



Introduction

Strategic Competition and Russia: Trends and Catalysts

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Abstract: In what could be called the current “inter-paradigm period,” the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian order will be largely determined by the outcome of Russia’s war against Ukraine. The articles in this issue delve into various aspects of this period, including Russia’s hybrid operations in Romania, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as the war itself and its consequences for Ukraine, Russia, and the world.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war, information warfare, terrorism, resilience, nuclear doctrine, Romania, Moldova, Georgia

Introduction

While there is no clear consensus concerning the nature and characteristics of the current global order or paradigm, “strategic competition” is the preferred term of reference in U.S. and European official strategic and foreign policy documents. However, when considering Russia’s full-scale, multi-axis attack on Ukraine, war is the reality, and confrontation—bordering on crisis and leading to conflict and war—is a factor across NATO’s eastern flank. What we euphemistically reference as “strategic competition” across the eastern flank, some have suggested, is, in fact, “Cold War 2.0.”

However, this vision is wanting. First, the United States considers China, not Russia, its “near-peer” competitor or “pacing threat,” reflecting the realization that power shifts from Europe to the Indo-Pacific, where competition is sharpest and most consequential. In this reality, Russia is not a principal actor vis-à-vis China, but rather its subordinate, and proxy wars shift from the Indo-Pacific to Europe. Second, the international system’s bipolar structure shifts toward multipolarity, and states in the “Global South” embrace multi-alignment rather than

non-alignment, playing a much greater role as intermediaries between the great powers. Third, competition takes place in an age of economic interdependence, characterized by global supply and logistics chains, which raise dilemmas inherent in “de-risking” and in soft/hard decoupling choices. Fourth, strategic calculus in an age of inter-enabling technologies, cyberattacks, AI advances, space-enabled warfare, and nuclear blackmail is far more complex.¹

The expectation of those “present at the creation” of the post-1945 liberal international order was that it would be based on liberal principles and proceduralism, provide public goods open to all, consist of inclusive, universalist “responsible stakeholder” institutions, adhere to the rule of law, and allow for legal redress. For these reasons, such an order was expected to prove resilient and sustainable, capable of self-correction. This open, rule-bound, predictable, and stable liberal international order embedded U.S. power in multilateral institutions and defined legitimate state behavior through liberal commitments.

President Putin has been in power for 25 years. As such, he is a system-forming figure, and that system rejects the West. The Western order, in Putin’s understanding, did not favor an illiberal, revisionist Russia with ambiguous “state-civilization” interests and values, a weak economy, and no real allies. Putin’s Russia declares itself to be a “state-civilization,” a unique and distinct civilization based not on territory, ethnicity, or a governance system, but legitimized by its supposed long-standing historical and cultural roots.² By definition, such an order is incompatible with Western universalism and the traditional Westphalian state system. State-civilizations exhibit transhistorical, regionally based civilizational claims and appear to be most logically embedded in regional orders, which they can “naturally” dominate.

Moscow focuses more on identifying what it considers to be the problems inherent in the current order—a US-led, “Anglo-Saxon”-dominated, unipolar, “colonial,” and “unjust” global order—than on offering a clear alternative beyond “fair multipolarity.”³ Regionalism, expressed through regional institutions and blocs that set regional agendas and priorities, becomes an alternative to the liberal international order.⁴ Russia appears to support a balance-of-power order,

¹ Graeme Dobell, “The 12 Elements of Cold War 2.0,” *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, September 12, 2024, www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-12-elements-of-cold-war-2-0/. See also: Sam Winter-Levy and Nikita Lalwani, “The End of Mutual Assured Destruction? What AI Will Mean for Nuclear Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 7, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/artificial-intelligence-end-mutual-assured-destruction>.

² Christopher Coker, *The Rise of the Civilizational State* (John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

³ Graeme Herd, “The Atlanticist Anglo-Saxon Reich and All That: How Russia Understands Strategic Confrontation,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 23, no. 2 (2024): 46-71, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.23.2.04>.

⁴ Stacie E. Goddard, Ronald R. Krebs, Christian Kreuder-Sonnen, and Berthold Rittberger, “Liberalism Doomed the Liberal International Order: A Less Legalistic System Would Help Protect Democracies,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 28, 2025, www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/liberalism-doomed-liberal-international-order.

with “state-civilizations” forming independent poles and assuming order-producing and managerial roles within their respective spheres of influence. In such an order, rules are agreed upon by a new “Big Three” (Moscow, Beijing, and Washington, D.C.)⁵ or the UN Security Council Permanent Five, with some managed strategic cooperation possible around systemic, structural, and transnational agendas across spheres. In a sense, Russia endorses a traditional nineteenth-century conception of great-power competition, centered on formal—usually European—empires controlling vassals within their spheres.

Ukraine as a Global Order Catalyst?

The “Orange Revolution” of December 2004 saw Ukraine emerge into global consciousness for the first time in modern history. Two decades later, is Ukraine becoming the litmus test of an emerging global-order paradigm? Certainly, a defeated Ukraine and Russian victory would uphold Russia’s alternative to a post-liberal international order – one based on a great-power bloc conception of global order. Ukraine’s capitulation would see its territory absorbed back into Russia’s. A rump Ukrainian state would be subsumed into Russia’s sphere of influence, with Moscow directly controlling Kyiv’s foreign and security policy. Subsequent FSB-led Russification and de-Ukrainization processes would ensure that Ukraine ceases to exist as an independent state, with its nationhood and identity criminalized; Ukrainian men would be compulsorily conscripted into the Russian military, and Ukrainian teenagers used as cannon fodder in future conflicts. Kremlin-supported Ukrainian political proxies would lead Ukraine’s military-industrial base, economic trade, armed forces, and domestic political order. Millions of Ukrainians would remain across Europe as conflict migrants. An unstable and subjugated Ukraine would become a grey zone for illicit arms, drugs, and other criminal activity. Russian troops and nuclear forces would be forward-deployed to the borders with Poland and Romania.

If Ukraine is defeated, Russia would be victorious. As such, its international standing and prestige, partnerships, and narratives would be immeasurably strengthened. Already, despite more than 1,300 days of full-scale war, three sets of expectations and predictive assumptions shape Putin’s self-understanding of the inevitability of Russian “victory.” First, Russia believes it has the battlefield initiative and, in a war of attrition—given Russia’s resources and Putin’s resolve—Ukraine’s collapse is inevitable.⁶ Second, Ukrainian statehood is perceived as posing an existential threat to Russia and therefore must be entirely extinguished, or Russia risks a historic defeat that could trigger its own national

⁵ Dmitri Trenin, “Three Powers Will Shape Future State of World,” Carnegie Moscow Center, October 31, 2016, <https://carnegie.ru/2016/10/31/three-powers-will-shape-future-state-of-world-pub-64988>.

⁶ Yevgeniya Gaber, András Rácz, and Graeme P. Herd, “Russia’s Evolving Red Lines,” *The Clocktower Series* CT25-02, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, June 30, 2025, www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/clock-tower-series/strategic-competition-seminar-series-fy25/russias-evolving-redlines.

collapse. Third, Putin has created a new economic-political war model based on upward societal mobility and wealth redistribution, reorienting oil and gas exports toward the “Global South” in ways that enrich his inner circle.

Putin views Ukraine as both a major obstacle to his strategic goals if it remains independent and the ultimate prize if it is defeated. A “reintegrated” Ukraine (along with Belarus) would provide Russia with an economic, demographic, and military force multiplier to achieve its wider goals, including the defeat of NATO, the isolation of the United States, and the establishment of Russia as a European power and Eurasian regional hegemon. Putin’s semi-mobilization of Russian society and the economy has become fully institutionalized – war is now truly the structural foundation and organizing logic of the regime.

To be sustainable, the strong but brittle (“anti-fragile”) system Putin has created must expand its external borders and resources to feed, reward, and renew elites. Further Russian external aggression then becomes unavoidable, along with the threat of a “second front” in the European theater. To avoid demobilization and internal destabilization, Russia first deploys its military as an army of occupation in Ukraine, supporting the group of fugitive Ukrainian collaborator politicians that Russia currently “curates.” Once Ukraine is “reintegrated,” Putin then faces a choice to demobilize or redeploy his troops to a “second front,” just as Saddam Hussein did after the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 with the invasion of Kuwait (“the 19th Province”) in 1990. The consistency of Putin’s worldview suggests that more “historical Russian lands” are then targeted.⁷ China’s “first island chain” aggression and Russia’s “second front” appetite toward Moldova, the South Caucasus, northern Kazakhstan, and the Baltic states are thereby incentivized.

Ukraine’s defeat would also appear to validate Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s reported vow to Kaja Kallas, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, that Beijing cannot allow Russia to be defeated in the war against Ukraine.⁸ The perceived virtues of “unlimited friendship” (Chinese “friends” have real “benefits”) would boost China’s reputation in the Global South and within a demoralized Europe. Not only would China not be deterred from aggression against Taiwan, but a Chinese invasion would become more likely, potentially timed to coincide with Russia’s “second front” in Europe.

Russia’s “Global South” narratives surrounding the “colonial,” “unjust,” and “unequal” international order would gain greater traction. Russia’s ability to position itself as a supporter of sovereignty, a security provider, and a reliable part-

⁷ “‘A Justified Perception of Russian Interests:’ Unearthed German Memo Reveals Putin Laid Claim to Parts of Ukraine and Kazakhstan Back in 1994,” *Meduza*, August 6, 2025, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/08/06/a-justified-perception-of-russian-interests>.

⁸ Finbarr Bermingham, “China Tells EU It Does Not Want to See Russia Lose Its War in Ukraine: Sources,” *South China Morning Post*, July 4, 2025, www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3316875/china-tells-eu-it-cannot-afford-russian-loss-ukraine-war-sources-say.

ner would be boosted. The predictive statement “First Kabul, then Kyiv”⁹ would become an article of faith in the “Global South.” The anti-West camp within the BRICS+ grouping would be strengthened, and Russia’s—and China’s—attractiveness as non- or anti-Western alternatives would increase. In addition, Russia’s ties with Belarus, Iran, and North Korea (“BRINK”), as well as their associated proxy terrorist groups, would be reinforced, emboldening the global anti-Western revisionist camp.¹⁰ These states and proxies would continue to act metaphorically as icebreakers or minesweepers in the international system, operating on China’s behalf.

As well as Russia becoming stronger, Ukraine’s defeat would clearly weaken the political or “Global West.” The U.S. Department of Defense’s European policy objectives would be dead on arrival. European-led conventional defense and deterrence, burden sharing, and an integrated transatlantic defense industrial base would be stillborn following Ukraine’s defeat. Rather than a strengthened European pillar of NATO, the discourse would shift toward considering a post-NATO European Treaty Organization (a treaty-based European collective defense arrangement) or a European Security Order (a toothless European OSCE). The United States would cease to be a European power institutionalized through NATO (if NATO ceases to exist). Either way, the United States would likely engage bilaterally with European states, most of which would no longer be under a U.S. nuclear umbrella, while competing with Russia and China for influence on a transactional, bilateral basis.

In this context, the Trump administration’s foreign policy credibility would decrease. “Biden’s War” would become “Trump’s Defeat” in Russian narratives, and the Kremlin would factor its assessment of the Trump administration’s strategic resolve and strategic patience into its own strategic calculus and predictive thinking. For Moscow, the perceived latent weakness of the “divided West” would have been exposed. Russia would intensify its hybrid activities in Europe, including the further weaponization of migration, cyber activity, increased FSB-sponsored organized crime and sabotage, and increased support for populist parties – tilting some countries (not only Slovakia and Hungary) further away from the United States. Russia would pose a greater threat to the United States

⁹ Russian Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev in an interview with Alexei Zabrodin, “Supporters of US Choice in Ukraine to Face Similar Situation,” *Izvestiya*, August 19, 2021, <https://iz.ru/1209165/aleksei-zabrodin/pokhozhaia-situatsiia-ozhidaet-i-sto-ronnikov-amerikanskogo-vybora-na-ukraine>. – in Russian; See also: Graeme Herd, “The Causes and the Consequences of Strategic Failure in Afghanistan?” *Marshall Center Security Insights*, no. 68, August 2021, www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/causes-and-consequences-strategic-failure-afghanistan-0.

¹⁰ Jahangir E. Arasli, Dmitry Gorenburg, David Lewis, and Graeme P. Herd, “Russia End State: BRINK (Belarus, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) Links?” *The Clock Tower Security Series* SCSS 10, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, July 24, 2024, www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/clock-tower-security-series/strategic-competition-seminar-series-fy24/russia-end-state-brink-belarus-russia-iran-and-north-korea-links.

at a time when the United States would be less able—with demoralized allies and partners—to address it or capitalize on a host of Russia’s very real current regional vulnerabilities: Armenia is on the verge of leaving the CSTO; a major rift with Azerbaijan is evident; Russian influence in Central Asia is eroding; Assad’s fall in Syria has caused major problems for Russia’s presence and military logistics supporting several military juntas in the Sahel; and limited support to Iran further reflects Russia’s overstretched resources.

If Ukraine survives, Russia loses. It is clear that Putin prefers war to the Trump administration’s de facto offer of an honorable “victory” off-ramp, including U.S. de facto recognition of Russia’s control over occupied regions of Ukraine, de jure recognition of Crimea, no Ukrainian NATO membership, easing sanctions pressure, and ceasing public criticism of Russia’s invasion and references to war crimes committed in Ukraine. Rather than accepting “victory,” Putin continues to press his maximalist demand for Ukraine’s complete capitulation.¹¹ For the “Global West,” preventing Ukraine’s defeat—an extreme and unlikely outcome—costs far less than allowing it. Ukraine’s defeat would reinforce the malign strategic behavior of Russia and China. As self-declared “civilizational states,” both would be able, with impunity, to conduct territorial land grabs accompanied by nuclear blackmail, which would become a settled norm in international relations. Vulnerable states would reasonably consider nuclear weapons as their only credible guarantee of sovereignty and survival. An anti-U.S. axis stretching from the Indo-Pacific to Africa to the High North would be consolidated. “America First” would become “America Alone” in a more unstable, unpredictable world of cascading, increasingly catastrophic first- and second-order effects.

Structure of the Special Issue

There is much at stake in this inter-paradigm period, and while “strategic competition” or “Cold War 2.0” do not fully capture reality, the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian order will not only be shaped but largely determined by the outcome of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. To address this paradigmatic point, this issue brings together ten authors who, through nine articles, examine and uncover key dimensions of this challenge.

The first three articles focus on aspects of Russian hybrid operations in Romania, Moldova, and Georgia. The remaining five then unpack the implications of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, including Ukraine’s potential relationship with neutrality, security assistance agreements, and the prospect of a European stabilization force, the impact Russia’s invasion has had on global terrorism, Russia’s nuclear doctrine, and its trade in oil and natural gas with Europe.

¹¹ Yevgeniya Gaber and Graeme P. Herd, “Russia’s End State: What Deters Russia?” *The Clock Tower Security Series* SCSS 1, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, October 15, 2024, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/clock-tower-series/strategic-competition-seminar-series-fy25/russias-end-state-what-deters-russia>.

Constantin Spînu begins by highlighting Russian FIMI activities that attempt to undermine Romania's social cohesion following Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine. He examines Russia's presence in the Romanian public sphere during the unprecedented four rounds of elections in 2024, culminating in the first-ever annulment of a presidential election. The article analyzes how Russia sought to legitimize its invasion of Ukraine, diminish Romanian public support for Ukraine, and erode confidence in national authorities as well as commitment to democracy and Western values.

Khyati Singh compares Russian tactics used in disinformation operations in Romania and identifies how they might be deployed in Moldova and Georgia. Drawing on strategic communication, information warfare doctrine, and hybrid warfare theory, she analyzes the specific historical, cultural, and political vulnerabilities exploited by Russian disinformation campaigns in Romania. The article then develops predictive models for operational escalation based on three alternative Russian political development scenarios, offering insights into potential variations in methodology, targeting, and impact. This comparative framework suggests that Romania has served as an experimental laboratory for refining disinformation tactics that are subsequently customized for deployment in neighbouring states based on specific regional vulnerabilities.

Shalva Dzebisashvili focuses on the capacity of Georgia's political system and institutions to counter malign Russian narratives aimed at weakening trust in Georgia's democratic system. The author addresses the issue of national resilience and develops and applies a coherent toolset that uses a threat-based resilience/ vulnerability index (RVAT) to assess key political actors in Georgia. As a result, the author can calculate an aggregated resilience index for the entire political system in relation to the threat posed by Russian propaganda.

Turning more directly to Ukraine and the implications of the full-scale invasion, Mark Nexon asks: Can neutrality restore Ukraine? The author identifies the potential utility of neutrality for Ukraine by exploring the experiences of post-war Finland and Austria, as well as other post-conflict states. The article argues that a credibly armed Ukraine capable of deterring Russian aggression would, as a neutral state, be required to sacrifice both its statehood within the 1991 borders and its westward strategic orientation. Security guarantees would be required for Ukraine to bridge the period from a ceasefire to neutrality as a strategic choice rather than an imposed outcome. In principle, neutrality might offer a path to peaceful statehood for Ukraine; in practice, however, it is more likely to become the mechanism for the Russian Federation's dismemberment of the Ukrainian nation-state.

Regarding Ukraine, Yelyzaveta Shevchenko and Graeme P. Herd explore the potential relationship between the 29 bilateral security assistance agreements signed by Ukraine and states in the Global West and the political mandate of proposed peacekeepers ("deterrent force"), as well as the military mission or tasks such a force could undertake to help Ukraine defend itself and deter future Russian attacks. These security accords or agreements could be viewed from

multiple perspectives: as a prerequisite for Ukraine's eventual NATO membership; as a strategic tool whose decisive provisions and implementation facilitated Ukraine's "armed neutrality" alignment with NATO standards and, at the same time, the strengthening of the European pillar of the Alliance; or as foundational steps that hypothetically enable Ukraine to join NATO at a future date. President Trump's ultimatum to declare a ceasefire deadline raises the prospect that peacekeepers may be deployed if Putin refuses to agree to a ceasefire.

Peter Kent Forster then addresses the relationship between the full-scale invasion and global terrorism, arguing that Russian aggression has diverted focus and attention away from terrorism, even as the risks of transnational, regional, and local terrorism stemming directly and indirectly from the war in Ukraine are increasing. Forster analyzes recent events and commentary to establish a framework for examining the war's impact on transnational terrorism trajectories and presents evidence of newly emerging terrorist threat vectors that challenge conventional counterterrorism strategies.

Ayşegül Ketenci and Kahraman Süvari examine the factors behind Russia's revisions of its nuclear doctrine in 2020 and 2024, noting the impact of the 2022 full-scale invasion in reshaping regional and global balances. They argue that these developments have led Russia to lower its nuclear deterrence threshold and broaden the conditions for use. Both external pressures, such as Western opposition and sanctions, and internal challenges, including domestic unrest, influenced this shift. The revised doctrine reflects Russia's attempt to adopt a more aggressive nuclear posture in response to evolving security dynamics.

Finally, Marc Ozawa examines how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affected Russia's trade in oil and natural gas with Europe. His article traces the levels of European dependence on Russian energy supplies and trust between European and Russian energy actors through changes in national and EU policies (including sanctions), public opinion survey data, and statements by company and government officials. Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents a tipping point and the most consequential rupture in Europe-Russia relations in a generation, with all conventional indicators of trust—such as cooperation, official statements, hedging strategies, and public opinion—pointing to a long-term breakdown of that trust.

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Dr. **Graeme P. Herd** – see a short CV on p. 110 of this journal issue, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.24.2.06>

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