

Putin's Russia: shaping a 'grand strategy'?

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In December 1999 Vladimir Putin, then prime minister and acting president, published an article on the Russian government website outlining his views on the situation in the country. The article set out a series of lessons to be learned from Russia's historical experience, a range of opportunities and problems it faced in the present—and the keys to its recovery, identified as a strong state and an efficient economy. What Russia needed, according to Putin, was to 'formulate a long-term strategy' that would overcome the crisis it was facing and create the conditions for its development.¹ The result was a short (eight-page) document entitled 'The strategy of development of the Russian Federation to 2010' ('Strategy 2010'). Noting that Russia faced the very real threat of being sidelined in international affairs, the strategy document stated its main aims as ensuring the improvement of the quality of life in Russia, the maintenance of Russian independence and cultural values, and the affirmation of Russia's economic and political role in international affairs. It offered a list of practical steps for achieving these aims.²

If Putin's first term as president subsequently saw attempts to conduct reforms along the lines of 'Strategy 2010', however, it did so in the face of a series of domestic and international setbacks. Pushed into the background by these events, the commitment of the Russian leadership to strategic planning re-emerged in the middle of the decade, and by the time Dmitry Medvedev became president in 2008, it was once again prominent. Medvedev emphasized the importance of a strategic approach in Russian security and political development. In an article of September 2009 entitled 'Russia, forward!', he stated that the leadership had already developed detailed step-by-step plans to move towards the long-term goal of Russia's strategic modernization. He stressed the existence of a 'new political strategy' and sought to elaborate the 'steps for realizing this strategy'.³ And indeed this commitment was codified in an overhaul of Russia's main strategic

* The author would like to thank Julian Cooper, Silvana Malle, Keir Giles, Patrick Porter, Beatrice Heuser and an anonymous reviewer for their insightful comments in the preparation of this article.

¹ The article, 'Rossiya na rubezhe tisyacheletii' [Russia at the turn of the millennium], was republished in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 30 Dec. 1999, and is available at http://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html, accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

² The document is available at <http://www.csr.ru/about-center>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

³ See Medvedev's article 'Rossiya, vperyod!' [Russia, forward!], 10 Sept. 2009, <http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/5413>; and speech to the Federal Assembly, 12 Nov. 2009, <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/5979>, both accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

documentation during Medvedev's presidency, resulting in a plethora of new or updated concepts, strategies and doctrines published between 2008 and 2010.

A refreshment of this overhaul has been under way since 2011. And with Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 came the publication of presidential orders which set out a series of goals to be achieved by 2018 or 2020. In January 2013, chairing an expanded government meeting, Putin stated that 'last year we outlined a strategy for our activities in the long term. We identified our priorities and targets . . . the work is already under way.'⁴ In the same month a draft new Defence Strategy was presented to Putin by the recently appointed Minister of Defence, Shoigu, and Chief of the General Staff, Gerasimov,⁵ and in February a new, updated Foreign Policy Concept was published.

This article explores this Russian commitment to strategic planning and asks whether the strategic overhaul and its refreshment equate to a Russian 'grand strategy'. The article is framed in two parts. It begins by sketching out the main threads of discussion about Russian strategy in the extant literature. In doing so, it seeks specifically to explore definitions of strategy, for the term is complex and contentious, and prone to use (and abuse) in a variety of ways in debates about Russia. The discussion here goes beyond a Russia-specific focus, therefore, to draw on a wider range of strategy-related literature. The second part of the article begins, albeit tentatively, to apply the definition thus arrived at to Moscow's strategic overhaul, first reflecting on the role of strategic planning and the crystallization of a planning team, and then turning to explore the implementation of the plans.

Given the potential scope of such an article, it is important to register two caveats at the outset. First, the study of strategy involves attempting to see all parts of the whole and how they relate to each other. Thus a full discussion of Russian strategy might involve exploration of a wide range of evolving, detailed issues—economic, military, social and political; but here we focus more on the process of strategy, rather than its content.⁶ Similarly, while each of the documents published under the aegis of the strategic overhaul and its refreshment that Moscow has conducted is important, this article is explicitly not an exploration of their content, since each of them was expertly assessed at the time of publication.⁷ The intention here is, rather, to provide a framework within which a more detailed debate about how Moscow is constructing a strategy can be developed; as a result, the main attention here is given to strategic planning and its implementation. The focus is on official

⁴ 'Rasshirennoe zasedaniye pravitelstva' [Expanded session of the government], 31 Jan. 2013, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/17396>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

⁵ 'Prezidentu predstavlen Plan oboroni Rossiiskoi Federatsii' [The President is presented with the Russian Federation defence plan], 29 Jan. 2013, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/17385>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

⁶ For a more detailed exploration of many of these issues, see Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov, eds, *Russia in 2020: scenarios for the future* (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment, 2011).

⁷ Detailed reviews of these can be found in Julian Cooper, *Reviewing Russian strategic planning: the emergence of Strategy 2020* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2012); Nazrin Mehdiyeva, *The three Ds: development, diversion and diversification. Reviewing Russia's Energy Strategy to 2030* (Rome: NDC, 2011); Keir Giles, *Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020* (Rome: NDC, 2009); Keir Giles, *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2010* (Rome: NDC, 2010), all at <http://www.ndc.nato.int/research/series.php?icode=9>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013. For another approach, see Marcel de Haas, *Russia's foreign security policy in the 21st century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

policy as reflected in the process of planning within formal institutions, and we do not here engage with questions of informal politics and networks, important though they are: these have been addressed in depth elsewhere.⁸ There are limits, moreover, even on this more narrow focus, given the level of secrecy surrounding planning—some important elements of strategic planning are classified, in view of their relation to national security—and the obscurity of some decision-making processes.⁹

Second, a debate about strategy can serve as a framework for assessing coherence in Russian behaviour, provide a foundation for more effectively contextualizing specific Russian policies and relationships, and contribute to a wider range of academic and public policy debates. These debates may be specifically about Russia, considering for instance whether Russia is a 'revisionist state', or change and continuity—and thus predictability?—in Russian policy; or they may be framed in broader, more comparative terms, considering for example whether authoritarian states are better at strategy than democratic states. Although such questions may offer fertile ground for further research, they are not the focus here: it is not the purpose of the article, for instance, to explore whether there is something uniquely Russian about this strategic overhaul, or whether it can be compared to Kazakhstan's 'Strategy 2050', for instance, or with western strategies; nor is it to explore whether Russia is an authoritarian state.

Defining (Russian) strategy

Assessments of Russian strategy have taken four main forms. The first could be called a philosophical approach, relating to 'geostrategy' and Moscow's geostrategic interests. This draws on historical traditions of thinking based on geographical, ideological and global visions advanced by Slavophile thinkers such as Nikolai Danilevsky. The main tenets of this approach are that Russia is a 'heartland' state, a bridge between emerging markets; and that its specific conditions determine a specific kind of politics, its vast, underpopulated territory and permanent threat of invasion generating the need for a strong central authority. This approach points to the importance of Eurasia as one of the international centres of power in a multipolar world.¹⁰ This understanding, although interesting and the subject of much work, and despite possible relevance to the Eurasian agenda that the

⁸ See e.g. Richard Sakwa, *The crisis of Russian democracy: the dual state, factionalism and the Medvedev succession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alena Ledeneva, *Can Russia modernise? Sistema, power networks and informal governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁹ For example, the Security Strategy and Military Doctrine both have classified addenda, and the order 'On the foundations of strategic planning' is also classified. Occasionally these veils of secrecy are temporarily lifted, as in the apparently accidental—and temporary—publication online of the classified order on strategic planning. See Cooper, *Reviewing Russian strategic planning*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Alexander Dugin is a prominent contemporary exponent of this approach. See e.g. his *Osnovi geopolitiki: geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii* [Fundamentals of politics: the future of Russia's geopolitical foundations] (Moscow: Arktogeia, 1997). For further discussion of this approach, see Dmitri Savin, *Geopolitika i mezhdunarodniye otnosheniya* [Geopolitics and international relations] (Moscow: Moscow University, 2012); John Le Donne, *The grand strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650–1831* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Irina Isakova, *Russian governance in the twenty first century: geo-strategy, geo-politics and governance* (London: Frank Cass, 2005).

Russian leadership is pursuing, does not help us unpack the process of Moscow's strategic overhaul, and so is not the approach adopted here.

A second form is more theoretical, using the methodology of 'strategic culture' to explore Russian strategic thinking. This approach suggests that historical experiences shape a political culture that in turn determines strategic choices, and ties national decision-making to a state's traditions and perceptions of itself in history. This approach was first developed to understand the USSR, and retains analytical popularity not least because Russian leaders often refer to Russian history and culture, and Russian strategic thinkers explicitly draw on a rich and sophisticated body of thought grounded in both Russian and Soviet political and security thinking and experience.¹¹ Further examination of this interesting framework would require deeper study of the specific ideas and arguments involved, exploring their methodological complexities, as well as of the exceptions and inconsistencies in any idea of a single Russian strategic culture.¹² This would draw us away from our main theme of unpacking the strategic overhaul, however; so, again, it is not the approach adopted here.

Closer to the present intention is a third form, which looks more at the development of plans and their implementation. However, this approach—which chimes with the understanding of strategy preferred by some in the West—has a more limited, military focus.¹³ Russian-language definitions of strategy have tended towards terms more closely related to a Clausewitzian understanding of strategy: the military art that determines the principles of and preparation for war and its conduct. Indeed, Peter Vigor emphasized the long and deep influence of Clausewitz in Soviet military thought.¹⁴ And this part of the picture is reflected in, for instance, the defence white paper of 2003, the Military Doctrine of 2010 and the Defence Strategy of 2013.

This definition is, however, too restrictive. Andrei Kokoshin, a prominent Russian strategic thinker, has suggested that *strategiya* in the Soviet/Russian context did not just mean military strategy, but encompassed more global connotations, reflecting the attainment of the state's wider aims by whatever means are considered most expedient.¹⁵ Senior Russian thinkers and officials also suggest that over the last ten to fifteen years the meaning has expanded to cover a wider range of issues, including not just military but also economic and political matters.

¹¹ See e.g. Jack Snyder, *The Soviet strategic culture: implications for limited nuclear operations*, R-2154-AF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, Sept. 1977); Ben Lombardi, *Strategic assessment—Russia: strategic culture and foreign policy* (Ottawa: Defence R&D Canada, April 2009); Henriikka Heikka, *The evolution of Russian grand strategy: implications for Europe's north* (Birmingham: POLSIS, University of Birmingham, 2001).

¹² For some of the complexities inherent in a 'strategic culture' approach, see Alastair Johnston, *Cultural realism: strategic culture and grand strategy in Chinese history* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). For a critique of strategic culture in the Russian context, see William Fuller, *Strategy and power in Russia, 1600–1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

¹³ Alexander Svechin, *Strategy* (Minneapolis: East View, 1992); V. Zolotarev, ed., *Istoriya voennoi strategii Rossii* [The history of Russia's military strategy] (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole Poligrafresursi, 2000); Condoleezza Rice, 'The evolution of Soviet grand strategy', in Paul Kennedy, ed., *Grand strategies in war and peace* (London: Yale University Press, 1991); Jennifer Mathers, 'Déjà vu: familiar trends in Russian strategic thought', *Contemporary Security Policy* 16: 3, 1995, pp. 380–95. Also see Fuller, *Strategy and power*.

¹⁴ Peter Vigor, *The Soviet view of war, peace and neutrality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 89–96.

¹⁵ Andrei Kokoshin, *Soviet strategic thought* (London: MIT Press, 1998), p. 50.

This wider definition brings us closer to what can be understood in the West as 'grand strategy', a concept that emerged in the mid-twentieth century; and it is this fourth form that will provide the focus for the remainder of this article.

Across those—surprisingly few—contributions to the literature that have adopted this 'grand strategy' approach, there is little consensus. Commentators can be broadly sorted into two groups, critics and sceptics.¹⁶ For some of the former, particularly those who emphasize the KGB credentials of the Russian leadership, it is almost axiomatic that the Kremlin has a 'strategy'—not least since one of the earliest definitions of the term alludes to a 'stragem', a ruse or trick to deceive an opponent. Other critics, with a similar propensity for echoing Cold War era concerns about Soviet expansionism, assert the existence of an aggressive and expansive strategy, exemplified by Russian moves in foreign or energy policy, and the Russo-Georgian war of 2008.¹⁷ Such views have gained particular traction with both the rise in strategic dissonance between Russia and the West since 2003 and the concern among some western observers of Russia that Vladimir Putin seeks to re-establish some form of empire. Critics tend to assume a central Russian strategy, and emphasize it by matching lists of perceived Russian strengths against western weaknesses.

The sceptics, on the other hand, doubt Moscow's ability to design a coherent strategy; indeed, some draw on Russian history to suggest a tradition of 'anti-strategy'. Inherent Russian 'advantages' such as numerical mass, or geographic or climatic conditions, have meant that Russian leaders have not had to develop coherent strategic plans, they argue.¹⁸ Others have gone further, pointing to a traditional 'Tolstoyan rejection' of strategy: strategic planning was futile, since the role of luck was too great, and the Russian leadership had too little control over events. Russian 'strategy', therefore, was merely tantamount to a combination of improvisation and accident, bolstered by a celebration of the moral strength and patriotism of ordinary Russians.¹⁹

Contemporary, post-Soviet-era sceptics point to a number of factors that prevent Russia espousing a strategy. Some argue that the personal interests of the leadership are given priority over those of the state;²⁰ others suggest a blend of habit, opportunism and arbitrariness in decision-making.²¹ Others emphasize the difficulty of conducting top-down reform in a political system that is beset by informal networks and dysfunctional governance,²² and still others emphasize the

¹⁶ Here we are not discussing the misuse of the term 'grand strategy' in its application to single, specific subjects, such as Putin's 'grand strategy' against domestic opposition, or towards Georgia or Ukraine. One observer, for instance, has suggested that Putin's grand strategy is to 'roll back democracy': Michael McFaul, 'The grand strategy of Vladimir Putin', *Hoover Digest*, no. 1, 30 Jan. 2004, <http://www.hoover.org/publications/hoover-digest/article/7634>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013. McFaul is now US Ambassador to Russia.

¹⁷ See e.g. John Lewis Gaddis, 'What is grand strategy?', keynote address to symposium on 'International security in a new era of crisis', Princeton University, 30 April 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mTNH2PegIQ>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

¹⁸ See Edward Luttwak, *The grand strategy of the Soviet Union* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983), p. 15.

¹⁹ John Moran, 'Back to the future? Tolstoy and post communist Russian military politics', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12: 4, Dec. 1999, p. 65.

²⁰ Author's correspondence with Peter Reddaway, April 2013.

²¹ James Sherr, *Hard diplomacy and soft coercion: Russia's influence abroad* (London: Chatham House, 2013), ch. 1.

²² Ledeneva, *Can Russia modernise?*

negative impact of intra-elite conflict. All these factors give rise to inconsistent and uncoordinated policies that, together, result in tactical, short-term thinking and action, either preventing or undermining coordinated long-term strategic approaches.²³ Celeste Wallander vividly sums up the views of these sceptics by stating that ‘Russian grand strategy is neither grand, nor strategic, nor sustainable’.²⁴

The views of critics and sceptics have important echoes throughout contemporary commentary on Russia, and make many relevant points about Russian politics. Yet these historical and contemporary views of Russian strategy can also be misleading, and they rarely seek to come to grips with the main tenets of grand strategy. Instead, they reveal myths and oversimplifications, and assumptions of Russia as a monolithic ‘black box’. They also emphasize a more polemical argument: as Andrei Tsygankov, who asserts that there is a Russian grand strategy, has suggested, both camps are wrong: the alarmists misrepresent the aggressiveness of Russian strategy while the sceptics overplay Russian weakness.²⁵

Strategic planning has a long history in Russia. Historians such as Dominic Lieven and John Le Donne, for instance, discount the historical ‘Tolstoyan’ rejection of strategy as a myth, arguing that, on the contrary, Russian policy was intelligently conceived and executed with consistent purpose, and carried out by competent officials.²⁶ Some observers of the Soviet Union took a similar line. Malcolm Mackintosh, for instance, suggested that Soviet foreign policy appeared to have been a ‘planned initiative in its own right [and could] justly be described as an example of the strategy and tactics of a Soviet Government acting unfettered and unhindered’.²⁷ Indeed, as Julian Cooper has pointed out, strategic planning was central to Soviet management, in which considerable administrative effort, time and resources were given to the formulation of these plans and their implementation. Although this system unravelled with the collapse of the USSR, Cooper argues that strategic planning remained an important aspect of state work in the 1990s, and that many of those currently in senior positions in Russia are familiar with the theory and practice of such methods.²⁸ Others, too, emphasize Putin’s focus on strategic planning, and his role as mission- and goal-setter.²⁹

To pursue this line of argument, it is necessary to work further on definition. The concept of strategy has evolved considerably from its more technical or limited origins. As noted above, since the mid-twentieth century understanding of the term has moved beyond the focus on military strategy towards ‘grand strategy’, which refers to the art of bringing together and using all the resources

²³ See discussion in Heikka, *The evolution of Russian grand strategy*.

²⁴ Celeste Wallander, ‘Domestic sources of Russia’s less-than-grand-strategy’, in Ashley Tellis and Michael Wills, eds, *Strategic Asia 2007–2008: domestic politics, change and grand strategy* (Washington DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2007), p. 140.

²⁵ See Andrei Tsygankov, ‘Preserving influence in a changing world: Russia’s grand strategy’, *Problems of Post-Communism* 58: 2, March–April 2011, pp. 28–44.

²⁶ Dominic Lieven, *Russia against Napoleon: the battle for Europe, 1807–1814* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), pp. 6–15; Le Donne, *The grand strategy of the Russian Empire*.

²⁷ J. Malcolm Mackintosh, *Strategy and tactics of Soviet foreign policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 17.

²⁸ Cooper, *Reviewing Russian strategic planning*, pp. 1–2.

²⁹ Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr Putin: operative in the Kremlin* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), esp. ch. 9.

of a nation to promote the vital interests of the state, including securing it against enemies real or presumed. It is thus about the relationship between political ends and military, economic, political and cultural means—the 'art of creating power'.³⁰

But this needs to be unpacked and shaped further. Three related points are worth emphasizing. First, the definition set out above gives prominence both to the formulation of a clear vision of the interests of the state and to the practical tasks of coordination and deployment of resources to those ends. Strategy is the combination and sum of the formulation of plans in theory *and* their implementation in practice.

Second, if strategy is the formulation and implementation of plans, clearly it cannot be understood without reference to those people and institutions who formulate and implement it. Strategy entails the careful coordination and balance of the various interests of these actors—conducting the orchestra rather than playing the individual instruments. This includes matching a degree of political flexibility—to reconcile and satisfy divergent internal interests and retain overall adaptability—with more specific clarity for the implementers. Related to this is the role of the different parts of the bureaucracy, which must be able effectively to coordinate their activities and share information: internal struggles between departments over policy can consume so much time and attention that the overall context becomes secondary.³¹

Strategy is often understood as the preparation of plans with a view to the long-term horizon. While this has merit in terms of attempting, as Churchill phrased it, 'to foresee the outlines of the future and be prepared to deal with it',³² and some relevance given Moscow's focus on 2020 and beyond, alone it is insufficient as a basis for understanding strategy. The third point, therefore, is that strategy is also a process of dialogue with a changing context and of constant adaptation to evolving conditions and circumstances in a world in which chance, uncertainty and ambiguity dominate, not least in respect of the actions, intentions and purposes of other actors. Leaders must both plan for a long-term context that has not yet happened and is shrouded in 'fog' that prevents clear vision, and deal with the impact of 'friction' that occurs as a result of the changing context serving to warp initial formulations even as those plans are implemented. Strategy is therefore on the one hand a view of the longer term and on the other a dialogue with the present and immediate future, and it is rarely successful if it shows no adaptability. It thus represents a creative element in the generation and exercise of power and implementation of policy.³³

³⁰ There is an ongoing debate about defining strategy. For a useful overview of the various definitions and changing understandings of strategy, on which this passage draws, see Beatrice Heuser, *The evolution of strategy: thinking war from antiquity to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Hew Strachan, 'The lost meaning of strategy', *Survival* 47: 3, 2005, pp. 33–54.

³¹ See Edward Meade Earl, ed., *Makers of modern strategy: military thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948); Richard Betts, 'The trouble with strategy', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Autumn/Winter 2001–2, p. 25; Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein, eds, *The making of strategy: rulers, states and war* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 19–21.

³² Cited in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of modern strategy: from Machiavelli to the nuclear age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 503.

³³ Lawrence Freedman, ed., *Strategic coercion: concepts and cases* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 15;

As we turn to Moscow's strategic overhaul, then, we do so with a definition of grand strategy as both the shaping of a clear and coherent vision that coordinates the necessary appropriate personnel and resources, and the process of implementing that vision in an evolving context to create power.

Moscow's strategic overhaul

In an illuminating book published in 2007, Andrei Kokoshin, formerly a deputy defence minister and secretary of the Russian Security Council and now a parliamentarian and one of Russia's most prominent strategic thinkers, wrote that 'the application of strategic planning means a significantly higher level of governance than governance based on reacting to immediate situations'. Putin's directive to create a state system of strategic planning in Russia, he argued, is 'fully justified'. Strategic planning (in different spheres) is one of the mechanisms for a *strategy of development of the country*, which is one of the most important current problems facing Russia. 'The advancing of this kind of strategy has a political-mobilisation function,' he continued, for which a whole new semantic basis should be created, in which the foundations and central ideas are conceptualized.³⁴

The book is an important representation of the moment in time, conceptualized and written in the wake of the major terrorist attacks in Moscow, the 'colour revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine, and a deteriorating relationship with the West on the one hand, and domestic political difficulties, including the failure of social reforms, on the other. The strategic documents written in 1999 and 2000 were, as a result, out of date and did not correspond to the changing international and domestic context. Consequently, initial planning for the development of new documents was commissioned.

If the need to update the hierarchy of strategic documents was clear, at the same time the need for a more systematic approach to strategic planning was recognized. At one of the meetings of the State Council held in July 2006 it became clear that the federal centre had no legal basis for a comprehensive strategy or programmes.³⁵ Subsequently, in 2009, a classified order 'On the foundations of strategic planning' was issued, which framed strategic planning as the determination of the directions and means of achieving the strategic goals of the stable development of Russia and providing for national security. As Cooper notes, strategic planning represents the 'elaboration and implementation of concepts, doctrines, strategies, programmes and projects for the stable development of Russia', and it reflects an

Murray et al., eds, *The making of strategy*, p. 1; Michael Handel, ed., *Masters of war: classical strategic thought*, 3rd rev. and expanded edn (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p. 50.

³⁴ Andrei Kokoshin, *O strategicheskoy planirovani v politike* [On strategic planning in politics] (Moscow: URSS, 2007), pp. 8–10.

³⁵ Cooper, *Reviewing Russian strategic planning*, p. 4; 'Zasedanie Gosudarstvennoy sovet "O mekhanizme vzaimodeystviya federalnykh i regionalnykh organov ispolnitelnoy vlasti pri razrabotke programm kompleksnoy sotsialno-ekonomicheskoy razvitiya regionov"' [The State Council's session 'on the mechanisms of interaction between federal and regional authorities in the development of programmes for the integrated socio-economic development of regions'], Meeting of the State Council, 21 July 2006, <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2/2006/07/21/109663.shtml>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

understanding of a dynamic process of foreseeing and responding to developments likely to impinge on Russian society.³⁶

Two other important aspects of the concept are elaborated in the document. The first is the time-frame. Strategic planning is laid out in stages: a short term of three to five years, a medium term of five to ten years and a long term of ten to 20 years. The second is the delineation of the powers of the organs of the state and the coordination of their activities, which draws our attention to the attempt to establish a more coherent strategic planning architecture. While the president and the presidential administration are at the summit of the planning architecture, what is noteworthy is the increased role of the Security Council (SC). Chaired by the president, the SC is an organization that has risen in importance during Putin's leadership and has become a reservoir of experience and authority, particularly since the appointment in 2008 of Nikolai Patrushev, a career KGB officer and previously director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), as its secretary.³⁷ The order sets out the SC's role in coordinating strategic planning and expert preparation of concept, doctrine, strategy, programmes and projects in the areas of domestic and foreign policy. As president, Dmitry Medvedev subsequently reinforced this document in May 2011 with a further order that granted the SC powers going beyond forecasting and assessing threats and allowing it in theory a role in the implementation of plans. This document states that the SC 'forms the main directions of state domestic and foreign policy'.³⁸ So, from a purely consultative body harvesting expert advice from across government, the SC has become a policy-forming body. As a result of this drawn-out process, Russian officials have suggested, the role of the SC has crystallized, and it has become a more serious, coherent organ; its powers are more streamlined and defined in an orderly way.³⁹

A range of other organizations have also been involved in contributing to relevant aspects of strategic planning. The Ministry for Economic Development is tasked with elaborating economic plans, for instance, and military, security and intelligence organs with contributing to the Military Doctrine. The preparation of the Energy Strategy to 2030 was created by a select group of specialists under the supervision of Deputy Energy Minister Anatoly Yanovsky, a highly qualified, experienced and senior figure in the Russian energy sector, who had contributed to the Energy Strategy to 2020.⁴⁰ The Russian Academy of Sciences and the Higher School of Economics have also contributed to planning and preparation, as have a number of think-tanks and other institutes.

The result of this focus on strategic planning was a cascade of documents published between 2008 and 2010, framed as strategies, concepts and doctrines that sought to address a wide range of different aspects of life in Russia. Foremost

³⁶ 'Ob osnovakh strategicheskovo planirovaniya v Rossiiskoi Federatsii' [On the foundations of strategic planning in the Russian Federation], presidential decree no. 326, 12 May 2009; Cooper, *Reviewing Russian strategic planning*, p. 4.

³⁷ The website of the Security Council is <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

³⁸ 'On matters concerning the Security Council of the Russian Federation', presidential decree no. 590, 6 May 2011. The author is grateful to Keir Giles for this point.

³⁹ Interviews with Russian officials, spring and summer 2013.

⁴⁰ Mehdiyeva, *The three Ds*, p. 3.

among these were the Long-Term Socio-Economic Development Concept to 2020 and the Foreign Policy Concept, both published in 2008, and the National Security Strategy to 2020 and an Energy Strategy to 2030, both published in 2009. A Military Doctrine was published in 2010. These were supplemented by a series of other documents, including Medvedev's article 'Russia, forward!' noted above, a series of conceptual ideas, framed in what became known as the Medvedev proposals,⁴¹ and the speeches of senior figures, most notably the yearly presidential speeches to the Federal Assembly.

Shaping a horizon

To be sure, senior officials, even the top leadership, acknowledge the inherent difficulties in such an endeavour. At the meeting of the State Council in 2006 noted above, Putin himself emphasized that strategic planning for development is 'always a most complex . . . theme', and that texts tend to offer 'more questions than answers'.⁴² In interviews, others suggest that any planning beyond five years is relative, serving only as a rough guideline, a point emphasized by the current economic and social crises which render international affairs particularly complex.⁴³ Nevertheless, the attempt to set a long-term horizon is clear. In some respects there appears to be a strategy emerging: strategic planning processes are being developed, a team for coordinating the plans is in place, most importantly through the SC, and a range of documents have been published reflecting what appears to be a broad consensus.

These documents framed the main assumptions about Russia and its place in the world, and the directions in which policy should be developed. The main themes were that Russia had passed through its transformation phase and had resolved, or was in the process of resolving, many of the problems of the 1990s, and that its main goal was to become a leading state in world affairs, preserving its influence particularly in the post-Soviet region.⁴⁴ In large part as a result of Russia's great mineral wealth, especially oil and gas reserves, Moscow was able not only to pay off its debts but also to build up significant financial resources to invest in its plans. Nevertheless, the transition remained incomplete. Domestically, numerous problems remained and, internationally, while Russia was among a group of rising states, the context was one of greater instability and insecurity, in which there would be competition for ideas, values, influences and resources resulting in an increasing number of conflicts.

The Russian leadership has offered a threefold broad answer to this situation: first, to assert Russia as a sovereign, independent actor in international affairs;

⁴¹ These included proposals to reconsider and reform the European security architecture with a new treaty, the wider European energy architecture through reform of the European Energy Charter, and the wider international economic and financial architecture with greater emphasis on the G20. See Andrew Monaghan, *At the table or on the menu? Moscow's proposals for strategic reform*, research report (Rome: NDC, June 2009).

⁴² 'Zasedaniye', Meeting of the State Council, <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/appears2/2006/07/21/109663.shtml>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

⁴³ Interviews with Russian officials, spring and summer 2013.

⁴⁴ Tsygankov, 'Preserving influence in a changing world'.

second, to invest in infrastructural improvement and the conversion of the Russian economy from one focused on commodity exports to one according a greater role to innovation; and third, to build regional integration projects such that Russia will become a Eurasian hub. In sum, this can be framed as maintaining the domestic system through development at home and the creation of conditions conducive to this abroad.

As noted above, updates from 2011 onwards have resulted in the updated Foreign Policy Concept of 2013. In addition, a lengthy (864-page) document entitled *Strategy 2020* was published in March 2012. Although commissioned by Putin, *Strategy 2020* is not an official document, though it does seek to offer a range of policy options and scenarios. Both documents reflected a response to developments since 2008—specifically the economic crisis and the revolutions in some countries in North Africa and the Middle East—though the overall thrust of their content emphasized not change but continuity.

Creating power?

As framed above, strategy is not simply the formulation of an idea. It is also the prioritization and coordination of its elements, and its implementation. The Russian leadership is operating in a demanding context. On the one hand, the international environment is complex and evolving. On the other, the leadership team must deal with both a burdensome Soviet inheritance and contemporary Russian questions. All kinds of infrastructure—particularly energy and transport—are both decrepit and limited and in need of replacement or construction. Reforms for the military alone are anticipated to cost tens of billions of roubles, as are those for the energy sector and those in pursuit of economic and societal development. Preliminary upgrading in housing and utilities alone appears set to cost 9 trillion rubles (\$280 billion).⁴⁵ As a result, although Moscow appears to be putting substantial effort and assets into sketching out goals for development, and investing considerable resources into achieving them, important questions may be asked about how these plans are being implemented, and thus whether those goals amount to a grand strategy.

Towards conceptual coherence?

The first point relates to the plans themselves. There are inconsistencies, contradictions and gaps that emerge between the various concepts, strategies, doctrines and presidential instructions that serve to dilute clarity for implementers. While the Foreign Policy Concept and Socio-Economic Development Plan may correlate with the relevant sections of the National Security Strategy, for instance, Keir Giles has noted that the Military Doctrine strikes a more dissonant chord, and, with its emphasis on military threats, rolls back some of the more optimistic notes of the Security Strategy issued less than a year before.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Meeting of the State Council, 31 May 2013, <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news/5511>, accessed 8 Aug 2013.

⁴⁶ Giles, *The Military Doctrine*, p. 3.

In terms of gaps, it is noteworthy that although the *Strategy 2020* document offers a range of policy options, it does not seek to provide a programme for the government; nor does it address issues such as Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization,⁴⁷ or the challenges facing the agricultural sector, which has been identified by leaders (including Putin) as an important area for development. Nor does it address the more sensitive question of whether economic reform can be achieved without political change.⁴⁸ In other documents, such as the National Security Strategy and the Foreign Policy Concept, the evolving role of China and how Russia will interact with its huge south-eastern neighbour are largely neglected, if not deliberately omitted. Similarly, in the Military Doctrine, little attention is given to major structural reform of the armed forces;⁴⁹ and the lack of clear and consistent guidelines for military reform serves to emphasize indecision and disagreement between departments, the shifting of goalposts mid-reform, and costly mistakes and reversals of reforms already begun.⁵⁰ In important ways, therefore, the plans themselves do not provide a clear framework for action; the gap between 'political flexibility' and 'clarity for implementation' is not uniformly bridged.

Conducting the orchestra?

In part, this is because the capacity for formulating the documents is limited. Although academic and think-tank expertise has been drafted in to contribute to the planning process (as illustrated by the *Strategy 2020* document), there appears to be a shortfall in both quality and quantity when it comes to the official capacity to provide the substance to turn initiatives into more detailed practical policies. Some observers emphasize a shortfall in the quality of the bureaucracy: Vladislav Inozemtsev writes of a 'galloping de-professionalisation' of the Russian elite, Richard Sakwa of a 'passive revolution' in a bureaucracy which lacks creativity and initiative.⁵¹ At the same time, a huge burden has been loaded onto a quantitatively limited bureaucratic planning capacity: ministries are being required to prepare a wide range of documents, from overall concepts to plans for regional integration and other initiatives. The shortfall in capacity does not necessarily prevent major policy initiatives from being pursued—much effort is being put into the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, for example—but it does limit the ability to develop concurrently several initiatives in detail, as witnessed by the inability to convert initiatives such as the proposals to reform the European security and energy architecture—an important aspect of Russian foreign policy—into concrete policy.

⁴⁷ Russia acceded to the WTO after the publication of 'Strategy 2020' in 2012.

⁴⁸ Cooper, *Reviewing Russian strategic planning*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Giles, *The Military Doctrine*, p. 8.

⁵⁰ See discussion of these problems in Mikhail Barabanov, ed., *Russia's new army* (Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2011).

⁵¹ Vladislav L. Inozemtsev, 'Neo-feudalism explained', *American Interest* 6: 4, March–April 2011; Sakwa, *The crisis of Russian democracy*, pp. 29–33.

Also, ministries are not fully coordinated in their actions. The day-to-day tendency of agencies to follow their own agenda, combined with some disagreement, even rivalry, between the presidential administration and the government, or between ministries, is reflected in the formulation of documents. One illustration of this is provided by the disagreements between the Ministry of Economic Development and the Finance Ministry in the preparation of documents such as the Long-term Socio-Economic Development Concept finally published in 2008. Equally, efforts to establish coordinating mechanisms and streamline authority suggest that, for instance, federal and regional law enforcement bodies do not coordinate well in counterterrorism, and it appears that relevant and important information is not shared between organs such as the Federal Security Service and the Interior Ministry, hampering coordination and entrenching a piecemeal approach. In other areas, it appears that responsibilities are not clearly delineated. In November 2012, for instance, Putin, chairing a meeting of the State Council, stated that the transfer of federal programmes from the Ministry for Regional Development to the Ministry for the Development of the Far East was not working, and had resulted in 'blurred responsibilities and failures in work'.⁵²

Further illustrating this problem are the gaps between state economic planning, security planning and the budget. Although the Ministry for Economic Development is tasked with planning for the economy, and the SC has a wide remit for planning, gaps appear to remain between economic planning on the one hand and security planning on the other, and the budget in between. Perhaps the clearest indication of the disagreements caused by these gaps was the resignation in 2011 of the long-standing Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, citing disagreements over economic policies, particularly defence expenditure.⁵³ Although the existence of this gap appears to have been recognized, attempts to resolve the problem are stalled. Indeed, such gaps appear to have delayed the approval of the law on strategic planning that has been under consideration since 2006. As a result, there is no legal framework establishing the status of the various documents, and there are no institutions or mechanisms for linking planning for socio-economic development with security planning.⁵⁴

The failing vertical of power

More significant, however, are the problems the leadership faces regarding the implementation of plans. This is most clearly illustrated by the failure of the 'vertical of power', the hierarchy established by Putin to facilitate a vertical chain of authority, with strong government at the top and discipline and responsibility below in implementing tasks. Yet even during Putin's first presidency a

⁵² 'Zasedaniye prezidiuma gossoveta' [Meeting of the Presidium of the State Council], 29 Nov. 2012, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/16990>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

⁵³ 'Kudrin ushol v otstavku' [Kudrin resigns], Lenta.ru, 26 Sept. 2011, <http://lenta.ru/news/2011/09/26/kudrin3/>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013; author's correspondence with Julian Cooper, July 2013.

⁵⁴ Author's correspondence with Julian Cooper, July 2013.

high percentage of presidential instructions remained unfulfilled—a trend that continued when Medvedev became president and Putin prime minister in 2008. By 2010, Russian newspapers were suggesting that officials sabotaged the orders of the President and Prime Minister, and the President had established a series of meetings to discuss the execution of presidential instructions, threatening punishment for officials who failed in their duties.⁵⁵ This is important because, following the definition sketched out above, the second pillar of strategy, alongside the formulation of ideas, is their implementation.

The failure of the vertical of power has a dual negative impact. First, clearly it limits the leadership's ability to have the agenda it has set followed through, as exemplified by the failures to fulfil the state defence order for supplies and military equipment in 2010. This is an ongoing problem, and one to which Putin regularly draws attention. In autumn 2012, for instance, he reprimanded three government ministers for their failure to implement instructions: Labour Minister Maxim Topilin, Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov and Oleg Govorun, Minister for Regional Development. Govorun, who had served for over a decade in the presidential administration before being appointed presidential envoy to the Central Federal District in 2011, and who is a senior member of the United Russia party, was subsequently fired. This issue was again prominent in spring 2013, as first Medvedev and then Putin pressed ministers to explain the tardy execution of instructions. Most recently, on a visit to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk in July 2013, Putin stated that some 80 per cent of orders outlined the previous year for the development of the region had not been implemented.⁵⁶

Second, it seriously inhibits the leadership's ability to adapt to developments abroad and at home. The international financial crisis that broke in 2008 had a significant impact on the Russian economy. While senior figures asserted that they would not let the crisis blow Russia's plans off course, and subsequent strategic planning did not reflect a major change in direction, it was also the case that the government struggled to have its anti-crisis policies implemented. In 2009, for instance, Dmitry Medvedev criticized the government for its failure to carry out more than 30 per cent of the measures announced.⁵⁷

As a result of the failure of the vertical of power, the government is also unable to respond effectively to other problems. The response to the fires of summer 2010 demonstrated many of the problems the vertical was supposed to resolve, as local authorities failed either to control the spread of the fires or to pass information up the chain of command. The terrorist attack on Domodedovo airport in January 2011 was another example of how the orders of the top leadership, even on priority issues, were not implemented: directly after the attacks, orders

⁵⁵ For further discussion of the vertical of power, see Andrew Monaghan, 'The *Vertikal*: power and authority in Russia', *International Affairs* 88: 1, Jan. 2012, pp. 1–16.

⁵⁶ 'Stenograficheskii otchet o soveshchanii o kompleksnom sotsialno-ekonomicheskom razvitii Sakhalinskoy oblasti' [Verbatim report of the session on a comprehensive socio-economic development of the Sakhalin Oblast region], 16 July 2013, <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/18824>, accessed 5 Aug. 2013.

⁵⁷ Cited in Phil Hanson, 'Networks, cronies and business plans: business–state relations in Russia', in Vadim Kononenko and Arkady Moshes, eds, *Russia as a network state: what works in Russia when state institutions do not?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 131.

intended to prevent further security lapses were either ignored or fulfilled in an incomplete manner.

In these circumstances, the leadership is obliged to resort to 'manual control' methods to ensure instructions are carried out. This means that the most senior figures are required to become involved in regional, even local issues, micro-managing rather than focusing on strategic matters. Such a need to respond in this way to day-to-day events suggests that the ability of the leadership both to conduct a dialogue with its context and to shape a longer-term horizon—an important element of strategy—is limited at best.

Conclusions

Strategy is difficult. Circumstances are constantly evolving, resources are limited and contested, problems are inherited. Leaders, often working under significant time pressure, must parry problems thrown up by day-to-day diversions or the activity of others, mitigate and balance domestic concerns, and manage an unclear international context to achieve goals that are themselves evolving, not always under the control of the leadership.⁵⁸ Such difficulties—among others—mean that the very idea of grand strategy remains contested and there is debate over whether it is not just difficult but an illusion.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, this article seeks to offer a qualified defence of the idea of grand strategy, and suggests that it offers a useful measuring stick by which to understand the coherence of Russian behaviour.

Putin has initiated and led a serious effort to reorganize Russian strategic planning. Moscow's wider *Strategy 2020* project, as reflected in the strategic overhaul, is complex and ambitious, even aspirational. The commitment to longer-term strategic planning has resulted in both the partial establishment of a planning architecture at the heart of which is the Security Council chaired by the president, and a proliferation of documents and presidential instructions which reflect a broad consensus across the top leadership.

The political idea of Russia as a leading international power at the centre of a rising Eurasian region is asserted. The overhaul or updating of the conceptual and strategic documentation, although weaving in major developments, has not substantially diverged from this broad goal, which, aspirational though it may be, suggests that Russian policies (which are based on these assumptions) will show not change but continuity. And indeed Moscow has had some practical success in achieving the goals it sets out: a customs union has been created, and progress is being made towards establishing the Eurasian Economic Union. Within the planning schedule established, forecasting to 2030 has begun, and it may be that an updated national security strategy should be expected, perhaps in 2014 or 2015. Should it be published, this document will be an important indicator of the evolution of Moscow's strategic thinking.

⁵⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On war*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 78; Colin S. Gray, 'Why strategy is difficult', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Summer 1999, pp. 80–86.

⁵⁹ For an examination of this discussion, see Richard Betts, 'Is strategy an illusion?', *International Security* 25: 2, 2000, pp. 5–50.

But proliferating strategic documents and long-term planning do not themselves make a grand strategy. 'Conducting the orchestra' remains very difficult, and it has not proved easy to bridge the gap between political flexibility and practical clarity in the strategic overhaul. Most important, however, are the serious problems associated with the 'second pillar', the implementation of plans.

The vertical of power operates in a difficult context, beset by Soviet legacies, more recent Russian problems, and a competitive international environment itself burdened by economic and social pressures. Its failures highlight the scale of the task facing Moscow. The resulting necessity for the top leadership to carry out manual control in day-to-day management is a severe impediment to the development of political initiative, and reflects the difficulty the Russian leadership continues to face in the dialogue with context.

As a result, power is created only unevenly, and adaptability is limited. While the leadership may be able to weave the dialogue and context into its strategic plans, practical responses are less effective. Moscow may have a political idea, and a consequent proliferation of plans, and even some successes in achieving goals; but it does not yet have a grand strategy: this remains a work in protracted progress.