious "Russian soul," often connoted with the famous *Matryoshka doll*.¹ Western powers have occasionally downplayed the role of Russian state of affairs and viewed it as an anomaly in European security architecture. The famous Russian political philosopher Boris Kagarlitsky argued that the universal European models usually fails in Russia, nonetheless, understanding Russia through the standpoint of national exclusivity also fails as well.² So, it is necessary to understand Russia through its own view shaped by its unique interactions with the outsiders. Therefore, the article has attempted to analyze Russia's strategic mindset and its impact on Indo-Pacific power dynamics.

A Mystery Inside an Enigma

While examining the Russian strategic thought it is noteworthy to mention Winston Churchill's famous saying that "Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest."³ Likewise, Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev's famous verse narrates that,

You cannot grasp Russia with your mind
Or judge her by any common measure,
Russia is one of a special kind –
You can only *believe* in her.⁴

Different ideological schools have tried to paint the Russian history, culture, and strategic mindset through different prisms. The Westerners have viewed Russia as a part of the great European civilization which due to ill-fated circumstances left behind. While the Slavophiles viewed Russia as a distinct and unique civilization which was shaped even before the Asian and European

civilizations left its imprints on it.⁵ The bitter rivalry between the two schools led the former conceptualizing Russia as an anomaly while the latter perceived it as a Russian *special way* of dealing with its state of affairs.

Since the end of Cold War, the attention towards Russian scholarship witnessed a drastic decline regarding the fundings on Russian studies. This decline resulted into the vague conceptualization of Russian way of war in 21st century. These inquiries led towards the crafting of several terms and tropes connoting to Russian strategic thought notably 'Gerasimov doctrine' and 'Russian Hybrid Warfare'. Nonetheless, all conceptions failed miserably as they proved to be flawed in analyzing the Russian Modus Operandi. Russian intervention in Syria, annexation of Crimea and the recent invasion of Ukraine are pertinent illustrations of what we call it as a 'strategic surprise'.

Why is the 'West' continuously misreading Russian Designs?

In past, Russian annexation of Crimea come as a surprise to the western policymakers. It turned out to be one of the major interstate security crises in European continent following the collapse of the Berlin Wall.⁶ Fiona Hell thus argued that "Why are we constantly surprised? They [Russians] do all these things, and sometimes they do signal quite clearly, but we missed a lot."⁷ This attitude reflects the underestimation of the Russian military prowess which has led towards the superficial analysis of its intentions and actions. Nonetheless, these views have attributed towards the understanding that Russia is combining a blend of military and non-military synergies in its conceptualization of war. However, this conception became inaccurate when Russia did otherwise in Crimea. In 2015, Western powers were once again surprised when President Putin ordered Russian intervention in Syria.⁸ Even so, the transfer of Russian military hardware and troops already begun in August.⁹

The question arises that why the 'West' is unclear about the Russian actions when it can foresee the signals coming from Moscow. For instance, it appeared that the demonstration of the T-14 Armata at Moscow's Victory Day Parade made Western military experts unaware of its development. According to UK military intelligence's report, 'the tank has caused a sensation'.¹⁰ It also called an urgency to upgrade the existing inventory of the battlefield tanks.¹¹ However, it is unclear that how the demonstration of Armata came as a surprise as Russia has never cloistered its development. In fact, Russian Ministry of Defence has stopped financing the T-95 in errand of Armata development.

These illustrations suggest that Russia has already signaled its intentions clearly before starting the actions. It is now the duty of the Western policymakers to change the perceptions of the West of Russia as an over-

securitized and over geared state.¹² In past years, the role of Russia has been downplayed by the politicians and policymakers while knowing that Russia has one of the strongest militaries, largest nuclear stockpile, and an aspiring space program. The assumption of a weaker Russia created a misleading picture of the Russian affairs which often lead towards the inability of West to read Russian strategic designs. Ivan Ilyin therefore argued that 'Russia as a nation still appears to be a hidden world for the Western world'.

Assessing the Response of Indo-Pacific Actors

Russia's policy of 'looking towards East' sought to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific. Russia's declining energy assets and its status as an energy superpower is prompting it to diversify the market for its LNG products.¹³ Nonetheless, its hopes for reorientating the East Asian markets have resulted into strained relations with the Indo-Pacific states. The region may be far from the Ukraine, yet it will be affected by the dynamics of energy security and geopolitics. The Asian states affected mostly by the Ukraine war are the Russia's immediate neighbors, South Korea and Japan. The recent Japanese defense documents signals sensation towards the deteriorating regional security environment in its backyard. The deepening Sino-Russian partnership coupled with China's assertive actions over Senkaku Islands is threatening for the Japan's strategic calculus.

South Korea on other hand is also concerned with the Russian actions in Ukraine. Korean concerns are oblique with respect to China, yet it is more concerned with the lessons North Korea's is drawing in the current situation. North Korea's support of Russian actions and even recognizing the annexed territories is likely to reduce the Russian pressure on the nuclear issue. This situation has compelled South Korea to ask US to redeploy nuclear weapons in South Korea and building a domestic capability. Moreover, Russia's vision of Eurasian connectivity will likely limit the options for South Korea. Nonetheless, considering alternative response will enable it to assist Ukraine. If Russia succeeds to undermine the Zelensky's government in Ukraine, it will be a serious imperative for the democracies across the world.

In this regard, Biden administration has taken some practical steps notably encouraging South Korea and Japan to provide military assistance and contributing LNG to the European states, respectively. Japan responded positively to US pledge to supply LNG to the European partners. Likewise, Biden administration should solicit Japan and South Korea to halt their diplomatic overtures with Russia. Russia's 'Far East' is among the area of its core national interests. Thus, suspending new investments on the joint development projects in the 'Far-East' is also a need of time until the resolution of crisis. In the light of these factors, it can be argued that Russian actions in

Ukraine coupled with growing Sino-Russian partnership resonates the Russia's aspirations for creating a multipolar world with great powers having respective sphere of influences. The access to the East Asian markets is likely to grant Russia enough leverage to arm twist Europe regarding the energy security. In this regard, East Asian allies notably Japan and South Korea should be encouraged to employ alternative responses to Russia. Certainly, the diversified energy and diplomatic pool of Russia will limit the response of Japan and South Korea. However, encouraging them to augment their international participation will strengthen the global response against the aggression.

Unveiling the Enigma: Analyzing Contemporary Russian Mindset

The shifting of the geopolitical tectonic plates has always been uncontrollable and unpredictable. It is evident that Russia is unable to fight a conventional war with NATO due to the deficiencies in conventional domain. Hitherto, it is more inclined towards using the threat of nuclear deterrent combined with net-centric warfare aimed at disrupting the critical nodes of adversary's civilian infrastructure. Russian strategic mind intends to employ multiple tactics to fuel disunity among the adversarial parties and rendering them incapable of generating a collective response. Ofer Fridman put it as 'to end the enemy's political will to fight.'¹⁴

Russian doctrinal patterns are aimed at sowing discord among the adversary's alliances and trying to influence their public's opinion. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, India called off on the last moment the UK high level delegation due to Modi's government reluctance to express its stance on the Ukrainian crises.¹⁵ Similarly, twenty-six out of 54 African countries didn't favor the UNSC resolution condemning the Russian actions in Ukraine. On other hand, Russia has initiated its economic onslaught in face of Western dependency on Russian gas. The disruption of Nord stream is link to the same thread where Western states found themselves in an immediate haste due to their dependence on the Russian gas.

Ukraine is part of the contested geopolitical field of post-Soviet space and attains a vital position in Russian geopolitical culture. Russia has considered these territories as a part of its vital national interests which is outlined in the so-called Primakov doctrine.¹⁶ Ukraine's current tilt towards EU and NATO fueled the Russian strategic anxieties of the expansion of the NATO in the near abroad. Russian strategic mind is concerned with regaining the Russian influence in the former Soviet territories. Gerard Toal argued that the goal is not to recreate the Soviet Union but to make Russia great again. Therefore, the Russian demands from NATO to cease the new membership of alliances lies in the fear of regime change at home.

Sun Tzu's famous maxim argues about knowing the enemy and oneself. During the Cold War era, the Western powers overestimated the Soviet Union, and its dismemberment came as a surprise. The realist school also witnessed a shift in the paradigm as it also failed to predict the end of the Cold War. However, following the dissolution of Soviet Union, the Western powers underestimated the Russia as a rogue regime struggling with the former Soviet Union's nostalgia. Russia however annexed Crimea and secured Sevastopol to prevent the bottling of its crucial Black Sea Fleet. The current invasion of Ukraine is call for the US and its allies to view and handle Russia with care which involves a careful examination of its political and military strengths.

The series of events in past have demonstrated that Russia is trying to enhance its geopolitical influence across the world. West should be mindful of the consequences of downplaying Russian role in the international politics. Russian political system and strategic culture is distinct from the Westerners; however, it doesn't imply that application of the European universal models can provide a nuanced picture of the Russian strategic mindset. The relationship between the Russian people and the power is complex as compared to that of West. Russian famous proverb "Master will come – Master will judge us" presents a picture of the mysterious Russian soul and its own interpretation of the events.

Conclusively, one can see that President Vladimir Putin has manipulated the traumatic experience of the 1990's and has legitimized the regime at home. The Russian 'black box' is a complex phenomenon and understanding it requires a deep analysis of the Russian history, society, and strategic culture. Therefore, West need a comprehensive and careful understanding of knowing and interpreting the Russian signaling. Indo-Pacific field will be impacted by the far-reaching consequences on geopolitics, energy, and food security. Despite of being far from Ukraine, Russian ambitions pose an alarm to the allies including Japan and South Korea. Therefore, their participation in global response will signal the resolve of democracies against authoritarian threats. Hitherto, making sense of the Russian strategic and doctrinal pattern is hereby necessary to understand its broader geopolitical agenda. Sun Tzu's maxim of knowing the enemy is relevant because without knowing Russian real intentions in the light of Russian strategic culture, history and society, West will remain unable to understand the mysterious Russian soul.

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