RUSSIA'S WAY OF WAR: REINTERPRETING RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

by

NICOLO' FASOLA

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Department of Political Science and International Studies
School of Government
College of Social Sciences
University of Birmingham
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Abstract

This thesis analyses the ultimate categories of thought (beliefs) underpinning the Russian way of war, unpacking their nature, development, and interaction between 2008-2018. Prevalent Western interpretations of Russian strategic and military behaviour are affected by two limitations. First, they fail to consider Russian choices on their own terms. Russia's actions are frequently reduced to the opportunistic pursuit of material gains, the anti-democratic drive of an autocratic regime, or Putin's personal agency. The intellectual nuances and the peculiar system of assumptions backing the reasonings and decisions of the Russian elite are largely disregarded. Second, the 2014 war with Ukraine believed to be a watershed in Russian military-strategic thinking. Such assessment fails to recognise the strong consistency of strategic perspectives and military *modi operandi* that Russia has displayed since 2008. The present thesis addresses such limitations by stressing the influence of Strategic Culture (SC) on Russia's decisions on whether and how to wage war. SC is the dominant set of beliefs concerning security policy and the threat or use of force held by a state's security elite. A SC-led approach allows us to explore in depth the motivations, nuances, and mechanisms underpinning Russia's way of war and explain change, or lack of it, across time.

The thesis proceeds as follows. First, I research the concept of SC, proposing a refined model that is more coherent theoretically and easily employable for empirical analysis. Second, I interrogate Russia's SC via this conceptual framework. By examining a wealth of Russian primary sources and broad military practices (e.g., reforms, exercises) within the timeframe 2008-2018, I form general hypotheses about the ultimate beliefs underpinning the Russian approach to strategy and war-fighting. Third, I test such hypotheses against three case studies, namely Russia's interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), and Syria (2015). These case studies will confirm my expectations about the reasonings motivating Russia's strategic behaviour and its preferences regarding the use of force, while showing their nuances as well as consistency across time and case studies. This thesis contributes not only to the progressive development of the concept of SC but also, most importantly, to the understanding of Russian thinking on security and war. While staying clear from making forecasts on future conduct, my analysis provides a solid basis on which to build

expectations about and chart strategies for counter-acting Moscow's actions — including in the context of the current iteration of the Ukraine war.

Acknowledgements

Table of contents

Introduction

During the Cold War, Western academics and policy-makers scrutinised closely the Soviet 'way of war' — i.e., Moscow's approach to strategy and war-fighting. Building on a firm grasp of Soviet strategic literature, terminology, and broader culture, the likes of J. Erickson, R. Garthoff, and J. Kipp provided key insights about the Soviet military-strategic thought and its development. Particular relevance was given to how the Marxist-Leninist ideology and other categories of thought (so-called 'operational codes;' Leites 1951) shared by Soviet decision-makers influenced their interpretation of global dynamics, the conduct of diplomacy, as well as the assessment of the role and likelihood of war in international relations (Erickson 1975a,b; Garthoff 1958; Kipp 1987). On the military side, scholars interrogated Soviet writings and force structures to unveil the ultimate principles underpinning the Kremlin's approach to escalation and armed conflict (Erickson 1963, 1976a,b; Garthoff 1958; Mahoney 1990). Overall, Sovietologists gave ample proof of the radically different system of beliefs held by Soviet leaders, and demonstrated the ability to grasp its fundamentals by scrutinising the country's history, narratives, and behaviour carefully. This enquiry helped tremendously Western policy-makers formulate sensible strategies vis-à-vis Moscow.

When the Cold War ended, Western capitals believed there was no longer any need to continue focussing intellectual and material resources on Moscow. The enemy had been defeated, the Warsaw Pact was no more, and Russia was not expected to pose a threat in the foreseeable future. By contrast, instability in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa gained greater traction in Western agendas. As a result, the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) downsized drastically the vast infrastructure once devoted to understanding, deterring, and offsetting Moscow's plans, repurposing the Alliance for expeditionary crisis management operations. The field of Soviet (now Russian) studies started receiving less and less funding; its presence in educational curricula shrank considerably and a number of institutions concerned with the former socialist bloc were shut down (Adams 2013; Gerbert 2015; Horowitz 2014). Of course, expertise on Russia has not disappeared completely – as many of the references included in this

thesis testify to; yet it shrunk considerably, to the detriment of a fuller understanding of Russia's agency in international relations.

Apparently justified by the 1990s' historical conjuncture, the shortsightedness of this decision has become increasingly evident over the last 20 years. The complex issues raised by the re-emergence of Russia as a key global player appear difficult to disentangle without understanding Russian interests and perceptions *on their own terms*. The cases of Russia's relations with the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) are emblematic. Despite incessant contacts, countless partnerships, and various strategic agreements, both strains of Russia-West relations have recursively failed to bring about stable, positive results. A great deal of such lack of progress can be accounted for by the inability of the two parties to actually grasp the system of meanings and beliefs underpinning the other's position — and adapt accordingly (e.g., Averre 2005; Craig Nation 2012). As Sovietologists noted during the Cold War already, Russian (Soviet) decision-makers interpret key political and strategic concepts differently from the West (Erickson 1975b). If this cognitive divergence is not taken into consideration, the inner logic behind Moscow's action risks being misinterpreted — to the detriment of effective policy-making.

This is true also in regard to the Russian use of force. Western accounts of the four military interventions conducted by the Russian Armed Forces (AF) outside of federal borders (to date) are unsystematic and obfuscated by catchy labels that do not capture operational reality. 2008's Georgia war was quickly forgotten by Western observers, who preferred to focus on the (failing) promise of the Russia-US 'reset;' therefore, that conflict was relatively understudied. Absent a grounded understanding of previous events, the seizure of Crimea and the first Ukraine war (2014/15) were quickly proclaimed a watershed in Russian military-strategic thinking — irrespective of the actual similarity of the Russian military *modi operandi* before and after 2014, as well as the virtual irrelevance of 'hybridity' in subsequent Russian campaigns. Of these later campaigns, that conducted in Syria (2015-2018) is typically reduced to its aerial component only, while the current iteration of the Ukraine war (2022) is still to be subject to in-depth scholarly enquiry. Overall, then, there is still wide room for improving our understanding of the rationale behind Russia's decisions to deploy the AF, as much as the nature of the operations conducted since 2008.

Inspired by the work carried out by Sovietologists during the Cold War, this thesis aims at addressing the aforementioned deficit of understanding of the Russian way of war by providing a thorough analysis of its intellectual nuances and their (consistent) behavioural outcomes. I do so by stressing the influence of Strategic Culture (SC) on Russia's decisions on whether and how to wage war. I define SC as the dominant set of beliefs concerning security policy and the threat or use of force held by a state's security elite. A SC-led approach allows us to explore in depth the system of beliefs underpinning Russia's strategic and military choices and explain its development across time. In accomplishing this, I contribute to: first, the progressive development of the concept of SC; second, the understanding of Russian thinking on security and war; third, the analysis of Russian strategies and operations in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. Moreover, while staying clear from making forecasts on future conduct, this thesis provides a solid base on which to build expectations about and chart strategies for counter-acting Moscow's actions — including in the context of the current iteration of the Ukraine war.

The remainder of this Introduction expands further on the objectives, significance, and methods of this thesis. First, I review the debate on Russia's way of war, pinpointing the conceptual and empirical limitations of prevalent approaches. Second, I explain how I intend to address such limitations and set my main arguments, highlighting their originality and potential impact. Third, I present the method and methodology that underpin this research. I conclude by sketching the structure of the thesis.

i. Debating the Russian way of war

The scholarly and public debates on Russia's international behaviour offer three main explanations of Moscow's strategic choices. These are seen alternatively as the result of the opportunistic pursuit of material gains, the anti-democratic drive of an autocratic regime, or Putin's personal agency. These perspectives, however, leave no room for understanding Russia's approach to strategy *on its own terms*. By forcing the Russian decision-making process into pre-packaged logics of action, they mischaracterise it and lose track of any Russia-specific categories of thought that might underpin the Russian posture.

Attempts to make sense of Russia's behaviour via (neo-)realist arguments are frequent. By over-emphasising the role of material constraints, numerous scholars and commenters equate Russia's strategy to the rational quest for power and security, according to the allegedly universal logic of relative gains (Friedman 2008; Lynch 2001; Marshall 2015, pp. 11-37; Mearsheimer 2014). Under this light, for example, Russia's opposition to NATO's eastwards expansion would result from the geostrategic anxieties induced by the gradual approach of an armed opponent to Russia's borders, and the consequent loss of (hard) power that it entails. Russia's wars on Ukraine are typically referred to as unavoidable outcomes of this dynamic.

While power and material factors are important, especially when it comes to military decisions, state action cannot be boiled down to them solely.[1] Material structures represent one layer of reality only, whose role is permissive at best. Even conceding that they limit "the type and volume of the processes that *might* take place among actors," they do not "necessarily determine the [...] processes that *actually* take place" (Colombo 2009, p. 85; my translation, emphasis original). While (neo-)realist arguments can help recapitulate the broad context within which decisions are taken, they are scarcely useful to understand the 'why,' let alone the 'what' of a specific policy course or military operation at fine-grained level — which this thesis aims at doing. Overall, the materialistic nature of realist theory and the universal rationality underpinning it risk transforming states into "pre-programmed torpedoes" acting and reacting the same way to given stimuli (Katzenstein 1996a, p. 204). If that were true, making sense of Russian strategic behaviour would not be so problematic as it seems to be. Even conceding on the realist-like consistency of Russia's international conduct, the reasons, logic, and nuances of such behaviour still deserve inspection — as they might not be the same as those of other (great) powers.

Another interpretation of Russia's international behaviour draws on the liberal-inspired idea that Moscow is driven by the ultimate goal of 'making the world unsafe for democracy' (Diamond 2016). In that sense, the decisions to invade Georgia, Ukraine, and intervene in Syria on

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[1] Admittedly, neo-classical realism acknowledges this problem and tries to explain state action via a mix of systemic material forces and domestic political variables, including SC (Ripsman et al. 2016). In this sense, it represents an improvement on realist scholarship. However, neo-classical realism fails to provide a convincing, coherent argument on how all those factors interact and, in particular, it ends up using SC as a second order variable squeezed in-between the systemic and domestic levels.

Assad's side become the mere reflection of Russia's autocratic regime and its push-back against the spread of democracy. This argument is shaky at best, for two broad reasons. First, it explains policy outcomes by adopting a quite narrow, simplistic focus on regime type, while disregarding the broader socio-cultural *milieu* that underpins and influences decision-making. I do not intend to dismiss completely the idea that political ideologies influence policy outcomes (Balzacq & Barnier-Khawam 2021). Yet to boil strategic decisions down to the compatibility, or lack thereof, of domestic institutional arrangements across states seems misguided. One might note that, until 2014 at least, Russia had grown increasingly assertive *despite* integrating more in the global economy and Western institutions. Moreover, none of the countries subjected to Russian military operations showed high democratic standards when the invasions occurred.[2] And, significantly, 2008's Georgia war took place during the presidential tenure of D. Medvedev, relatively liberal by Russian standards. These observations indicate that regime type might not be the key factor to look at when interpreting the making of Russian strategy.

Second, liberal-inspired arguments leave the door open to farfetched claims that reduce international dynamics to a sheer clash between Good and Evil — where Russia plays the negative role (Snegovaya 2014; Diamond 2016). This argument is inaccurate and misleading (Tsuruoka 2022). By denigrating any course of action that is not coherent with Western liberal-democratic standards, it precludes dogmatically the possibility to make sense of a competitor's views — which is a scientific requirement as much as a precondition for successful dialogue or confrontation (Gunitsky & Tsygankov 2018). Even conceding on the evident different ideologies expressed by the West and Russia, this does not exclude the need to better grasp the latter's way of thinking and acting — as was done vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

An alternative perspective sees V. Putin as the one and ultimate source of Russian politics. It is not unfrequent to encounter sentences like 'Putin's war on Ukraine' or 'Putin's support for

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[2] Georgia's combined average rating across Freedom House indexes was 4.0 (partly free) in 2008, while Ukraine's 2014 score was 3.5 (also partly free); Russia scored 5.5 (not free) in both 2008 and 2014 (Freedom House 2008, 2014). Hence there is a divergence in democratic standards, but not as clearcut as liberal arguments would suggest. Also consider that Freedom House lamented a substantial reversal of democratic standards in both Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2014, respectively. That implies that Russia did not invade when the alleged democratic threat was higher, but lower. Note that Freedom House scores for the given year build on data gathered the preceding year; a score of 1.0 indicates maximum freedom, while 7.0 means a near complete lack thereof.

Assad.' There the underlying idea is that Putin alone, irrespective of political, bureaucratic, and other constraints, is responsible for any Russian course of action, from the strategic down to the tactical level. This stance is a degeneration of the more reasonable argument on the 'domestic sources' of Russia's international behaviour (Borozna 2022, pp.221-265). To be fair, Putin does wield considerable political power that he uses to shape and stir Russia's security policy; the character of the Russian institutional set-up allows and channels such disproportionate influence (see Chapter 2). However, studies have shown the remarkable consistency of Moscow's international action irrespective of Putin holding the presidency or being part of the institutional system at all (e.g., Mankoff 2012; Nalbandov 2016). Also, it is unlikely that Putin has the ability and resources to set all by himself not only the country's strategic agenda, but also to decide autonomously on how to best fashion the use of military force at operational level. Overall, analyses centred on an individual, Putin in particular, downplay the dialogical, group-based nature of decision-making and the redistribution of competencies that still exists also in a highly centralised politico-institutional system as Russia's. By doing so, one fails to grasp the wealth of military-strategic debates that have been ongoing in Russia since the 1990s and the composite (yet not necessarily atomised) nature of the Russian leadership.

Not only the interpretation of Russia's strategic choices, but also of its military-operational manoeuvres runs into a problem of mischaracterisation. In particular, since the first iteration of the Ukraine war, the default conceptual preoccupation of many scholars and commenters has been the allegedly 'hybrid' character of the Russian way of war (e.g., Bērziniš 2014; Chivvis 2017; Galeotti 2014; Jonsson & Seely 2015; Pomerantsev 2014).[3] Accordingly, contemporary Russia had gone through a revolution in its approach to war, breaking with the past in favour of a radically new way of achieving its strategic goals — as allegedly shown in Crimea and Donbas in 2014/15. This 'new' Russian way of war is supposedly centred on a multi-domain approach to war-fighting and the primacy of non-kinetic measures over kinetic, conventional military means. However, an

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[3] Originally, the term 'hybrid warfare' was coined in an attempt to describe the actions carried out by non-state actors (e.g., Hezbollah). It described hostile actions that "incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder," carried out concurrently in the same battle-space (Hoffman 2007, p. 8). Other labels such as 'non-linear' and 'new generation' warfare have emerged as alternatives to depict Russia's way of war, without adding much to the concept of hybridity.

excessive focus on hybridity has obfuscated any clear understanding about Russia's way of war (Charap 2015b; Monaghan 2016a; Renz 2016).

Besides being conceptually fuzzy — hence prone to misuse — hybridity is unable to capture the intellectual developments surrounding the use of Russian AF, as well as the actual character of the operations they conduct. A first problems lies in the fundamental misinterpretation of Russian military writings perpetrated by the preachers of hybridity. While occasionally lingering on this and similar concepts, no Russian military expert refers to hybridity as the main emphasis of the Russian way of war. Quite the opposite, the Chief of the Russian General Staff (GS) V. Gerasimov (2013), as much as other high standing officers (Chekinov & Bogdanov 2013; Serzhantov, Smolovy, Dolgopolov 2021) see hybrid war as the hallmark of Western (destabilisation) operations. Also, empirical evidence disproves the idea that Russia's military-strategic logic now emphasises non-kinetic measures. The comparative analysis of Russian operations in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria demonstrates the highly consistent and chiefly conventional character of Moscow's use of force — from 2008 to date (see Chapters 3, 4, 5). No watershed has occurred in the Russian way of war in 2014. Overall, by building on a very superficial understanding of Russian sources and operations, hybridity has led to inaccurate observations on the Russian way of war.

More grounded, alternative interpretations of Russian military actions were proposed in the immediate aftermath of the Crimea annexation. Cimbala (2014) described convincingly Moscow's actions in Ukraine as an example of military persuasion — defined as "threat or use of armed force in order to obtain desired political and military goals" (p. 360). Through this prism, he detailed the evolution of Russian moves between late February and mid-March 2014 and reasoned on the complex interplay between military actions and political calculus, while avoiding the distortions that I highlighted above. Freedman (2014) proceeded similarly, highlighting the skilful blend of military and non-military actions through which Moscow managed to control escalation and keep the Ukraine conflict limited (see also Freedman 2019). These early accounts have been followed by others, going beyond the Ukrainian context. These are based mainly on the concept of strategic deterrence, defined in ways that could embrace not only conventional and nuclear means of pressure but also non-military tools (Adamsky 2018a; Loukianova-Fink 2017; Ven Bruusgaard 2016; see the following chapters for other valuable sources).

The added value of these studies is twofold. First, while paying due attention to select peculiarities of the Russian *modus operandi*, these authors bring to bear the explanatory power of consolidated interpretive frameworks, thereby gaining in analytical depth and overall coherence compared to hybridity. Second, these studies generally rely on a wider and more skilfully interpreted number of Russian primary sources than those usually referred to by the proponents of hybrid war. This helps achieve greater analytical accuracy, reducing the risk of mirror-imaging Western pre-conceptions onto accounts of Russian deeds.

The one limitation affecting also these alternative contributions is that they lack overall conceptual depth and fail to provide a broader socio-political contextualisation of the Russian way of war (partial exceptions being: Covington 2016; German 2020; Jonsson 2019; Skak 2016). This is partly due to the nature of the issue under discussion. Given the topic's military nature, contributions tend naturally to display thinner theoretical frameworks, at least compared to the standards of Political Science — of which both Russian and Security Studies are a branch, after all. Even when some authors mention the usefulness of broader socio-political concepts, these do not find actual space in their analyses. A telling example is represented by Adamsky's 2018 essay in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*. The author opened by lamenting a lack of cultural studies on Russian deterrence and invoked the use of SC to bridge the gap — but then failed to give substance to such claim in subsequent pages. The reader does not find any theory of SC framing the study but a rather superficial use of the term throughout the text (similarly, see: Baev 2018; Kipp 2014). Because of such lack of conceptual thickness, literature has lost an important opportunity to gain in complexity and connect studies on Russia's strategy and war-fighting with those on its foreign and domestic politics — more rigorous and richer both methodologically and empirically (Clunan 2009; Mankoff 2012; White & Feklyunina, 2014; Nalbandov 2016; Neumann 2017).

The preceding discussion leads to two main observations about the contemporary debate on Russia's way of war. First, scholarly and policy literature give limited space to the analysis of the ideas and concepts underpinning Russia's approach to strategy and war-fighting. The unfolding of Russian strategies and military thought is generally brought back to pre-packaged logics of action that do not allow to appreciate their nuances and implications fully. Second, a more grounded interpretation of the Russian way of war can be obtained by making use of more solid and

consolidated conceptual frameworks (than, e.g., hybridity), as well as by interrogating a wider array of original Russian sources. In other words, both the conceptual thickness and empirical richness of the study of Russia's way of war can be improved considerably. This would allow the researcher to draw deeper insights onto the ultimate categories of thought underpinning Russia's approach to strategy and war-fighting and better understand their continuity and change.

ii. Objectives, arguments, and significance of this thesis

This thesis responds to such observations by offering a theory-led analysis of the ultimate categories of thought (beliefs) underpinning the Russian way of war, unpacking their nature, development, and interaction between 2008-2018. My core arguments develop as follows.

First, I claim that social structures, such as belief systems, bear primary explanatory power in relation to the making of strategy and war. In particular, I argue that a state's way of war is chiefly influenced by the beliefs about the self, the world, and the use of force held by its ruling elite. This view challenges prevailing interpretations of Russia's behaviour from an epistemological perspective. Material factors, regime type, and individual agency might have varying influence on policy-making, but they do so in subordination to beliefs — which first give value and meaning to the phenomena experienced by decision-makers. That is why it is important to interrogate Russia's system of strategic and military-related beliefs to understand Moscow's behaviour.

Second, I argue that this task can best be accomplished by employing the concept of SC. As anticipated, SC is the dominant set of beliefs concerning security policy and the threat or use of force held by a state's security elite. SC is engrained in the mindsets of decision-makers. By informing perceptions and policy preferences, SC shapes the elite's assessment of threats, opportunities, courses of action and fosters the homogenisation of state policies across time/scenarios. The conceptual framework of SC does not pre-define the content of these beliefs, but provides a guide to explore and identify preferences relative to strategy and war-fighting. Hence a SC-led approach is well suited for exploring in depth the nuances and development of Russia's way of war, without obfuscating it via the superimposition of pre-packaged logics of action.

My SC-led approach is innovative for two interrelated reasons. On the one hand, while there is no shortage of SC scholarship, most of it consists of critical reviews that do not actually contribute to the concept's scientific progression. Also because of this, SC-based approaches continue to occupy a secondary position in the field of Security Studies, which is still dominated by rationalist-materialist styles of enquiry. Moreover, frequently the concept of SC is employed 'lightly' — i.e., without the backing of a theoretical framework that justifies its adoption and guides its use — and superficially — as a mere synonym for foreign policy preferences. This thesis develops in contrast to such trends, providing a theoretically grounded use of SC as a tool for analysis.

On the other hand, and relatedly, I offer a refined conceptual model of SC. With respect to previous variants, it displays a clearer positioning in the agent-structure debate and a clearer, more parsimonious definition — justified in all its parts. I also provide an original operationalisation of SC, breaking it up into its constituent beliefs. I propose to see SC as composed by two pairs of beliefs: politico-strategic beliefs, which set the self-perception and worldviews held by a security elite; and military-strategic beliefs, which set the elite's preferences and assumptions regarding whether and how to use armed violence. This operationalisation facilitates SC's use for practical analytical purposes and reflects my idea of SC as a bridge between security policy and military action. It is worth observing that my model of SC does not want to be applicable to the case of Russia only, aiming instead at being universally employable. Other area specialists and students of strategic issues at large will be able to use (or challenge) in other contexts the framework presented here.

Third, the Russian SC displays unique, consistent features and complex nuances. I infer the beliefs constituting this SC from the analysis of Russian political narratives, military debates, and broad military-strategic practices (see the following section on methodology). It results evidently that Russia's strategic posturing and military manoeuvres are not driven by the sheer logic of material gains or a purely anti-democratic drive, but by a peculiar constellation of XX century-like assumptions that shape the elite's perceptions and policy-preferences. While select behaviours might resemble those of other states, the thinking process leading to them follows Russia-specific paths.

I argue that the identity held and enforced by the Russian security elite is imbued in a primordial, ethno-religious sense of civilisational belonging that legitimises a magnified perception of the self and backs a hierarchical vision of international relations — wherein Moscow sits high. Such self-perception develops along with a worldview that interprets reality as a bundle of interconnected domains and deterministic dynamics, historically leading to persistent competition among civilisations. It follows that the Russian elite sees itself entitled to both rights and duties, and is impelled to defend its 'place in history' (i.e., its self-perception, rights, and responsibilities) by actively competing in the great power game.

Within this system of politico-strategic beliefs, Russia's displays a dualist approach to the use of military force. Within the civilisational space that Russia identifies as its own responsibility, the elite is expected to display a greater proclivity to hostile behaviour — resulting in the uninterrupted enforcement of non-military measures of competition and the quick transition to the use of force. Elsewhere, instead, Moscow will subject the decision to use force to procedural, legal considerations and the logic of great power condominium. The discriminating factor that separates these two logics lies in the Russian self-perception, as I develop further in Chapter 2.

Interestingly, once the decision to wage war is taken, Russia is likely to use force in rather consistent ways — irrespective of the theatre of war. Russia's SC leads to a preference for the asymmetric and pro-active use of force, centred on conventional war-fighting style emphasising the seizure of initiative, mass, intensity, as well as the achievement of command superiority. These findings further disqualify the hybridity argument. While I do not refute that non-kinetic (informational, cyber, etc.) means of confrontation play an increasingly important role in conflict dynamics, I do not find any evidence of them being the new main emphasis of the Russian way of war.

Fourth, and related, I claim that the Russian SC is particularly resistant to change. The thorough analysis of Russian narratives and operations during the wars in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria shows the considerable consistency of Moscow's behaviour — on both the politico-strategic and military-operational plans. That is, the logics of action backing Russia's intervention in those scenarios and the way the elite commanded the use of force are strikingly similar — notwithstanding the different historical, political, and operational contexts of those wars. Such

consistency mirrors the tendency of the Russian elite to interpret novelties and war lessons as a confirmation of traditionally held categories of thought, rather than as sources for innovation. This happens, I argue, because of the narrow, insulated, and strongly conservative nature of the Russian security elite — which is not too dissimilar, in this regard, to its Soviet predecessor (Mahoney 1990).

Overall, the empirical work and observations I cast in this thesis are significant for several reasons. First, they are backed by an original theoretical perspective. As noted already, only a very limited number of mostly theory-light works of comparable nature have been published to date. The theory-led nature of my analysis allows us to explore the socio-political context within which the Russian way of war develops, while also providing a clear, replicable template within which to organise findings and build expectations. Second, no less than 200 Russian primary sources including elite speeches, strategic documents, and specialised military essays are inspected in this thesis. The unprecedented breadth and depth of the analysis I conduct on these sources allows to dive deep into the Russian mindset, so to observe directly the (un)spoken assumptions and associations that guide the strategic and military decisions of the elite. This is fully coherent with the stated aim of looking at the Russian way of war on its own terms — thereby enriching extant scholarship on Russia. Third, and related, my research results in an original reinterpretation of the Russian SC, down to the level of its ultimate constituent beliefs. No such mapping of the Russian way of war has been offered to date. Several of my empirical findings challenge widely-held positions about Russia's behaviour, including hybridity. Notably, I diverge in this regard from Jonsson (2019), whose recent work supports the argument of a non-kinetic shift in the Russian military-strategic thought. Fourth, to date no other publication carries out at once such systemic analysis of the Russian SC in general, as well as in the applied contexts of the wars in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. In fact, almost no comparative studies of Russian military operations are available to the reader (partial exceptions being: Bērziņš 2020; Sutyagin 2018). Finally, my work aims at being valuable for the policy-making community, too. While forecasting is not a concern of this thesis, my reconstruction of the Russian way of war can be useful to build expectations on Moscow 's behaviour and counteract it.

iii. Research method and methodology

This research develops within the timeframe 2008-2018. I do not examine the 1990s because of their transitioning character. While they would provide a good context for studying the remaking of Russian strategic and military thought after the collapse of Soviet institutions (Erickson 1993; Mahoney 1990), that would subtract space and resources to the in-depth analysis of the military-strategic course of today's Russia — this thesis' main concern. The years 2000-2007 do not include any meaningful cases of international, independent use of force by Russia and thus are excluded according to a logic of parsimony. On the contrary, 2008 is a good date from which to start the analysis, for it marked both the war in Georgia — the first war fought by post-Soviet Russia out of its borders — and the launch of defence minister Anatolii Serdiukov's reforms — which have shaped the Russian defence sector to its current form (Baev 2010; Cooper 2010; Giles 2014; Golts 2014). To begin my analysis in 2008 also allows me to inspect the character of Russia's way of war before 2014, thereby verifying whether the latter year was truly a watershed in the Russian military-strategic approach.

The closing year of the referent timeframe (2018) was chosen so as to work on a research span short enough to keep my research focussed, but long enough to allow for the interrogation of a large and variegated corpus of (primary) sources. This 10-year research span also includes all the cases in which the Russian AF had conducted independent war-fighting operations abroad since the collapse of the Soviet Union and till the beginning of my PhD journey. The exclusion of the years following 2018 from the referent timeframe made this study less chaotic, for I did not have to examine the unfolding of events and incorporate an ever increasing amount of new sources. Clearly this leaves out the most recent iteration of the Ukraine war (2022), which exploded only months before the submission of this thesis. In order to compensate for this deficit, I include some preliminary reflections on the ongoing conflict in the thesis conclusion.

To investigate the Russian SC (2008-2018) I employ an epistemological approach that lies somewhere in the middle of the positivist-interpretivist spectrum, acquiring the characters of what Ruffa and Evangelista (2021) referred to as "post-positivist leaning approaches" (see also Della

Porta & Keating 2008). In other words, I acknowledge the existence of a social reality, but I argue that the latter cannot be known 'perfectly' or without engaging in (subjective) interpretation.

As positivists would do, I sometimes employ the language of causality (e.g., 'dependent' and 'independent variables,' 'hypotheses'). However, I do not do so because of a firm faith in linear and measurable cause-effect dynamics, but rather to highlight (cor)relations among social phenomena via a widely used language that appeals to Anglo-American academia and strategic thinkers especially. As I explain in Chapter 1, linearity and measurability do not pair well with (strategic) cultural enquiry — which, in fact, has been typically dominated by interpretative approaches. The theoretical claim I make is that SC is the 'ideational *milieu*' within which security elites take decisions about strategy and war-fighting; other factors (e.g., geography, logistical requirements) do play a role in this process, but only because of the mediation of SC — which allows decision-makers to see, interpret, and evaluate (i.e., make sense of) those 'objective' material factors. In this sense, SC is the main 'independent variable' of my research, while military-strategic behaviour is the 'dependent' one. But since it is impossible to look into the brains of decision-makers directly, the correlation between such two 'variables' can be explored by no other means than indirect ones — by investigating the unspoken assumptions, meanings, and cognitive shortcuts hiding behind words and actions (Balzacq & Barnier-Khawam 2021, p. 162).

Similarly, while the conceptual discussion I engage in aims at offering a generally applicable model of SC, no such goal underpins my empirical analysis — which, in fact, deals with Russia only and within a specific timeframe. Indeed, the very purpose of SC is to highlight culture-specific (i.e. non-universal) approaches to strategy and war-fighting, counter to the tendency (familiar to positivists) to assume the existence of universal military-strategic standards of thought. My research design reflects such a dualist approach. On the one hand, as I detail below, the choice of sources and the organisation of case studies intends to maximise internal and external validity, as well as reliability. On the other hand, given its subject, this research cannot be based on statistical or other typically positivist methods, including a large-n of case studies. Though careful towards 'scientific objectivity,' only an interpretative method can shed light on the effects of SC onto Russian military-strategic behaviour.

More precisely, I adopt a deductive qualitative methodology (Braun & Clarke 2006;

Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill 2016, pp. 165-175). It is deductive because I frame my case-specific empirical analysis within a pre-prepared conceptual framework — whose scientific value is justified *ex ante* by reference to scholarly literature and then applied for analytical purposes. The functioning of SC as a source of military-strategic behaviour is assumed and empirical sources are interpreted accordingly. My findings shed light on the Russian case only. While (ideally) testifying to the worth of SC as a tool for sound military-strategic analysis in general, this research does not attempt to build a universal theory of war, claiming that the Russian way of war is representative of all 'ways of war.'

Throughout Chapter 2, when reconstructing Russian SC (2008-2018), I interrogate two main sets of qualitative sources. First, Russian primary sources such as leaders' speeches, programmatic security documents (e.g., National Security Strategies, Military Doctrines), and publications in military journals and magazines (e.g., *Voennaia Mysl'*, *Voenno-promyshlennyi Kur'er*, *Krasnaia Zvezda*). These texts will have a general character — i.e., they will discuss Russian strategic and military perspectives in broad terms, without making explicit or exclusive reference to the three military campaigns that constitute my case studies; this choice, as I explain below, responds to the need of avoiding circularity. The analysis of speeches, documents, and writings brings about a considerable added value for research, as they open a direct window onto the Russian mindset. Far from being mere rhetorical exercises void of concrete meaning, these primary sources reflect the minimum common principles shared across the security elite. Second, I turn to Russia's military exercises and defence sector reform. Actual military operations will be excluded at this stage of the research, in order to ease observation; yet this has no negative impact on the quality of my findings. Being fictitious scenarios, drills are similar to what the natural sciences call 'closed systems;' at the same time, they are real enough to provide a satisfactory point of view over the intended use of the AF.

To rely simply on speeches, documents, and publications would be too limiting, inasmuch as words might not translate into reality. By the same token, observable actions may in principle be the mere product of random contingencies and not necessarily the purposeful outcome of conscious choices. This is why I analyse both types of sources: to obtain cross-validation of the inferences I cast from each of them (Neumann & Heikka 2005). It is via practices that linguistic

narratives acquire (or not) practical meaning and credibility; it is also via the attempt to legitimise new practices that self-representation may (exceptionally) evolve (Pouliot 2010; Flockhart 2012). Attentive and rich thematic and policy analysis will reveal the latent beliefs hidden behind narratives and practices (Braun & Clarke 2006; Gioia, Corley, Hamilton 2012), shedding light on Russia's way of war as a whole. I will be reasonably certain of the existence of a given strategic cultural belief only if I find evidence of it in both speech and action; if not, the given hypothetical principle either does not exist, or it covers a secondary role in Russia's strategic preferences. Also note that the inspection of both kinds of sources is also coherent with my conceptualisation of (strategic) culture, as I clarify in Chapter 1.

The last part of the thesis is dedicated to case studies. They explore three actual Russian military campaigns — namely Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014/15), and Syria (2015). These case studies fulfil a 'confirming' and 'interpretative' purpose (Lijphart 1971): they aim at validating further the utility of my conceptual framework as a tool for military-strategic analysis, as well as testing the veracity of the hypotheses on Russia's SC I develop in Chapter 2. In particular, by inspecting the security elite's words and military moves in these three contexts, I want to check whether my reconstruction of Russia's strategic cultural beliefs (2008-2018) is merely a shaky abstraction, or it actually helps make sense of Moscow's way of war in real-life scenarios.

I choose *three* case studies following a logic of replication that can best support the validity and reliability of my findings (Yin 2018, pp. 102-107). The Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria campaigns do not coincide with the total number of military operations *ever* conducted by Russia, but do represent the only occasions in which Moscow resorted to military force *within* the referent timeframe. Hence, even if small, the sample is still adequate to explore the Russian SC and capture its behavioural outcomes between 2008-2018 (Collier & Mahoney 1996). These three cases display high variation of contextual, environmental factors and thus are adequate to test a socio-culturalist argument based on ideational factors — which are the only elements assumed to be constant across the sample (Gerring 2001, ch. 8; Seawright & Gerring 2008). As the case studies will show, apparent Russian behaviour in each scenario conforms with the strategic cultural expectations built in Chapter 2.

Finally, a note on the sources interrogated in the case studies. There, too, I apply the same

method as above, looking at both words and deeds; yet two caveats are worth noting. On the one hand, I analyse only those elite speeches, documents, and writings that deal with the specific case study — not statements about strategy and war in general, as in Chapter 2. On the other hand, I do not look at Russian drills and defence reforms anymore (as done in Chapter 2 instead) but at the actual operations conducted on Georgian, Ukrainian, and Syrian soil by the Russian AF. I do so not only to respect the time and space boundaries of the case studies and their 'applied' nature, but also to avoid incurring in an error of circularity — whereby the case studies would confirm my hypotheses only because the same sources were interrogated.

iv. Thesis structure

The thesis develops across five chapters, grouped in two 'parts.'

Part I includes the theoretical and the main analytical chapters of the thesis. The former (Chapter 1) presents the conceptual framework that guides my research. There I explore the impact of social factors, such as culture and beliefs, on military-strategic dynamics and argue in favour of SC's utility to explore a military mindset 'from within.' Then I present my model of SC, offering an original definition and operationalisation that help employ the concept (more) rigorously and effectively (than previous variants) for the purpose of empirical analysis. I also discuss issues related with the identification of a SC's sources, as well as its degree of continuity and change.

Chapter 2 reinterprets Russia's SC via the conceptual framework above. Accordingly, I first identify the holders of such SC — i.e., the Russian security elite; this allows me to know whose speeches, writings, and actions to consider throughout my research. Then I interrogate such sources within the timeframe 2008-2018 to I infer the ultimate categories of thought underpinning the Russian way of war. I offer a precise break-up of the Russian SC across its constituent beliefs, from the politico-strategic to the military-strategic level. The nuances and interrelations among such beliefs are explored in-depth; I also cast hypotheses on their degree of resistance to change.

Part II of the thesis includes three case studies, each aimed at testing the interpretation of Russian SC I offered in Chapter 2, as well as confirming the general utility of SC as a conceptual tool. As stated already, the three case studies explore Russia's military operations in Georgia

(Chapter 3), Ukraine (Chapter 4), and Syria (Chapter 5). Each chapter treats the strategic cultural beliefs I identified in Chapter 2 as hypotheses about the nature of Russian narratives and actions, and tests such hypotheses against Russia's actual behaviour. Divergence from my expectations is explained, if need be. I also reflect on the overall degree of consistency of the Russian way of war across the three scenarios.

In the Conclusion to the thesis I overview the main arguments and findings of this study, pinpointing their scientific value and significance for policy-making. There will be space also to touch upon the ongoing iteration of the Ukraine war, in an effort to cast some preliminary observations based on my understanding of the Russian SC.

Part I

Chapter 1

Recasting Strategic Culture: A Socio-structuralist Understanding of Strategy and War-fighting

This chapter aims at presenting the conceptual framework that will enable to understand the inner logic, nuances, and development of the Russian way of war. I do so by pursuing two main lines of enquiry. First, I make the case for a 'socially sensitive' approach to the study of strategy and war-fighting — i.e., an approach that recognises the role of socio-cultural structures, beliefs in particular, on the shaping of military-strategic thought and practice. Second, I elaborate on the concept of SC as a means for pursuing such a 'socially sensitive' approach. I argue that SC is uniquely positioned to highlight the influence of beliefs on the identification of threats and strategic interests, as well as on the nature of military responses. I propose a model of SC that, moving from structuralist assumptions, identifies clearly the term's conceptual *contours* and refines its employability as an analytical tool.

Before moving ahead, it is worth clarifying the meaning of two terms that are key to this research: culture and strategy. The former has been defined in a number of different ways, with some authors stressing its ideational component, while other focussed on its behavioural outcomes (e.g., Keesing 1974; Dittmer 1977; Swidler 1986; Geertz 2017). As I will argue, these two aspects are closely related. Hence it is reasonable to broadly define culture as *both* an epistemic frame *and* a repertoire of actions. More precisely, culture can be conceptualised as a collectively held ideational framework that sets the perimeter of a group's understanding of the contingent environment and enables coherent action. The fundamental units of any culture are "coded bundles of information" commonly called beliefs or symbols (Handwerker 1989, p. 316). The concept of 'symbol' has quite a specific meaning which is tangential to the military-strategic focus of my research; consequently I don't make use of the term. Instead I employ the concept of 'belief' extensively, meaning with it: "[t]he act of deciding on or being convinced of the truthfulness or reality of a proposition. Belief involves accepting the proposition even when logic or rationality would suggest the opposite" (Sullivan 2009, p. 46). In other words, beliefs are cognitive assumptions — bits of knowledge held

a priori;[4] as such, they may or may not reflect reality. The broad definition I offered above highlights another important element: culture belongs to a collectivity. Hence any cultural analysis should move from the identification of the social group that thinks and acts according to the given set of beliefs. This will be one of my major tasks in both the present and following chapter.

'Strategy' is no less difficult to define than culture. The term's most basic meaning, valid across a variety of disciplines, is that of a series of broad steps (a policy) devised to achieve a specific purpose. By definition, strategy is instrumental — that is, always oriented towards a goal (Gray 2000, p. 18). If approached from the perspective of security studies, the term indicates the setting up of military or other methods to fulfil the ends of policy, taking into account available resources (Yarger 2006). Depending on the chosen means and specific purposes, one could talk about grand/national strategy or military/theatre strategy — the former involving a rather holistic set of tools and concerns that exceeds the military domain (Larsdotter 2019). Yet these two levels are unavoidably interwoven, in as much as they both stem from priorly defined national interests. I will make such link evident both in this chapter, from a theoretical perspective, and in the following one, empirically. Chapters 3-5 will help address instead the contentious issue of the relation between (Russian) strategic theory and strategic practice (Winton 2011; Strachan 2019). Finally, it is worth noting the difference between strategy and planning. Both are goal-oriented, but the latter is of a lower order and has greater rigidity than strategy; while a plan defines concrete steps for achieving a purpose, strategy sets the broader end-ways-means framework that motivates the adoption of a plan and limits its possible forms.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows. First, I justify the choice of a 'socially sensitive' perspective on strategy and war-fighting. I do so by highlighting the relevant impact of socio-cultural factors on military-strategic decision-making, doctrine, battlefield performance, and military adaptation. Second, I introduce my concept of choice to carry out such 'socially sensitive' analysis of strategy and war-fighting — i.e., SC. After reviewing the scholarship on SC, I identify the

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[4] While the term "belief" is similar to or related with the concepts of "idea" and "norm," these are no synonyms. *Ideas* are "an abstract representation of a given element of reality" (Balzacq & Barnier-Khawam 2021, p. 159); as such, they have a strong element of symbolism, a high level of abstraction, and are not necessarily aimed at bridging between experience and action. Instead *norms* are formalised standards of accepted behaviour. While this very general phrasing might well to beliefs and ideas, too, the term 'norm' frequently takes on a legalistic meaning that here I want to avoid.

areas where it needs improvement and propose ways to tackle them. In particular, I refine and operationalise SC to enhance its deployability and analytical utility, moving from structuralist ontological assumptions. This discussion will result in a clear definition of SC, as well as a precise break-up of its constituent beliefs and the ways they influence strategy- and war-making; I also speculate on the origins of an actor's SC and its potential for change. I conclude with some methodological observations on how to investigate SC empirically, thereby completing the conceptual framework that will guide the analysis of Russian sources in Chapter 2.

1.1. Situating my work in the field: rational-materialist versus socio-cultural approaches to strategy and war

This section offers a critical overview of ontological-epistemological approaches to the study of strategic and military affairs, introducing my choice for a 'socially sensitive' approach based on SC. The core of the literature in Strategic Studies moves from rationalist claims that predicate the universality of military-strategic thinking and the primary relevance of material forces in military affairs. Without denying the latter's importance, I do not attribute primary explanatory value to them. Instead, I highlight the fundamental role that socio-cultural factors have played in the making of strategic and military choices historically. Among the existing conceptual constructs that allow to capture such dynamic best is SC — which will frame my research in this thesis.

1.1.1. The rational-materialist mainstream in Strategic Studies

A considerable portion of the literature on Strategic Studies does not emphasise socio-cultural factors. Commonly this scholarly field adopts a realist philosophical ontology that confers upon the subject its typical rationalist and pragmatist tone. As a result, material dimensions of conflict are

given priority, at the expenses of other factors — like beliefs —, which do not fit well in the (allegedly) universal models of strategy and war-fighting.[5]

This state of things is motivated by two general conditions. Firstly, the very practical nature of strategy and war-fighting. The ultimate military question being the achievement of victory via (the threat of) killing, emphasis has fallen on a series of problems whose nature is far more immediate and concrete than the abstract theorising about the socio-cultural underpinnings of war. Secondly, contemporary Strategic Studies are still deeply influenced by the rationalist thought of Modern theorists (and practitioners) of war like Antoine-Henri Jomini, Napoleon Bonaparte, Alfred Mahan, Ferdinand Foch, and Julian Corbett — just to name a few.[6] According to them, strategy is a science that should focus on the individuation of the universal principles of war and military victory — these principles being propositions holding true across time and space, irrespective of (allegedly epiphenomenal) conditions, including socio-cultural factors. Indeed, even those who conceive of strategy as an art rather than a science tend to provide accounts of warfare focused on technological, logistical, and operational dimensions, with little or no interest for ideational elements.[7]

Among others, the *US Army War College Guide to Strategy* offers a good example of this tendency.[8] Drafted by military practitioners *and* political scientists, the volume identifies national values as the foundation of strategic decision-making and the core determinants of national interests (Dorff 2001). While *per se* 'values' are open to a variety of definitions, throughout the text they end up being equated with interests themselves, which in their turn are clearly defined in rational and material (Realist-like) terms (Jablonski 2001). Instead, factors such as ideology and elite convictions are seen as rhetorical artefacts used to legitimise power-seeking behaviour or even something which "risks damaging the nation" (Roskin 2001, pp. 62-64). The more recent *Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy* (Balzacq & Krebs 2021) showcases a variety of scholarly approaches

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[5] The main issue-areas regard the operational, technological, and logistical dimensions of strategy and war. The bulk of discussions range from the (hard) security implications of a given strategic posture to the assessment of the adversary's military capabilities, passing through the evaluation of the features of the battlefield and a number of arrangements gravitating around war-time operations - including training, procurement, intelligence, mobilisation.

[6] For a review of their thoughts on war, see: Paret (1986c); Mahnken & Maiolo (2008).

[7] See, for example, the work of Prussian field marshal Helmut von Moltke (Holborn 1986).

[8] The same holds true for 2006's revision of the volume (Boone Bartholomees 2006).

to the subject but non-rationalist, 'socially sensitive' variants continue being presented as emerging (at best) alternatives to an enduring realist-pragmatist mainstream. Indeed, the 'rational analysis' model of grand strategy that Glaser (2021) overviews in said volume is the method I have seen applied the most in military headquarters. The bulk of articles published in the *Journal of Strategic Studies* and professional military periodicals as the US' *Military Affairs* and Russia's *Voennaia Mysl'* further testify to this approach.

Based on the above, it is safe to conclude that a considerable portion of the literature devotes scarce attention to the impact of socio-cultural factors on the making of strategy and the conduct of war. This, however, must not necessarily be the case. In fact, an alternative strain of scholarship, one more sensitive to socio-cultural factors, has managed to consolidate itself, finding fertile ground in some of the early intuitions of classical strategists, as well as in sociological studies (for an overview, see: Balzacq & Barnier-Khawam 2021; Bueger & Gadinger 2021; Kornprobst & Traistaru 2021; McCourt 2021). Such is the research stream I intend to follow.

1.1.2. *The social dimension of strategy and war*

An alternative strain of 'socially sensitive' scholarship has found fertile ground in some of the early intuitions of classical strategists, as well as in sociological studies (for an overview, see: Balzacq and Barnier-Khawam 2021; Bueger and Gadinger 2021; Kornprobst and Traistaru 2021; McCourt 2021). By reference to historical evidence, they highlight the pervasive effects of socio-cultural factors on strategy and war-fighting — including on threat assessment, the development of military doctrines, combat effectiveness, and military adaptation. Here I touch upon these processes, trying to clarify their relation with beliefs and social institutions.

The father of modern (Western) Strategic Studies, C. von Clausewitz, pointed already to the relevance of socio-cultural factors to strategy and war.[9] Clausewitz's search for the universal categories of war and his detailed technical particularisation of conflict should not be confused with an approach insensitive to the human, social dimension of conflict (Paret 1986a; Clausewitz 2000). The Prussian general acknowledged irrationality — i.e., moral, cultural, and psychological

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[9] On why it is still relevant to talk about Clausewitz, see Gray (1999a).

forces — as one of the three 'Gods' that regulate the 'chameleonic' nature of war;[10] he also went as far as comparing war with commerce, the two sharing a marked social, inter-relational character. Most importantly, Clausewitz argued that both the military aim (*Ziel*) and the specific means to achieve it are defined by the political purpose (*Zweck*) that a given community intends to achieve by waging war (Herberg-Rothe 2014). One can discuss whether the fine-tuning of *Zwek*, *Ziel*, and military means happens automatically or by means of rational calculation but the nature of this process does not change Clausewitz's main point — i.e., military-strategic choices are not ontologically independent but subordinated to the political realm, which responds in its turn also to non-rational impulses of socio-cultural nature (Høiback 2011).

Building on Clausewitz, M. Howard (1979) and C.S. Gray (1999b) dissected strategy into four dimensions: operational, logistical, technological, and *social*.[11] According to the two authors, the social dimension of strategy subsumes the broad social, political, and cultural context wherein conflict takes place. *Inter alia*, they mentioned demography, social organisation, internal cohesion, and modes of production as strategy-shaping factors (Howard 1979, pp. 977-981; Gray 1999b, 23-31). While not focussed on these factors only, Howard and Gray echoed the call for a more sociological approach to military studies expressed by war historian J. Keegan (1976, 1993) — whose plea would be addressed later and in greater detail by V.D. Hanson, in his seminal work on *The Western Way of War* (2009). What all these authors claim is that, by influencing the definition of interests, (un)bearable costs, and what is (not) negotiable, the social dimension frames strategic decision-making and doctrinal choices. *Ceteris paribus*, on such basis one should expect variations in the incidence and character of war across time and space, in accordance with variations (or absence thereof) in the social dimension (Kagan 1995; Luttwak 1995).

Socio-cultural factors impact also on military effectiveness and performance. The organisational innovations introduced by Napoleon are a case in point. These were made possible only by the replacement of the *Ancien Régime* by a new social system which extended the rights

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[10] The other two Gods are rationality (derived from the subordination of military doctrine to the rational calculation of the state's political interests) and non-rationality (i.e., chance and probability).

[11] Indeed, Gray is one of the main representatives of the 'first generation' of SC. However, he made clear that he rejects a *purely* culturalist understanding of war and, in fact, his scholarly production is far more complex than that. The work cited here displays such broader approach to strategy and war.

and duties of citizens in relation to the government and war (Paret 1986b).[12] Moreover, by enlarging the recruitment base and injecting soldiers with nationalistic enthusiasm, the French Revolution allowed the elaboration of new strategies and tactics. Napoleon's typical tactical sequence — opened by skirmishers (*voltigeurs*) and the bayonet charges of regular troops — entailed human costs that were just unthinkable before the Revolution but granted him military success. In that context, social changes enabled victory; yet the opposite scenario is equally possible: certain social structures can impair military performance. For example, military apparatuses that reflect wider cultural, political or other types of cleavages see their effectiveness drastically reduced during both phases of strategic planning and battlefield execution, as a result of scarce internal cohesion (Rosen 1995). This was the case of the Austro-Hungarian empire, whose army was made dysfunctional by the same ethnic fractures affecting the empire at large. Similarly, the caste system, tribalism, and culturally embedded views on information-sharing, training, and security have led "Arabic-speaking armies [to be] generally ineffective in the modern era", first and foremost when trying to carry out combined arms operations (De Atkine 1999; see also Pollack 1996).

Relatedly, socio-cultural factors help explain the extent to which actors are open to the adoption of new technologies or practices (Farrell & Terriff 2001; Goldman 2006; Jungdhal & Macdonald 2015). This calls for a careful evaluation of the effects of the so-called 'Revolutions in Military Affairs' (RMAs) in different social spaces. The ability of technical (or other) innovations to change the nature of military doctrine and operations is not to be taken for granted; rather, it depends on the inner characteristics of the receiving culture and, in particular, on the latter's attitude towards change — which is typically low in conservative military environments. German preparations to World War I offer an emblematic example. Germany, in fact, based its Schlieffen Plan on the same 50-year old doctrine applied during the Unification War (Rothenberg 1986). Back then, the conduct of short decisive battles of annihilation (*Vernichtungsschlachten*) granted victory quite easily, legitimising such model as *the* way of achieving victory. The institutionalisation of the experience of 1866 in the German military thought led the General Staff to overlook the seismic

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[12] The Napoleonic innovations I am talking about include conscription and national mobilisation, the modular re-structuring of the AF in corps and divisions, and the establishment of the General Staff.

changes that happened in the military landscape since then.[13] These made the Schlieffen Plan impossible to fulfil but Germany's decision-makers, 'blinded' by their doctrinal preconceptions, had not been able to anticipate that. As a result, the freezing of the Western front came as a shock for German strategists. Less catastrophic, but still representative of the socio-cultural obstacles to military adaptation is the case of the 'Westernisation' of Communist-legacy AF. NATO has supported the transformation of these forces for more than 20 years now, dispensing educational, technological, and financial assets. Yet results fall short of expectations, with both Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries and some (formerly Communist) allies lagging behind set doctrinal and operational standards. Insufficient insistence by the Allies on re-structuring the social dimension (read: the military mindset) of those countries offers a credible explanation of such disappointing outcome (Sanders 2017; Young 2016, 2018).

The previous claims resonate with those set forth by the constructivist, socio-institutionalist, and various practice- and discourse-based branches of Political Science. According to them, strategic and military choices are culturally idiosyncratic because they are based on assessments and procedures that — having a social and political nature — are rooted in beliefs and ideology inevitably (Balzacq & Barnier-Khawam 2021). Such ideational stances are embedded in all decision-making institutions of a social community, influencing policy outcomes by defining what is relevant, appropriate, and desirable (Goldstein & Keohane 1993; Katzenstein 1996b; Weldes 1996). Institutions tasked with the making of strategy and doctrine are no exception. Hence also the choice of threats, allies, and paths to national security are necessarily reflective of socio-cultural conditions. This process takes place at all levels of analysis (for an overview, see: McCourt 2021, pp. 305-307). It underpinned, for instance, Tannenwald's (2007) enquiry into the effects of the social and normative stigma attached to nuclear weapons on the (first) use of such weapons; Katzenstein's (1996a) account of the peculiar (contrasted) approach to security of post-war Japan; as well as Eden's (2004) explanation of how old-fashioned, yet institutionalised ways of thinking about war affected US' nuclear doctrine during the Cold War.

Overall, the relevance of the socio-cultural factors to strategic and military matters appears evident. As E. Kier (1995) put it: "military doctrine is rarely a carefully calculated response to the

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[13] Including new technologies, the growing size of armies, and their logistical complexity.

external environment" (p. 66); conversely, strategic and military "[p]references are endogenous; they must be understood within their cultural context" (p. 67). This is not to deny completely the role of the material dimensions of security. The argument I support is rather that the impact of the socio-cultural *milieu* on the making of strategy and the conduct of military operations is ontologically prior to that of other variables and actually shapes the way the latter are considered by decision-makers. While it is true that "[t]he nature and purpose, or function, of strategy are invariable throughout all strategic history" (Gray 1999b, p. 16), its content is not. The proverbial balance among ends, ways, and means cannot be resolved unequivocally, according to some rational, universal recipe based on purely material concerns. The social dimension, by influencing the definition of both ends and ways, relativises the strategic process: other things being equal, strategic choices should change in accordance with variations in the socio-cultural context; by the same token, if socio-cultural premises are kept constant, strategic reasoning should maintain a significant coherence even in the event of deep changes in material variables. The relativisation of strategic processes applies in both synchronic and diachronic terms - i.e., across time-located social units and within the same unit, across time.

The concept that best captures such view of strategy and war-fighting is that of SC, to which I turn now.

1.1.3. Strategic culture: a literature review

The corpus of literature on SC developed with the precise intent of counterbalancing the rationalist-materialist mainstream in Strategic Studies, giving due weight to the impact of socio-cultural factors on strategy and war-fighting. In doing so, the initiators of SC wanted to fight back against the fallacy of "strategic ethnocentrism" — i.e., the tendency of projecting onto others one's own way of conceiving strategy, assessing risks, and determining military responses (Booth 1979; Gray 2013). This problem still endures today also in relation to Russia, as I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. A focus on socio-cultural factors and the continuing relevance of the problem of strategic ethnocentrism qualify SC as a good starting point to pursue the goal of this research.

Coincidentally, one of the earliest foundational works on SC was concerned already with the understanding of Moscow's strategic plans and military preferences. It was 1977 when J.L. Snyder published with RAND *The Soviet Strategic Culture*. The author reconstructed the mindset of the *homo sovieticus* in order to understand whether Moscow could comply with the (then) new American posture of limited nuclear deterrence. Instead of thinking in game-theoretic terms, Snyder (1977) moved from the assumption that "Soviet leaders and strategists [were] not culture-free, preconception-free" (p. 4) but subjects whose decisions were guided by a peculiar way of thinking embedded in their minds as a result of socialisation. On this basis, the author concluded that Washington should not expect the Soviets to react to strategic stimuli according to the same logic of US' decision-makers.

Snyder inspired many scholars to proceed along the same lines. The scholarship on SC comprises three so-called 'generations' that span the 1980s and the 1990s (Johnston 1995b; Uz Zaman 2009; Lock 2010). They all share the broad idea of SC as a set of time-resistant assumptions and preferred modes of action relative to security and the use of force, generated and continuously reconfirmed by the stratification of perceptions and experiences. SC-backed courses of action are inherently preferable, legitimate, and rational — they are the 'natural' choice — to those who are faced with the task of making strategic decisions. Nevertheless, inter-generational differences are considerable. The second generation is the most 'exotic', since it follows a *sui generis* path close to post-structuralism and the Gramscian critique of hegemonic power (Luckham 1984; Klein 1988). Second generation scholars see SC as a rhetorical tool instrumentally deployed by power-seeking elites to mask and legitimise their actions. Hence SC is downgraded to a mere artificial construct with no operational impact, whereas rational self-interest is the real determinant of strategic behaviour. Conversely, the first and third generation confer real explanatory power on SC: states enforce certain military doctrines because of the peculiar set of strategic assumptions that frame the ways of thinking of decision-makers. But while the first generation sees SC as a 'context' and does not properly differentiate between what should be considered as cause, part of, or consequence of SC itself (Gray 1981, 1999c; Lord 1985), the third generation posits a discernible linear relation between SC (the independent variable) and behaviour (the dependent variable), and seeks to carry out research in a more methodologically

rigorous way (Johnston 1995a; Kier 1995; Rosen 1995). A self-proclaimed fourth generation has recently emerged, pledging to put order in the scholarship (Burns & Eltham 2014; Libel 2016, 2018). Yet this goal is still far from being reached. On the one hand, the fourth generation weakens the explanatory power of SC by giving to socialised actors the power to rise above and modify the social structure informing their minds (it recalls the second generation). On the other hand, these authors expend considerable energies in theorising how SC could *change* but forget about the hallmark of this approach — i.e., explaining *continuity*.

While the generational sub-division is useful to categorise scholarship retrospectively, I believe it should not be the point of reference for new research. The obsessive focus on generations has pushed scholars to insist more on differences rather than similarities, thereby exacerbating the discussion around SC and complicating the task of theoretical progression. For this reason I think that the decision of Libel and colleagues to declare themselves the 'fourth generation' is counter-productive. In this thesis I will not side a priori with any generation but rather evaluate individual contributions as part of the whole scholarship on SC. This is with the exception of the second generation, which I do exclude a priori because of two reasons. Firstly, it is a sort of outlier in SC studies. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, second generation scholars reduce SC to a mere rhetorical mask; being deprived of independent explanatory power, SC becomes a spurious variable not worthy of attention. Secondly, and relatedly, such generation moves from ontological assumptions that are opposite to mine — as I will clarify in the next section of this chapter. Suffice here to note that the second generation's choice to confer on leaders the capacity to modify arbitrarily SC clearly signals the (implicit) support for the agent side of the agent-structure debate of the Social Sciences. My choice is different.

As concerns the debate between first and third generations, it is really a matter of pragmatism. If we look beyond the borders of SC scholarship, anthropological and sociological studies recognise a circular relation between beliefs and behaviour (Neumann & Heikka 2004). The former — be they individual thoughts or publicly held knowledge — are part of the cultural structure; on their basis, agents determine what should be done and what is (il)legitimate. Behaviour stems from this reasoning and acquires meaning in light of culture; behaviour performs as the practical counterpart of beliefs, concretising their potential agency on the material plan. By

providing concrete results, behaviour legitimises those beliefs that gave it its *raison d'être* — and so on, cyclically. In this sense, *both* beliefs *and* behaviour are culture (McCarthy 1996, pp. 2-5; Hamati-Ataya 2018, pp. 17-23). As the first generation put it: culture is 'context'. Hence it seems difficult to hold a strictly linear-positivist view on the relation between SC and strategic behaviour — as the third generation does. For good or bad, the social world is not like the one pictured by the Natural Sciences (Machlup 1961/1988). However, the acceptance of a circular relation between culture and behaviour by no means precludes the possibility to research how the former shapes the latter *within a specific timeframe*. That is what I will do in following Chapters 2-5.

As a result of inter-generational divergencies, scholars in the field have not managed to bring about a progressive theoretical model of SC and some fundamental questions still have to be addressed (Biehl et al. 2013). Firstly, is it possible to formulate a common definition of SC, or at least one that could be used by all generations with no major problems? So far there has been great disagreement with regard to the content and operationalisation of SC not only *among* generations, but also *within* the same generation. With the exception of A.I. Johnston's (1995a, 1995b), other proposals are quite fuzzy and under-specified. This condition has further complicated communication among students of SC and reduces the theory's ability to benefit from the interaction with other, more consolidated academic traditions — e.g., that on Political Culture (Johnston 1995b, pp. 14-15). Secondly, how does SC impact on behaviour? While the position of the first and third generation is clearer, the fourth's is not; for the second generation this question is rather irrelevant instead. In all these cases, the specific mechanism linking SC's beliefs with behaviour is not explored thoroughly. Thirdly, what are the origins of SC? What processes engender and confer on it its specific content? Literature has not even made an effort to bridge the various suggestions, which have piled up incoherently. Proposed sources of SC range from historical experiences to recent events, from ideology to geography, passing through 'ways of life,' trans-national processes, socio-political structures, and political/military institutions (for an overview: Howlett & Glenn 2005; Lantis 2002, 2006). Finally, a last question revolves around the issue of continuity and change: is SC rigid or is it open to change? In the latter case, how easily does change happen and under what conditions?

The inability to address coherently these areas of concern has resulted also in a quite unsystematic employment of SC in empirical research. Beyond those works ascribable to the 3+1 generations, only a few other authors have embarked in the task. Among them, Biehl et al. (2013) and Tellis et al. (2016) attempted to compare the SCs of the main state players in Europe and Asia, respectively. The comparative effort is certainly admirable, since it fills a gap in the scholarship. However, their analyses reconstruct states' foreign policy preferences, rather than SCs: no proper space is given to how each different culture sees the enemy, war, and how it would use force. Other works have been more successful in this regard. *Inter alia*, Vardi (2008) discussed the SC of Israel, Stone (2016) that of China, while Zapfe (2016) and Kubiak (2017) focused on Germany. In all these cases the concept of SC is presented in quite a sketchy way, especially in regard to the issues of origin, impact, and change. But while the authors' contribution to the theory of SC is null, they succeed in employing it empirically. They provide readers with academically informed and policy-relevant observations about the strategic preferences of the object country, linking the political and military levels and presenting with precision the operational consequences of such SCs. Unfortunately, Covington's (2016) is the only recent work on Russian SC that reaches such standards. Other works, while informed by sound knowledge of Russia, use the term SC superficially and end up being quite partial. As in the case of Biehl's and Tellis's edited volumes, these studies merely review the main tenets of Russian foreign policy, some of them provide assessments of its threat perception, but none discusses the relation and impact of these elements on the military level (Eitelhuber 2009; Heikka 2010; Lytvynenko 2013; Skak 2016; Kanet 2019).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations, I believe that the concept of SC is worth saving. In fact it allows to approach the issues of strategy and war-making from an angle that, while not unconventional, does not appear frequently in the literature. The historical and literary examples reported above testify to the important role of socio-cultural variables in strategic matters and war-fighting. Thus it seems reasonable and legitimate to bring the 'social dimension' to bear more solidly on the study of war — and SC is one natural tool to do so. In particular, the re-evaluation of the social dimension via SC has the potential to link Strategic Studies with Social Sciences at large, contributing to a conversation between scientific domains and the construction of progressive knowledge. Inter-disciplinary connections would help fill in the conceptual gaps of SC,

thereby raising its value as a tool of understanding. That is the task I set for myself in the reminder of this chapter.

1.2. Re-casting strategic culture: working towards a refined analytical model

This section presents the underlying assumptions, key arguments, and conclusions of my conceptual journey in my approach to SC. My overall aim is to strengthen the concept's theoretical foundations and increase its analytical deployability, so as to make it an internally coherent, practically useful tool for deductive military-strategic analysis.[14]

To do so, I start by making a foundational ontological assumption relative to the agent-structure debate of the Social Sciences. Within such debate I side with structuralists, assuming a holistic top-down approach (Hollis 2004, pp. 1-22; see also Klotz et al. 2006). Social structuralism has roots in continental philosophy and counts among its members intellectuals of the calibre of K. Marx, E. Durkheim, and P. Bourdieu. According to this school of thought, the (social) whole has priority over its parts — or, to put it the other way around, individual action presupposes a social structure made of norms, beliefs, and dispositions. In this sense, "society is constitutive of human being" and has "ontological primacy [...] over mentality, consciousness, and all of mental life" (McCarthy 1996, pp. 1, 15). Individual thinking and action are inescapably bound to the structure of rules and knowledge underpinning society: norms shape individuals, not vice versa — and decision-makers are no exception (for a critical discussion of this position, read: Jervis 2013).

This assumption frames the rest of my conceptual elaboration. Moving from here, I tackle the aforementioned areas of concern of SC scholarship: first, I propose an innovative definition and operationalisation of the concept; second, I detail the processes by which SC influences military-strategic behaviour; third, I discuss the origins of SC; and finally, I reflect on the conditions under which a SC might change. The resulting model of SC can be visualised with the help of Figure 1 (page 48).

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[14] An embryonic version of these reflections was presented in my MA thesis and in Fasola & Lucarelli (2019).

1.2.1. Definition and operationalisation

In order to bear analytical utility, concepts should display terminological clarity, address a finite range of phenomena, and clarify the nature of and relations between the components of the chosen phenomenon (Odgen & Richards 1985, pp. 1-23; Gerring 2001, pp. 39-41).[15] Students of SC have proposed a wide range of definitions, many of which are quite poor if assessed against these criteria. In some cases, excessive parsimony has resulted in conceptual under-determination, while in other cases the concept extends too much, at the expenses of internal and external coherence. Johnston's definition is a partial exception.[16] But while probably the best definition of SC, it suffers from two limitations. First, it is wordy, since it includes elements that are either superfluous (see the definition's parenthetical list) or redundant (like the final proposition on the "aura of factuality," which merely restates a general characteristic of culture). Second, it is somehow misleading. Looking at the definition one would expect a study focused only on military issues, whereas Johnston (rightly) speaks about a lot more than that, touching self-perception, threat assessment, and grand strategy. These elements find space in Johnston's research but are not reflected in his definition.

Starting from this premises, I define SC as the *dominant set of beliefs concerning security policy and the threat or use of force held by a state's security elite.* I use 'belief' in accordance with the definition presented in the opening of this chapter. As such, beliefs are *lex insita*: they are not (necessarily) explicit law-like rules but implicit, unquestioned dispositions that inform mindsets and organise action (Bourdieu 2012, pp. 19, 81, 214). The presence of the attribute 'dominant' in the definition above suggests instead that various sub-cultures might exist. Hence deviance and strategic cultural change are both possible. A deviant or non-dominant SC can aspire to reach dominance but, until then, its impact on strategic behaviour is limited or null. The ability of a non-

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[15] For an interesting, dense discussion on different approaches to concept analysis in International Relations, see: Berenskötter (2017) — especially the part on 'scientific approaches,' which best captures my endeavours.

[16] Johnston (1995a) defines SC as a "system of symbols (e.g., argumentation structures, languages, analogies, metaphors) which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs, and by clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the strategic preferences seem uniquely realistic and efficacious" (p. 36).

dominant SC to influence decision making raises when the conditions for strategic cultural change emerge (see sub-section 1.2.4); under normal conditions, only the dominant set of beliefs is analytically relevant. Finally, I follow the logic of Dahl (1961) and Putnam (1971) and define the 'security elite' a relatively small group of people that, in light of their expertise and (hierarchical) position within a society, is directly involved in the discussion and implementation of security policy and military operations. The precise identification of the members of a security elite is an empirical question and will vary on the basis of the socio-institutional setting interrogated by the researcher.[17]

As per my definition, SC is held by a security elite. Therefore SC is a property neither of organisations, nor states, nor individuals, but of the elite as a social group. Given the focus of this thesis, the reader may incur in sentences like 'a state's SC' or 'Russian SC'; these should be considered mere linguistic shortcuts and not a rejection of my structuralist assumptions. In themselves states have no independent subjectivity; instead they are functional apparatuses that organise and express the structurally (culturally) derived preferences and choices of the group of decision-makers. Hence SC is not held by states as such, but becomes manifest in state policies to the extent that the latter are decided by security elites thinking and acting on the basis of SC. Coherently with a structuralist ontology, military-strategic decisions are shaped neither by universal rationality nor by individual leaders' personal philosophies; at the opposite, the elite group makes and implements its decisions in accordance with the system of security-relevant beliefs shared by its members — i.e., SC.

My definition of SC is broad enough to be adopted by all generations. At the same time, it displays a fair terminological clarity, circumscribing the social phenomenon under inspection and identifying its main dimensions. This definition stresses the military component of SC but does not forget about the latter's connection with the realm of policy. In this way, I avoid transforming the

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[17] For example, in strongly hierarchical settings like autocratic societies (e.g., Russia), the identification of the security elite and its operating standards is relatively easy, as the group of military-strategic decision-makers is usually small and prominent. The task becomes more complex in democratic settings, where military-strategic decisions are more exposed to bottom-up influences. In these cases, the security elite might include not only high-ranking politicians or military officers, but also other actors like security-relevant non-governmental organisations.

concept into a mere synonym of political culture, foreign policy or a shorthand for military operations.

This becomes clearer as I make a further step and clarify what types of beliefs make up SC. In other words, I specify the individual categories of thought and ideational propositions which SC is concerned with. In this way I support the operationalisation potential of the definition provided above. Looking at the wider scholarship of Political Science, I provide the following sub-division of SC:

a) politico-strategic component:

i. *constitutive beliefs* (self-perception): these deal with an actor's existential narrative, specifying the core attributes (implicitly or explicitly) attached to the Self and the differences with respect to the relevant Other(s) (Katzenstein 1996a, p. 18; Katzenstein 1996b, p. 5; Farrell 1998, p. 410). Self-perception tells the story of a (collective) actor's self-identification in terms of 'who we are' ("mirror identity") and 'who we are not' ("wall identity") (Cerutti 2008, p. 6). To reconstruct an actor's self-perception the researcher should try to find the actor's answers to such questions as: who am I? What is my role? Who is the Enemy? What threats does it pose?

ii. *scientific beliefs* (worldviews): these are "conceptions of possibility" (Goldstein & Keohane 1993, p. 8). Worldviews describe an actor's views on the true essence of reality and the cause-effect dynamics that affect international politics. These beliefs tell us something about how the world works, what is possible, and what is desirable (Johnston 1995a, p. 37; Kitchen 2010, p. 129).

b) military-strategic component:

i. *intentional beliefs*: these normative orientations establish general goals, ethical boundaries, and operational parameters for security policy and the use of force (Goldstein & Keohane 1993, p. 9; Katzenstein 1996b, p. 5; Kitchen 2010, p. 129). They mediate between the politico-strategic component and operational beliefs. To reconstruct an actor's intentional beliefs the researcher should try to find an actor's answers to such questions as: what is the nature and role of war? Under what conditions/in which cases should force be used? How useful is the use of force?

ii. *operational beliefs*: these offer a pre-defined set of preferred (coercive) actions to reach a given goal, in line with the boundaries dictated by the previous ideational categories (Katzenstein 1996b, p.5; Kitchen 2010, p. 219). To reconstruct an actor's operational beliefs the researcher should try to find the actor's answers to such questions as: should confrontation take place on the military or non-military plan? Up to what level should force be used or threatened? Should I put a premium on attack or defence? Should I employ force en masse or with precision? How relevant is the time factor?

These components are interdependent and equally necessary (Johnson 2006, pp. 8-9). Before acting, an agent (in this case, a state's security elite) must be — i.e., it must possess an understanding of what it is, what is not, and what the world around it looks like. Cognitive (self-) positioning is a pre-condition for action, also in the domain of (military) security. Clausewitz hinted at such a connection by differentiating between *Ziel* and *Zweck* — as I have already pointed out at the beginning of this chapter. While the former is exogenous to military strategy as such, the latter is informed by *Ziel* and acquires relevance thanks to the political interests it reflects. Inasmuch as interests are defined (also by) threat perception, identity, and socio-political composition, it is safe to admit that these factors have some degree of impact also on the military sphere (Kowert & Legro 1996, pp. 469-483; Weldes 1996; Wendt 1999; Onuf 2012).

1.2.2. The influence of strategic culture on behaviour

As evident from the above, SC defines the security elite's objectives *and* toolkits in relation to security policy and war-fighting.[18] I suggest that SC influences state behaviour by determining the identity, interests, and instrumentality upheld at cognitive level by the elite responsible for setting a security policy (Yee 1996). SC is the ideational factor that simplifies reality in the eyes of the elite and limits the range of possible choices. Since a limited number of choices is culturally acceptable, behavioural discretion is possible mainly within culturally defined borders of appropriateness (Jervis 2006; Porter 2018); choices falling beyond such boundaries of appropriateness qualify as

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[18] In this sense, I bridge between the 'old' and 'new' waves of cultural studies (Elkins & Simeon 1979; Swidler 1986; Laitin & Wildavsky 1988; Goldstein & Keohane 1993; DiMaggio 1997).

deviant acts, and as such they are sanctioned. SC impacts on the whole policy-making process — from discussion to implementation — by providing the members of the security elite with a common, group-level ground on which to base decisions (Gaenslen 1986). Through the perceptual lens of SC, the security elite interprets reality, identifies problems, elaborates goals, draws strategies of action, and finally acts. We should then expect overall coherence between the abstract thinking of a security elite and the policies implemented at state level.

This is broadly how SC influences behaviour. Yet what is the specific mechanism that enables such an outcome? That is, how do beliefs become part of the cognitive schemata of relevant social actors, who then act these beliefs out in their deeds and decisions? The answer lies in socialisation. Socialisation is a process allowing for the reproduction of socio-cultural norms across time and space (Burke 1982, pp. 74-82; Bagnasco, Barbagli & Cavalli 2004, pp. 107-108). By means of socialisation, "a person learns to conform to a society's norms, values, and social roles", deriving a 'common sense' of what is appropriate from the interaction with already-encultured members of society (Sullivan 2009, p. 479). This process begins with the exposition of (new) group members to the group's 'official' discourse and practice. Repeated long-term exposition to (i.e., education into) the group's discourse and practice gives institutional status to such ideas and behaviours, which - in the minds of new members - acquire the value of 'absolute truths' (McCarthy 1996, pp. 68-84; Vardi 2008, p. 296). Alternative modes of thought and action are automatically excluded, while official ones are automatically enforced (DiMaggio 1997). Deviance is possible but discouraged by the political, communicational, organisational, and ontological costs it implies (Pierson 1994, pp. 16-19).[19]

The implicit purpose of socialisation is therefore the *homologation* of in-group behaviour, an outcome on which the success and the very survival of both the individual and the group depend (Rosen 1995; Gat 2006, esp. pp. 40-55, 149-156). Without the homogenising effect of socialisation, inter-personal understanding, the predictability of the thoughts and actions of peers, and the possibility to develop expectations about the environment would be drastically reduced, if not lost in the infinite variability of existence.

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[19] The dynamics of groupthink exemplify this mechanism. See, for example, Badie (2010).

There are multiple agents, venues, and methods of socialisation. Individuals, institutions, and society as a whole participate in this process, each contributing to social learning. In all these cases, *interaction* is the key medium of socialisation. Socially relevant interaction proceeds along two main routes.[20] On the one hand, beliefs and behavioural standards are conveyed via dialogical or authoritative persuasion, which is a non-coercive communicational act (Checkel, in Klotz et al. 2006, pp. 364-365). In this case, rules are more or less explicitly told and repeated by socialisers, and occasionally discussed with the recipients of socialisation. On the other hand, socialisation takes the form of practical knowledge learnt 'by doing,' via direct practical experience rather than verbalisation (Pouliot 2008; Bueger & Gadinger 2015). That is especially the case with physical routines and the formation of body-related instincts, which athletes are well cognisant of. Redundancy is crucial for both types of interaction, whose ideal outcome is the acceptance (internalisation) of social rules and standards by part of the newcomers of society. From then on, they should be able to behave as proper members of society, holding values and performing actions coherent with the group's.[21]

Hence socialisation can be reframed as the process that extends to new group members the *logics of appropriateness and practicality* prevailing at social level. In this sense I side with T. Hopf (2018), who opposes the mutual exclusion of these two logics. While (practical) habit does account for our "automatic going on in the world […] conscious reflection still matters" (p. 689). The logic of practice does not rule out the logic of appropriateness: mimetic repetition of experienced behavioural schemes is relevant to (the formation of) thought and action, but so is the deliberate instruction of norms and principles. As psychological studies confirm, in life there is space both for automatism and self-reflection — and both are based on acquired social lenses (Hopf 2018, pp. 689-691).

There is no reason to doubt that these processes hold true also in relation to SC. In our case, the story would go like this. On the one hand, there is SC, the set of beliefs and related objectives and toolkits that we are interested in; on the other hand, there is the security elite, which is our

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[20] Bourdieu (2012, pp. 87-95, 159-167) proceeds along similar lines, mentioning exposition to discourse, practical familiarisation, and emulation as ways to transmit *habitus*.
[21] Clearly, there can be instances of incomplete socialisation or re-socialisation. While the former brings us in the realm of deviance, the latter pertains to cultural change — which I address later.

social group of reference. SC is the set of socio-cultural beliefs of the security elite. Such group, as any other social group, naturally enforces centripetal dynamics in order to homogenise the behaviour of members and limit deviance as much as possible. It does so because internal cohesion and coherence are necessary attributes of a successful social entity. Hence socialisation into SC kicks in. Credibly, potential members of the security elite undergo a sort of pre-socialisation before joining the group as such. Usually, these people had similar educational and professional experiences, such as in the military, foreign service or high administrative roles. This condition performs as a sort of pre-screening, facilitating reciprocal understanding, convergence, and control once the individual actually joins the security elite. Building on such kind of 'primary socialisation,' the 'secondary socialisation' taking place within the security circle is conveyed via a range of verbal and practical interactions: daily tasks, briefings, closed doors meetings, informal discussions, punishments and prizes that put a premium on conformity with the group's pre-constituted logic of thought and action (SC). As a consequence of these processes, members of the security elite will confront reality in comparable ways, displaying homologue behaviours — i.e., they will act out the same assumptions and preferences, those enshrined in SC itself. Checkel (2001, 2005) has exposed the functioning of this powerful mechanism inside the European Council, while Porter (2018) has recently published an inspiring essay detailing the constraining role of the 'blob' on US foreign policy. This thesis will apply and test the argument in relation to Russia's way of war.

1.2.3. How does strategic culture emerge?

Students of SC have discussed at length the possible origins of strategic cultural beliefs, proposing a range of potential sources. In no particular order, frequently cited ones are: geography, socio-political structures, ideology, trans-national processes, culture, etc. Such discussion presents two epistemological problems in the eyes of those who might approach SC from a third generation-like, clear-cut positivist perspective. First, proposed sources seem too many and too diverse to provide a coherent explanation of SC's genesis. Their appearance and combination in the literature changes on a case-by-case basis and why certain elements (rather than others) should be considered as generative of SC is not clarified. Second, many of the proposed sources of SC can be seen as

independent explanatory variables of strategic behaviour without any need to pass through SC itself. But this might be tricky if one treats SC as the main explanatory variable — as I do. By identifying the factors that produce SC, the latter would be reduced to a spurious variable devoid of actual casual power.

I do not believe these problems are so fundamental to impair a sober discussion on the sources of SC. Coherently with my previous reflections on the circular nature of culture, I propose to look at the issue from a different angle. I argue that SC, as any other social object, is over-determined and cannot be traced back to one process of linear causality (see Buzan & Lawson 2016, esp. 504-506). Quite the opposite, it results from a web of multiple interactions contingent in time and space. In this sense, none of the aforementioned factors can be seen as a proper cause of SC — yet they all influence the final outcome, since the characteristics of any SC will depend on the unique sequencing and interaction of such factors. This gives rise to a degree of uncertainty regarding the sources of a SC, but such condition — while scarcely palatable to a positivist audience — is not untenable. As accepted by anthropological and sociological studies at large, the origins of a given culture cannot be retraced unequivocally. Given culture's cumulative character, to search for the precise time, space, and conditions conducive to the birth of a cultural object becomes an exercise in infinite regression. The one reasonable, if rather broad statement that one can make about the genesis of a SC is that it develops within historical experience.

History provides social groups with a factual context which allows collective subjectivity to emerge and consolidate via experience — where experience is defined as both knowledge of the past and consciousness of existence (Scott 1991, pp. 778-782). As stressed by philosophical and psychological literature, thoughts and perceptions ("mental representations") would not emerge in the absence of experience (Le Poidevin 2007, esp. pp. 17-65; see also Carr 1986). At the level of social groups, this means that historical experience is a necessary base for the emergence of collective representations. History is thus something more than the mere cumulation of contingencies linked by a monotonous relation of cause and effect; it is the process by which social groups confront reality, thereby obtaining an inventory of benchmarks for evaluating themselves, the others, and the world — i.e., obtaining the rough material for the construction of socio-cultural compasses to orient future action (Cruz 2000; see also Kowert & Legro 1996).

As Bourdieu argued, the structure of dispositions characterising a society's *modus operandi* (and thus its *opus operatum*) has an historical nature. Such dispositions "are determined by the past conditions which have produced the principle of their production" and extend into the future by means of continuous re-enactment (Bourdieu 2012, pp. 72-73). In other words, *habitus* (social structure, SC in this case) is "history turned into nature" (*ibid.*, p. 78). This means that the contemporary way of thinking (and, consequently, behaviour) of a social subject has to have roots in a lived and remembered past. The (post-)imperial features of Russia's (as well as Turkey's, China's, the UK's) security policy and military thought — of which I will provide plenty of examples in the following chapters — testify to the role of the past in giving meaning to one's present reality.

This discussion about history's role vis-à-vis socio-cultural structures has two practical implications for my research. The first one regards the strategic cultural analysis to be carried out in the next chapter. There, the reference timeframe is 2008-2018. I consider that as the 'present,' and what lies behind it (i.e., before 2008) as the 'past.' Since I claim that SC is broadly constant within the chosen timeframe, and given what said above, the foundational experiences of a given SC must be located at a time preceding the beginning of such continuity — i.e., before the beginning of the timeframe itself (2008). However, the exploration of such foundational experiences will not be a task of this thesis. While there will be occasion to note the historical roots of Russia's categories of thought, preference will be given to the identification of the *nature* of today's Russian SC. Only once that is settled one can attempt to search for its origins — which, however, cannot but remain a partial effort, given the above observations.

Second, one might still argue that, *within* the timeframe, events happening at a given moment can influence later manifestations of SC. There is no reason to exclude this. In fact, in Chapters 3-5 of this thesis, I will also try to understand the extent to which Russian military thought and behaviour have adjusted to the consecutive military experiences in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. However, it is worth remembering that socio-cultural structures enjoy homeostatic properties and therefore are resistant to change. This means that, within this specific reference timeframe, one should expect SC adaptation, rather than change *tout court*. I will address this issue of continuity and change in the next sub-section.

1.2.4. Change and continuity in strategic culture

Once in place, does SC remain always the same? There are three possible answers. The first one is the answer that would be given by a cultural primordialist like the German philosopher Fichte, who posited the immutability of (national) culture. However, there is no empirical evidence for such thesis — which has political rather than scientific value. The second option takes an opposite stance, supporting the thesis of culture's extreme fluidity: culture changes easily and quickly, mutating as the environment changes and in accordance with the free will of actors. This position is upheld by the second and fourth generations and is shared implicitly by some other scholars such as Kier (1995), who stresses the role of recent events in respect to SC. I dismiss this second option on the basis of the aforementioned structuralist assumptions. The third option sits in-between these two extreme positions and is the one I side with. According to this view, SC is neither given once and for all, nor extremely fluid but rather characterised by "flexible rigidity" (Katzenstein 1996a, pp. 3-4). SC follows a sort of Galilean dynamic model, whereby long-term homeostasis is the rule and change is an exception.

Being socially necessary, institutionally transmitted, and cognitively engrained, the tendency is for SC to maintain inertia and thus resist change. This brings us back to the mechanisms by which SC influences behaviour (see section 1.5) and which, applied over time on a large scale, bring about path-dependency at societal level. Via a multifaceted process of positive feedback, the continuous validation of pre-existing beliefs is promoted, re-socialisation is constrained, and socio-cultural reversal is made unattractive (Pierson 2004, pp. 17-18, 24, 143-153). However, this does not mean that SC cannot change at all; it rather means that in order for change to happen, the causes of change must be 'powerful enough' to disrupt the strong homeostatic nature of the socio-cultural structure. Thresholds vary across social units but, in general terms, SC may experience change only in the face of so-called socio-cultural traumas, shocks, or revolutions. Such kind of developments strikes at the foundations of collective cognition, impinging upon a society's ability to make sense of itself and the world (Eckstein 1988; Hopf 2010; Lantis 2002, 2006). That state of *anomie* bridges "between two river banks, that of the world as it

was [...] and that of the world as it might be", offering a unique context for new sense-making (Andress & Wahnich 2008, p. 138, paraphrasing Francois-René de Chateaubriand).

The contingent form of such developments cannot be determined a priori and there is wide debate about how and why they may happen (Pierson 2004, pp. 82-96, 134-139; Hopf 2018, pp. 693-700). Some stress the *longue durée* of cultural re-generation, while others underline the productive role of crises and sudden social shocks; marginal or partially socialised groups may work to bring about cultural change in favour of their own sub-culture, but also society as a whole may independently shift towards a new way of thinking and behaving; change may be total, partial, or null. But while the a priori identification of contingent forms of socio-cultural change might be difficult, to understand whether strategic cultural change happens is quite straightforward.

In such case, the given social unit would display a new way of perceiving and acting, since the constitutive, scientific, intentional, and operational beliefs at the basis of SC will have mutated qualitatively. Also, when strategic cultural change happens, it is likely accompanied by a change of the dominant security elite — which, as suggested above, embodies a SC (Adler & Haas 1992). Given instead the presence of the same security elite, radical change (because of a single time-bound event) remains unlikely, since that would be tantamount to cognitive disruption for the members of the elite itself. Arguably, Germany's and Japan's SCs changed radically and permanently after 1945 because of the complete renovation of their elites, and the new dominant set of beliefs that this process established. Conversely, Gorbachev's attempt to change the Soviet (strategic) culture failed precisely because of the opposition of the dominant elite, which stuck to its own traditional mindset; the lack of any deep changes in the makeup of the Russian elite throughout the 1990s might actually explain why select Soviet categories of thought have resurfaced with time.

Socio-cultural shocks having such magnitude to bring about sudden, radical strategic cultural revolutions are exceptional — but not impossible. [22] But the clearly identifiable manifestations and effects of similar phenomena makes them less of a puzzle than a SC's

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[22] See, for example, the radical effect the current iteration of the Ukraine war has had on Finland's and Sweden's SCs — which are moving away from a historically consistent posture of neutrality, after only a few months from the shock of February 2022. Yet it is still to be assessed whether this represents a case of SC change or a more 'superficial' *policy* change.

(incremental) adaptation. Superficial adjustments in SC are always possible, inasmuch as structure has to confront a continuously changing empirical reality. Yet these "transformations and regulated revolutions" (Bourdieu 2012, p. 82) have to be coherent with the pre-existing structure, whose core beliefs remain unaltered. SC is conservative, not static. The case of Russia will offer plenty of occasions to reflect on these dynamics.

1.3. Conclusion — and a methodological coda

In this chapter I presented the conceptual framework that will guide my research on Russia's way of war. I began by reviewing the prevailing approach to Strategic Studies, highlighting its rational-materialist contours. While such approach allows us to appreciate the logistical, operational, and technological aspects of war, it seals the so-called social dimension off the equation of conflict. This is problematic inasmuch as such dimension does have an impact on strategy and war-fighting — as historical experience and scholarly reflections suggest. Literature on SC recognises that and aims at conceptualising the culture-relative nature of military-strategic thought and behaviour. I devoted the remainder of this chapter to presenting my approach to SC, while trying to address some of its conceptual and epistemological weak spots. Socio-structuralist assumptions backed this effort.

I defined SC as the dominant set of beliefs concerning security policy and the threat or use of force held by a state's security elite (see Figure 1 for a visual recap). This definition contains four main bits of information. Firstly, SC has an ideational nature: it is constituted by beliefs, which are socially derived and cognitively engrained dispositions of thought and action. Secondly, the dominant set of beliefs is the one affecting policy-making the most; non-dominant, alternative sub-cultures may exist but their influence on group behaviour is constrained by the homeostatic properties of culture. Thirdly, SC is a property of the security elite. And lastly, SC bridges between the realm of (security) policy and military action — it is 'strategic' in a true sense. This is reflected in my operationalisation of SC, which I break up into two pairs of beliefs. The politico-strategic component of SC is composed by constitutive and operational beliefs, which set a state's self-perception and worldviews. Instead the military-strategic component includes intentional and

operational beliefs, which determine, broadly speaking, why and how to go to war. These components are inter-dependent and equally necessary.

In order to influence the thoughts and actions of the security elite — and thus shape policies — SC needs to be internalised via socialisation. Socialisation is a process of repeated exposure to and interaction with norms and practices; this process shapes the elite's cognitive frames, embedding into their minds the specific logics of appropriateness and practicality implied by SC's beliefs. Behaviour follows coherently. The actual characteristics of a given SC stem from a social group's unique historical experiences, which coalesce to form memories and preferences. Given its structural nature, SC is conservative — but not static. This means that SC tends to preserve its characteristics and content in the long term. Adjustments may take place only at a superficial level; core beliefs remain unaltered. For them to change, the society recipient of SC must experience powerful social shocks in deep contradiction with previous history or able to overthrow the elite itself.

This conceptual framework provides some useful methodological guidance One of the initial observations was that SC is a property of the security elite. If the dominant elite group is associated with a specific SC, then elite change should bring about SC change. Vice versa, other things being equal (i.e., in the absence of exogenous shocks), the permanence in power of the same elite should signal the likely absence of (abrupt) SC change. In light of this, a good first step on the way of studying a specific SC would be to identify the security elite of the given state or other social body. The researcher should try to understand who belongs to the security elite and whether this group of people has maintained its hold on power within the chosen timeframe. If yes, then strong continuity of SC is to be expected; if not, the next step would call for understanding the nature of these changes. Minimal adjustments in the composition of the elite are physiological and, to the extent that newcomers still share with 'old members' the same formative experiences and network of allegiances, continuity is not to be ruled out. But if elite change is total, then the researcher should expect to detect a corresponding change of SC and the structural causes of such variation should be understood.

Once identified the security elite, the researcher will also know whose words and deeds to analyse in order to unveil SC.[23] Within the wide spectrum of such words and deeds, the researcher has to pick the ones most appropriate for his/her enquiry. In this regard, Johnston (1995a, pp. 14-15) raised a relevant question: should one look only at military sources or consider non-military sources too? Given my definition of SC, I propose to look at both types of sources, but with one *caveat*: non-military sources still have to be relevant to the domains of security policy, military doctrine, strategy. In practical terms, this means that the researcher may analyse, for example, presidential statements in regard to strategic posture, international alliances, and defence spending — but not statements regarding the educational system, healthcare, or financial collaterals.

Attentive and rich thematic and policy analysis allows to uncover key themes and recurrent actions, highlighting implicit logical chains and thus revealing the latent strategic cultural beliefs hidden behind narratives and practices (Johnston 1995a, pp. 49-51; Braun & Clarke 2006; Dunn in Klutz et al. 2006; Gioia et al. 2012). Of course, to unveil SC is not merely to describe complacently the representations and practices of given society. It rather means to be "able to pose the question of the mechanisms through which the relationship is established between the structures and the practices or the representations which accompany them" (Bourdieu 2012, p. 21). The consistency of SC throughout time can be double-checked by looking for failures to promote changes of the strategic course, the punishment of positions deviating from elite consensus, the narrative space (not) devoted to alternative policies or military practices, or the presence/absence of any trauma or shock that could be responsible for structural change.

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[23] On why it is best to look at both words and deeds, look back at the methodological section in the thesis' Introduction.
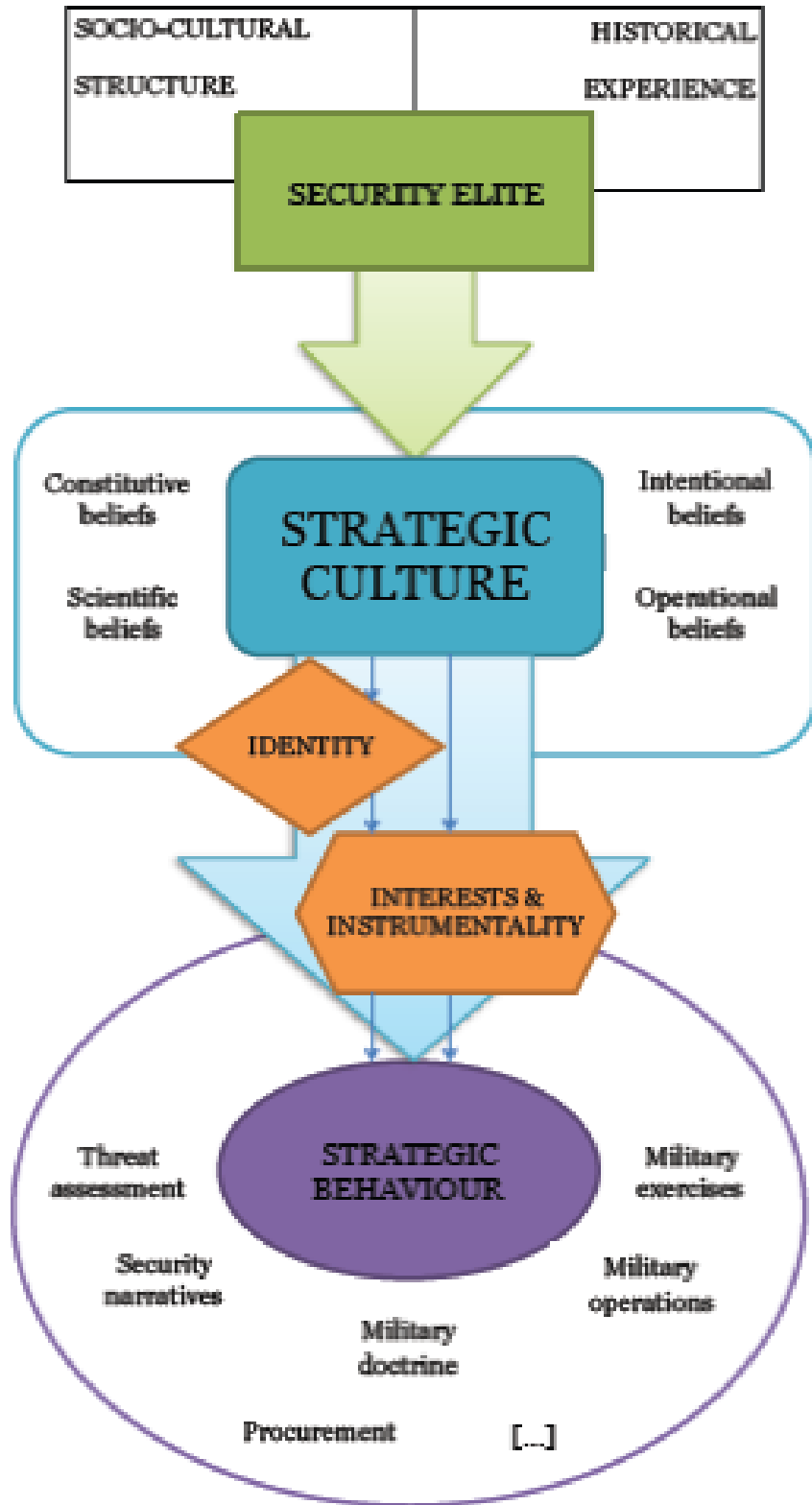
Figure 1. A re-fined model of Strategic Culture.

Chapter 2

Russian Strategic Culture

In the previous chapter I introduced a SC-based approach to the study of strategy and war. Moving from socio-structuralist assumptions, I proposed a new model of this concept, with the purpose of improving its theoretical coherence and empirical employability. I defined SC as the dominant set of beliefs concerning security policy and the threat or use of force held by a security elite. I also identified two pairs of beliefs at the basis of every SC: constitutive and scientific beliefs enshrine an elite's ultimate assumptions in regard to the identity of the community of reference and the functioning of the world, respectively; intentional and operational beliefs point instead to the conditions under which a security elite might decide to wage war and how war would be waged. These beliefs result from the stratification of the historical experiences of a socio-political community and are transmitted in time via processes of socialisation that shape the elite's mindset. By conditioning the thoughts and actions of decision-makers, SC grants the long-term consistency of security policy and military doctrine.

This chapter is devoted to the practical application of my model of SC to the Russian case. More precisely, it unveils the key socio-cultural assumptions underpinning Russia's preferences in the spheres of security policy and military practice; my four-fold concept of SC functions as a scientific framework, granting logical coherence to this analytical effort. The chapter is important in both theoretical and empirical terms: on the one hand, I show the practical utility of my theoretical speculations and proposals; on the other hand, I add to the understanding of Russia as an international actor, with a specific focus on its approach to strategy and war-fighting.

The chapter is organised as follows. First, I identify Russia's security elite. Given the correlation between SC and the elite, this is a necessary preliminary step without which it would not be possible to fully justify my long-term approach and the choice of sources. Once this is cleared, the chapter moves to its core purpose — i.e., the reconstruction of Russia's strategic cultural beliefs. In order of appearance, I analyse constitutive, scientific, intentional, and

operational beliefs.[24] The chapter concludes by reviewing its main findings and setting the ground for the case studies (Chapters 3-5).

2.1. The Russian security elite

In the previous chapter I conceptualised the security elite as a relatively small group of people that, in light of their expertise and (hierarchical) position within a society, is directly involved in the discussion and implementation of security policy and military operations. The identification of a security elite is the first logical step to take in order to enquire into SC. By knowing who belongs to that group, the researcher will know whose words and deeds to analyse for inferring the ultimate principles of a given SC. Building on the above, I frame Russia's security elite as the narrow group of individuals holding political and administrative resources (i.e., decision-making power) in the sphere of security and military affairs, thanks to their field-specific expertise and their relative support to the governance model consolidated throughout the 2000s.[25]

In the remainder of this section, I clarify the perimeter and components of the Russian security elite. I do so by making reference to the concept of *institution* — in both formal and sociological terms. Formal institutions are physical apparatuses based on systems of compliance and procedures that fulfil specific (public) functions. This is the meaning usually attached to the term 'state institutions,' which I employ in the following pages to restrict in the first place the range of actors to be included in the Russian security elite. Yet institutions can be interpreted also in broader sociological terms, as complexes of beliefs and codes of conduct having normative cogency for a given social group (Cavalli & Douglas 1996). These rules and relations are not formalised judicially but still shape the cost-benefit assessment of specific behaviours. The two meanings are not mutually exclusive, as the second type of institutions operates also *within* formal institutions.

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[24] An embryonic version of these reflections was presented in my MA thesis and Fasola & Lucarelli (2019).
[25] On the different ways to conceptualise the Russian elite, see Volkov (2016, esp. pp. 3-4).

2.1.1. Formal institutional boundaries

I first draw the boundaries of Russia's security elite on a formal basis. In other words, I look at those state institutions which, in accordance with national legislation, bear power and responsibility in the field of (military) security. These are the President of the Russian Federation (PRF), together with the Presidential Administration (PA) and the Security Council (SeCo); the Government, in particular the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and Defence (MoD); and the intellectual top-brass of the military establishment, working at the GS.[26] I do not linger on the specifics of the MoFA and the MoD since their relevance is quite self-evident. Suffice to note that both are included in the so-called 'power ministries' and their work is all about the international pursuit of Russia's national interests, also in terms of (military) security and via the (threat of the) use of force. The other institutions deserve more attention instead.

The PRF is a Russian institution holding extra-ordinary competences in the security domain. It does not carry out mere ceremonial functions but substantially directs the life of the country, also and especially in terms of foreign and security policy (Constitution of the Russian Federation 1993, artt. 80-88). At the most superficial level, the presidential institution embodies and represents Russia's sovereignty and stance in the world. Most importantly, the PRF actually establishes the domestic and foreign political priorities of the country and (in)directly leads (*rukovodit*) the 'power ministries' — inclusive of the MoFA and MoD. Since 2004 the President is also directly responsible for the so-called 'force structures' (*silovye struktury*) — i.e., Russia's security services (Renz 2010); since 2014, it controls the Military Industrial Commission, which is where decisions on military procurement are taken (Hakvåg 2017, pp. 499).[27] Overall, then, the PRF shapes substantially and grants coherence to the country's choices in the spheres of foreign and security policy, as a fourth, independent institutional power in addition to the canonical three (executive, legislative, judicial powers) (Ganino 2010, pp. 109-115). The legally recognised value of

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[26] Depending on the emphasis on non-military and/or internal security, one may include also Russia's intelligence services and domestic security forces. I do not do that, because my work focuses mainly on the *international* (threat of the) use of *military* force. For a critical discussion of their influence on policy-making, see: Galeotti (2016).

[27] Before 2014 the Commission fell under the responsibility of a Deputy Prime Minister. However, the specific persons occupying the post — namely S. Ivanov and D. Rogozin — are names traditionally close to the presidential circle.

the PRF's annual addresses to the Federal Assembly as primary strategy-setting documents testifies to such role — and makes those speeches particularly worth studying (Planirovanie 2014, §4.15).

The PRF is assisted in its tasks by the PA and the SeCo (Ganino 2010, pp. 116-121; Smith 2010, pp. 30-49). The former is an extensive bureaucratic apparatus that provides information to the PRF, elaborates strategies of action, and ensures that presidential decisions are implemented by other state bodies. The PA can be seen as a membrane between the PRF and the world, functioning in two directions simultaneously. On the one hand, the PA acts as a gatekeeper, filtering the information that reach to the President. This selection mechanism naturally favours those actors that have already access to the system, thereby reinforcing prevailing perceptions, logics, and practices. On the other hand, the PA enables the President's widespread influence on the politico-institutional life of the country. In fact one of the major tasks of the PA is to ensure the compliance of other state bodies with presidential orders. This happens also in the domains of foreign and security policy, via the Foreign Policy Directorate and various other (in)formal channels of communication with (control on) Russia's power ministries and security services (Galeotti 2016).[28] In addition, as E. Huskey (2010) observes, the PA functions "as a training ground for high-flying administrative cadres", since "the higher the position [in the Russian institutional system], the more likely it is that its occupant has served for a time in the presidency's administrative offices" (p. 367). In this sense, the PA facilitates intra-elite mobility and simultaneously prevents outsiders from reaching the inner circle of Russian decision-making, thereby supporting the stability of power.

Tasks comparable to those of the PA belong to the SeCo, the highest inter-ministerial state institution specifically devoted to security. It is directly chaired by the PRF. Three functions of the SeCo are relevant to our case: firstly, it "drafts policy proposals on defending vital interests [...] against internal and external threats;" secondly, it "helps determine a uniform state policy on security;" and, thirdly, it "draws up crucial documents defining conceptual approaches to national security" (Kremlin ND). The significance and widespread impact of these functions is ensured by the fact that the Council counts among its permanent members representatives of other key

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[28] Notably, Belarus and Ukraine fall under the PA's responsibility, not the MoFA's.

security-related institutions — namely the Government (including the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defence), the Chief of the GS, as well as the Directors of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). While to some extent each of them will defend the particular interests of its own administrative apparatus — interests which are not necessarily compatible with those of other Ministries, agencies, and bodies (Renz 2010, p. 59) — the strong role of the PRF in the domain of security policy and the coordinating action, under the President's leadership, of PA and SeCo provide a formal institutional framework that blurs, curbs, and reconciles the potentially different stances of all participants. In this sense, the SeCo can be the venue for both inter-institutional clashes *and* convergence. Proof that the latter actually takes place is to be found in the rather coherent strategic-level security policy that results from this process, as enshrined in the National Security Strategy (NSS), the Foreign Policy Concept (FPC), and the Military Doctrine (MD).[29]

Finally, the Russian GS, too, deserves attention, as it still abides by the Prussian model — thereby retaining greater responsibilities than most of its Western counterparts. As Grau and Bartles (2016) put it, the Russian GS can be seen as "a caste of professional planners for handling operational-strategic matters" (p. 12; see also pp. 10-11). In particular, the (Chief of the) GS plays a leading role in long term military planning, based on the 'scientific foresight' of the incidence and character of future wars.[30] On this basis, the GS develops concepts *and* capabilities and manages strategic transportation, military procurement, and the correct application of doctrines and standards. During peace-time, the GS (together with the MoD) contributes significantly to the design of defence reforms and the conduction of military exercises (Hakvåg 2017, pp. 499-500; Ruiz Palmer 2018). The war-time operational control of forces is formally with the commanders of the Military Districts but these remain subordinated to the GS. The theoretical and practical reflections (and debates) backing the action of the GS can be followed on the pages of *Voennaia*

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[29] On the conceptual evolution, see Pynnöniemi (2018), who underlines the strong coherence and the many continuities that can be spotted in Russia's strategic level security planning throughout time.

[30] Also the Russian Academy of Military Sciences contributes to the reflection on future conflict. While, formally, it is a non-governmental organisation, *de facto* it enjoys a close relation with (or even subordination to) a number of state military institutions, including the GS. Many of the publications of said Academy provide input to or echo the GS' activities; a considerable number of the Academy's members worked for the GS.

Mysl', the institution's official journal, as well as affiliated magazines like *Krasnaia Zvezda* and the *Voenno-promyshlennyj Kur'er* — just to name a few.

In light of their areas of competence, functions, and standing, the aforementioned formal institutions can be regarded as key to the ideation and implementation of Russia's way of war.[31] This offers a reasonable starting point for the identification of the Russian security elite but does not exhaust the task set for this section. In fact if we were to identify the security elite only on such formal basis, it would be easy to shift towards a personalistic model of decision-making, in which the individuals occupying those institutional posts can determine Russia's security policy as they please, irrespective of the complex environment they operate in. Such view runs against the socio-cultural approach of the present thesis.

2.1.2. Social mechanisms of selection and behavioural convergence

One way to avoid such conundrum is to look at select formal institutions as recipients of *social dynamics* — i.e., as mechanisms of coordination and conveyance of the action of groups. All the aforementioned institutions are not sheer job posts held by individuals, but social frameworks that shape and express the ultimate position of a larger group of people having expertise on, interests in, and influence over the issue-area of security. Therefore, the words and actions of the PFR and other high-level officials are not simply the words and actions of individuals but those of the entire group of professionals involved in the discussion and/or implementation of Russian security policy — the pool of long-serving civilian and military officials that guide (and are guided by) those who sit at the very top of the institutional pyramid. This is what I mean by 'security elite,' coherently with the general conceptualisation recalled at the beginning of this section.

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[31] By contrast, the contribution of the legislative branch of power to Russia's security policy is negligible (Petrov & Gel'man 2019; Smith 2010, pp. 30-49). Notwithstanding the existence of issue-specific parliamentary committees, their actual influence over security-related decision-making is almost null. The more so when the majority of deputies sitting in the Parliament belongs to the PRF's party — as during the timeframe 2008-2018. When it comes to the security and defence budget, in-depth parliamentary discussion is further hindered by the growing proportion of items secreted by the executive (Andermo & Kragh 2020). Overall, then, the legislative branch of power at best confirms and re-produces the security policy line decided elsewhere.

A sociological perspective helps identify the mechanisms that grant behavioural coherence of the security elite. In fact a purely formal institutional approach cannot grant by itself that the members of the aforementioned bodies really share the same SC. The conceptual package presented in Chapter 1 supports *ex ante* the existence of such ideational homogeneity; furthermore, the results of this chapter — i.e., the identification of Russia's strategic cultural beliefs — will testify to that *ex post*. However, here it might be worth bridging theory and empirical evidence by presenting a few preliminary arguments which prove *prima facie* that the professionals gravitating around the aforementioned security-related institutions have a similar mindset. The plausibility of a common mindset shared by the members of the Russian security elite can be sustained by looking at the practical-political dynamics underlining the elite's formation, functioning, and survival.

The contemporary Russian socio-institutional setting is rooted in the remnants of the Soviet system and the limitations post-socialist transition in the 1990s (Monday 2017). The failure of mass privatisation, the continued dependance of the private on the public (especially in the defence sector), and the weakness of political competition and civil society created the necessity of *and* the opportunity for the re-centralisation of authority. As a consequence, since the early 2000s, we have witnessed the construction of the so-called 'vertical of power' (*vertikal' vlasti*), which, in relation to security policy, centres decision-making in the hands of a relatively small group of individuals and institutions — as per above (Kryshtanovskaya & White 2009, p. 294-296).

Since then the members of the elite have been selected on the basis of two criteria. First, their personal ties to V. Putin, who took advantage of the opportunities provided by the 1990s' socio-political environment to recruit loyal operatives that could help him carry out the effective rearrangement of Russian statehood.[32] Lacking a political base and still constrained by El'tsin's 'family system,' Putin looked for collaborators among those with whom he had shared some prior relevant experience (Renz 2006, p. 904). Given Putin's background, *siloviki* — i.e., people who used to belong to Soviet or Russian 'force structures' — and a small group of economic and judicial

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[32] As observed already, this does not imply the existence of a pre-arranged 'Putin masterplan' for taking over Russia. Though influential, the individual Putin should not be seen as the one and only decision-maker in Russia, who achieved power on the basis of a carefully planned and thought-out strategy to curb the system. Quite the opposite, the system allowed the rise of Putin, providing him with a set of opportunities and constraints he was skilled enough to take advantage of effectively, as they arose.

experts from Saint Petersburg have occupied the most apical positions in the governing elite (Rivera & Rivera 2018, p. 222).

Second, and related, an essential condition of selection has been the degree of 'ideological fit' of these individuals with the principles and directions prevalent within the elite. On this basis, by 2008 a new leadership had formed around the values of a strong state, conservatism, and national independence — and corresponding codes of behaviour have consolidated in "a kind of matrix that determines how decisions are made" (Petrov 2017, p. 123). A degree of the ideational homogeneity we are searching for is thus a pre-condition for accessing the elite circle. After 2012 we witness the partial reshuffling of this group but no proper replacement of governing cadres has taken place: rather than moving out of the decision-making circle, elite members have moved up and down the leadership ladder. The low turnover of the country's upper echelons has resulted in their progressive insulation from other domestic actors and from the broader Russian polity, with relevant consequences on the sphere of security, too (Sakwa 2019, pp. 1-17). As N. Petrov (2017) put it, "the security resource [has been] isolated from politics, so that the corresponding agencies can operate under direct command of the Kremlin" (p. 126; see also Petrov & Gel'man 2019). The closed nature of the regime grants simultaneously the stability of rule and centralised, continued control over security and defence.

Within this socio-political context, the thesis of *prima facie* homogeneity of the security elite's mindset is supported by two interrelated processes. On the one hand, it is ensured *before* individuals access the elite circle. In the broadest sense, homogeneity is fostered by the shared Russian enculturation, which includes, but does not reduce itself to, Soviet indoctrination. All the members of the elite have been exposed to varying degrees to such socialisation(s). The roots of the contemporary Russian ethos reach further back than the Soviet past and present strong continuities with the intellectual *milieu* prevailing in XIX century's Russia. According to I. Berlin (1966, 2000), the latter was characterised by an ontologically realist, scientistic, dogmatic, and holistic approach to existence, combined with a peculiar tendency towards moralism and "self-preoccupation" that fostered superiority and inferiority complexes towards the West, simultaneously (see also Monas 1971). Marxism-Leninism found fertile ground in such intellectual background and perpetuated its main characters throughout time, though in a different guise;

these foundational features still frame contemporary Russia's self-perception and worldview, as it will become apparent in the following pages (see also Adamsky 2010). Clearly this broad Russian enculturation does not imply by itself a strong commonality of views, otherwise all citizens of a state would think exactly the same way. However, at a minimum it does restrict the flexibility of individual cognition within generally accepted boundaries of social acceptability, as any other process fostering (national) identity does. The outcome is what T. Hopf (2013) labels "mass common sense," or "the taken-for-granted ideas of publics about social life" (p. 318).

Besides that, a sizeable part of the Russian security elite also shares the formative experience of military service, which is one of the most powerful forms of late socialisation (Skak 2016). For sure, *siloviki* — military personnel in general — do not constitute a monolithic social group (what group is after all?) but it is credible to expect a considerable degree of coherence at least in the way they perceive and approach the specific issue-area around which the group itself is centred — i.e., security and defence. Differences in ranks, roles, and services may give rise to different organisational priorities but a common ethos must cut across these differences or the military would not exist as a functioning system. The reader should also bear in mind that I do not include in my model of security elite the totality of the Russian AF, but the GS only. As Grau and Bartles (2016, pp. 10-11) noticed, once a Russian officer, generally early in his/her career, is selected to serve in the GS, s/he dismisses previous insignia to wear those of the GS itself, usually for life. This further adds to the idea of the GS as a 'caste.' Hence it is reasonable to believe that GS personnel are relatively detached from the inter-branch/service disputes taking place at lower levels of military decision-making; at the same time, the specific functions and strategic-operational remit of the Russian GS bring it closer to the civilian component of the security elite, enabling direct influence over high-level decision-making. This means that the military component of the security elite will not partake in the constitution of SC on the basis of fragmented organisational approaches, but rather of the GS' rather coherent view. Finally, a last layer of a priori commonality of mindsets is linked with the similar social backgrounds of elite members and their personal ties to the PRF (Monday 2017; Willerton 2019, pp. 31-35). These factors cut across *siloviki* and the enlarging group of non-*siloviki*, resembling each other in terms of urban lineage (they mainly grew up and/or developed their careers in the areas of Moscow and Saint Petersburg)

and faith in Putin's leadership or Russia. While personal ties to Putin are not a *conditio sine qua non* for working at the GS, urbanisation and support for the current Russian strategic course do characterise the personnel of such institution.

The individuals meeting these preliminary conditions display a sufficient degree of a priori cognitive compatibility with the elite's mindset to be selected as new members. At this point a second set of social mechanisms supports *a posteriori* the homogeneity of the security elite's mindset. Once entered the elite circle, homeostatic processes kick in, keeping the individuals' *way of thinking* on track and driving it towards further convergence with the receiving elite's pre-existing mindset. These are the dynamics of socialisation, path dependancy, and cultural inertia underlined in the previous chapter and which take place within the formal institutions mentioned so far. As highlighted by P. Porter (2018, pp. 15-16) in the case of the US, (security) elites cluster around habit. A broad consensus in regard to the main strategic objectives naturally results from the elite's agenda-setting power and the mechanisms of internalisation of ideas and practices that enable the group's survival and reproduction. In so doing, the elite avoids deviant thinking, internal break down, and ensures the long-term coherence of policies beyond epiphenomenal changes (as, for example, a new President coming to office). The effects of these processes are amplified by Russia's peculiar institutional setting — which is rigid, closed, and increasingly interwoven as we move towards the tip of the 'vertical of power,' where the security elite lies (Romanova 2018, pp. 85-87). While inter-institutional disagreements may exist, these are fewer and lesser than the actual similarities that bring the elite together on security policy and the use of force (Bashkirova, Litikova, Smeltz 2019; Lussier 2019; Petrov & Gel'man 2019).

2.1.3. Conclusion

In this first section I was able to localise Russia's security elite at the intersection between state institutions and socio-political processes. The formal redistribution of competences relative to security policy and the country's peculiar arrangement of authority centres the security elite around a handful of apical institutions (PRF, PA, SeCo, MoFA, MoD, GS), inclusive of the body of civilian and military officials that constitutes them. In this sense, leaders matter but only as

representatives of a deeper, wider group of decision-makers characterised by converging views on security priorities and shared operative preferences.

The identification of the bearers of SC helps clarify further the sources to look at to extract strategic cultural beliefs, adding to what I said in the Introduction already. It is reasonable to state that a source is relevant to the aim of this thesis if it is, first, security-related and, second, institutionally legitimised. On this basis, I attribute research value not only to the actual policies supported or implemented by the members of the elite but also to their verbal (oral and written) messaging. Elite members enjoy both "narrative authority" and "cognitive authority" — i.e., in light of their institutional position and professional expertise, their discourse is expected to be and factually is relevant to the field of competence (DeRosa 2017, p. 510). In our case it means that security-related speeches and documents reflect the "knowledge and expectations" of Russian policy-makers as much as factual military actions do (ibid., pp. 508-509). Therefore, not only one should treat *both* words *and* deeds as relevant strategic cultural sources; one should also expect a relatively strong coherence between verbal messaging and practical actions, since they both stem from the same common mindset.

Continuity should be expected not only across sources, but also across time. As argued above, the upper echelons of Russia's decision-making elite have not undergone considerable changes after the transition period. Over the last ten years, this has been true for that part of the elite which deals with security, too. If it is true that elites cluster around political identities and operational habits, and given that Russia's security elite has been remarkably static over the relevant timeframe, then we should spot continuity in Russia's security narratives and practices between 2008-2018. A quick look at the articles published during that period in *Voennaia Mysl'* seems to confirm such an expectation. The limited number of people contributing to the debate — with the same topic constantly covered by the same few individuals — renders the idea of a strongly institutionalised and conservative military thought.

I have clarified whom and what to look at in order to analyse the Russian SC. I now turn to the main part of this chapter, which reconstructs Russia's strategic cultural beliefs and their practical implications.

2.2. Russia's politico-strategic beliefs

This section unbundles the intricacies of Russia's self-perception and worldview, as emerging from strategic documents and the narratives of key members of the security elite. Before starting it is worth recalling that the former component of SC, self-perception (constitutive beliefs), deals with an actor's subjectivity; it contains references to the nature of one's identity, its aspirations, values, and orientations towards the Other. Worldviews (scientific beliefs) describe instead the way an actor perceives the functioning of the surrounding world, with relevant implications in terms of the expectations s/he may nurture about the future and others' behaviour.

2.2.1. Constitutive beliefs: ascriptiveness, greatpowerness, stateness

Russia's self-perception is grounded in three main constitutive beliefs — the first of which I define as 'ascriptiveness.' This attribute refers to the nature of the Russian community and the fundamental borders between the in- and the out-groups. In particular, ascriptiveness denotes an idea-of-being founded on primordial, unique, non-negotiable features such as blood, language, and culture (Wright 2011). In the case of Russia, both the elite's narrative and strategic documents identify the constitutive elements of the Russian community as those of national freedom and independence, a strong statehood, collectivism and social solidarity, (traditional) family values, the "organic, natural feeling" of patriotism (Putin 2012), and an all-encompassing "belief in Russia" (Medvedev 2008n). While they may well be seen as components of a civic identity, these elements are rooted in a broader idea of 'Russianness' which makes them decidedly ascriptive. Russianness emerges in fact from the intersection of two primordial communities — the ethnic *obshchnost'* of the Slavic brotherhood and the religious *sobornost'* of the Orthodox ecumene. Taken together, these elements constitute a "spiritual and moral heritage" that Russia "will never give up no matter what the circumstances", fighting "until victory" (Medvedev 2008n; see also Putin 2015, 2016).[33]

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[33] For a taste of Russian academic debate on the need to foster and preserve the Russian national identity, see: Granin (2011); Tishkov (2019).

A few considerations follow from here. First, ascriptiveness implies a static idea of belonging and a sentiment of civilisational particularism. As Putin (2012) stated, Russia "must be and remain Russia" — the "civilisation-state." EU-Russia relations around the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) are quite telling in this regard, in as much as these joint ventures were ultimately impaired by the ideational and perceptual divergencies between the two actors and, in particular, Russia's jealousy of its own framing of security, values, and being itself (Averre 2009a; Lukyanov 2008; Rieker & Gjerde 2016, pp. 306-310).

This outcome is even more relevant if one considers the element of 'Europeanness' that Russianness includes (White & Feklyunina 2014, pp. 101-117; see also Andreev 2010). Moscow has often voiced its European choice. In the words of Putin: "Russia was, is and will, of course, be a major European power. Achieved through much suffering by European culture, the ideals of freedom, human rights, justice and democracy have for many centuries been our society's determining values [...]. We did this together [with the other European nations], sometimes behind and sometimes ahead of European standards" (quoted in Lukyanov 2008, p. 1111; see also Medvedev 2008a; Lavrov 2012; Primakov 2015). Theoretically, the idea of a connection with Europe in terms of identity should make dialogue easier — at least if compared to the (scarce) degree of mutual understanding achievable instead with the US, Russia's ontological other (Hopf 2005, p. 240-241). However, the ascriptive nature of the Russian community constrains also Europe/EU-Russia relations, which cannot move further than the limits imposed by the ultimate pillars of Russia's alleged civilisational uniqueness.

The concept of 'sovereign democracy' is relevant to this dynamic, since it shows that Russia, while recognising its European civilisational background, also romanticises some specifics of its political culture, making them non-negotiable reference points of Russian international action (Surkov 2008, 2009; for a discussion see: Averre 2007; Ziegler 2012). But not only. As the building bricks of Moscow's international agency, the protection of the features of Russianness has become and object of national security (Strategii 2009, §79-84; Strategii 2015, §76-82). Indeed, given the declared "primacy of the spiritual over the material" (Strategii 2015, §78; see also Der Spiegel 2009; Putin 2013b), it sounds credible that Russia will react promptly and dis-proportionately to

ideational threats and to those physical threats that are susceptible to be framed in terms of 'spiritual security' - i.e., threats to Russianness. Both cases may result in a quick escalation of the Russian (re-)actions, motivated precisely by the ontological value attached to the founding features of Russianness, which must be defended at all costs.

The second observation points to the fact that the constitutive elements of Russianness are not confined to the judicial borders of the Russian Federation but thrive beyond them, in the so-called *russkij mir*. This unique civilisational space spans geographically the areas formally under imperial/Soviet rule, where elements of the Russian *obshchnost'* (e.g., Russian language) or *sobornost'* (i.e., Orthodoxy) still thrive. Supposedly, the origin and moral centre of such civilisational space lie in Moscow. The geographical extension of the *russkij mir* and the (ideal) collocation of Moscow within it extend Russia's ontological concerns to the whole area, with relevant consequences in terms of threat perception and security posture. Put differently, the Russian self transcends the Federation's borders; this implies that Russia's perception of threats to its 'spiritual security', as well as the application of (counter-)measures to secure it, will exceed those formal borders, too. This dynamic is further reinforced by the second existential belief forming Russia's strategic consciousness — to which I turn now.

'Greatpowerness' (*velikoderzhavnost'*) is the second pillar of Russian self-perception. Official narrative is centred around the image of Russia as a great power bearing the responsibility to participate in the management of international relations.[34] "We will do everything possible to make the world a fairer and safer place", Medvedev (2008n) said during his first address to the Federal Assembly, echoed a few years later by Putin (2013), who described Russia as "mature and responsible nation." The rights and duties of greatpowerness belong to Russia as per natural law: Russia's *grandeur* appears as an ontological given, always validated and never disproven by Russian actions. "Russia has demonstrated immense responsibility and leadership" in dealing with international challenges and guaranteeing world peace — Putin suggested (2016) — and this makes Russia one of "the world's leading nations" (Putin 2018). Programmatic documents mirror this belief too. The NSS 2009 states that Russia has "sufficient potential to [grant] its entrenchment among global leaders" in economic and political terms (Strategii 2009, §9), in order to achieve a

[34] On the relation between power and responsibility see Clark & Reus-Smit (2013).

role that — according to the FPC 2008 — is "well-deserved" (Kotseptsiia 2008, section II). NSS 2015 stresses "the Russian Federation's role in resolving the most important international problems, settling military conflicts, and ensuring strategic stability" (Strategii 2015, §8), thereby reflecting interests that are clearly greater in scope than those of a small or medium power.[35] It is interesting to notice that the "geopolitical status of the state" (*geopoliticheskij status gosudarstva*) is recognised by one military source as the most important factor in the hierarchy of international goods (Koniakhin, Kovalev, Vinokourov 2013). This further reinforces the importance of Russia's self-perceived greatpowerness.

The Russian security elite conveys the sense of *velikoderzhavnost'* not only in positive terms but also negatively, turning the narrative of greatness into a narrative of 'unattained greatness.' Moscow has voiced many times its deep discontent with an international status quo perceived as inherently inadequate and unjust for it is dominated by the West and not open to Russia (Lavrov 2008 as quoted in Svarin 2016, p. 133; see also Lukyanov 2008, p. 1114; Medvedev 2008n; Putin 2012, 2013b).[36] The alleged refusal by other actors to recognise Russia's greatpowerness frustrates the Kremlin, which finds itself forced to "striving for respect," legitimacy, and participation (Putin 2013b; for a discussion see Forsberg 2014; Krikovic & Weber 2018).

Even if with some stylistic differences, such rhetoric cuts across the whole political spectrum (Clunan 2009, p. 114; Mankoff 2012, ch. 1, 2; White & Feklyunina 2014, pp. 101-128; Nalbandov 2016, pp. 4-5). Politicians belonging to liberal, nationalist, and Eurasianist traditions have all shown considerable resentment for post-1991 political developments, stressing the need to claim Russia's legitimate place in global affairs back. As Putin (2013b) put it, "[o]ther power centres" have consistently attempted at containing Russia's resurgence and they are now "closely monitoring Russia's progress as it grows stronger" (see also Kontseptsiia 2008, section II;

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[35] While falling without this thesis' timeframe, Putin's famous Munich speech (2007) is a powerful example of Russia's dissatisfaction. See also Strategii 2009, §21-24; Strategii 2015, §30-31; Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, IV; Kontseptsiia 2013, §4, 42-94; Kontseptsiia 2016, §3, 49-99.

[36] See also Strategii 2009, §8, 17; Strategii 2015, §13, 15-18, 106; Kontseptsiia 2008, sections I, II; Kontseptsiia 2013, §4, 14, 15, 63; Kontseptsiia 2016, §5, 61, 70; Doktrina 2010, §7; Doktrina 2014, §9, 10. Here, against the backdrop of an intense critique to the West, Russia draws a line connecting directly global inequality (read: Western/US dominance) and global instability. The West becomes synonym for chaos.

Medvedev 2008n; Chekinov & Bogdanov 2015, p. 42; Vorob'ev & Kiselev 2014b, p. 51). The success of the Federation seems inevitable however, inasmuch as Russia is said to have all it needs to effectively "respond to all these challenges" (Putin 2016b).

At the intersection between greatness and 'unattained greatness' emerges the tendency towards a "mimetic" policy (Sakwa 2013) focused on remembering and re-enacting the grandeur of Russia's (imperial and Soviet) past, while victimising the Russian present self. Attempts to revise history and rebalance the global order fit into such approach (I expand on this in section 2.3.2). Interestingly, mimesis takes also the form of what M. Skak (2013) defined "copycat behaviour" (pp. 8-10) with respect to the practices of today's great power *par excellence* — the US. If greatness is *the* Russian state of being and geopolitical status has the importance underlined above, then it seems reasonable to take inspiration from the international hegemon to bridge the gap between self-perceived and actual status. On this basis, the grand design of Russia's strategy assumes the same outreach as the US'. Yet Russia should satisfy also its belief of (civilisational) uniqueness, as entailed in ascriptiveness. Hence, while the grandeur of Russian strategic design may formally resemble that of the American counterpart, the two strategies will always have divergent content and aims.

The origin of Russia's might and the reason why it is fated to be a great power have roots in the nature of the Russian community. Ascriptiveness lies at the basis of Russia's sentiment of *velikoderzhavnost'*, which does not stem (merely) from materialistic considerations but first and foremost from a magnified self-perception as an active and fundamental historical subject. Russia is a great power because it enjoys the status of a unique civilisation (Lavrov 2016a). The *fil rouge* connecting greatpowerness and traditions seems to lie especially in Christian Orthodoxy, which offers a pre-constituted cultural-cognitive layer cutting across faith, political action, and moral ends (Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, III.3; Kontseptsiia 2013, §21, 32; Kontseptsiia 2016, §19, 38; see also Engström 2014). Orthodoxy elevates Russia above other civilisations and transforms Moscow into a peacemaker with worldwide responsibilities (Nalbandov 2016, p. 31). Yet here a *caveat* is needed.

While it is true that Moscow enjoys global interests and responsibilities, no universalist drive — i.e., geographical and ideological expansionism — underpins them.[37] That is because of the very nature of ascriptiveness, which is static and non-negotiable. Within the area of the *russkij mir* we may well expect the translation of great power paternalism into interventionism or even expansionism, but this is not necessarily the case elsewhere. Since Russia's intrusive *droit du regard* is constricted within defined cultural borders, outside of the *russkij mir* the Russian behaviour acquires a conservative nature, not an expansionist one. The Medvedev doctrine is a good example of such view: on the one hand, it recognises the sacrality of international law and the general applicability of the principle of non-intervention; on the other hand, simultaneously, it asserts Russia's 'privileged interests' over the *russkij mir*, carving out a space for extra-judicial intervention legitimised on political, historical, and cultural grounds (Vesti 2008; see also Mankoff 2012, ch. 1). The partition of the world in two different (geo-ideational) spaces, each calling for Russia to behave in a specific way, emerges from what has just been written (Allison 2017, pp. 528-534). The same outcome results also from the last component of Russia's self-perception, to be discussed now.

I call 'stateness' (*gosudarstvennost'*) — that is, the attribution to the state of ultimate authority and absolute primacy over society and individuals — the third Russian existential belief. In the domestic domain this links with the historical drive towards the centralisation of power and the guarantee of the executive's autonomy, prioritising internal order over political equality (Antonov 2012). The elite's proudly conservative attitude towards constitutional norms — with the significant exception of those regarding presidential succession — testifies to the attachment to such a monolithic model of power (Medvedev 2008n; Putin 2013b). At the international level, this finds its counterpart in the staunch support for a Westphalian type of state sovereignty that emphasises independence and non-interference (Kokoshin 2014a).[38] In so doing, the Russian elite relates state survival not only to a firm domestic order, but also to the achievement of international actorness, with sovereignty being the juncture between these two dimensions (Strategii 2009, §21;

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[37] Differently from the Soviet Union.
[38] Contrary to many Western commentaries, Russian academics often suggest that sovereignty and statehood will maintain (or even accrue) their role in future international relations (Grinin 2009, 2011).

Strategii 2015, §30). As Putin (2014d) put it, "either we remain a sovereign nation, or we dissolve without a trace" (see also Putin 2012). Yet the Russian idea of sovereignty does not limit itself to the judicial aspects of statehood, focussing on authority and control instead. Real sovereignty, in Russia's eyes, means being recognised both "the right [...] to engage in specific kinds of activities" and the legitimacy to do so in a coercive way, if deemed appropriate (Krasner 1999, p. 10). In line with the second constitutive belief, this is the type of sovereignty typical of a great power.

On the international stage, one corollary of *gosudarstvennost'* is the repeated call for equality as the key principle for the conductof international relations. In itself this should not surprise us, in as much as formal equality is one of the (many) faces of the Westphalian type of sovereignty prized by Russia. As stated in the FPC, "Russia develops international cooperation on the basis of equality, mutual respect [...] and mutual benefit" (Kontseptsiia 2008, section II; almost identical phrasing in Kontseptsiia 2013, §28 and Kontseptsiia 2016, §23). Official narratives link equality with the concepts of justice, freedom, and independence and backs Moscow's support for "a truly democratic model of international relations, not allowing any one country to dominate in any sphere" (Medvedev 2008n; see also Putin 2016b).

In other words, equality frames morally and judicially Russia's preference for a multipolar world order wherein to strike a balance between the pursuit of self-interest and mutual respect (Kontseptsiia 2013, §5, 6; Kontseptsiia 2016, §4; Medvedev 2008n, 2009, 2011a; Putin 2012, 2014b, 2018; Tsyrendorzhiev & Kuroedov 2017). Russia's staunch defence of formal principles translates into frequent references to legal methods of settling international controversies, while rejecting the introduction of new norms such as the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) (Solov'yev 2013). This is consistent with the aim of maintaining domestic order — which is potentially threatened by the extensive interpretation (and application) of the R2P —, as well as with a traditional Westphalian understanding of sovereignty — which does not fit well with the legitimisation of external interferences into one's exclusive domain (Allison 2017; Baranovsky & Mateiko 2016).

The simultaneous emphasis, within the remit of *gosudartvennost'*, of sovereignty as authority and control and sovereignty as formal equality may sound contradictory. However, the contradiction is only apparent, as the role attached by Russia to the United Nations (UN)

demonstrates. Moscow concedes that the UN system is imperfect (mainly due to the allegedly nefarious influence of the US) but also believes that it can stand (again) as the vanguard of a just world order, a universally accessible mechanism capable of conveying collective action effectively (Medvedev 2008n, 2009; Putin 2012; Strategii 2009, §13; Strategii 2015, §104; section III of Kontseptsiia 2008, 2013, 2016). The implications of this universalistic logic are limited by the elite's beliefs in Russia's greatpowerness and *gosudarstvennost'*. Solidarity and cooperation within the UN, in fact, are subordinated to the logics of responsibility and authority: far from becoming a world parliament, the UN is instead the forum for great power condominium, via the Security Council (UNSC). Here is where world justice and global order meet each other, administered by the permanent members of the UNSC (Kokoshin 2014a, pp. 452-453).[39] All in all, it is as if Russia held a dualist vision of equality: the equality among great powers and that amongst lesser members of the international community, the former type of equality being of a higher order than the latter. This means that the sovereignty of those belonging to the second group can be superseded legitimately by the sovereignty of those belonging to the 'World Directory' — but the latter's cannot be trumped by lesser forms of sovereignty. This fits well with the geo-ideational partition of the world discussed above.

Overall, Russia's self-perception rests on three main beliefs: ascriptiveness, greatpowerness, and stateness. Taken together, they render the image of an actor whose identity is pre-modern (primordial, community-based, conservative), status-sensitive, and focused on hierarchies (of authority, order, and spaces). The security elite frames Russia as a great power by birth and the centre of a civilisational ethos. Given that the 'Russian ethos' is not confined to the borders of the Russian Federation, and given that Russia is the (moral) centre of such ethos, then Russia can escape universal norms within its own civilisation space. This translates, at a minimum, into a paternalistic approach and, at a maximum, into outright interventionism — a possibility that does not apply out of the Russian civilisational space instead. Both choices are framed as an expression of authority and responsibility.

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[39] As written in the FPC (2008), the good functioning of international relations "[r]equires collective leadership by the leading states, which should be representative in geographical and civilisational terms" (section III; see also FPC 2013, §30; FPC 2016, §25).

2.2.2. Scientific beliefs: holism, determinism, Huntingtonism

Having discussed the nature of Russian self and its security-related implications, I now turn to scientific beliefs — i.e., the security elite's ideas about global mechanics and the variables governing the functioning of the world. As I will show in the following paragraphs, the Russian worldview is informed by a zero-sum mentality that considers power plays and conflict between culture-bearing units as the main determinants of the flow of history.

As in the case of self-perception, three ideational pillars also constitute Russia's worldview. Two of these can be considered jointly as forming a perceptual dyad that brings a holistic approach to reality and a deterministic philosophy together.[40] Not infrequently, when providing an account of a given condition, the Russian interlocutor would start a digression on apparently unrelated, distant topics that are eventually reconnected to the original theme via a series of (sometimes fuzzy) logical steps, whose necessary explanatory value is dogmatically remarked by the speaker. This way of structuring thought stems not from a lack of rhetorical skills, but rather from the aforementioned perceptual attributes. In fact the Russian security elite frames international reality as an organic whole of interdependent components. No specific dimension of global affairs can be understood individually, but only within the wider web of connections it entertains with other dimensions. Formal compartmentalisations between policy domains (e.g., internal versus foreign policy) fade, leaving space to all-embracing relations. Within this reality, each given factor exerts some degree of influence on multiple others, according to clearly identifiable cause-effect dynamics. Chance has no space in the Russian worldview.

This outlook emerges quite clearly from the text of the main strategic documents, which locate national security at the crossroads of individual, societal, and state security, domestic and foreign security, military and non-military measures (Strategii 2009, §6; Doktrina 2010, §6a, 8-10, 12a; Doktrina 2013, §8, 12-14, 15a). The link between the country's (even military) security and socio-economic development is frequently stressed (Strategii 2009, §3; Strategii 2015, §5, 26) and has been voiced recently by Putin (2018), who declared that "[e]ffective defence will serve as a

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[40] Adamsky (2010, ch. 1) employs a similar terminology.

guarantee of Russia's long-term development". The definition of threats, interests, and priorities reflects such a holistic, cross-domain outlook (Strategii 2009, §6, 21, 23; Strategii 2015, §30, 31).

Overall, a constant feeling of vulnerability afflicts Russia, as if adverse forces were continuously attempting to undermine its existence and inner constitution, generating perils that could strike at all levels both within and outside of Moscow's civilisational space (Doktrina 2010, §12-14; Doktrina 2014, §15). This is well exemplified by Medvedev's suggestion that the crisis in South Ossetia and 2008's global financial breakdown had "a common cause:" US' self-interest and malevolence (Medvedev 2008n). By the same token, the very difference between internal and external sources of harm blurs, as they all seem to share the same non-Russian origin (Doktrina 2010, §8-10; Doktrina 2014, §12-14). Even classically domestic threats such as subversion and revolution necessarily have an external source, as the rhetoric of foreign-led 'colour revolutions' exemplifies (Putin 2014d; Skak 2016; Vorob'ev & Kiselev 2014b, pp. 52-55).

The temporal dimension of this holistic and deterministic worldview shines through the ascriptiveness of Russia's self-perception, in the frequent references to the "continuous history [of Russia] spanning over one thousand years" (Putin 2012; see previous section of this chapter). But for the purposes of this thesis, it is even more significant how such beliefs coalesce in the consolidated Russian tradition of 'military forecasting' (*voennoe prognozirovanie*), which is based on the idea of a patterned linear development of history and the interrelatedness of its various aspects. Military forecasting is defined as the scientific analysis of the trends and factors affecting the (dis)continuity of the forms of conflict, with the aim of shedding light on the nature of future wars (Kruglov & Iakupov 2017; see also Kamalov 2016). Chekinov and Bogdanov (2014) — two authorities in the field of Russian military science — see the foresight of the future (*predvidenie budushchego*) as a key factor pushing both military technique and art forwards, enabling the military success and the ultimate survival of Russia since Peter I.

This practice is a fascinating example of how a specific *forma mentis* impacts on the operative plan. In this case, the holistic and deterministic nature of the Russian worldview brings about an approach to planning and the study of war that is based on scientism. Russian military officials do think that it is possible to identify "patterns of occurrence, development, and resolution of military conflicts" (Sinikov 2014, p. 24), develop models of conflict and project them onto the

past and the future, in order to master war. Within this framework, two interesting data emerge: firstly, the necessary correlation between political and military crises; secondly, the strict dependence of the course and nature of an armed conflict "on the correlation of potentials [*sootnoshenie potentsialov*] of the conflicting sides" (Sinikov 2014, p. 25). This concept, which is reminiscent of the Soviet 'correlation of forces,' further testifies to the holism of the Russian *Weltanschauung*.

As understood by the Russian elite, the thick social web constituting reality is regulated by what I call a 'Huntingtonian belief' — i.e., a pessimistic, power- and culture-sensitive outlook.[41] This third component of the Russian worldview frames the world in a series of Hobbesian zero-sum dynamics and, consequently, reality assumes an inherently conflictual nature (Lo 2015, pp. 36-37). It is possible to find trace of this reasoning in the emphasis put on the "competition for resources" and shifts in the "balance of power," as well as the acknowledgement that "problems may be resolved using military force," according to "a rational and pragmatic foreign policy" (Strategii 2009, §12-13; Strategii 2015, §13-14; see also Medvedev 2011b,c). Such Realist-alike approach has consolidated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, since the disintegration of Communist ideology left the elite with no conceptual framework to interpret international reality. Some authors stress how Realism and, in particular, geopolitical thinking were the closest conceptual fit to the dogmatic, materialistic, and conflict-centred theory of Marxism-Leninism (Sergunin 2004; Solov'ev 2004). In this sense, to fill with Realism the cognitive gap left by the delegitimisation of the Communist worldview did not entail considerable adaptation costs for the elite, in cognitive terms.

This notwithstanding, Moscow's contemporary worldview rejects a purely materialist focus. As Putin (2018) stressed recently, "the state's role and positions in the modern world are not determined only or predominantly by natural resources or production capacities; the decisive role is played by the people." In line with its self-perception, Russia perceives competition mainly in cultural terms, with civilisations as the ultimate units of international politics. Values and moral principles, rather than material interests, are the engines of the world and the main objects of

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[41] From S.P. Huntington, whose worldview — as presented in his famous "The Clash of Civilisations?" (1993) — is characterised by those three attributes. On the early Russian reception of Huntington's paradigm see Tsygankov & Tsygankov (1999).

competition (Strategii 2009, §8; Strategii 2015, §13). All FPCs present this view, highlighting the "civilisational dimension" of contemporary global dynamics and the continuous "attempts to impose values on others" in the face of the fact that "cultural and civilisational diversity […] and multiple development models have been emerging" (Kontseptsiia 2016, §4-5; see also: Kontseptsiia 2008, sections II, III.3; Kontseptsiia 2013, §13). That is why Russia's security should be granted also by ensuring the country's "cultural sovereignty […] against the external expansion of ideologies and [non-traditional] values", as well as "the creation of a system of spiritual-moral and patriotic education of citizens" (Strategii 2015, §82).

In such context, two main observations emerge. First, if reality is characterised by holism and determinism — i.e., given that everything is connected across time and space by cause-effect relations — and if conflict is the basic functioning of such reality, then conflict is always and everywhere a possibility. This leads to two outcomes relevant to the making of strategy. On the one hand, a deep anxiety regarding the transmissibility and escalatory potential of conflicts, amplified by the sensitivity to (dis-)order inherent to *gosudarstvennost'* and exemplified by Medvedev's concern for "[t]he tendency of local problems to take on a global character" (Medvedev 2008n). On the other hand, if such is the state of international relations, then it is incumbent upon Russia to implement a "rational and pragmatic foreign policy" that can turn to Moscow's own advantage the inter-connected and conflictual nature of being. This typically takes the form of *dividi et impera* strategies, intimidatory displays of force, and other non-military interferences — more in general, a politico-diplomatic approach that tries to 'play with conflict' on multiple levels and domains simultaneously. To put it differently, Russia will tend to exploit the advantages held in certain contexts or issue-areas to achieve goals on seemingly unrelated diplomatic tables and conflict scenarios.

Second, this Huntingtonian belief, resonating with Russia's self-perception as a civilisational hub, leads the elite to divide the world into 'Good and Evil' and assume that confrontation with the universalist liberal West is almost unavoidable. As argued by two military analysts, today the main feature of international relations is the confrontation between the West (led by the US) and "the leaders of the developing world" (China, India, Russia), who are now "in the position of defending real state sovereignty" (Tsyrendorzhiev & Kuroedov 2017, p. 6; see also

Grinin 2009, esp. pp. 484-485).[42] This should not be confused, however, with a total rejection of the existing international order (Sakwa 2013, pp. 207-212).

The US-led and liberal nature of such order are not completely at odds with Russia's beliefs and interests; nonetheless, Russia does criticise and oppose *certain features* of the liberal international order sustained by Washington. As T. Romanova (2018) put it, "Russia rhetorically supports most elements of the liberal international order and justifies its moves accordingly" (p. 81), to the point of condemning the West for its breaches of those principles that Russia deems as fundamental to the order itself. Those principles, however, belong to the older (traditional) version of the international society, the (post-war) "Charter Liberalism" that emerged after the two world wars (Clunan 2018, pp. 46-47, 49-51). The latter is compatible with Russia's worldview, inasmuch as it recognises the role of multilateralism, great powers, the pluralism of interests and political philosophies, and is centred on 'real' sovereignty. Yet the capitalistic and Western democratic features grafted by the US on this original form of order since the 1990s, plus their consequences in terms of American hyper-power, clash with Russia's politico-strategic beliefs. To the extent that these latter features continue acquiring prominence in the international order, to the detriment of its original post-WWII configuration, confrontation with the West will remain unavoidable — in Moscow's eyes.

2.2.3. Conclusion

This section analysed the elite's narrative and national strategic documents in order to extract the politico-strategic beliefs of Russia's SC. It conceptualised Russia's self-perception as the sum total of three existential beliefs: ascriptiveness, greatpowerness, and stateness; the Russian worldview, for its part, is informed by a holistic, deterministic, and Huntingtonian approach to reality. To sum up, Russia's subjectivity is imbued in a primordial sense of communal belonging with ethnical and

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[42] Note how both greatpowerness and *gosudarstvennost'* come to the fore here. Also consider that the cooperation between Russia and China has gained growing coverage and importance in Russian official narrative. Putin even stated that the "partnership [between these two countries] can be regarded as a model for shaping a world order free from the domination of a single country" (Putin 2016b). On Russia-China relations see: Luzyanin (2020), Malinova (2019), Menon (2009), Kaczmarski (2019).

religious roots that legitimise a magnified perception of the self and back a hierarchical vision of order(s) and relations. Such identity develops within a broader *Weltanschauung* that interprets the world as a bundle of inter-related dimensions kept together by strictly linear dynamics of zero-sum competition among civilisational units. Taken together these cognitive features render a complex image of Russia's agency, with relevant implications for security policy and the making of grand strategy.

A first strategy-relevant element regards the securitisation of the cultural ethos, a necessary consequence of the pre-modern nature of Russia's self. Given the definition of Russia in civilisational terms primarily — the ultimate ontological value attached to Russianness — the elite is likely to react quickly and harshly to ideational threats. Since the aforementioned cultural ethos exceeds the formal borders of the Russian Federation, such a securitisation dynamic, too, extends beyond those borders, giving rise to Moscow's paternalistic and/or interventionist behaviour in the *russkij mir*. The ascriptive character of this community, however, prevents the adoption of universalist aspirations: Russia's unilateral interventionism is motivated by concerns relative to the preservation of a static and localised cultural ethos (and the implied hierarchy of roles and values); hence the *systematic* use of force beyond the borders of Russianness is not to be expected. This makes of Syria an interesting case study.

Clearly the above does not mean that Russia has no global interests. The Russian elite does claim global interests and responsibilities, seeing Russia as an existential great power. But while greatpowerness expresses itself in terms of exclusive moral authority and political control within the *russkij mir*, outside that geo-ideational space greatpowerness takes the form of condominium and a legally framed sense of responsibility. In both cases, Russia seems to distinguish between 'real sovereignty' and lesser types of it on the basis of an actor's ability to be an active (rather than passive) player of the international game. In the eyes of Russia, such ability is dependent on the cultural (inborn) *and* material potential of a national community — without which it could not be possible to withstand the challenge of an inherently conflictual reality.

The elite's acceptance of competition — even in its extreme form of armed struggle — as the default mode of international relations cannot be decoupled from the constant perception of pending threats, which is further reinforced by the holistic framing of reality. For Russia, conflict is

everywhere and everything could be an object of conflict (Covington 2016, pp. 26-38). In grand strategic terms, this has two relevant consequences. On the one hand, the extensive interpretation of conflict means that in Moscow's eyes the barrier between peace and war blurs, generating a grey zone in which the conversion between peaceful and conflictual conduct is potentially rapid. On the other hand, given the multifarious, interconnected nature of the threat landscape visualised by Russia, we should expect the security elite to develop a rather comprehensive military-strategic planning, leading to the adoption of an all-of-Russia approach to security based on the "coordination among all branches of power" (Kontseptsiia 2008, section III; see also section II of the same document and later editions). Taken together these two elements make Russia assume a state of semi-permanent and cross-sector mobilisation (see section 2.4.2).

I conclude with one final observation that wraps together what I have written so far. I agree with M. Engström (2014, 2018) about the appropriateness of the term 'katechonic' to depict the Russian elite's politico-strategic cognition. The word derives from the ancient Greek *katechon* (the withholder) and perfectly expresses Russia's self-portrayal as a unique subject entitled of major responsibilities deriving from a transcendent investiture, as well as of a special mission that seeks to rebuff moral and physical contaminations emanating from the chaotic outside. [43] This characterisation also helps stress an additional theme of the Russian strategic outlook: self-sufficiency. Being an Aristotelian *communitas perfecta*, by definition the *katechon* finds in itself the strength and resources needed to achieve its goals; at the opposite, the outside world, in light of its negative qualities, can never be trusted upon. An autarchic, self-reliant attitude stems from these conditions. Russia's self-perception and worldview are clearly aligned with such reasoning and thus we may expect Russia to take on autarchic posture also from a strategic perspective — meaning, for example, the search for the freedom of strategic action, military-technical independence, and the unilateral conduct of military operations. The remainder of this chapter will help better understand how such operational are conducted by Russia.

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[43] To examine in greater depth the concept of *katechon*, see Cacciari (2013) and Schmitt (2011, pp. 38-53).

2.3. Russia's military-strategic beliefs

After having dealt with the politico-strategic (constitutive and scientific) beliefs underpinning the elite's mindset, I now turn to the military-strategic component of the Russian SC. First, I reconstruct intentional beliefs, which describe what Russia regards as the appropriate use of force on the international stage and when to intervene. Second, I look at operational beliefs, which shed light on the preferred ways in which Russia intends to use force, irrespective of the specific conflict scenario. I extract both types of beliefs from an analysis of the content of strategic documents and military articles, trends in defence reform, and military exercises — within the timeframe 2008-2018.

2.3.1. Intentional beliefs: confrontation and war across geo-ideational spaces

Intentional beliefs indicate the conditions under which a social community intends to wage war. In general, this topic is quite obscure and difficult to investigate, as thresholds for the use of force are rarely stated with clarity. Publicly, elites tend not to go beyond declarative statements on the right to respond with force to any acts of direct aggression and existential threats, as prescribed by international law. That is the case with Russia, too, as exemplified by Putin's (2018) rather general declaration according to which: "[a]ny use of nuclear weapons against Russia or its allies, weapons of short, medium or any range at all, will be considered as a nuclear attack on this country. Retaliation will be immediate" (see also Doktrina 2010, §20-29; Doktrina 2014, §22-34; Osnovy 2020). These statements have no real value for the present research, given two reasons. First, they provide only low-resolution pictures of the elite's intentionality regarding war. Second, the fact that very different leaderships across the globe resort to such these vague, law-compliant declarations might lead to think that all states share the same threshold(s) to go to war; however, such conclusion runs counter the theoretical assumptions of SC and is backed by no empirical evidence.

In order to get deeper insights on the Russian threshold(s) for waging war, more of an interpretative effort is required. Clues about intentional beliefs come to the fore from a variety of (open) military sources that, beyond their jargon and repetitiveness, provide a gateway to military

thinking. While it will not be possible to determine the exact empirical threshold(s) of Russia's use of force, the range of possibilities can be reduced considerably and in a policy-relevant way. Previous findings on the politico-strategic beliefs of the Russian SC will also come in handy. In fact, as I will later explain, Russia's military intentionality is closely related to the dualist conception of spaces and order highlighted in the first half of this chapter.

In order to get to the answer we are searching for, we should first look into a couple of preliminary questions. One of the key terms in my conceptualisation of intentional beliefs is 'war.' Hence before being able to understand when Russia would wage war, we should understand what it means by war. Luckily, Russian military professionals show a particular proclivity towards the definition and measurement of complex phenomena and war is no exception. War (*vojna*) is seen as the main object of military security and shares with it a multilevel, composite nature that spans the economic, psychological, and traditional military spheres (Chekinov & Bogdanov 2016a, p. 41). For such reason, military security and war cannot be referred only to the Ministry of Defence but rather call for an all-of-Russia approach, consistent with the aforementioned holistic conception of security (Andrianov & Lojko 2015, p. 68; Lutovinov & Khmara 2016, p. 9). At this point, however, Russian military professionals do not bring holism to its extreme consequences by arguing that war is everywhere.

As noted earlier, the security elite perceives the world in a permanent state of competition, but this is no synonym of a permanent state of *vojna* — which is a rather circumscribed phenomenon instead. The Russian military identifies the main feature of war in the systematic use of armed violence. In the words of N.M. Vasil'ev (2013), "war is a form of violent resolution of controversies [...]. *Namely violence and the use of weapons for the resolution of controversies are the main feature of war*" (p. 41, italics original; see also Fomov 2013). Wars can vary in scale and form but they all entail the ultimate clash of opposite parties in a military conflict (Babich 2014; Diatlov 2013). Coherently, and while always within a holistic approach, the MoD and, specifically, the AF must have the lead in dealing with war and war remains the main concern of (military) strategy (Chekinov & Bogdanov 2016a, p. 42; Vasil'ev 2013, pp. 43-44).

These statements find widespread support in the Russian military community notwithstanding the recognition of the growing importance and expansion of another dimension of

international competition, called 'struggle' (*bor'ba*) (Chekinov & Bogdanov 2017; Kopytko & Kopylov 2013). Struggle, at the opposite of war, is a form of non-violent confrontation embracing political, economic, social, informational and other measures. These can be employed by the AF and are supportive of military actions but they do not entail the use of force; *bor'ba* and *vojna*, while both being facets of confrontation, do not coincide. Also, they do not serve the same purpose: while war aims always at the creation of conditions conducive to a favourable peace (for oneself) (Vasil'ev 2013), forms of struggle merely reinforce the conflictual nature of reality, being aimed at the accumulation of useful but not decisive victories in the zero-sum game of everyday's competition. Of course, violent and non-violent measures can be deployed jointly within the same confrontational context but this does not preclude separation of *vojna* and *bor'ba*. If the use of force and AF are the main means to achieve political goals and struggle is only used to strengthen the former's impact, then we will find ourselves in a context of war. Vice versa, if the emphasis is on non-military means and the AF only threaten the use of force or exert pressure by presence, then the Russian security elite would not label the context as one of war (Chekinov & Bogdanov 2017; Kopytko & Kopylov 2013). In the Russian mindset, the distinction between these two scenarios (i.e., between *vojna* and *bor'ba*) is much clearer than in Western commentaries on hybrid warfare.

The preceding discussion already tells us something about the possible conditions under which Russia may resort to military force. Since *bor'ba* is part of the normal functioning of reality, Russia credibly expects to attend the implementation of many acts of struggle by others (read: the West) — and we should expect Russia to do the same. But while the thin boundary perceived by the Russian elite between the time of peace and the time of war may lead to suspicions about an imminent escalation, in general we should not expect Russia to react violently to such measures. Acts of *bor'ba* do not require any exceptional — i.e., violent — response. This is not the case in regard to acts of *vojna* instead, since by their very nature they necessarily entail the resort to armed force and call for a comparable reaction.

But is the use of force still relevant to Russia? *Prima facie*, the aforementioned expansion of the space of non-violent confrontation seem to support a negative answer. However, quite the opposite emerges from a close reading of relevant military writings. While states can now achieve their political goals via additional means, this fact does not deprive the use of force of its value as

the ultimate means to pursue or defend the most important interests (Chekinov & Bogdanov 2017; Diatlov 2013). The Russian opinion in this regard is much more conservative than the proponents of hybrid warfare argue about. As Chekinov and Bogdanov (2015) underline: "[d]uring future wars, the decisive role of armed fight remains but [also] all other types of combat will be actively used. Under these conditions, military force will not only maintain its importance but also strengthen its position" (pp. 43-44; see also Doktrina 2010, §12-14, Doktrina 2014, §15). Admittedly, two editions of the FPC stress that "modern conflicts cannot be solved by the use of force" (Kontseptsiia 2008, section III; also Kontseptsiia 2013) but this statement does not imply that force is useless. In fact other strategic documents make it clear that "[t]he role of force as a factor in international relations is not declining" (Strategii 2015, §14) and, indeed, is becoming "increasingly important" (Kontseptsiia 2016, §6). Such empirical observation reinforces the implications of the elite's Huntingtonian worldview, making of the use of force (by others) one of the major threats to Russia's security (Strategii 2008, §10); a threat that is even greater in light of the perceived tendency of contemporary warfare to move closer to the absolute Clausewitzian type (Vinogradov 2013; see also Kiselev 2017). At the same time, however, war becomes almost normalised in the Russian imagery. This fact, together with the cognitive legitimisation of coercive actions entailed by the existential beliefs of greatpowerness and stateness, contributes to weakening the constraints on the use of force.

Besides the separation between war and struggle, Russian military thought discriminates, within the category of war, between different types of military conflict. Writings present a three-level classification ranging from local war (*lokal'naia vojna*) to regional war (*regional'naia vojna*) to large scale war (*krupnomashtabnaia vojna*) (e.g., Diatlov 2013; Doktrina 2010, §6; Doktrina 2014, §8).[44] Local wars typically involve two or more states and narrow military-political goals that affect the interests of warring parties only; conflict unravels exclusively within the borders of such

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[44] The Russian military lexicon further differentiates between *armed* and *military* conflict. The two are near synonyms, but the former tends to assume a broader meaning than the latter. Armed conflict is defined as "an armed confrontation between states or social communities within individual states, aimed at resolving economic, political, national-ethnic and other contradictions via the limited use of military force" (Voennyj Entsiklopedicheskij slovar' NA) Instead military conflict is "a form of resolution of controversies in inter- or intra-state relations via the use of military force by opposing sides" (id.). While worth noting, this differentiation does not bear direct relevance for my research.

states. Regional wars have greater geographical and political scope: they see the participation of two or more states or coalitions in the pursuit of "important" military-political goals, and involve an entire region. Finally, large scale wars have a total character: they stage the clash between coalitions of states led by great powers, which struggle to achieve "radical" military-political goals; large scale wars affect multiple regions. Outright nuclear exchange is often hinted at as the very last (fourth) level of conflict but its technicalities are not discussed in depth, since very little would be left to actual planning in that event.

Even though the risk of military conflict is assessed as rapidly increasing, Russian military forecasters attribute low probability to the incidence of major (regional or large scale) and nuclear wars in the near future (Kruglov & Iakupov 2017).[45] As evident, these war-types differ across two interrelated variables, namely the nature of their goals and geographical scale. Such categories do not provide exact, quantifiable thresholds of escalation from one level of conflict to another — or from peace-time to war-time, for that matter — but only general qualitative parameters to orient strategic action. Yet each war-type is associated with an appropriate (or expected) use of armed violence that, according to the accurate reconstruction proposed by Kofman, Fink and Edmonds (2020), ranges from demonstrative or targeted (limited and sub-nuclear) use of force in the case of local wars to the mass employment of conventional forces, counter-force strikes, and demonstrative nuclear use during regional wars, up to the intensive use of all types of force against the adversary within the context of large-scale wars. Below the level of local war one should not expect Russia to engage in acts of *vojna*; above the level of large-scale war, nuclear Armageddon is all that Russia expects to witness.

This overview of the Russian military taxonomy helps develop a clearer understanding of the conditions under which Moscow might decide to engage in war, as well as the level of violence

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[45] Interestingly, Chekov and colleagues (2019, pp. 32-33) observed that Russian literature seems to suggest that five conditions must apply for major wars to break out and we are two conditions away from it to happen. Verified conditions are the widespread dissatisfaction with the international status quo, the existence of revisionist states willing and able to change international norms, as well as the presence of hotbeds of conflict. This is widely coherent with Russia's worldview (see also Pavlov, Bel'skij, Klimenko 2015, p. 3; Surovikin & Kuleshov 2017, p. 5). However, Russian sources seem to convene that it is still too early for major war, since there are neither a "war nation" whose elites and people agree to resolve perceived problems via absolute conflict, nor the technological capabilities that would allow such nation to defeat the enemy (without unleashing nuclear Armageddon) and occupy its territory.

it might resort to. To this end, consider three elements of the Russian SC that have emerged along the way. First, in general, the subordination of military-political goals to politico-strategic goals, within a SC (as per Chapter 1). Second, the relevance (interrelation) of space and military-political goals for the Russian thinking on war, as the previous paragraphs made clear. Third, the association of space and (political) interests also at the level of politico-strategic beliefs, which bring the Russian elite to subdivide the world in two geo-ideational areas: the *russkij mir*, geographically contiguous to Russia and *locus* of vital interests; and the rest of the world, the non-Russian world, where Russian responsibilities and interests do not require a maximalist approach. These elements are key to answer the present question(s), too. In fact, I argue that the different value attached to the geo-ideational spaces of Russianness and non-Russianness brings Moscow to consider the possibility of war in different ways. There are two main contexts and modalities under which the Russian elite would give a green light to the use of force.

The first context is linked with the geo-ideational space of the *russkij mir*, where Russianness lies. Moscow perceives itself as the centre of such unifying civilisational ethos, to which ontological value is attached. In this space we witness the maximum joint expression of Russia's ascriptiveness and greatpowerness, of civilisational conservatism *cum* exceptionalism. In this context, *bor'ba* is a danger and an opportunity for Russia, simultaneously: on the one hand, it is the main tool via which external intruders try to disintegrate the alleged unity of the Russian civilisational space; on the other hand, and according to a deterministic logic of action and reaction, Russia's own resort to forms of struggle grants the continuous exertion of authority by taking advantage of pre-existing ethno-cultural and structural links.

Yet *bor'ba* may not be sufficient to satisfy Russia's jealousy for the area. The extension of the Russian self-perception beyond the Federation's borders — in other words, the extension of Russia's identity to the whole *russkij mir* — implies the expansion not merely of Moscow's area of interest, but also of the very area of its existential concerns. Since the defence of one's (ideational and physical) ontology ranks first in the list of existential interest, we should expect Moscow to resort to force swiftly and decisively in this space. The natural urge to defend the fundamental components of Russia's extended self — the civilisational unity of Russianness and the subordination of the entire area to Moscow's sovereignty — engender a behaviour characterised by

strategic brinkmanship and the quick transition from *bor'ba* to *vojna*. Given the value attached to this geo-ideational space, Russia's military-strategic interests and goals are likely to acquire at least an "important" nature — to use a term employed above while discussing war-types. This means that in case of war, Russia would show readiness to escalate conflict exponentially.

In the geo-ideational space of non-Russianness, relative restraint in the use of force prevails instead. There, ascriptiveness still applies but only tangentially, as the ultimate source of Russia's greatpowerness, which in its turn is mitigated by *gosudarstvennost'*. Outside the *russkij mir*, Moscow still perceives itself as a 'class A' sovereign but the choice to resort to violence is mediated by the logics of condominium and legal proceduralism. Therefore, here we should expect the prevalence in terms of volume and frequency of non-violent over violent measures and, if the case, gradualism in the transition from the former to the latter. Absent transcendent (ontological) legitimisations, the use of force in the non-Russian geo-ideational space must be judicially legitimised. Modern normative canons relative to armed violence frame Russia's engagement with the area. There, Russia is unlikely to participate in conflicts that transcend the local level, if not as a consequence of a regional conflict that expanded from the *russkij mir* to the global level.

2.3.2. Operational beliefs: asymmetry and pro-activeness

The last step of this enquiry into the Russian SC leads us to look at *how* Russia would make use of force. After having dissected the way the security elite perceives the Russian community and the surrounding world, and after having understood how this influences the decision to wage war, I now turn to operational beliefs. This last component of SC points to the set of preferences regarding the use of armed violence held by the security elite. That is, once Russian decision-makers have approved the use of force, how will military means be actually employed? The long-term analysis of professional military writings, defence reforms, and military exercises reveals the Russian preference to use force in an asymmetric and pro-active way. These doctrinal features emphasise the role of the ground forces (within a combined-arms framework), mass and manoeuvre, the (disorganisation) of command and control (C2), and strategies of deterrence.

Asymmetry is the first feature of Russia's military operational mindset. Before delving more into this aspect it is worth raising a *caveat*. 'Asymmetric' is not a synonym for non-conventional

(e.g., terroristic) or non-violent (as in *bor'ba*) means of confrontation; not necessarily at least. Here I employ the term with its basic, broader meaning of 'non-matching' at a quantitative and/or qualitative level. In military terms, this means that if the one side of a conflict uses a type A of force, then the asymmetric opponent will either use the same type of measures, yet stepping up or scaling down its quantitative commitment; or it will use a type B of force. If type A has a conventional character, then type B may well be irregular — but it may also involve simply other kinds of conventional measures. The choice will depend as on the capabilities of the parties, as on their military proclivities (Pynnöniemi 2018, pp. 252-255; Thornton 2017).

Russian military thought pursues asymmetry mainly within the conventional sphere. First, as observed in the previous section, the expanding range and importance of *bor'ba* does not subvert its relation of subordination to military force (see also Persson 2020). As a consequence, non-violent measures gravitate at the periphery of Russian military doctrine, which focuses on forceful measures instead. Second, within the range of violent means, land power plays the major role. Moscow has attempted repeatedly at developing a balanced military structure but the emphasis has always fallen on land forces — irrespective of technological and strategic conditions (Vorob'ev & Kiselev 2013). Russia was and is mainly a land power, solid in its belief that infantry, armour, and artillery determine victory in war, while sea and air power have only supportive roles.[46] Credibly, the underlying assumption is that the ability to seize and retain land is still decisive to the outcome of war, even under present conditions.

Admittedly, ground troops have hardly been prioritised in the Russian State Armament Programmes, but the material base they inherited from the Red Army was in a better state than other services'. Since they could be modernised more efficiently (time- and cost-wise), the Russian ground troops quickly became more operation-ready than their counterparts at sea and air. This certainly helped them retaining their central role in the Russian doctrine. Not only the Army is the biggest and better served component of the Russian AF, comparatively better manned and with more than 90% of its equipment serviceable (Kjellén & Dahlqvist 2019, pp. 27-29); it is also

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[46] Bartles (2018) provides some interesting insights on this.

overrepresented in the leadership of the Russian MoD.[47] Continuous delays in the effective reform of the Russian fleet and the slow pace of modernisation of the Air Force can be considered further reflections of the disproportionate attention benefitting the Army (Connolly 2017; Kjellén & Dahlqvist 2019, pp. 29-34).

The composition of Russia's 'groupings of forces' (*gruppirovki vojsk*) testifies further to the focus on the land domain. These groupings are major assemblages of troops put together to carry out (offensive) military operations at theatre-level. While groupings include different branches and services of the Russian AF, land power lies at their centre — quantitatively and in operational terms (Norberg & Goliath 2019, p. 60; see also Batyushkin, quoted in Bartles 2018). More specifically, the type of conventional land power emphasised by Moscow is one heavily reliant on armour and artillery. The features of Russia's basic operational-level ground task-force — the Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) — render it clearly (Grau & Bartles 2022). By including a dis-proportionate number of tanks, missile, and artillery troops vis-à-vis their Western counterparts, BTGs qualify as fire-heavy formations capable of highly destructive operations. As the case studies will show, the physical obliteration of the adversary's manpower and/or hardware is a primary task of the Russian AF, and these type of units are the main means to do so (see opening statements of Samorodsky & Morozov 2020).

Land power enjoys doctrinal priority over nuclear forces, too. While the security elite prizes the nuclear arsenal as a showcase of Russia's greatpowerness and the ultimate guarantee of survival and strategic stability (Kokoshin 2015), its war-fighting utility seems to be limited. Already during the Cold War no major changes of Soviet military doctrine followed the acquisition of intercontinental (nuclear) capabilities in the 1950s. Technological modernisation was pushed only as far as stalemating Washington's power over the long distance, thereby allowing Moscow to keep cultivating its preferred (conventional) means of conflict (Garthoff 1958, pp. 10-13). The same reasoning applies today, reinforced by international normative constraints on the use of nuclear power and the dissuasive potential of US missile defences (Tsyrendorzhiev & Kuroedov 2017, pp.

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[47] According to the MoD's website, the leadership is shown to comprise 14 individuals, including the Russian President, the Minister of Defence, the Chief of Staff and 11 Deputy Defence Ministers. Out of 14 people, five served with the Army (seven if one considers also the two individuals who served in the Airborne forces, which were subordinated to the Army during most of the Soviet period).

16-17; Chekinov & Bogdanov 2015). The arguments put forth by those who hypothesise the existence of a Russian 'escalate to de-escalate doctrine' are shaky at best, and cannot make a definitive case in support of the allegedly primary war-fighting role attached to tactical-operational warheads by today's Russian doctrine (Tertrais 2018). As things stand, recent Russian propaganda about ground-breaking innovations in ballistic missiles (Putin 2018) should not be regarded as an attempt at altering the nuclear balance but rather as (potentially) devastating advances in conventional capabilities. Not nuclear weapons but the destructive power of new conventional technologies has been at the centre of the Russian discussion on future war over the last ten years; there lies the Russian concern and there lies the focus of Russia's own military posture.

Within the conventional sphere, asymmetry is pursued by the Russian military in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Two enduring features of Russia's military behaviour illustrate the search of an asymmetric advantage in quantitative terms. Firstly, the inability to move completely to a fully professional AF. This has been attempted consistently at least since the time of Serdiukov, with no promising results (Herspring 2013; Renz & Thornton 2012). Russia's demographic crisis, the political willingness to cut the organisational costs of Defence, and the growing complexity of military activities support the idea of dispensing with conscripts, forming instead a smaller but specialised military force made up of contractors (*kontraktniki*). However, attempts in this direction have encountered the resistance of military cadres. The reasons for that link with the interest of the military top-brass in retaining its traditional privileges, but opposition was backed also by an ideational element: the conviction that only a large standing army continuously beefed up by draftees could defend Russia properly (Barany 2008, pp. 597-598; Douglas 2014, pp. 523-525). While the overall size of the AF has been reduced, conscripts still outnumber *kontraktniki* and the ideal goals of reform are still far from being achieved; quite the opposite, Russian AF continue to reflect the hundred-years old *dictum* of General N.P. Mikhnevich about the necessity to enjoy (numerical) superiority over the adversary.

Here a preliminary assessment is worth making. The permanence of a SC emphasising mass interacts badly with the (incomplete) transition to a smaller, professional force. In fact, while the Russian AF continue operating on the assumption that mass grants victory, they might not enjoy the numbers to achieve such critical mass anymore — especially against sizeable opponents.

Not only the number of Russia's active military personnel (ca. 900.000 individuals) is very far from past (Soviet) standards (IISS 2022, pp. 164-217); but also, given the vast reliance on conscripts, only part of that active personnel has the skills necessary to conduct Russia's way of war effectively. Historically, the delivery of high-quality education has never been a priority for the Soviet/Russian military, yet now — with less personnel on active service — the lack of skill diffusion might play out negatively on the battlefield. The misalignment of doctrine and force structure, as well as the low number of (skilled) personnel available to Russia today might prove critical at tactical-operational level especially, reducing the manoeuvrability, survivability, and overall effectiveness of Russian BTGs (Kofman & Lee 2022).

The second feature shedding light on the security elites' preference for a quantitatively asymmetric approach links with troop mobility and the benefits it brings about in terms of outnumbering the adversary. It is possible to spot the permanence of a well-established Russian approach that puts a premium on achieving breakthroughs into the adversary's formation. There is a *fil rouge* connecting Triandifilov's theory of deep offensive operations (*teoriia glubokoj nastupatel'noj operatsii*) to the later theory of strategic offensive (*strategicheskoe nastuplenie*) and today's Russian operational art (Vorob'ev & Kiselev 2013). They all point to the simultaneous attack of the adversary along the entire depth of its defence, via a series of strikes coming from converging directions; the success of these manoeuvres is granted by the massification of troops and firepower in one or several points. As noted by Ruiz Palmer (2018), one of the constant features of Russia's annual strategic exercises over the period of study has been the staging of "decisive, deep operations" aimed at isolating and defeating the adversary's forces by conducting wide manoeuvres under the "shielding effect" of mass fires and A2/AD assets (pp. 19-20, 24-26). The ability to bring as much servicemen as possible in the area of operations is also crucial to the success of such mass-based approach. In fact drills and exercises testify to the enduring commitment to quantitative advantage, showing Russia's ability to (quickly) mobilise between 100.000-150.000 servicemen in one strategic direction (Norberg 2015, 2018).

The qualitative side of Russia's asymmetric doctrine develops instead in the direction of an organic use of (military) instruments and resources. Dylevskij et al. (2016) observe that "the first years of the formation of Russian statehood were marked by the emergence of the concept of joint

use [*sovmestnoe ispol'zovanie*] of national forces and means of deterrence and international instruments of prevention of military conflicts in their dialectical interconnection and interdependence" (p. 5). The authors make this statement in support of their reflections on Russia's approach to deterrence and armament talks — topics which exceed the narrow focus on the present section. However, the observation of Dylevskij and colleagues hints at an important characteristic of the Russian military approach: the *sovmestnoe ispol'zovanie* of different branches of the AF — to put it differently, the coordinated use of inter-service/inter-agency groupings resulting in a cross-domain approach to the use of force (Chekinov & Bogdanov 2016b, pp. 7, 10-17; Surovikin & Kuleshov 2017, p. 8).

Again, these features emerge quite clearly from the military exercises conducted by Russia within the timeframe of analysis. Drills show the synergic contribution to conflict of a many types of units, coordinated by a strong C2 system; both internal and external security services, civilian and military structures participate in the war effort, each one with its specific role (Johnson 2019; Norberg 2018, esp. pp. 37-38; Ruiz Palmer 2018, pp. 35, 37). Irrespective of the nature of the conflict staged, the whole of Russian resources is deployed (Covington 2016, pp. 26-35). MDs confirm such practice, suggesting that the defence of Russia is dependent on the coordination and integration of civilian and military spheres, in a way coherent with my previous observations on the Russian (holistic) interpretation of security and the relation *vojna-bor'ba* (e.g., Doktrina 2014, §19-34, 40-42). By implementing such outlook, Moscow aims at hitting the adversary at multiple levels, on multiple fronts, with multiple means, bringing conflict terribly close to a total war.

Together with asymmetry, Russia's military operational preferences revolve around another key concept: pro-activeness. The Russian security elite believes in the utmost value of seizing the initiative. This means that, irrespective of the nature of a given conflict, Russia will not take a passive posture but rather pre-empt and anticipate the adversary, even turning defence into offence. A datum emerging quite clearly from Russian military writings regards the importance attached to the initial period of war (*nachal'nyj period vojny*) (Chekinov & Bogdanov 2013, p. 23; Kardash 2014).[48] In Moscow's view, the military *and* political result of wars depends on that limited period of time, lasting about one month. The enormous destructive potential of new

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[48] For an overview of the concept see: Cimbala (2013); Covington (2016, pp. 36-38).

military technologies makes it even more pressing to act with promptness, speed, and surprise (*svoevremennost'*, *skorost'*, and *vnezapnost'*); only by following these three time-related principles one can avoid defeat (Chekinov & Bogdanov 2015, p. 46; see also Chekinov & Bogdanov 2016b, p. 7; Surovikin & Kuleshov 2017, pp. 6-8).

The seizure of initiative appears as a vital objective and we should expect Russia to concentrate its efforts and resources in the initial phase of an armed conflict, in order to secure military dominance and score victory. Such expectation is confirmed first of all by the growing number of readiness inspections that have been carried out by the Russian AF since Shoigu took office as Minister of Defence. More in general, military exercises testify to Moscow's primary concern with developing force readiness and responsiveness (Ruiz Palmer 2018, pp. 2, 19-20, 32-34). The analysis of such exercises shows capabilities in line with the goal of dominating the initial period of war. In fact Russia has repeatedly demonstrated the ability to conduct major operations within a 8-week timeframe — depending on the strategic direction, the number of military districts involved, and the (offensive/defensive) nature of the effort (Norberg 2018, pp. 48-49; Norbert & Goliath 2019, pp. 72-73).

Several features of Russia's defence policy can be brought back to such set of assumptions. The first of such features involves mobilisation once more and relates to the so called 'readiness gap' — i.e., the period of time the country needs to be war-ready. What Russia does in order to cope with the readiness gap is to keep society in a state of semi-permanent mobilisation (Monaghan 2016b, 2018). As clearly stated in the MDs, the various socio-economic branches of the Federation should be arranged, both internally and in their interaction, in ways that favour "timely preparations for switching over to working in wartime conditions", in order to grant the swiftest, fullest, and most effective transition to activities supportive of military operations (Doktrina 2010, §47-48; see also Doktrina 2014, §40-42). The permanence of conscription and Russia's militaristic ethos, condensed in the goal of "improving youth pre-draft training and military-patriotic education of citizens" (Doktrina 2014, §39.r), point to the same direction. Russia's state of diffuse mobilisation reflects not only a deep concern for readiness but also previous findings regarding the perception of the inevitability of conflict and thin boundary between peace-time and war-time.

The belief in the necessity of taking a pro-active approach to military action backs also the security elite's emphasis on C2 and deterrence. The theme of C2 develops mainly around the objective of command superiority (*prevoskhodstvo v upravlenii*), that is "a clear advantage in the efficiency of response to critical changes in the [military-strategic] situation", during both peace- and war-time (Nagalin, Donskov, Ansimov 2015, p. 26; see also Balybin 2016). Part of such effort involves the merely passive ability of keeping one's lines of C2 in a functioning state. This is an essential task especially for AF as Russia's, intended for inter-service operations. In fact Moscow has devoted considerable resources and efforts to the improvement and consolidation of command effectiveness and order transmission across all levels and domains (Mikhajlovskij & Saifetdinov 2015). Since 2008, Moscow has worked consistently to develop a redundant, survivable, secure, and reliable C2 system capable of functioning even in worst case scenarios (Defense Intelligence Agency 2017, pp. 26-28). Today, such system brings together apparently contradictory features. On the one hand, it is centralised and dispersed simultaneously: command is localised in the hands of a few institutions (PRF, MoD, GS) but their control on forces and operations is granted by a thick human and technological network covering the whole of Russian territory. On the other hand, while in parts still reliant on old and simple Soviet equipment, contemporary Russian C2 is also empowered by cutting-edge systems that grant competitiveness in the technological race.

The functioning of these arrangements has been tested repeatedly via military exercises, demonstrating the achievement of a good level of "effectiveness and readiness of command echelons from the national level down to the brigade level," irrespective of the breadth and duration of the conflict staged (Johnson 2019, p. 3). Yet it is worth calling for caution in the assessment of such results, since the Russian C2 system might not perform as well during an actual war. The reason why lies in the enduringly rigid, top-down nature of Russia's model of military planning and execution (Sukhorutchenko 2020). Russian operational commanders merely execute the plans they are fed by the GS; there is little to no room of independent adaptation for lower levels of military command. If the plan being executed matches actual conditions on the ground, victory is expected; otherwise the GS will have to elaborate and feed down a new plan, more coherent with the unfolding situation. Hypothetically, if the Russian AF managed to impose themselves successfully since the onset of the war (e.g., by harvesting the advantage of time), no

major adaptation would be required; yet in the case of adverse and rapidly changing military conditions, such planning-and-execution system centred on the GS might prevent the AF to react swiftly, forcing them to inertia until the arrival of new directives from the upper echelons. Hence critical problems of troop management might ensue, irrespective of the aforementioned reforms in Russian C2.

Even more important is the (pro-)active dimension of the achievement of command superiority, which translates into the pre-determination, mis-direction, and disorganisation of the adversary's C2 system (Donskov, Moraresku, Panasiuk 2017; Kliushin et al. 2017). An implicit call to the need to master the dimension of time runs underneath the discussion of these topics and becomes particularly evident in the insistence on the continued relevance of reflexive control (*refleksivnoe upravlenie*) techniques, including measures of *maskirovka* borrowed from the Soviet era (Kazakov et al. 2014; Makhnin 2013; Orlianskij & Kuznetsov 2013).[49] The strong informational and psychological component of these measures confirms the supportive role of *bor'ba* with respect to military efforts but does not exhaust the range of available options. As underlined by Donskov, Moraresku, and Panasiuk (2017), command superiority can be achieved also via the physical obstruction, violation, or disruption of the adversary's headquarters and chain of command via special operations, electronic warfare (EW), or even destructive firepower (Balybin 2016; Pasichnik 2017).[50] Irrespective of their violent or non-violent nature, all these measures display a pro-active character. Being aimed at securing faster and more efficient access to situational information, they should be employed by Russia with timeliness and even prior to the initial period of war. The distortion of the adversary's peace-time and war-time strategic assessment should confer to Russia a quantitative (temporal) and qualitative advantage in the elaboration and implementation of strategic decisions, thereby granting a firm grasp on the pace and intensity of the confrontation (escalation dominance) (Donskov, Besedin, Botnev 2017; Donskov, Moraresku, Besedin 2018).[51]

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[49] On reflexive control theory and *maskirovka* see: Keating (1981); Thomas (2004).

[50] EW received an extensive coverage in *Voennaia Mysl'* between 2008-2018. Interestingly, many of the authors writing on the topic are the same ones writing on C2 issues; this testifies to the close connection between the two issue-areas. *Inter alia*, see: Balybin, Donskov, Bojko (2013); Kuznetsov, Donskov, Korobejnkov (2013); Vorob'ev & Kiselev (2014a). For an extensive analysis, see Kjellén (2018).

[51] See Thornton (2018) on the concept of 'pace' in Russian military thinking.

The same type of reasoning emerges from the professional debate on deterrence. Unsurprisingly, Russia shows a relatively broad definition of strategic deterrence (*strategicheskoe sderzhivanie*) that brings together military and non-military measures with the aim of "persuading the military-political leadership and the public of the state (coalition of states) of the potential adversary (aggressor) about the uselessness of the achievement of military and political aims by means of force" (Polegaev & Alferov 2015, pp. 4-5; see also Khriapin et al. 2015; Vartan'ian, Olejnikov, Ubozhenko 2015).[52] Here the problem for the Russian security elite lies in the identification of the right path of persuasion (*put' ubezhdeniia*) or, in purely military terms, of the unacceptable level of damage (*nepriemlemyi uroven' ushcherba*) to be reached to deter the enemy (Aksenov, Tret'iakov, Filin 2015; Kokoshin 2014b; Polegaev & Alferov 2015). Such evaluation and the resulting policy choices are likely to respond to the same dual logic presented in the previous section, leading the security elite to scale measures of *vojna* and *bor'ba* on the basis of the perceived (i.e., identity-framed) level of threat.[53]

The balance between violent and non-violent measures of deterrence will be influenced also by the meaning attached to '*sderzhivanie*' in the specific context — i.e., on the type of persuasion required; in fact, Russian military lexicon expresses no difference between 'deterrence,' as we mean it in the West, and 'compellence,' both falling under the same term instead. However, irrespective of the positioning on the scale of violence and the nature of the effort, Russian military professionals stress the need to implement *sderzhivanie* pro-actively, influencing the strategic planning of potential adversaries even before the use of force appears among their options. In this sense, deterrence becomes a form of reflexive policy, as such oriented towards dominating the time factor, in support of the achievement of command superiority and escalation control. This is one more reason why nuclear weapons play a not-so-central role in contemporary Russian military thinking. Nuclear deterrence is still part of the equation but its active utility is superseded by other means of conventional (land- and space-based missiles) and asymmetric (EW and IW) nature. These can be employed pro-actively without risking the outbreak of a nuclear exchange, which is an

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[52] For a broader discussion of Russia's interpretation of deterrence, see Adamsky (2018a); Fink & Kofman (2020).

[53] As Russians themselves admit, it is the leadership's mentality that frames such assessment, rather than any set of allegedly objective factors (Morozov 2014, p. 42).

eventuality running counter the key objective of retaining command and escalation dominance. This does not rule out nuclear use *tout court*, but pushes it further back in the escalation ladder (Kofman & Fink 2020).

2.3.3. Conclusion

This section analysed strategic documents, military articles, reforms, and exercises in order to extract the military-strategic beliefs of Russian SC. On this basis, and tacking stock of previous observations on politico-strategic beliefs, I determined that Russia's decision about whether to use force develops in line with a dualist logic. In the *russkij mir* Moscow displays a greater proclivity to hostile behaviour. There, the constant application of non-violent forms of control may give rise to strategic brinkmanship and quickly escalate in the deployment of armed violence. Outside that geo-ideational space the situation appears almost reversed, since the Russian security elite subjects the decision of using force to procedural, authority-based, and power-related considerations. The discriminating factor that separates these two logics lies in the Russian self-perception, which extends Moscow's ontological concerns to the *russkij mir*, thereby fostering dis-proportionate reactions within that geo-ideational space. Once the decision to wage war has been taken, we should expect Russia to deploy force on the basis of two operational principles: asymmetry and pro-activeness. Asymmetry develops at both quantitative and qualitative levels and mainly within the conventional domain, though other types of (non-)military means may play a supportive role. Together with the emphasis on seizing the initiative, this brings about an all-domain, all-forces approach based on the mass, mobility, and pre-emption - the latter to be achieved via the constant pursuit of command superiority and deterrence.

From this discussion we can derive two main observations regarding the nature of Russia's approach to war. Firstly, is Russia's military doctrine offensive or defensive? If we were to trust Russian officers, we should conclude that "[a]t present, the military security of the Russian state presents features of the defensive type" (Lutovinov & Khmara 2016, p. 11). However, the earlier discussion on pro-activeness and pre-emption casts doubts on a similar assertion and seems to suggest that Russia's military doctrine is rather offensive. It is true that many states and even

NATO have developed rapid deployment corps to face crises but differences still apply. In the case of Russia, not specific corps but the whole security system is devised to remain in a state of permanent mobility and readiness. *Operativnost'* does not apply just to contingent, specific crises but to the management of entire conflicts. In practical terms, these are not the features of a passive (defensive) posture. However, from a theoretical standpoint there may not be a clear cut solution to such offence-defence question, for two main reasons. On the one hand, to recall Clausewitz, defence does not necessarily match with passivity. To be successful, defenders as well should assume an aggressive posture, concretising in this way the dialectic between offence and defence (Thornton 2018, pp. 25-26). On the other hand, if we look back at politico-strategic beliefs, the offence-defence question finds its answer in the hyper-anxious perception of reality entailed in Russia's SC. Given that Moscow always assumes the presence of some threat to its physical or ideational constitution, each measure implemented would have, from the Kremlin's perspective, a defensive character. This explains statements like the one above by V.I. Lutovinov and I.N. Khmara.

A second observation concerns a topic raised at the very beginning of this thesis — i.e., the role of hybridity in the Russian military thought/doctrine. The analysis conducted in this chapter confirms the original skepticism about Russia's posture being centred on hybrid war. Moscow's discussion of hybridity displays a reactive character — i.e., it emerges as a consequence to the (perceived) use of hybrid techniques by other international actors, namely the US. The Russian discourse on the topic usually highlights two aspects (Bartosh 2018; Kiselev & Vorob'ev 2015; Kokoshin 2018): first, hybrid war is nothing new, except for the prevalence of the cyber-component in today's operations of that kind; second, Russia is badly prepared to stand against hybrid war and has to reform its security apparatus coherently. As already noticed, Russia recognises the expanding role of *bor'ba* — to which many aspects of hybrid war pertain —, and does include such non-military tools it into its holistic approach to security. Nevertheless the increasing importance of *bor'ba* does not change its character and, most importantly, does not subvert its functional subordination to *vojna*. Overall, there is no ground to assert that Russia is rejecting traditional forms of confrontation in favour of a hybridity-based posture. Quite the opposite, Russian military thought and practice still put the main emphasis on the conventional domain: this is the playing

field on which military and political victory (or defeat) is decided. All the rest does not belong to the realm of *vojna* and, as such, does not qualify as an act of military confrontation; while means of non-military confrontation (*bor'ba*) can be deployed in support to the achievement of military (conventional) operations, such eventuality does not modify the overall Russian approach to security, which retains its force-based character. The case studies will shed more light on this point.

2.4. Conclusion

In this chapter I applied the concept of SC to the Russian case. To begin with, I identified the Russian security elite by looking at those formal institutions relevant to security *and* the social mechanisms governing them. On this basis, I identified the members of the security elite in those civilian and military officials working in the apparatuses of the PRF, the 'Ministries of power,' and the GS. Besides differences in terms of individual proclivities and organisational affiliations, these individuals form a social group whose relative coherence is ensured by rooted mechanisms of pre-selection and socialisation. This means that, when it comes to security policy and military-strategic preferences, the members of the security elite share a common mindset — i.e., they hold the same SC.

Then, I explored the Russian SC by looking at the words and deeds of the members of the security elite (see Table 1 below for a recap). At politico-strategic level, the Russian *forma mentis* is characterised by the belief in the ontological uniqueness of the Russian community, which translates into the might of the Russian state and gives rise to a series of global responsibilities that Moscow must fulfil. Such self-perception is accompanied by a worldview that frames reality as competitive and inter-connected, giving rise to a constant feeling of existential anxiety as well as the view of world as being divided in two major areas of threat/responsibility. Such subdivision acquires primary relevance at military-strategic level, as Russia is keener on escalating the level of confrontation and unilaterally launching war within the geo-ideational space of maximum concern (the *russkij mir*), while careful scaling of the use of force applies to the non-Russian geo-ideational space. Either case, when the Russian security elite decides to employ armed violence, it does so in a

pro-active and asymmetric way, putting a premium of conventional force, the concentration of man- and fire-power, and the achievement of shock and surprise via the retention of command superiority. The following Table 1 summarises these findings.

The preceding analysis leads to three key observations. First, the Russian approach to strategy and war-fighting is indeed characterised by a degree of peculiarity. This is particularly evident in the military-strategic component of the Russian SC, which holds categories of thought and operational standards still reminiscent of the last century — hence long foregone by many other relevant (Western) military players. To be fair, some of the beliefs making up the politico-strategic component of the Russian SC might not be exclusive to Russia. For example, other security elites might see their communities of reference through an ascriptive lens; however, the Russia's belief of ascriptiveness makes reference to elements and sustains logical connections different from, say, China's. While by knowing what ascriptiveness means in general one might be able to guess the contours of any versions of such belief, that would suffice to reconstruct the specific content and implications that each specific form of ascriptiveness entails. This is holds true for all other beliefs. Overall, the Russian variation of each category of beliefs displays unique characteristics; the interaction among such beliefs gives rise to equally case-specific, non-generalisable policy outcomes. It is so because of the unique set of historical experiences that converged to generate the socio-cultural *milieu* with which the Russian security elite is imbued. Future comparative studies can help shed more light on the degree of (dis)similarity between different SC.

Second, and with particular reference to the Russian worldview, skeptics might argue that, since it corresponds approximately to a realist outlook, then SC could be discarded as an indeterminate approach. I do not agree with such assessment, because it overlooks certain empirical and epistemological aspects of my strategic cultural analysis. The Russian SC does have elements in common with a realist outlook, but other elements are not — including the civilisational character of Russia's self-perception, worldview, and policies. A realist might interpret such civilisational element as nothing more than the rhetorical coating of a course of action ultimately motivated by power, but that take would merely testify to the divergence of approaches between such Realist and myself. I explained at length my ontological and

epistemological position in the introduction and first chapter of this thesis. To me, ideational factors are no mere supra-structure but the ultimate drivers of military-strategic action; discourse is no mere rhetorical disguise, but a portal to the logics that underpin concrete action. Moving from there, the Russian elite's (partial) acceptance of (select) realist assumptions does not testify to the victory of Realism as a theory, but rather signals the internalisation of a hierarchical zero-sum view of the world. The Russian security elite holds such view because of the peculiar socio-cultural preconditions I hinted at in this chapter; other elites, partaking in a different milieu, do not possess the same outlook (that is the case of Italy, for example). I also invite realist critics to bear in mind that this is no inductive research. This chapter did not aim at analysing Russian behaviour in order to support the veracity of any specific (meta-)theoretical approach. Quite the opposite, a set of theoretical assumptions was justified and accepted ahead of conducting analysis; the validity of my model of SC was tested here, but not its ontological assumptions. Hence any theory-related criticism should be better addressed to other parts of this thesis.

Third, within the timeframe 2008-2018, the Russian SC displays strong consistency. No apparent revolution in the Russian way of war has taken place; on the contrary, the Russian security elite has continued to voice and act out the same beliefs about strategy and war-fighting. I expected to register such consistency not only because of my theoretical speculations, but also because of the persistence of the same security elite at the helm of Russia's security policy — which is a strong indicator of a SC's survival, as per my model. I do not deny that Russian policies might have undergone some degree of mutation during the referent timeframe (see: Cooper 2021; Hedenskog & Persson 2019; Pynnöniemi 2018). However, I argue, these adjustments have not the character of SC changes: they have not altered but rather reconfirmed the broader, pre-existing directions of Russia's way of war. In other words, variations, if any, have taken place at tactical or superficial level; instead the fundamental coordinates of Russian SC have remained unaltered throughout 2008-2018. My analysis was able to identify such structural continuities and the belief structures that underpin them. The confidence of my conclusion is backed by the vast number and diversity of the primary sources I interrogated — from politico-strategic narratives to defence reforms, from programatic documents to military exercises, passing through the many Russian voices that took part in ten years of debate on the use of force. Further research could explore the

degree of continuity and change of the Russian SC (2008-2018) not only with the Soviet SC, but also with the beliefs about strategy and war held by the security elite during the 1990s and early 2000s.

In the following part of this thesis (Chapters 3-5) I will test the findings of this chapter against three case studies — namely the military interventions carried out by Russia in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. I argue that by knowing the SC dominant within a certain timeframe, it is possible to make sense of Russia's strategic and military decisions in any particular contexts within such timeframe. I will treat the strategic cultural beliefs I identified above as hypotheses in search of validation (or disproval). For each case, I will analyse statements and writings of the Russian security elite, as well as the operations conducted by the Russian AF, to check whether the military-political behaviour displayed in those scenarios is coherent with general SC-framed expectations on Russia's conduct. If my theoretical assumptions are correct and the findings of chapter are accurate, I expect: first, to find a high level of consistency in the ultimate strategic and military logics backing Russia's interventions across the three scenarios — notwithstanding the diversity; and, second, that these logics are coherent with the discrete strategic cultural beliefs introduced in this chapter. Variation from these expectations will be explained, if need be, by resorting to conceptual and/or empirical arguments. Notably, the three case studies will offer the chance to reflect once more on continuity and change, by assessing the degree to which Russia has readjusted its military *modus operandi* at each new war, building on the lessons learned from the previous conflict.

RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

Belief category		Russian belief	Description	Implications
Politico-strategic beliefs	Constitutive	Ascriptiveness	idea of being founded on primordial, unique, non-negotiable features such as blood, language, and culture	• partition of the world in two geo-ideational spaces: Russianness (*russkij mir*) and non-Russianness • *russkij mir*: the Russian self exceeds the Federation's borders to embrace this space; here Russia enjoys a special *droit du regard* • narrative and practices of (unattained) greatness characterise Russian security policy at large • sovereignty seen as the ability to exert authority and control; hence some states are more sovereign than others • dual vision of equality: equality among 'real sovereigns' trumps
		Greatpowerness	Russia as a great power bearing the responsibility to participate in the management of international relations	
		Stateness	attribution to the state of ultimate authority and absolute primacy over society and individuals	
	Scientific	Holism	no specific dimension of global affairs can be understood individually; each given factor exerts some degree of influence on multiple others, according to clearly identifiable cause-effect dynamics	• constant feeling of vulnerability: threats are always present, everywhere • fear in the transmissibility and escalatory potential of conflict • competition is inevitable • blurring of peace and war • all-of-Russia approach to security and semi-permanent mobilisation
		Determinism		
		Huntingtonism	pessimistic, power-based, zero-sum and culture sensitive outlook	

Military-strategic beliefs				
Intentional		The enduring utility of military force …	bor'ba, vojna, and levels of armed violence; military force as a legitimate political instrument	• Russian self-perception as the key factor legitimising military intervention • conservative assessment of the nature of conflict: war proper and the use of military force are still the main means to resolve very important controversies • means of non-military confrontation (bor'ba) cannot substitute the use of force (vojna) • offensive military doctrine, implemented for (self-perceived) defensive purposes • XX-century-like way of war
		… to be scaled in accordance to the geo-ideational space of reference	• in the space of Russianness (russkij mir): bor'ba is both a danger and an opportunity; escalation to vojna happens quickly and is justified by the defence of 'important,' self-defined ontological interests • in the space of non-Russianness: relative restraint in the use of force prevails; if violence is used, it happens gradually and within a normative framework of legitimisation	
Operational	Asymmetry	Conventional land power	emphasis on 'boots on the ground,' armour, and artillery	
		Quantitative and qualitative advantages	numerical and fire superiority, operational manoeuvres, and combined-arms operations are key determinants of military victory	
	Pro-activeness	Seizing the initiative	focus on the initial period of war; need to shorten the 'readiness gap'	
		Escalation control	emphasis on the achievement of command superiority (via passive and active means) and the implementation of an all-embracing system of strategic deterrence	

98

Part II

A methodological reminder

The second part of this thesis presents three case studies looking at Russian military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria during the period 2008-2018. Each case study aims at verifying the empirical correctness of my analysis of Russian SC and, by extension, the general utility of SC as a concept. In particular, in the following chapters I will verify that: first, the Russian self-representation and views on events developed in each case according to my expectations, reflecting the broader strategic cultural beliefs I identified in Chapter 2; second, Russian military operations fulfilled, in their intentions and/or actual results, the main beliefs on the use of force enshrined in the Russian SC 2008-2018.

It is significant to look at the Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria cases for two reasons. First, they represent the totality of Russian interventions within the relevant period. Hence their analysis allows for a full picture of the Russian way of war and an appreciation of any potential changes of Russia's SC that might have occurred between 2008-2018. Second, the three case studies display variation across (or different combinations of) key contextual factors — including geographical setting, actors involved, political and military preconditions, person holding the Russian presidential seat, Russia's positioning in the global hierarchy of power, etc. On the basis of the findings of Chapter 2, I claim that Russia's SC is the one factor affecting Russia's military-strategic decisions that remained constant throughout the timeframe — and as such bears key value in making sense of Russian behaviour and its consistency across cases.

These case studies build on a set of sources similar to those interrogated in the previous chapter. To assess my hypotheses on Russian politico-strategic beliefs, I analyse a wide range of Russian texts, including documents, speeches, articles produced by the security elite and affiliated media outlets. I inspect the compliance of Russian war-fighting with the elite's military-strategic beliefs by looking at the actual operations conducted by the AF on the ground, as reconstructed or analysed in Russian military commentaries. Clearly, in both cases I approach the interpretation of these sources *cum grano salis*, fully cognisant that Russian sources (as any other primary source) should not be taken at face value. That said, Russian sources, if correctly interpreted, can help understand the way the Russian security elite thinks and acts. This would be true even if one were

to consider these sources mere propaganda. Those sources — being artefacts produced by encultured human beings — would still tell us something about the logical connections, interpretations, and meanings proper of the Russian mindset.

The reader should also bear in mind that this is a theory-led, deductive piece of research. Hence the following three case studies do not aim at creating new theories, but rather at applying a pre-existing one. The issue of alternative interpretations of the Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria events is resolved a priori (and indeed addressed in depth) in Chapter 1, and it will not be the key concern of these three chapters. Yet the exploration of Russian narratives and actions in the case studies still provides occasion for assessing the relative weight of material, ideational, and other factors in select Russia decisions.

Chapter 3

Russia and the Georgia war

This chapter explores how strategic cultural beliefs informed the Russian security elite's interpretation of the events leading to 2008's Georgia conflict and, consequently, why and how Moscow intervened with military force. In other words, is it possible to make sense of Russia's intervention in Georgia by reference to the SC beliefs I outlined in Chapter 2? Do the statements, decisions, and actions of the Russian security elite in the Georgia context align with the broader SC of Russia? If so — or not — what is the significance of that finding? This case study shows that the politico-strategic and military-strategic beliefs I identified earlier do help frame and explain Russian actions in the Georgia war.

The Georgia war of 2008 is grafted in a turbulent regional history, characterised by the contestation of sovereignties and clashing ethno-national identities. The territory of today's Georgia belonged first to the Russian empire and then, to the Soviet Union until 1991, except for a brief period of rather tumultuous independence between 1917-1921. By the end of the 1980s, the ethnic minority leaders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia — back then special administrative units of Soviet Georgia — came to the realisation that, absent the imposition of the administrative status quo by the Muscovite centre, their rights (i.e., relative power) would be lost to an independent Georgia. This fear was motivated by the rise of nationalism in the country, well represented by the motto of Z. Gamsakhurdia, President of (Soviet, then independent) Georgia during 1990-1992, who invoked the slogan: 'Georgia for the Georgians.' This context soon led to the explosion of armed violence.

Both South Ossetia and Abkhazia rushed ahead and unilaterally declared their independence from Georgia — the one in 1990, when still part of the Soviet Union, the other in 1992. In both cases, Tbilisi attempted to resolve the political issue by using military force and failed. Local separatists, helped by North Ossetian irregulars and elements of the Russian armed forces, neutralised Georgian troops rapidly. Unable to set conditions on the ground, Georgia lacked leverage to influence on its own terms the ceasefire agreements with South Ossetia (1992) and

Abkhazia (1993), mediated by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN respectively. Russia, instead, emerged as the 'protector' of the two breakaway republics. While Tbilisi maintained formal sovereignty over these regions, the agreements *de facto* legitimised an indefinite Russian presence on Georgian soil: by entrusting Moscow with the command of the multi-national Joint Peace-Keeping Force to be based in South Ossetia; and by mandating the establishment of an all-Russian peacekeeping contingent in Abkhazia.

It is debatable whether Russia's participation in these events was part of an established foreign policy design or was rather prompted by the independent decision of Russian military commanders based in the Caucasus, legitimised *ex post* by Moscow (Mörike 1998). But irrespective of that, this early post-Soviet experience taught Moscow that, if successful, even a limited operation in a localised conflict could grant it a relevant voice in peace settlement negotiations and, consequently, a long-term ability to influence the status quo. The history of relations among Russia, Georgia, and the breakaway republics throughout the 1990s and early 2000s seems to testify to the internalisation of such a lesson by Russian decision-makers. 'Boots on the ground' allowed Moscow to gradually deepen its economic and political links with (and control over) South Ossetia and Abkhazia, while these entities, protected from major Georgian reactions by the Russian military presence, moved closer to factual independence.

Moscow exerted pressure on Georgia throughout the early 2000s, at a time when Tbilisi was accelerating its plan to join Western institutions. Tbilisi first applied for NATO membership in November 2002 and signed a bilateral security pact with the US in April 2003.[54] Later that year, the so-called 'Rose Revolution' gave even more impetus and legitimacy to such political course. M. Saakashvili, who became president after heralding the revolution, centred his mandate on the achievement of two goals: resolving the issue of separatism and securing Georgia's membership in the Atlantic Alliance; the modernisation of the state and its armed forces was seen as necessary precondition to the achievement of both objectives. With this in mind, in 2004 Tbilisi agreed with NATO its first Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) and was later offered Intensified

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[54] The pact included mainly security assistance provisions, to be carried out in addition to those Georgia benefitted from as a NATO Partner already.

Dialogue (2006).[55] Saakashvili also launched a mix of military and political actions aimed at taking South Ossetia and Abkhazia back, but all attempts failed, resulting in the re-militarisation of the separatist issue instead. After summer 2004, Georgian and separatist forces would regularly exchange artillery fire and engage in skirmishes, especially at the *de facto* border with South Ossetia.

Saakashvili's twin-track policy was met with opposition by the Russian security elite, as it entailed a potential double loss for Moscow: the deprivation of its special relation with the two breakaway republics, that is, of a meaningful way of exerting control over the Southern Caucasus; and, simultaneously, the expansion of the Western security architecture to the Caucasus itself, in direct contact with the unruly southern borders of the federation. Russia reacted in kind. First, it tightened its political grip on South Ossetia and Abkhazia by forcing the appointment of trusted individuals to key decision-making posts and fast-pacing the handing out of Russian passports to local residents. Second, Russia reinforced its military presence in the region, enhancing the readiness of the North Caucasus Military District and building advanced military bases in South Ossetia. Meanwhile, Moscow engaged in an excruciating tit-for-tat with Tbilisi. Notably, Russia imposed an economic blockade on Georgia (2006), launched a widespread search-and-expel operation to the detriment of Georgians residing in the federation (2006), and even conducted air sorties targeting Georgian infrastructures in or near South Ossetia (2007); the threat of invasion was presented to Tbilisi, if it took military action against the secessionist republics.

The actual efficacy of these measures was limited at best, to the extent that Saakashvili's policy objectives did not change. The pursuit of NATO membership actually accelerated and in February 2008 Tbilisi filed an official request to become a Membership Action Plan (MAP) recipient. Georgia's request was debated at the NATO Bucharest Summit in April that year: while no MAP was granted, the Allies agreed in principle on welcoming Georgia and Ukraine as members, in an unspecified future (the so-called 'open door policy;' see NATO 2008, §23). The Kremlin concluded that the accession of those countries was no longer a hypothetical possibility,

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[55] IPAP is a tailored programme of military training, education, and reforms according to NATO standards. Intensified Dialogue is a mechanism of discussion on high level political, economic, military issues reserved to NATO Partners who are interested in joining the Alliance, "without prejudice to any eventual Allied decision." Note that Georgia became a NATO Partner back in 1993 and soon enjoyed, together with Russia and Ukraine, a 'Special Relationship' with the Alliance.

but just a matter of time. Russia reacted quickly, following up with economic, political, military means in retaliation to NATO's decision. The establishment of legal and diplomatic relations between Russia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, as well as the visible Russian military build-up in and around those territories concerned Georgia deeply. Fearing invasion and the definitive loss of territorial integrity, Tbilisi launched a military operation against South Ossetia on the night of 7-8 August. The conflict, which spilled over into Abkhazia, saw the direct participation of Russian forces against Georgia's. A ceasefire mediated by France formally put an end to the 'August war' after five days from the start of hostilities, even though Russian operations continued through September. The military defeat of Tbilisi opened the door to Russia's formal recognition of the independence of the two breakaway republics, entrenching Russian presence in the South Caucasus and curtailing Georgia's sovereignty permanently.

Russian perspectives and actions in the run-up to this conflict and its immediate aftermath are the empirical focus of the present chapter. Their critical assessment serves the purpose of verifying the context-specific analytical value of my general model of (Russian) SC. On the basis of this model, I expect the Russian security elite to think and act in specific ways, emphasising particular discursive themes and preferring one course of action over others. The next pages will highlight the continued relevance of some key concerns and *modi operandi* that characterised the entire post-Soviet history of Russia-Georgia relations — including a historical pattern of heavy-handed Russian meddling in local disputes, opposition to extra-regional actors gaining influence in the region, as well as the use of force as a quick fix against emerging tensions. I will account for these behaviours and others, particular to the 2008 war, by reference to the system of strategic cultural beliefs that permeates the Russian security elite. First, via the thematic analysis of selected speeches and declarations I enquire into the nature of Russia's self-perception and worldviews, and how these influenced the Russian evaluation of the 2008 events. Second, I reconstruct the logic that brought the security elite to decide on an early military response to the 'Georgia problem' and conclude by observing the character of the operations conducted. I close the chapter with a reflection on the overall degree of confirmation that this case study gives to my expectations on Russian behaviour.

3.1. Politico-strategic beliefs

Politico-strategic beliefs are the component of SC that deals with self-perception (constitutive beliefs) and the understanding of the world (scientific beliefs). By informing a security elite's perceptions about the self (the other) and international dynamics, these beliefs constitute the ultimate basis for the definition of interests, threats, and opportunities. In Chapter 2 I argued that the Russian self-perception was based on the beliefs of ascriptiveness, greatpowerness, and stateness, while the surrounding reality was interpreted via a holistic, deterministic, and Huntingtonian frame; these beliefs gave rise to specific policy preferences. I expect these SC beliefs to frame and guide Russia's words and deeds at any given point within the timeframe 2008-2018, including in context of the Georgia war.

3.1.1. Constitutive beliefs

Russian narratives on the lead-up to, development, and consequences of the Georgia war illustrate the elite's belief of ascriptiveness. In the eyes of the Russian security elite, not only the two breakaway republics but Georgia as a whole belong to the *russkij mir*. This civilisational linkage, however, is not explicitly depicted in ethnic or religious terms — as in the case of Ukraine (see Chapter 4) — but rather through a historical lens.

I found no relevant statements being made in 2008 describing Russians and Georgians as the same people. Instead the security elite lingered frequently on differences among Georgians, Ossetians, and Abkhazians. For instance, Medvedev (2008p) characterised South Ossetians and Abkhazians as "neighbouring people[s]" of Georgia — implying some degree of ethnic alterity between these groups. Such 'discourse of diversity' undoubtedly served the functional purpose of legitimising the claims of independence of the two breakaway republics but, notably, it never paired with a discourse of ethnic identity among Russians, South Ossetians, and Abkhazians that could legitimise annexation. Even the attempt to justify military intervention via the right to defend Russian citizens abroad is not driven by ethnic arguments. The 'Russian citizens' referred to by Moscow belonged to two categories: peacekeeping troops deployed in the secessionist territories

and an artificially inflated number of locals holding a Russian passport. Either way, Russian discourse made use of the civic concept of national belonging (*rossijskij*, not *russkij*) and the existence of such groups had never been associated with the 'return' of those lands to Moscow.

In the absence of a prominent ethnic dimension, the Russian security elite still communicated the idea of civilisational unity by resorting to historical arguments. In other words, while South Caucasian peoples where not framed as Russian peoples, their history and existence were seen as components (products) of the history of Russian civilisation. On several occasions the Russian security elite referred to the 'one roof' — provided for by Moscow — these peoples used to live under till the 1990s (Medvedev 2008e). Such shared experience established an unspecified "genetic" link between Russia and the Caucasus, upon the preservation of which regional peace is dependant (Medvedev 2008o). By implication, political developments incompatible with the continuation of regional history along the Russian path acquire a negative connotation. That is why the transition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia under the 'Georgian roof' was identified by the Russian security elite as a bad turn of history, as opposed to the allegedly positive experience of Russian rule. This broad theme developed in two major directions, typical of an ascriptive mindset, fundamental to the Russian interpretation of the Georgia events.

First, Tbilisi was seen as being disruptive of the region's historical positioning under the Russian 'roof.' The Russian role in 2008's events was anchored on a firm opposition to Saakashvili's seeming disregard for (the Russian interpretation of) Georgia's constitutive ("genetic," as per above) ties to Russia — whose historical embrace was to be escaped by moving closer to the West — as well as to South Ossetia and Abkhazia; apparently, Georgia lacked of the "sensitivity" (read: civilisational standards) necessary to lead successfully multiple nations under its banner (Medvedev 2008e,g). But the Russian elite's negative framing of Georgia runs even deeper, showing the ultimate rejection of Georgia's sovereign existence. In more than one occasion, Medvedev (2008o) recalled "the role played by Russia in establishing [the Georgian] state [...] if it weren't for Russia, of what was once the Russian empire, Georgia would not exist as a nation"; Georgia is not "a normal and full-fledged state," but one whose sovereignty "will be ultimately determined by its relations with neighbours" (Medvedev 2008e). In the eyes of the security elite, Georgia's sovereignty is dependent on its (historical) ties with Russia; it follows that, by severing

such ties, Tbilisi would necessarily endanger the country's independence and territorial integrity (see also: Chirnov 2008; Lenskij 2008).

Second, and relatedly, the Russian security elite perceived a strong feeling of historical entitlement to actively shape the political destiny of the region. As stated by president Medvedev (2008b): "[h]istorically Russia has always been the guarantor of the security of the peoples of the Caucasus. This is our mission and our duty. We have never been just passive observers in this region and never will be." According to the elite, Russia has a unique historical role to uphold, one that passes through the continuation of the connections (centred on Moscow) that formed in the past. It is against this ideational background that Moscow's decision to step into the conflict between Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia acquired the character of an historical *revanche* aimed at ending the destabilising consequences of what was perceived as an anomalous, temporary Russian absence.

Overall, then, even in the absence of an ethnic-laden discourse, Georgia was interpreted as a product of Russian history. Russia's security elite embroiled Georgia in a civilisational hierarchy, wherein Tbilisi is a peripheral component of the *russkij mir*, centred on Moscow. Such a top-down civilisational status implied for Russia the right and duty to be arbiter in the Caucasus, and for Georgia the supposed impossibility to re-negotiate its subordination to Moscow. The ascriptive framing of Russia-Georgia relations affected deeply the development of the other Russian constitutive beliefs, by providing a strong set of assumptions that strengthened the traditional arguments of greatpowerness and stateness. I now turn to these.

The narrative of Russian greatpowerness revolves around a handful of straightforward themes: Russia's axiomatic responsibility to stop Georgia's military designs, the ability to pursue an independent policy and change facts on the ground, and the far-reaching implications of Russia's success (or lack thereof). In the run-up to the August war, commentators close to the security elite urged Moscow to intervene because "[l]etting the situation along its borders slide is incompatible with the status of great power" (Chirnov 2008) and would entail huge costs in terms of global — not just regional — credibility (Kiselev 2008). The Kremlin's choice to actually intervene militarily was later praised as a proof that Russia had the "authority" (*ves*) of "claiming the superpowerness once enjoyed by the Soviet Union" (Tsyganok 2008) and "changing the

prevailing geopolitical realities" accordingly (Korotchenko 2008). In other terms, (the success of) the military operation in Georgia was appreciated not solely as a guarantee of greater security on Russia's southern frontiers, but also as a strong statement that Moscow was rightfully back in the 'great power game.' Such interpretation echoes the feeling of 'historical *revanche*' I mentioned above, in relation to ascriptiveness. These words of a Russian military commentator render it clearly: "Russia has demonstrated that the US' view on Georgia is just as 'unimportant and indifferent' to her as Russia's views on Iraq, Kosovo and missile defence are to the US" (Tsyganok 2008). Overall, then, the willingness and capability to conduct decisive (military) action was key to Russia's idea of greatpowerness in the Georgia context. To the extent that such confident form of (military) activism took central stage in the security elite's identity, alternative ways to solve the crisis — options having a more passive, transactional, or simply dialogical (diplomatic) nature — moved at the bottom of palatable policy choices.

The nature of Russia's self-perceived greatpowerness is not only assertive but also reasonable and compassionate, even 'enlightened.' As E. Kropatcheva put it: "Russia's intervention was presented as the right move — not [only] from the point of view of international law — but primarily in terms of common sense, morality, and justice" (2009, p. 52). The security elite stated consistently throughout 2008 that its main objective was to stop the violence carried out by Georgia against South Ossetians, Abkhazians, and Russian citizens in the two breakaway republics. "[W]e want to help people in misfortune today, and there is no other motive in our actions;" "Russia had no option but to crush the attack to save lives. This was not a war of our choice" — Medvedev said (2008d,g). Humanitarian concerns about the 'genocide' allegedly being perpetrated in South Ossetia and Abkhazia featured prominently in the Russian narrative on the crisis. While all parties to the conflict violated the laws of war (IIFFM 2009, esp. pp. 295-438), accusations of genocide remain unsubstantiated and appear instrumental to Moscow's effort to construct a legal case around the events of 2008 (to be discussed later, under stateness). However, they also reflect a broader idea of Russia as a moral actor with "clean hands" (Vladimirov 2008; see also Kuzar' 2008) — which upholds its historical role (ascriptiveness) by protecting the peoples it is responsible for by the virtuous exercise of its capabilities (greatpowerness). The allegedly enlightened character of Russia's greatpowerness confers an aura of self-perceived righteousness

on the security elite's decisions, offering yet another a priori legitimation for the chosen course of action.

The security elite communicated its belief of greatpowerness also via a negative frame, by expressing frustration at the unwillingness of other relevant actors to act according to Russian advice (Tsygankov & Tarver-Wahlquist 2009). Both Washington and Tbilisi were portrayed as being irrational, naive, and arrogant — in contrast to Russia. "Russia continually displayed calm and patience. We repeatedly called for returning to the negotiating table [...] Regrettably, [we] were ignored" (Medvedev 2008f). While the Georgian regime was seen as plain reckless (for a colourful account, see: Ruchkin 2008), the main dimension of America's irrationality was identified in their allegedly irresponsible behaviour (Lavrov 2008a) — which fuelled, instead of stopping, Saakashvili's aggressive designs (Medvedev 2008f,i). By highlighting the flawed reasonings and choices of its adversaries, the Russian security elite told the story of a great power, Russia, whose good faith was challenged and its status not adequately served. This theme, which I labeled 'unattained greatness,' reflected a deep-seated sense of victimhood and humiliation that led Moscow to the stubborn pursuit of its own policies, reducing the space for mediation (see later sub-section on intentional beliefs).

Interestingly, the Russian critique of the US did not prevent Moscow from (indirectly) casting a more positive light on some American deeds. In a few cases members of the security elite put Russian and American foreign policy choices next to each other not to discredit the latter, but to equate them in terms of magnitude and global implications. The implicit logic here was that — if the great power *par excellence*, the US, was able to/did act in a certain way, then Russia, a great power itself, could and should do the same. For instance, the choice of intervening in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and then recognise their independence was virtually always justified by reference to the American (NATO) policies regarding Kosovo. Other kinds of proposals for military action reflected the same thinking (Vladimirov 2008). Yet the most flagrant example of such thinking resided probably in the equation of 9/11 and 8 August 2008 (Allison 2008, p. 1169).

Already during the second Chechen war both V. Putin and S. Ivanov had threatened Georgia with invasion by drawing on the US-led campaign in Afghanistan prompted by 9/11. On that occasion the comparison had centred on the violation of another state's sovereignty to pursue

the 'just cause' of the War on Terror (German 2009, pp. 231-232). Six years later, the parallel 9/11 - 8/8 reemerged, conveying three main messages. First and foremost, August 2008 was believed to share with September 2001 the same revelatory character. From a Russian perspective, in both cases a great power (Russia and the US, respectively) was forced by a reckless opponent to react violently, deploying all its might to restate its hierarchical position and re-establish order and justice. In this sense, the Georgia war was for Russia a test of will, confirming its status, rights, and duties (Medvedev 2008k). Second, and related, the parallel reinforced implicitly the righteousness of Russia's 2008 intervention — to be regarded as legitimate as the American campaign of 2001, inasmuch as Georgia was no less of a terrorist state than Afghanistan. Third, the comparison also betrayed a latent disappointment, for Russia's five-day war was not met with the same international support as Washington's anti-terrorist crusade, as inferred by Lavrov (2008d). Such was an unsatisfactory outcome for the Russian security elite, considering the two preceding points. Overall, it is as if Moscow's 'copycat references' bridged between the positive and negative themes of the Russian great power narrative, thereby further strengthening the security elite's assumptions about appropriate conduct.

Russian discourse and behaviour around Georgia were shaped also by the belief of stateness. Themes key to stateness such as authority and control can hardly be disentangled from the Russian narrative of ascriptiveness and greatpowerness. Earlier paragraphs stressed how key assumptions about historical role and status fed directly into the assessment of what was worth pursuing, thereby shaping Russia's controlling and assertive behaviour vis-à-vis Georgia. This behaviour can also be seen as the externalisation of the idea — applied by the elite in domestic affairs too — that 'real sovereignty' comes with the ability to impose one's preferred form of order onto selected others. In the eyes of Russia, regional stability does not equate necessarily with everyone's freedom to pursue independent policy choices; stability and (Russia's) security rather stem from the maintenance of hierarchy and a system of dependencies. Several examples foreshadowed the application of such reasoning to the Georgia case, including: suggestions about shaping the Caucasus into a demilitarised confederation that "will not need a foreign policy — only guarantees from its neighbours (led by Russia)" (Chirnov 2008), Russia's passportisation policy and military footholds in the two secessionist republics since the 1990s, the rejection of Georgia's

'Rose Revolution,' as well as the nature of the post-war agreement signed with Abkhazia (Khrolenko 2009; Korbut 2010). By embracing neighbours in a thick web of dependencies, Moscow aimed not at promoting the independent development and consolidation of those territories, but rather at (de-)transitioning their governance structures back to a Russian model. The achieved degree of homogeneity would grant Russia material advantages, but also and primarily validate the security elite's hierarchical framing of neighbourhood policies.

Against this backdrop, a dualist view of sovereignty emerged clearly. In the eyes of the Russian security elite, parties to the 2008s events belonged to one of two categories: on the one hand, there were 'real sovereigns' like Russia, US, France, Germany — i.e., states capable of ordering the world. On the other hand, there were lesser states like Georgia, treated as objects, not subjects, of international relations. The latter's sovereignty was not seen as a given but rather as dependent on the decisions of the former group of states. This behaviour confirms the general observations cast in Chapter 2, about the Russian elite applying the norm of sovereign equality in selected cases only. For the Russian elite, sovereignty appears to work as a privilege, and Georgia was not immune to the consequences of such a judgement.

In fact a discourse of top-down imposition emerges from the words and deeds of the Russian security elite vis-à-vis Georgia — before, during, and after the August war. Throughout 2008, Moscow's relations with Tbilisi were limited to the communication of threats, demands, and a discursive mix of ridicule and dismissiveness. The active inclusion of Georgia in the final ceasefire agreement did not emanate from Russia but from France — broker of the accord. The Russian resistance to the amendments suggested by Saakashvili's government and the dismissive attitude towards those parts of the agreement mandating the rapid restoration of Georgia's sovereignty testified to the lack of recognition of this attribute. Instead Moscow engaged consistently with the US and major European powers, showing at least in principle their (formal) acceptance as peers and a willingness to maintain cooperation (Kropatcheva 2009, p. 52). Throughout the crisis, Russian officials paid great tribute especially to small-group multilateral organisations such as the Great-8 (G8) and the UNSC. Such seemingly cooperative stance does not contradict the Russian interpretation of sovereignty as authority and control. Quite the opposite, it confirms the security elite's hierarchical view of international relations to the extent that, simultaneously, it bestows on a

small number of countries the right to deliberate on Georgia's very existence, while *de facto* stripping Tbilisi of any say on its own destiny.

In closing this part on constitutive beliefs, it is worth noticing that Russia's Georgia narrative featured prominently a legalistic, para-judicial language — an expected corollary of the security elite's belief of stateness and its peculiar interpretation of sovereignty. Moscow engaged in a double-faceted effort: on the one hand, it consistently rejected any legal (or moral) responsibilities for the start of hostilities and denied having committed war crimes.[56] On the other hand, it tried to justify its deeds by reference to international norms of universal appeal. Three main legal arguments were used: Russia intervened on the basis of the right to self-defence, to protect Russian troops (peacekeepers) and nationals who were being targeted by Georgian forces; Georgia was perpetrating genocide against South Ossetians (and, soon, Abkhazians) and had to be stopped; Russian actions conformed to the norm of R2P (Allison 2008, 2009; Kropatcheva 2009). Interestingly, Russia backed these arguments and its later recognition of the two breakaway republics with systematic references to the precedent of NATO's operations in Kosovo, playing back to the West some of the arguments that Moscow itself had criticised till then (Averre 2009b).

Three major observations can be drawn from this legalistic narrative. First, Moscow did not perceive itself as a proper party to the conflict, but rather as an external pacifier that intervened lawfully to 'force Georgia to peace' after its allegedly treacherous attack on South Ossetia (Allison 2009, pp. 174-175). This is consistent with the aforementioned themes of civilisational responsibility and great power morality. Second, and related, said arguments highlighted the "conflation of Russia's responsibilities within and outside borders" in the elite's mindset (Allison 2008, p. 1154). Besides confirming the tendency to perceive the territories lying just beyond the Federation's borders as sources of ontological concerns — a tendency rooted in both ascriptiveness and greatpowerness (see above, as well as Chapter 2) — such a position linked also with the specific "effort to undermine Georgia's claim to inviolable territorial integrity" (id.). In fact, by unilaterally defining and sanctioning Tbilisi's crimes (not last by invading), the Russian elite signalled its view of Georgia's sovereignty as dependant on Moscow's own assessment of what Tbilisi should or

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[56] As noted already, none of the parties to the conflict acted in accordance with international law (Nygren 2019, pp. 383-385).

should not do. This is a clear example of the Russian elite's dualist perception of sovereignty, as informed by stateness. Overall, the politico-strategic beliefs held by Russian decision-makers shaped the way they interpreted and utilised international norms. Such norms became, at the same time, mirrors of the elite's assumptions regarding what Russia could and should do or not do, and instruments to fulfil such designs.

3.1.2. Scientific beliefs

A holistic and deterministic perception of international reality shines through the Russian narrative around the Georgia war. In Russia's eyes, the crisis of 2008 had no unidimensional explanation but emerged at the intersection of multiple, diverse trends rooted in the historical past. While none of these processes was individually responsible for war, their complex interaction could not but lead to that catastrophic outcome of war — according to the Russian security elite.

At the most superficial level it might look as if the Russian elite portrayed 2008's war simplistically, putting all the blame on the Georgian leadership for yet another outbreak of violence in the Caucasus. Saakashvili and his government were seen as "fully responsible" for the exacerbation of tensions and their explosive outbreak (Medvedev 2008c). "[S]ick and tired of diplomatic efforts" to settle the South Ossetian and Abkhazian issues, and dreaming of NATO membership, Saakashvili took the "criminal decision" to "militarise" Georgia and undertook "ruthless action" to "destroy the peacekeeping architecture that has been in place in the region for a decade and a half so as to replace it with new settlement mechanisms that suit the Georgian side [only]" (Karasin 2008; Matveev 2008b; Medvedev 2008c; MFA Information and Press Department 2008b). Admittedly, the Russian elite frequently presented the events surrounding the Georgia case in a distorted manner; yet such a pejorative narrative shall not be seen exclusively as a mechanism of propaganda. For one thing, the aforementioned statements reflected the belief of the Russian security elite that Russia is greater (read: better) than its neighbours, thereby perpetuating Russia's self-representation as a worthier, 'more rational' actor. But most importantly, closer inspection of the Russian perspective on the 2008 events reveals that Moscow understood 2008's events through a frame much more complex than that of derogative propaganda.

Russia's elite made its account of the crisis more complex in two ways. On the one hand, it expanded *across time* its criticism of the Georgian leadership, underlining the historical roots of its faults. Saakashvili's allegedly reckless policy course was not seen as a unique case, but rather the norm in post-Soviet Georgia. In Russian eyes, the history of independent Georgia was a history of ethnic sectarianism and violence, and was characterised by the consistent intent to escape its 'genetic' civilisational collocation within the *russkij mir* by drawing the US into the region; the consistent attempts at crushing the rights of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the 'Rose Revolution,' as well as Tbilisi's search for closer ties with NATO epitomised this trend (e.g., MFA Information and Press Department 2008a; see also any of Medvedev's interviews delivered on 26 August 2008).

On the other hand, the Russian view of 2008's events showed complexity by drawing (not always intelligible) connections between the Georgia crisis and a broader set of global dynamics. Three of these linkages are notable. First, the security elite frequently discussed Georgia as part of a broader Western manoeuvre to threaten Russia. Within this narrative, the potential inclusion of Georgia into NATO went hand in hand with the deployment in Eastern Europe of US missile capabilities (*Aegis Ashore*) that, according to Moscow, were aimed at Russian territory (e.g., Medvedev 2008d). Together, these episodes were seen instances of an encirclement from East and South. They added up to the perceived shock of the Western intervention in Kosovo (1999) and the later recognition of its independence by several NATO countries between February-March 2008 (Averre 2009b).

These latter events were were perceived as a dangerous precedent. The Russian elite feared the Georgia crisis could develop similarly, with the West intervening rapidly and decisively in the Caucasus to help Tbilisi, thereby stripping Russia of its regional footholds and possibly exploiting Georgia as a platform to destabilise Russia from within. The elite's statements provide no explicit explanation as to why such chains of events were likely to happen and why Western actions had to have a hidden anti-Russian intent. Instead the interconnection and dangerousness of such developments was simply assumed.

In fact the Georgia events were seen as the quintessential representation of a world that is holistic *and* Huntingtonian. According to the Russian security elite, the *fil rouge* running through the aforementioned set of threatening dynamics was the dysfunctional nature of the international

system — manipulated by the global hegemon, the US, for its own advantage. Here Russia's holistic worldview intermingled with a Huntingtonian mindset that framed global politics as a competitive game wherein each actor tries to achieve its goals at the expenses of the others' — with the US leading the game unscrupulously. Such reasoning emerged consistently across Russian statements on the Georgia crisis, translating into a permanent, pervasive sense of vulnerability. First, this emerged in the identification of NATO's plans of further enlargement to the post-Soviet space as a threat to Russia. "In general, my impression is that the MAP and this entire policy of drawing Georgia into NATO are not so that Georgia should meet NATO standards; it's just anti-Russian policy, supporting an aggressive regime in Georgia. This is our assessment," Lavrov (2008b) said. The Minister was echoed by Medvedev, who described the intention to draw Georgia (and Ukraine) into NATO as "a new encirclement of arms around Russia" (2008h), in the attempt of "bringing [NATO's] military infrastructure right up to [Russian] borders" and achieve "victory over Russia" as if it were a "battle" (2008m).

Second, and relatedly, Moscow believed that Georgia had been "a 'special project' of the United States" since the early 1990s (Lavrov 2008a,c). This view feeds back into the perceived illegitimacy of Georgia's sovereignty and the theme of 'colour revolutions' as a tool of Western influence. In this sense, Washington was not merely complicit but responsible for Tbilisi's violent designs. "The United States actively helped Georgia build up its military machine, pumping money and arms in. Unfortunately, at some point they gave Mr Saakashvili *carte-blanche*, including for military action" — Medvedev (2008f,h,i) said. To be fair, commentators close to the White House testify that Washington had consistently tried to dissuade Saakashvili from escalating tensions (Asmus 2010). However, this happened behind closed doors, while American public statements expressed support for Georgia and its transatlantic aspirations in particular (White House 2008a,b). It is on these statements that the Russian security elite based its assessment of US' culpability, ultimately deciding that Washington exploited Georgia's destabilising designs for its own geopolitical purposes.

Third, and more broadly, the Georgia affair was seen as a particular instance of a "Great American War" whose main objective was to find "an expedient to openly 'punish' Russia" (Vladimirov 2008; see also Deviatov 2008, Ivanovskij 2008). The reasons why the US held such

objective were framed in materialist terms mainly, but an implicit civilisational explanation loomed in the background, as one of the ultimate underpinnings of US policy was believed to be the imposition of "the American way" (Vladimirov 2008). Interestingly, one member of the Russian security elite observed fatalistically that the pursuit of a 'Great American War' was and will always be the key driver of US global action (id.). To an extent, the Russian view that world politics is a zero-sum game eased both the retrospective interpretation of international history and the task of strategic forecasting, supporting the widespread belief in the inevitability of confrontation between powerful actors with distinct ideational characters. In this sense, instances of Russia-US cooperation (before and after the Georgia crisis) shall be understood as selective engagements within a broader zero-sum game, pursued by Moscow in recognition of the advantages that such time- and issue-specific cooperation might bring about — in terms of temporary deescalation or great power image (see above). They are tactical in nature and do not reflect a strategic reassessment of bilateral relations, which the aforementioned scientific beliefs limit inevitably. The following case studies will illuminate this issue further.

3.1.3. Conclusion

The Georgia case confirmed my hypotheses about the politico-strategic beliefs underpinning the Russian SC. Ascriptiveness took central place in the Russian approach to the 2008 crisis, providing a framework within which to judge the appropriateness of political developments in the South Caucasus. The perception of Georgia as 'genetically' tied to Russia, and of Russia itself as a great power led the Russian security elite to reject Georgia's attempts to escape its political subordination and to oppose Western interference in Tbilisi's affairs. This problematisation of the 2008 developments was compounded by a zero-sum mentality that assumed the inevitability of confrontation with the West (US). The Georgia crisis (war) came to be seen by the Russian security elite as part of Washington's plans for global domination requiring a Russian counter-action. Overall, this interpretation of the events unfolding in 2008 is consistent with the expectations relative to Russian SC cast in Chapter 2. Such cognitive framework provided the ultimate ground

on which to decide whether to intervene militarily — a topic I will address in the second half of this chapter.

3.2. Military-strategic beliefs

The second half of this chapter is dedicated to Russia's military-strategic beliefs in the Georgia context. In Chapter 2 I divided these beliefs in two categories: intentional beliefs, signalling the conditions under which a social community would start or join war; and operational beliefs, or an elite's preferred modes of using military force. Following the same procedure applied above, here I am going to test whether the Russian security elite's decision to use military force and the way the AF were employed in Georgia confirm my hypotheses. In particular, I expect to identify a quick and swift transition from peace to war from the Russian side, as well as an asymmetric and pro-active use of force.

3.2.1. Intentional beliefs

The launch of Russian military operations in Georgia followed the escalation dynamic valid for the *russkij mir* hypothesised in Chapter 2 — i.e., a rapid escalation of hostilities from the political to the military level, motivated by a magnified perception of impending threats within a physical space which is attached the greatest ideational value.

As argued in Chapter 1, military intervention — as any other form of international action — follows from an assessment of threats and opportunities, which are shaped by the way decision-makers perceive of the community they represent and the world. Hence in order to make sense of why Russia waged war on Georgia in August 2008, one should look at the identity and worldviews held by the Russian security elite in that politico-historical context. I did so at length in the previous pages. On that basis, I argue that Russia's invasion of Georgia responded to the elite's concern for the integrity of Russia's primary community of reference — the *russkij mir*. 2008's events were assessed from Moscow as yet another instance of the US' attempt to dominate the international system. The fact that such attempt was taking place via Georgia magnified Russia's

concerns, inasmuch as Georgia fell within a geo-ideational space key to Russia's self-representation. To lose control over it would have resulted not only in great material losses, but first and foremost in the collapse of the set of beliefs that brings the security elite together. Hence the perception of Tbilisi as 'close and subordinate' to Moscow had to be preserved, and Russia's leadership in the whole 'geo-ideational space of Russianness' restated. In this sense, the military intervention in Georgia validated the self-perception held by the Russian security elite of Moscow as the defender of the *russkij mir* in the face of nefarious external forces.

Russia responded with a rapid succession of escalatory moves to the perceived threat emanating from Georgia, transitioning rapidly from *bor'ba* to *vojna*. As illustrated above, dynamics affecting the 'geo-ideational space of Russianness' are given the highest attention by the security elite. Since the Russian idea of self extends beyond formal national borders, developments in the neighbourhood are internalised as developments affecting Russia directly. Consequently, in Russian eyes they acquire automatically an 'important' or even 'radical' nature — categories of value that are oftentimes referred to by Russian strategists when they discuss interests involved in regional and large scale wars, respectively. The identification of instability in the Caucasus as yet another instance of the "American global war," and the later Russian attempt to use the Georgian conflict as a reason for revising the European security architecture testify to such scale of perceptions. This overall interpretative framework, underpinned as it is by extreme ontological anxiety, drove the Russian security elite towards highly escalatory responses — disproportionate if assessed from a non-Russian perspective.

Given this setting, the means of *bor'ba* did not qualify as an adequate response over the long term. According to Russian military-strategic thinking, the implementation of such measures pertains to the normal functioning of reality — but nothing had the attribute of 'normal' in the Russian assessment of the Georgia scenario. Three consecutive events taking place in the first half of 2008 rapidly brought about Russia's escalatory reaction: first, the recognition of Kosovo's independence by many Western states, in February-March; second, the outcome of the Bucharest summit, in April; third, the mounting expectation of a Georgian attack on the two breakaway republics, by Summer 2008 (Kiselev 2008; Matveev 2008 a,b; Zajtsev & Evdokinov 2018). These developments fed into the aforementioned Russian perceptual framework, worsening an ever-

present sense of urgency and grave danger. While still conducting *bor'ba* as a means to buy time and prepare the ground for further action, Moscow decided to fulfil its (perceived) mission in the *russkij mir* by deploying measures suitable for conditions of 'important' or 'radical' nature — i.e., armed violence. The nature of the fears caused in the Russian security elite by Tbilisi's chosen political course shaped directly the objectives of the Russian military campaign, which aimed at reversing those conditions and granting control over the situation in the long term (Beehner et al. 2018, pp. 22-23; Vendil Pallin & Westerlund 2009, p. 403). The specific ways in which military force served these objectives will be analysed in the last section of this chapter.

Scholars of Russia have debated whether the decision to intervene militarily in Georgia stemmed for real from a rapidly growing sense of urgency and impending threat (as I suggest above), or it was a long-time-planned move merely awaiting an opportunity. The latter hypothesis is usually supported by reference to Russia's continual infringements of Georgian sovereignty since the 1990s as well as the (reasonable) assumption that, given the country's relevance to Moscow, the Russian GS had to have a standing plan for war-fighting in Georgia. However, neither argument is sufficiently strong to decide on the issue: on the one hand, Russian hostile activities against Georgia during 1991-2008 can be drawn back to the category of *bor'ba* — which Russian SC sees as a component of the regular conduct of international relations, with no prejudice to the decision of starting a war; on the other hand, even if proven, the existence of a pre-2008 war plan against Georgia does not say anything about Moscow's long-delayed desire to invade Georgia, because the preparation for hypothetical wars in areas of interest is standard military procedure. The initial disarray of the Russian political and military leadership in front of Saakashvili's decision to begin military operations in South Ossetia seems to discredit further the idea of a long-held intention to wage war (Cohen & Hamilton 2011, pp. 22-23; Vendil Pallin & Westerlund 2009, pp. 406-407).

This notwithstanding, it is reasonable to believe that the Russian security elite had been planning to launch war on Georgia before August 2008 — more precisely, since spring 2008, when Russian anxieties exploded as a result of the three pivotal events mentioned in the preceding paragraph (Cornell, Popjanevski, Nilsson 2008, pp. 23-24). Widespread (Western) support for Kosovo's independence, as well as the 'open door' statement issued by NATO one month later were met by increasingly harsh tones by Russia, which also speeded up its moves on the ground.

Building on the 'Kosovo precedent,' the Russian ambassador to NATO D. Rogozin declared that "the real secession" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would follow suit (quoted in ICG 2008, p. 14). He was echoed by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs G. Karasin, who threatened that Georgia might lose those territories "forever" if it tried to crush the republics' desires for greater independence or continued along the path of joining NATO (id.). The Bucharest Summit precipitated the situation, leading the Russian security elite to conclude that "no business as usual" was possible anymore with NATO (ICG 2008, p. 15).

On 16 April, then Prime Minister Putin signed a decree establishing direct legal and diplomatic relations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, *de facto* recognising their independence (Government of Russia 2008). Verbal signalling of a readiness to conduct war increased in parallel. "We will do everything to prevent Georgia from joining NATO," stated the Russian Chief of the GS Y. Baluevskij (quoted in Asmus 2010, p. 149; see also p. 148 of the same book and ICG 2008, p. 3). Throughout April-July 2008, Moscow met the perceived lack of willingness of its counterparts to consider the Russian (op)position with increasing military activism — including the staging of land- and sea-based exercises,[57] overflights on Georgian territory, the deployment of additional peacekeepers in the secessionist republics, and the refurbishment of logistical infrastructure connecting Russia with Georgia; through July and the early days of August, secessionist and Georgian forces engaged in a growing number of skirmishes, which prompted further Russian mobilisation in and around Georgia (Asmus 2010, pp. 20-28). The sequence of events clearly shows that from March 2008 onwards, Russia had been moving steadily on the path of militarisation: each new development was met with a military response; each response better positioned Russia to conduct war on Georgia.

While it is true that Saakashvili caught the Russian elite off guard, when deciding to use military force against South Ossetia in the night between 07-08 August, it is safe to conclude that this decision merely anticipated the breakout of a war that Moscow had been preparing for six months already. That timeframe does not run against the stated hypothesis of Russia's proneness

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[57] As reported by Russian journalist I. Latynina (2008a), "[d]uring the exercise [Kavkaz-2008], the military was even given printed leaflets. 'Warrior! Know your probable enemy!' Georgia was the likely enemy: the soldiers knew that these Washington henchmen were about to attack and were preparing to defeat the enemy."

to conflict within the 'geo-ideational space' of the *russkij mir*; quite the opposite, it supports the original expectation. The preparation of high-intensity warfare in such restricted timeframe, and Russia's ultimately successful performance, was and still remains a considerable military achievement for Russia as any other modern military — notwithstanding the various difficulties the Russian AF faced in their operations. These are the aspects I turn to next.

3.2.2. Operational beliefs

The way Russia used its armed forces in the Georgia conflict confirms my hypotheses regarding the security elite's war-fighting preferences. Russia resorted to force in an asymmetric and pro-active way. On the one hand, it implemented land-centred, inter-service operations aimed at achieving quantitative and qualitative advantages over the adversary — for example via in-depth manoeuvres and the concentration of man- and fire-power. On the other hand, Russia put considerable effort into the pursuit of command superiority and the exercise of strategic deterrence from the early stages of the conflict, in order to take full advantage of the so-called 'initial period of war.'

All the elements of the Russian interpretation of asymmetry, as defined in Chapter 2, were evident in the way war was waged on Georgia. To begin with, Russian operations showed a starkly conventional character. On the one hand, this is no surprise, to the extent that the security elite identified the Georgian threat as a conventional military threat. Besides sparse comments ridiculing the lack of warring spirit (morale) of the opponents, Russian military commentators recognised the ability of Georgian armed forces to wage modern warfare (Falichev 2008; Khrolenko 2008; Zajtsev & Evdokinov 2018). They were seen as highly professional forces, trained in accordance with NATO standards and equipped with modern US equipment; the Georgian air-defence systems were a particular concern for Russia, whose air force was still suffering from the consequences of the disbandment of the Red Army. This notwithstanding, Russia could have replied to the Georgian attack on South Ossetia in a variety of ways, without necessarily employing conventional forces.

Today's *vulgata* on hybrid warfare would expect economic, irregular, cyber and other forms of *bor'ba* to play a preponderant role in Russia's strategy against Georgia. As noted, Russia did

operate in these non-military domains ahead of the August War and during the initial phases of conflict. Such measures were devised to change the Georgian leadership's cost-benefit assessment of given *political* choices but, arguably, they did not impact on the course of the *military* confrontation. There is no proof that the economic blockade imposed by Russia on Georgia influenced negatively the latter's ability to reform its security sector — which benefitted from conspicuous Western help instead. The passportisation policy gave Russia a useful pretext to intervene but does not say anything about Russia's war-fighting style or the outcome of the 'five-day war.' Also the long-time presence of Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia proved to be of little combat value, to the extent that those forces were too few and not sufficiently equipped to even hold off against the Georgian offensive.

Potentially more relevant is the case of the cyber operations conducted against Georgian online platforms throughout August 2008 (Beehner et al. 2018, pp. 59-61; Cohen & Hamilton 2011, pp. 44-49). A wide-raging series of relatively well coordinated cyber attacks (not directly attributable to Russian state agencies) affected the functioning of Georgian governmental and media websites — but results were short-lived and not operationally relevant. very low rates of Internet penetration and dependency spared Georgia from far-reaching structural consequences (Tikk, Kaska, Vihul 2010, pp. 66-88). While, at first, Tbilisi's ability to communicate with its citizens and international allies was reduced, alternative mass media solutions were taken up quickly. Russia took advantage of the initial success to gain traction in the informational sphere, but Russian propaganda arguably did not manage to turn the Georgian and international audiences against Tbilisi. As multiple Russian commentators observed, Moscow lost the information war against the West (Tsyganok 2008; see also Antonenko 2008). Above all, these cyber attacks did not target military platforms; Georgian C2 maintained its functionality intact, without affecting the conduct of military operations.

Within such conventional military approach to the use of force Russia emphasised land operations — confirming a further hypothesis about the security elite's war-fighting preferences. The bulk of fighting was carried out by ground troops or *Spetsnaz*, including airborne and GRU

units, fulfilling the tasks of assault infantry.[58] The troops committed to South Ossetia were drawn mainly from the 58th Army, reinforced by air assault, airborne, and mountain troops. At least 3 BTGs were deployed, centred on mechanised troops with heavy artillery support and counting circa 150 tanks and armoured vehicles. The Russian contingent in Abkhazia carried out combat assistance tasks mainly but its composition allowed for the conduct of similar operations (Cohen & Hamilton 2011, pp. 8-10; Falichev & Zajtsev 2009). Abkhazian forces, much more structured and capable than the South Ossetian militias, operated rather independently but applied the same kind of land-centred, artillery-heavy approach followed Russian troops (Tikhonov 2008).

One might argue that the Russian emphasis on ground operations was due to material constraints rather than in-built military preferences. In fact, besides being more costly to deploy, Russian naval and air forces were not nearly as serviceable as their ground counterparts: their operational readiness was lower and the chances of them becoming a combat liability, rather than an asset, were higher; this might have put a premium on the use of ground troops. This assessment holds general value but does not justify Russian war-fighting style in Georgia. First, the conduct of land-centred operations did not spare Russia from operational and tactical failure. Russian commanders were fully cognisant of the shortcomings affecting the armed forces as a whole — including ground troops. To that extent, to use the latter did not entail any additional guarantees of success — or less chances to incur in costs — than relying on naval and air forces. Second, as the use of the air-force was constrained by Georgia's modern air-defences, so the use of ground troops would (did) find an obstacle in Georgian direct artillery fires and physical geography; in particular, the Roki tunnel presented a relevant challenge to the Russian forces heading to South Ossetia. This notwithstanding, the costs of pouring through that chokepoint, as well as the challenge of Georgian artillery were accepted upfront — differently from the employment of air forces, which was not prioritised. Third, throughout 2008 and beyond Russian commentaries highlighted the key role of ground troops — within the Georgia conflict as well as in universal terms. This is atypical not only because of the problems and losses the Russian land forces incurred in during the August war, but

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[58] The conduct of major fighting operations by Russian *Spetsnaz* might have been caused by a low number of battle-ready — i.e., sufficiently trained — regular infantry units, as well as the difficulties experienced by Russia in disabling/destroying Georgian air defences ahead of projecting forces deep into enemy territory (Bukkvol 2009, p. 58; Cohen & Hamilton 2011, p. 35).

also given modern developments in military affairs. At a time when the role of non-contact and air operations was increasing, one Russian general observed that "tanks are still one of the most effective means of armed struggle" (Troitskij 2008b). Finally, Russian operations aimed at repelling Georgian forces from the two secessionist republics and exercising territorial control on them. While repulsion could have been achieved by an equally muscular air campaign, the task of territorial control necessarily called for the use of ground forces. Yet even the pursuit of territorial control was not the only option available to Russia for resolving the Georgian crisis on its own terms. Building on my earlier analysis of Russian politico-strategic beliefs, I argue instead that the pursuit of such task and the consequent prioritisation of land operations were inextricably linked with the elite's peculiar understanding of territorial control as symbol of authority and a guarantee for (military and) political success.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on the land domain, Russia still attempted to stage joint-service operations — thereby meeting, at least in the intentions, one of the qualitative aspects of its idea of asymmetry. As noted by one Russian observer, "the armed forces easily managed to give military activities a more familiar character, imposing on the enemy its logic and tactics of combined arms combat" (Khrolenko 2008). The Black Sea Fleet entered the conflict in the afternoon of 9th August, officially to fulfil non-combat tasks (Vasil'ev 2008). Yet the nature of component vessels made immediately clear that the Russian naval group pursued objectives other than bringing humanitarian relief. Rapidly it forced a blockade on Georgia's major ports and helped pour additional troops into the theatre — including naval infantry, artillery, and armoured vehicles (Barabanov 2008). Reportedly, two Georgian ships were sunk in the process (Kedrov 2008). While the lack of meaningful opposition from the Georgian side does not allow to assess properly the war-fighting potential of 2008's Black Sea Fleet, events did render the image of a Navy playing in support of Russia's lines of action on the ground. Arguably the main contribution of the Russian navy to the conflict was the opening of an additional front on the East of Georgia, from where to inject additional troops into the area of operations; in other words, the take-over of the Georgian coastline allowed Russia to reinforce the main operational axes, by deploying an additional ground contingent that penetrated deeply into Georgian mainland.

Still supportive in nature but less efficient was the action of the Russian air-space force. The aviation joined the fight since day one, deploying a varied fleet (Kedrov 2008) tasked with the suppression of Georgian air-defences, the delivery of close-air support to ground forces, interdiction operations and transportation by air. Data show the effective execution of the latter mission, even on short notice and over long distances — which helped Russia redeploy and concentrate (land) forces to achieve quantitative advantages over the adversary (see below) (Cohen & Hamilton 2011, pp. 37-41). Direct combat action fell short of expectations instead. Lack of training, ageing hardware, as well as inadequate ammunition, EW and intelligence support severely limited the air-force's ability to acquire targets, suppress air-defences and carry out strategic attack (Cohen & Hamilton 2011, pp. 37-41; Vendil Pallin & Westerlund 2009, pp. 408-410). Most critically, Russian operations suffered from a critical lack of coordination between the army and the air-force — tellingly testified to by the campaign's commander not having control over the air component (Bukkvoll 2009, p. 59; McDermott 2009, p. 72). As two American military analysts noted: "[t]here did not appear to be unity of command in the joint sense" (Cohen & Hamilton 2011, p. 35). But even though the air-force's performance made the *implementation* of Russia's inter-service operational design faulty, *intentions* still confirm the expectation about a qualitatively asymmetric war-fighting style. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Russian air-force confirmed such operational belief also by showing a marked preference for disproportionate fire-power.

Russian military operations in Georgia confirm the expectation about a quantitatively asymmetric approach to war, realised by amassing man- and fire-power via broad operational manoeuvres. The Russian armed forces implemented high-intensity operations centred on the physical destruction of the adversary's military hardware. Massed artillery fires and the aerial dropping of dumb bombs with disproportionate payloads fulfilled this objective, leading the conflict to acquire a markedly XX century character (Khrolenko 2008). As reported by military analyst T. Bukkvol (2009), "[Russian] General Vladimir Moltenskoi claims that the Russian forces were in possession of precision weapons but that there was no real need for them in South Ossetia. The use of overwhelming fire has a prominent place in Russian operational thinking, and if you are not much concerned with collateral damage, you might even prefer the psychological effect of

heavy artillery to the less intimidating effect of precision munitions" (pp. 60-61; also McDermott 2009, p. 66). Moscow will follow such *modus operandi* consistently across the Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria scenarios. The impact of Russian operations was further reinforced by the sheer number of troops deployed — oftentimes identified as the key factor securing victory to the Russian side, notwithstanding the many shortcomings of its military performance (Baranets 2008). Moscow deployed in theatre around 19,000 ground troops (IISS 2008; Korolenko 2008) and enjoyed a 14:1 aircraft advantage over Georgia (Bukkvol 2009, p. 59); in addition, Moscow could rely on the biggest navy among post-Soviet states and a pre-positioned local contingent of peacekeepers and allied militias. Russia's numerical superiority was undisputed (Bukkvol 2009, pp. 57-58; Cohen & Hamilton 2011, pp, 8-10; Vendil Pallin & Westerlund 2009, p. 403).

Russia harnessed the power of mass and preponderant fire by staging in depth manoeuvres along multiple axes. Both Barabanov (2008) and Beehner and colleagues (2018) provided a detailed breakdown of Russian operations, allowing us to appreciate those features.[59] By forcing numerically inferior Georgia to commit all its troops to one operational direction (Tskhinvali centre/North), the Russian armed forces could reach the South Ossetian capital as well as Abkhazia largely unmolested and then thrust into Georgia proper with a three-pronged manoeuvre (Cohen & Hamilton 2011, pp. 23-27; Falichev & Zajtsev 2009). As a result of that, Russia cut Georgia in half, thereby severing the adversary's logistics and preventing any push-backs (McDermott 2009, p. 66). Heavy artillery barrages helped execute these manoeuvres successfully; in addition, as Russian troops penetrated Georgia, they took out a significant portion of its air-defences, which in its turn granted greater freedom of action to the Russian air-force — in support of the overall thrust. The combination of manoeuvre and heavy fires also exerted a shocking effect onto Georgian forces, which on several occasions abandoned their positions and assets on the battlefield, fleeing from the Russian advance (Cohen and R.E. Hamilton 2011, pp. 29-30).

The Russian military engagement in Georgia broadly confirmed also the expectation about a pro-active approach to war-fighting. Patterns of force deployment testified to the emphasis put by the security elite on seizing the initiative and capitalising on the initial period of war. The strategic exercise *Kavkaz*-2008, which took place two weeks before the 'August war,' allowed the Russian

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[59] See also: Troitskij (2008a); Latynina (2008c)

armed forces not only to rehearse operations similar to those then later in Georgia, but also to pre-alert and pre-deploy key components of the North Caucasus Military District (Zajtsev & Evdokinov 2018). According to investigative sources on the ground, elements of the Russian 58th Army were present in the area of Java — i.e., outside Russian formal borders, in Georgia (South Ossetia) — already before the 8th August (Latynina 2008a). In case of war, these troops should have sprinted to the South of Tskhinvali in order to prevent the entry of Georgian forces into the South Ossetian capital (Latynina 2008b). While this mission failed, Russia managed to catch up on the lost opportunity by taking advantage of two factors linked with the observations above. First, sheer mass and fire-power, which allowed to manoeuvre around and roll-over Georgian forces, notwithstanding the many shortcomings then affecting the Russian armed forces and even at the cost of high losses of hardware (Cohen & Hamilton 2011, pp. 28-29). Second, a rather functioning system of ground, air, and sea-based logistics, which granted multiple venues for introducing troops in-theatre. Overall, not only Russian observers (Khrolenko 2008; Tsyganok 2008) but also Western analysts assessed positively the Russian performance in terms of speed of deployment. As R. McDermott (2009) noted: "Russian mobility was arguably far superior to that seen in previous conflicts. Within 24 hours [from the start of hostilities] the deployed forces almost doubled in size even though Russia could not begin an immediate airlift, owing to Georgian air defenses, and the army columns' slow movement toward Tskhinvali via the Rokki Tunnel forced commanders to commit troops piecemeal" (p. 66).

In terms of pro-activeness, the Russian performance in the Georgia context lacked the same emphasis on — or, rather, the wide-ranging degree of success in the domains of — C2 and strategic deterrence that characterised the interventions in Ukraine and Syria. As outlined in Chapter 2, the Russian security elite pursues strategies of command superiority and strategic deterrence in order to apply reflexive control on the adversary, degrade the latter's decision-making and multiply instead its own chances to seize the initiative and dominate the initial period of confrontation. Russia did manage to exploit the time factor to its own advantage in Georgia — as the very limited duration of the active phase of conflict showed. However, the exercise of command superiority and strategic deterrence did not contribute heavily to such outcome — due to the structural shortcomings affecting the proper functioning of the Russian armed forces back in 2008.

The Russian C2 system displayed problems at all levels. At the politico-strategic level, many observers noticed the initial unpreparedness of the Russian elite in front of Saakashvili's decision to launch war (McDermott 2009, pp. 69-70; Vendil Pallin & Westerlund 2009, pp. 406-407). At the military-operational level, as I pointed out in the above discussion on jointness, coordination was partial. Relatedly, at tactical level, obsolete and faulted communication equipment hampered intelligence collection, as well as targeting, and was easy target of Georgia's relatively modern EW techniques (Kedrov 2008; McDermott 2009, p. 70; Vendil Pallin & Westerlund 2009, p. 407). As a consequence of these problems in 'passive' C2, also the task of actively influencing Georgian C2 was compromised However, Moscow still managed to regain some degree of command superiority, in two major ways. On the one hand, *during* conflict, via the physical destruction of military communication facilities as the Russian troops penetrated into Georgian territory. This meant a diminishing ability to coordinate a counteroffensive in the face of the Russian advance, making the situation irreversible for Tbilisi. On the other hand, *ahead of* conflict, Moscow had been orchestrating and coordinating political and military moves to gain an advantage on Georgian decision-making. Both the maintenance of a peacekeeping mandate (force) in the breakaway republics and the staging of regular military exercises at the border with Georgia supported this objective. Not only they allowed to probe Georgian defences, ready the area of operations, and pre-deploy troops in-theatre, thereby changing the local military balance in Russia's favour; they also scored two more strategic-level successes: "degrading the quality of Georgian political and military decision-making by raising and sustaining the pressure on Georgia's political and military leadership;" and "identifying and exploiting a gap between Georgian and Western policies that eventually led Georgia to conclude that it had no choice but to fight a war it had little chance of winning, and to fight that war alone" (Cohen & Hamilton 2011, pp. 17, 21). Taken together, these factors enabled Russia to quickly recover from the surprise of Saakashvili's unwise decision to force the status quo militarily and regain the upper hand strategically, redirecting events towards a more familiar course also by taking full advantage of military superiority.

The implementation of strategic deterrence was embryonic, if compared to Russian deeds in the Ukraine and Syria contexts. Military exercises can be seen as a tool of deterrence, too, as they include an important signalling component aimed at demonstrating military capabilities and

readiness to escalate. In this sense, Russian exercises off Georgian borders can be seen as part of a strategy to deter Tbilisi from proceeding along its chosen political path, while getting Russian forces ready to intervene militarily in the shortest possible timeframe — if Georgia were not dissuaded. This was arguably the only component of the Russian system of strategic deterrence that successfully contributed to Moscow's pro-active military stance; other typical components of this strategy did not play out as well. Notably, one cannot speak neither of a proper A2/AD bubble, nor of an effective system of (counter-)EW deployed by Russia in and around Georgia — contrary to doctrinal prescriptions and to later operations (see following chapters). Heavy aircraft losses and the sloppy performance against Georgian EW testified to the Russian lack of effort or failure on these fronts (IISS 2009; Kedrov 2008; Zajtsev & Evdokinov 2018). Yet such shortcomings do not disprove expectations about Russian military-operational preferences, whose actual existence is confirmed by the open critique launched by Russian military commentators and officials on the armed forces' performance in Georgia, as well as the defence sector reforms launched by state institutions following the August war — both of which identified in C2, EW, and the broader ability to exert escalation control key issue areas.

3.2.3. Conclusion

The Georgia case confirmed my hypotheses about Russia's proneness to escalate conflict in the *russkij mir*, as well as its asymmetric and pro-active war-fighting style. Russia transitioned rapidly to fully-fledged war in a handful of months once it reached what was perceived as the 'point of no return' of the Georgia crisis in spring 2008. From then on, the narrative of the Russian security elite harshened considerably, and incremental measures in preparation for war were put in place. In all likelihood, Saakashvili merely anticipated the outbreak of armed conflict. During the Georgia war, the Russian AF behaved according to my expectations, carrying out asymmetric and pro-active operations — as discussed in Chapter 2.

It is worth reminding that the preceding analysis of Russian manoeuvres did not aim at merely assessing military performance but rather at checking that whatever was done reflected — in practice and/or intentions — the system of military-strategic beliefs enshrined in Russia's SC. To

be fair, Russian military dealings confirmed only partially certain hypotheses (e.g., joint-service nature of the operations, emphasis on C2, deterrence), because of structural problems back then affecting the Russian AF. These included scarcely qualified personnel, high numbers of unserviceable or technologically archaic hardware, as well as human and technical problems affecting C2. In a nutshell, in 2008 the Russian AF had yet to catch up with the problems affecting force efficiency and effectiveness caused by the disbandment of their predecessor, the Red Army. These shortcomings notwithstanding, not only did Russia actually manage to win the Georgia war but also, as noted above, displayed a military *modus operandi* consistent with my hypotheses. Even in those cases where military performance could not conform to operational beliefs, it was possible to retrace at least the intention to follow a pre-constituted military design coherent with the canons of asymmetry and pro-activeness.

3.3. Conclusion

This chapter explored how the beliefs enshrined in the Russian SC informed the words and deeds of the Russian security elite in the context of 2008's Georgia war. The analysis provided a first confirmation of the utility/accuracy of the model of Russian SC I developed in Chapter 2 as a framework for making sense of Moscow's behaviour, as well as, more broadly, of the role of beliefs in strategic and military decision-making.

The politico-strategic and military-strategic beliefs enshrined in Russian SC underpinned the security elite's assessment of the situation unfolding in Georgia and the interests, risks, opportunities for Russia in that theatre — thereby contributing to the formulation of the policy course actually implemented in that scenario. The narratives and actions of the security elite, their meanings and intentions, conformed to the expectations I built in Chapter 2 — with select exceptions relative to operational beliefs, as observed above. Yet such exceptions regard the Russian military performance, rather than the ultimate ideas on the conduct of war that underpinned the use of the AF (that is, operational beliefs proper).

Two final observations are worth making about the Georgia case study and Russian SC. First, while the primary sources I inspected belong to 2008-2009 mainly, my findings bear broader

significance. In fact the narratives and behavioural proclivities displayed by the Russian security elite vis-à-vis 2008's Georgia resonate with older trends prevailing in Russia's approach to its neighbourhood. Many of the strategic cultural themes identified here run through Russian documents and debates pre-dating the August war. Consider, for instance, the ever-lasting dialogue among Russian liberals, nationalists, and Eurasianists — who, notwithstanding generally divergent views, all agree on the greatness and special responsibilities of Russia at regional, as well as global level (see Chapter 2). Another example is offered by the so-called 'Primakov Doctrine' from the late 1990s, which spelled out a worldview and interests compatible with Russian politico-strategic beliefs in 2008 — even though this a 'doctrine' was formulated under different conditions from those prevailing in the 2000s (e.g., Rumer 2019). Russia's consistent interference in Georgian affairs since the 1990s and the grounds on which this was motivated (see introduction) speak of the deep roots of the Russian approach to Georgia and beyond. The pre-2008 years fall outside the referent timeframe of this thesis, hence I will not expand on this aspect further. Yet the apparent consistency of Russian behaviour during and before 2008 might testify to the longer historical validity of the Russian SC 2008-2018, thereby further reinforcing the argument about the high resistance to change of (strategic cultural) beliefs. Future research can help shed more light on this aspect.

Second, as noted, while Russia won the August war, it did so *notwithstanding* — not thanks to — its way of proceeding militarily and the state of its AF. Military under-performance at the tactical-operational level was a reason valid enough to revise the ultimate principles underpinning the Russian way of war, thereby potentially leading to SC change. But no such change took place. The Russian security elite did recognise the shortcomings of its military intervention and launched a series of sweeping reforms aimed at making its defence sector more efficient and effective (Medvedev 2008j,l). However, the so-called 'Serdiukov reforms' clearly showed a markedly managerial, organisational character, and left untouched the key tenets of the Russian military thought (Herspring 2008, 2013). The clash between Minister of Defence Anatolii Serdiukov — an accountant by profile and, most importantly, an outsider of the Russian security elite — and then Chief of the GS N. Makarov — who soon succeeded in ousting Serdiukov from the Ministry — is

telling of the resistance encountered by these reforms when it came to war-fighting principles, which are the GS' primary responsibility.

Ultimately, it is as if the experience in Georgia was not assimilated by the Russian security elite as a symptom of the structural problems affecting the operation of the AF, but rather as a testimony of the enduring value and validity of Russia's consolidated principles of war (SC) — following which Moscow managed to achieve its objectives even in the face of a bad tactical-operational performance. As a Russian commenter effectively put it: "[i]f the army is not fit for local war — there is no need to reform [*peredelyvat'*] the army. One has to reform the war" (Latynina 2008c). The underlying message is that the key to victory lies in the successful imposition of one's own way of war, rather than the latter's reform to fit the changing standards of modern conflict. This way of thinking says something of the high degree of conservatism inherent in the Russian SC. Not surprisingly, the following case studies will show the strong consistency of the Russian modi operandi in Georgia with those in Ukraine and Syria — despite the fact that eight years had passed, the reforms the Russian AF were still undergoing, and rather different theatres of operations.

Chapter 4

Russia and the Ukraine war (2014-2015)

As with the previous case study, this chapter aims at testing my hypotheses on Russia's way of war. Here I do so in the context of the (first iteration of the) Ukraine conflict — focussing on the years 2014-2015, when the political crisis peaked and Russia made its most important military moves. How did strategic cultural beliefs inform the Russian interpretation of the evolving strategic situation surrounding Ukraine? Did Moscow's decision to intervene and the way it employed military force confirm the expectations built in Chapter 2? This case study, too, will demonstrate the credibility of my model of (Russian) SC as a tool for interpreting strategic and military moves in concrete scenarios. I will show that many analyses of Russia's actions in Ukraine leave out important nuances of the thinking that led the Russian security elite to intervene, as well as key features of the operations that unfolded on the ground. The comparison of these findings with those on Georgia and Syria show consistent patterns of behaviour.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and until 2014, relations between Russia and Ukraine went through a series of ups and downs (for an overview, see: Sakwa 2015, ch. 3; Tsygankov 2015, pp. 281-287). On the one hand, Moscow and Kyiv managed to cooperate successfully on a number of issues, including the handling of the Soviet nuclear arsenal, the establishment of new commercial deals, and countless technical partnerships for industrial and scientific development. On the other hand, bilateral relations were punctuated by disputes over the demarcation of borders, the status of Russian (speaking) minorities, and energy trade — to name a few. These arguments were accompanied by a broader, deeper disagreement on what should have been Ukraine's relative positioning vis-à-vis Russia and the West.

Since the onset of Ukraine's post-Soviet transition, Moscow made clear that the new relations Kyiv was establishing with the West should not compromise pre-existing ties with Russia. As the then Russian Ambassador to the US stated in 1993, the relations between Russia and Ukraine should remain "identical to those between New York and New Jersey" — that is, the latter should be subordinated to the former (Talbott 2002, p. 80). El'tsin's foreign policy line was consistent with such a view. The strategic documents adopted under his tenure made no mystery of

Russia's self-perceived "special authority" in the post-Soviet space and, once E. Primakov stepped in as Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Kremlin enforced such a view more decisively (Kremlin 1995; this document is still in force). In practical terms, that meant the provision of material support to Ukraine's pro-Russian elites, in parallel to a broader diplomatic attempt (not always successful) to make Russia's voice heard in Western fora.

The same policy line characterised the first two presidential terms of V. Putin (2000-2008). During that period, Ukraine experienced the so-called 'Orange Revolution' (2004), which brought the tandem Yushchenko-Tymoshenko to power. Moscow showed no enthusiasm for such an outcome, inasmuch as the new Ukrainian leaders won against the Russia-backed candidate to the presidency, V. Yanukovych, and pursued a Western-friendly agenda. The concrete perspective of losing grip on Ukraine made Russia's relations with Kyiv more bitter. As Charap and Colton (2017: 80) nicely put it: "the Kremlin was not prepared to subsidise a Ukrainian government that was now actively pursuing NATO and EU membership, while only paying lip service to Russia's integration agenda." As a consequence, Russia shifted towards a more confrontational posture, centred on economic coercion (see the two gas crises of 2005—2006 and 2008-2009) and direct meddling in its neighbour's internal affairs, by leveraging influence on Russian-speaking minorities and Ukraine's Easternmost regions. 2008's Bucharest Summit and Kyiv's political (as well as military) support to Georgia during the 'August war' provided Moscow with yet another proof that proper control over Ukraine had to be reestablished, and Western influence on the post-Soviet space contained.

The rise to presidential power of V. Yanukovych (2010), generously supported by Russia, did not change this landscape considerably. While slowing down Ukraine's Westward transition and seemingly recognising the country belonged to the Russian world, Yanukovych maintained dialogue with Brussels-based institutions. In particular, he started pursuing negotiations with the EU on an Association Agreement (AA) aimed at liberalising bilateral trade.[60] Yet Moscow was opposed to the AA plan, for multiple reasons.

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[60] An AA is a legally binding treaty between the EU and a third state, aimed at fostering closer ties via the convergence of the latter's regulations to the EU's *acquis communautaire*, in a number of fields. No promise of EU membership is included in the AA.

First, Brussels vocally promoted the deal as a 'civilisational alternative' to Russia, thereby presenting Kyiv with an either/or-type of choice that upset Moscow's rooted interest in keeping close ties with Ukraine (Merry 2016, pp. 33-40). Second, and related, Moscow was concerned that, if Ukraine entered the EU common market, its own project of the Customs Union — wherein Ukraine was key — could have not been implemented fully or without exposing too much the Russian market to European goods (Pomeranz 2016, pp. 60-61). Third, the AA included provisions on the convergence not only of economic regulations, but also of foreign and defence policies. In the eyes of Moscow, this evoked the spectre of newly expanding Euro-Atlantic security institutions. As R. Sakwa (2015) put it: "[a]lthough couched in classic European language of peace and development, the agreement in effect announced a formal state of contestation with Russia over the lands in-between" (p. 76). The fact that, throughout the three years of EU-Ukraine talks over the AA, Moscow was never invited to the negotiating table to voice its so-called 'legitimate concerns' made the Russian security elite even more hostile towards the deal.

In November 2013, Russia convinced (pressured) Yanukovych to at least postpone the signing of the AA — but such decision turned out to be all but positive for Russia's hold on the country. In fact massive protests started in Kyiv and then Western Ukraine, in reaction to Yanukovych's choice and the evident Russian meddling. Chiefly oriented against what was perceived as yet another instance of the elite's inability to manage the country in a transparent way, the protests also displayed an increasingly evident mix of pro-European, anti-Russian, and even nationalistic traits. The use of disproportionate repression by governmental forces triggered a spiral of violence that eventually resulted in the fall of Yanukovych's regime, in February 2014. Unable to mediate with opposition forces and to placate violence in the streets, Yanukoych fled the country during the night of 21-22 February, leaving Ukraine in a state of institutional and social disorder. Russia put blame on the West for orchestrating yet another 'colour revolution' and refused to recognise the new government in Kyiv.

These events were looked at with apprehension not only in Moscow but in Crimea, too. The Crimean peninsula had been a historically contested land, subject to many transfers of ownership (Wood 2016b, pp. 2-6). A considerable proportion, if not the majority, of the local population has been ethnically Russian since the 1900s at least — with Soviet demographic engineering pushing

this trend. Framed within the Russian historical memory as a place of military heroism, Crimea has had privileged relations with Moscow; not so much with Kyiv, which was aware of how Crimea could play as a Russian fifth column within Ukraine (*ibid.*, pp. 6-12). Claims about the 'Russianness' of those lands were repeatedly made by Russian politicians (Putin included) and pro-Russian Crimean leaders throughout the 1990s already, and then again after the 'Orange Revolution'.[61]

It is against this background that 2014's nationalistic, pro-Western excitement in Kyiv came to be perceived negatively by the Russia-friendly Crimean leaders and part of the population, who started organising 'self-defence' units and invoked Russia's protection. Moscow, which contributed to the spread of such anxieties by means of propaganda, viewed Crimea as an opportunity to weigh in on a crisis that, till then, had been difficult to manage. In less than a month (26th February - 21st March 2014), Russia entered militarily the peninsula and annexed it — legitimised by the results of a local referendum (16 March) that expressed overwhelming support for the 'return' of Crimea to the Russian Federation, with Sevastopol as a separate federal entity.

In conjunction with the events in Kyiv and Crimea, unrest started spreading also in the Donbas region, South-East of Ukraine. Local concerns superficially resembled Crimea's, as they were linked to the negative repercussions that the revolution in Kyiv could have exerted on Donbas' relations with the centre *and* with Russia. No history of separatism ever characterised this region but the lack of recognition of any official role for the Russian language — widespread in Donbas, too — has been traditionally a source of attrition with central institutions. Further tensions originated from the uneven development pattern of Ukraine, with Donbas being the country's economic powerhouse, as well as from the region's resistance to move too close to the West, as this was associated with the loss of its socio-economic specificity.

The nationalistic, pro-Western turn of the events taking place in the rest of Ukraine re-ignited these cleavages and sparked dissent. Demonstrations against post-Yanukovych institutions built up in March 2014, supported by Russian propaganda, money, and weapons. Clashes between insurgents and governmental forces soon turned violent and the leaders of some militias started invoking varying degrees of independence — from outright secession from Ukraine to the

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[61] An early Crimean attempt to secede from Ukraine failed in 1992.

achievement of more regional autonomy within a federalised state. Benefitting from the inability of Ukraine's security and armed forces to stop protests, insurgents proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics independent on 7th and 27th April, respectively. Yet, by August 2014, rebel forces lost momentum and started losing ground to Ukrainian forces. Faced with the potential loss of its local allies — key to maintaining influence within Ukraine's internal affairs — Russia decided to step up its involvement in Donbas, participating directly in war-fighting operations.

Since early 2014, numerous attempts have been made to resolve the conflict via diplomatic means: from the Geneva accords of April 2014 to the Minsk I and II agreements (September 2014, February 2015), passing through a series of deals and plans discussed bilaterally by V. Putin and P. Poroshenko — who was President of Ukraine between 2014-2019. All these attempts failed, undermined by the inability of both Ukrainian and rebel (and Russian) authorities to accept any compromises and the expectation to obtain concessions on the basis of their shows of force (Sanders & Tuck 2020). Pacification has been further complicated by Russia's consistent denial to be an active military party in the conflict, as well as the difficulties it encountered controlling the insurgents (Galeotti 2019, pp. 18-20). The aforementioned ceasefire and peace accords have had no other outcome than cementing the political position of the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, which have benefitted from a boost of legitimacy by becoming formal parties in the Minsk negotiations (Malyarenko & Wolff 2018). The recrudescence of war in February 2022 testifies to the ineffectiveness of such attempts at peaceful settlement.

The preceding paragraphs set the context of the 2014/2015 Russian military interventions in Ukraine, which I will unpack in the remainder of this chapter. The overview above hinted already at some historical leitmotivs of the Russian approach to Ukraine, namely the concern with preserving control over the country and its 'Russianness,' within the context of a competition with the West. I will show that these perceptions and concerns were key to the Russian elite's framing of the 2014 crisis and its military escalation and that they were ultimately rooted in the system of beliefs (SC) embedded in the elite's mindsets. In analysing Russia's military operations in Ukraine I will stress their compatability with the military-strategic beliefs identified in Chapter 2, as well as their strong similarity with the operations carried out in Georgia — thereby supporting my hypothesis about the consistency of the Russian way of war across time and space.

Both the Crimean and Donbas scenarios will be analysed. Even though the operations leading to the annexation of Crimea barely saw any actual war-fighting, the case is still relevant to the study of Russian SC, in as much as it provides illustration of the elite's politico-strategic beliefs and the employment of the AF. That fact that the peninsula was annexed bloodlessly does not mean that Russia had no plan in case the level of violence escalated (Kofman et al. 2017, p. 25). Therefore the patterns of Russian military deployment before, during, and after the Crimean takeover are still indicative of the intended use of force in conflicts of higher intensity — such as the operations undertaken in the South-East of Ukraine.

4.1. Politico-strategic beliefs

This section aims at testing my general hypotheses on Russian SC 2008-2018 in yet another specific scenario — namely the run-up to and unfolding of the first Ukraine war (2014-2015). Similarly to the previous case study, I start by analysing the development of Russia's politico-strategic beliefs. How did the elite's self-perception (constitutive beliefs) and understanding of the world (scientific beliefs) shape the framing of Ukraine events, leading to the decision to intervene? I show how the beliefs of ascriptiveness, greatpowerness, stateness and a holistic, deterministic, Huntingtonian worldview run through the words and reasonings of the Russian security elite, underpinning its policy choices. These beliefs, and ideational themes help make sense of Russia's behaviour in the Ukraine context and confirm my hypotheses about the nature of Russian SC (Chapter 2).

4.1.1. Constitutive beliefs

Pronouncements on Ukraine show clearly the Russian security elite's belief of ascriptiveness. Russia's interaction with Ukraine is narrated consistently by resorting to an ethnic framework that highlights the strong civilisational ties between the two nations. Both are seen as indispensable members of the Russian community of reference, the *russkij mir*.

As Y. Teper (2016) observed based on a wealth of primary sources, Russian discourse shows a "prevalent, in fact nearly absolute, use of the ethnically laden word *russkiy* in reference to the populations of Russia, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine" (p. 384, emphasis original). The shared quality of Russianness, rooted in a common Slavic and Christian Orthodox heritage, allegedly makes the bond between Russia and Ukraine indissoluble — and so is the fate of their 'brotherly people.' In other words, Ukraine is seen by the Russian security elite as part of the Russian extended self. As Medvedev (2014c) put it: "We do not have the right to forget that the people living on the other side of the border are close to us in their outlook on life, culture and mentality, and their fate will always matter to us." This is particularly true in regard to the ethnically Russian or Russian speaking component of the Ukrainian population, as it provides living proof of the civilisational connection between the two states, irrespective of modern borders (Teper 2016; Tsygankov 2015, p. 291).

This framing of Russia-Ukraine relations is historically rooted in the Russian thinking. Since the Middle Ages, Moscow has framed Ukrainians as 'little Russians' or 'almost Russians' — i.e., similar enough to their bigger brothers, but not quite the same (Riabchuk 2016). Russians recognise the Ukrainian ethnic group as kin to their own, yet some degree of alterity — be it backwardness, ignorance, corruption, or a tendency towards fascism — prevents perfect identity (id.; Kuzio 2019). Such 'flawed similarity' to Russia grants Ukraine membership in the broader Russian community, yet necessarily in a position subordinated to Moscow — which, in light of its 'full Russianness,' retains the role of political and moral leader within the hierarchy of the *russkij mir*. All in all, the idea that Russia and Ukraine share core elements of their identities has never fostered equality, but subordination.

These ascriptive assumptions generate two main implications for Russia's Ukraine policy. First, the positioning of Ukraine in the *russkij mir* has led the Russian security elite to conclude that Russia and Ukraine must stay together (Bukkvol 2016b, p. 269; Kuzio 2019, p. 493). In order to preserve such perceived civilisational unity, Moscow and Kyiv should keep sharing the same value system and persevere on a common development path. Ukraine's long-standing interest in NATO and later attempts to associate with the EU have been perceived by the Russian security elite as running counter to both requirements — as Brussels-based institutions stand for values and a

development model that are not Russia's. Likewise, many of Kyiv's post-Maidan policy decisions, including the cancellation of 2012's law on the status of Russian as a regional language, were framed as attempts to severe Russia-Ukraine civilisational ties (Tsygankov 2015, p. 293). Kyiv's potential (actual) distancing from Moscow was completely at odds with the expectations about Ukrainian policy choices that the Russian security elite held, based on its ascriptive mindset. Being inconceivable, such possibility was rejected and opposed as a threat (Riabchuk 2016).

Second, Ukraine's 'deviant' policy choices are accounted for by reference to its internal flaws — and the action of exploitative external forces. The aforementioned limitations attributed by Russia to the Ukrainian social group were identified as one of the concurrent causes of the 2014 crisis. In Russian eyes, such crisis would have not happened if Ukraine's domestic problems -- ultimately rooted in latent ignorance and fascism — did not provide fertile ground for corruption, the disregard for minority rights, and violence (JRL 2014h; MFA 2014b). Yet even these problems would have not led the crisis to acquire a civilisational character if it was not for the interference of nefarious external forces. By compromising the domestic status quo, Ukraine's internal faults created room for the West, led by Washington, to push its self-interested agenda (Bukkvol 2016b, p. 269; Kuzio 2019, p. 493).

Consequently, the NATO and EU-friendly plans examined by successive Ukrainian administrations — chiefly, Yanukovych's idea of an AA — were framed by the Russian security elite as the result of Western machinations, not autonomous political processes, as underlined by a press release of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "We again state that the United States, hiding behind appeals not to prevent the Ukrainian people from making a free choice, are in fact attempting to impose a 'Western vector' on their development, dictating to the authorities of a sovereign country, what they should do" (MFA 2014a). By attempting to sever the brotherly ties between Russia and Ukraine, the US and its European allies aimed at driving the latter away from its 'natural' place in the *russkij mir*, thereby undermining Moscow's regional and international position (Tsygankov 2015, pp. 287-288).

Similarly to Georgia, in the Ukraine case ascriptiveness connects closely with another belief held by the Russian security elite: greatpowerness. Russia's right and duty to assert its status over Ukraine is continuously backed by references to the conservative and non-negotiable values of the

russkij mir — and Russia's responsibilities over that geo-ideational space. In light of Russia's standing within the Russian world, the security elite feels entitled to keep order within that community. By fulfilling such a (self-attributed) mission, Moscow would ensure the historical continuity of the Russian community and, simultaneously, reassert its leading role as a civilisational hub — locally as well as globally. Russia has confirmed its jealousy towards the neighbourhood consistently. As Putin (2014c) rendered metaphorically during a Valdai meeting, in response to a question on the Ukraine crisis: "[...] the bear will not even bother to ask for permission. Here we consider it the master of the taiga, and I know for sure that it does not intend to move to any other climatic zones — it will not be comfortable there. However, it will not let anyone have its taiga either. I believe it is clear." Hence the conservative approach towards values that is enshrined in the belief of ascriptiveness carries over to greatpowerness, this time in relation to space. Only Russia can have access to and assume responsibility over what was referred to above as 'the taiga,' or Moscow's area of privileged interests.

This framing does not contradict, but enriches a purely geopolitical reading of Moscow's regional policy — which simply links geographical proximity with a heightened threat perception. While such linkage is generally true, per se it cannot explain Russia's reactions to other, objectively bigger military threats, such as those posed by China all along the Federation's South-Eastern borders or by the incremental absorption of Scandinavia into the Western camp. These developments have been matched by considerably milder, and non-military responses by Moscow, compared to the aggressive rejection of Ukraine's (and Georgia's) Western aspirations. The difference lies in the civilisational value attached to Ukrainian lands and the fact that control over them gives Russia a measure of its own greatpowerness, in the elite's mindset — something that does not apply to other geographical spaces contiguous to Russia.

While the above mentioned 'discourse of entitlement and responsibility' constitutes the bulk of Russia's narrative of greatpowerness, this belief is communicated also in a rather different way, by resorting — as expected — to the theme of 'unattained greatness.' The EU pushing the AA with Ukraine without even consulting with Moscow, and NATO drawing Ukraine closer to its 'open door' irrespective of Russia's opposition clashed with the Russian elite's self-representation as the ultimate decision-maker on Ukrainian destiny. The difficulties experienced by Moscow with

influencing regional dynamics in the *russkij mir* and confirming its own great power role gave rise to a deep sense of resentment that the Russian elite communicated via the lexicon of frustration and victimhood. As Putin (2014c) declared: "we simply want for our own interests to be taken into account and for our position to be respected [...] We are ready to respect the interests of our partners, but we expect the same respect for our interests" (see also Medvedev 2014b). As that was not perceived to be happening, notwithstanding diplomatic effort and the use of *bor'ba* (including economic coercion), Moscow ultimately decided to impose its own interests onto Western and Ukrainian preferences by force — as the elite deemed appropriate for a great power.

In light of this double-narrative of great power entitlements and 'unattained greatness, the Russian security elite came to frame the potential loss of Ukraine to the West as a test of Russia's might. The EU's 'civilisational rhetoric' and the security-related paragraphs included in the AA, as well as the gradual involvement of Washington in the crisis made Kyiv's interest in Western institutions more than a mere economic liability for Moscow. By February 2014, the Russian position assumed the character of a grandstand against the expansion to Ukraine of Western governance structures at large, including NATO. Within this context, Western values and institutions were rejected twice: both as means of Western (US) hegemony and as an invalid point of reference for Russia's cultural sensitivities (Averre 2016, p. 716; see also Tsygankov 2015, p. 292). Opposition was dubbed by the Kremlin "as vital for the survival of the Russian nation and state, the 'Russian world'" (Averre 2016, p. 708). Within this context, the annexation of Crimea assumed the character of a defining moment for Russia as a great power: by correcting such capital "historical injustice" (Medvedev 2015), Russia marked its international rebirth and the reacquisition of civilisational fullness (Teper 2016, p. 387). The interrelation between values and great power status in Russia's official discourse emerges clearly once more.

It is worth noting that the belief of greatpowerness also passes through the pairing of two joint narratives — the one aimed at denigrating the West, the other at elevating Russia. Taken together, they reinforce the image of a compassionate and 'enlightened' Russia, who knows what is best (for Ukraine) – unlike Washington and Brussels. This reasoning features in the Georgia and Syria cases, too, rendering clearly Russia's persistent sense of superiority vis-à-vis allegedly lesser opponents.

On the one hand, it is clearly noticeable that the Russian elite tried to project a positive image of itself throughout the Ukraine events, especially during the early phases of the crisis. In more than one instance Moscow proposed to mediate between Kyiv's post-Yanukovych regime and the armed opposition, and did so stressing its 'goodwill.' As Minister Lavrov remarked during talks with his German counterpart: "[...] we are not going to impose our mediation services on them, as we can frequently see today on the part of other partners of Ukraine" (JRL 2014e). These words paint the typical image of Russia as the only trustworthy actor — a moral trait that a great power should have, according to the Russian imagery (see also: MFA 2014b; Lavrov 2014f).

On the other hand, Moscow accused the West of provoking the Ukraine crisis "for the benefit of personal geopolitical interests" (MFA 2014c; see also: Lavrov 2014b; MFA 2014d; JRL 2014c,f).Washington and its allies were perceived by the Russian elite as irrational actors, pure agents of chaos. As Russian President Putin once commented in vivid terms when discussing the Ukraine events: "What motivates our partners? [...] I sometimes get the feeling that somewhere across that huge puddle, in America, people sit in a lab and conduct experiments, as if with rats, without actually understanding the consequences of what they are doing. Why did they need to do this? Who can explain this? There is no explanation at all for it" (quoted in Wood 2016a, p. 119).

The overall result of these joint narratives is that Russia, in its 'enlightened' might, is the only actor who can and actually wants to restore peace in Ukraine, whose destiny is traditionally a responsibility of Russia. However, this did not stop Russia from reaching out to the West. Within an approach broadly characterised by bitter criticism towards Washington and its European allies, Russia also showed openness to dialogue. As D. Averre (2016, p. 708) noted, "[d]uring the conflict Putin himself has periodically revived the narrative of interdependence and positive relations with Europe," and furthered calls for joint efforts to normalise the situation. *De facto*, Russian proposals offered no practicable solution, as they were based on the assumption — unacceptable to the West — that Russia's intervention in Ukraine was lawful and legitimate. Yet these rare instances of cooperative attitude are still significant from an ideational perspective. In fact, Russia's sporadic openness to dialogue is in line with the belief of greatpowerness. By showcasing the image of a pro-active actor involved in conversations with peers, such proposals — as well as the actual

participation in the drafting of truces and agreements — validate the elite's idea of Russia as a meaningful and indispensable regional player, a great power.

No implicit recognition of equal status to other powers should be seen behind Russia's apparent openness to a cooperative resolution of the Ukraine crisis. While in principle consistent with the third constitutive belief of Russia's SC — stateness — the idea of formal sovereign equality is quite absent from Russia's Ukraine policies. Stateness surfaces instead in the form of Moscow's authority and control over the *russkij mir*, Ukraine included. As in this case as in Georgia's, the conservative and hierarchical thinking embedded in ascriptiveness translates onto the belief of stateness, fostering a sharply unequal view of state-to-state relations, wherein Moscow always occupies the superior position. This emerges evidently from Russia's interactions with both the other great powers and Ukraine.

On the one hand, while Moscow seems ready to engage with the US and European powers in conversations over Ukraine's future, the actual degree of responsibility (control) that the Russian elite is willing to share is limited, and constrained by its self-perception as a regional hegemon. The agreements brokered by Moscow did nothing but consolidate Russia's hold on Donbas and, via that, the whole of Ukraine — at the expenses of other actors' ability to influence the future course of political and military developments (Malyarenko & Wolff 2018). On the other hand, Moscow's hierarchical mindset is particularly evident in its approach towards Ukraine. Moving from the assumption of Ukraine's subordinate status (see above), the latter is stripped of its sovereignty and reduced to an object of bargain, a mere stage of operations. The Russian security elite treats Ukraine as if it had no authority to set a policy course or control its territory without Russian approval.

The elite's thinking in terms of authority and control compromises also the credibility and effectiveness of its calls for greater involvement of international organisations. The case of the OSCE is quite telling (Webber, Sperling, Smith 2021, pp. 197-198). After the breakout of the war in Donbas, the OSCE sent two monitoring missions to the southeast of Ukraine; it also provided the diplomatic setting for laying the groundwork of the Minsk agreements. Yet Moscow's support to these initiatives was matched by obstructionism and reticence regarding other activities — including ministerial-level discussions across the organisation and the deployment of a mission in

Crimea. Notably, Moscow itself later proposed to send a peace-keeping mission to Southeast Ukraine. Such plan could have played a role in the mitigation of fighting, but the most likely outcome would have been the indefinite freezing of the conflict in its (then) current state (Wagner 2017, pp. 37-38). In so doing, Russia would have seen its control on Donbas and Ukraine consolidated within an institutional framework, thereby gaining permanently formal veto powers on the implementation of peace accords as well as Kyiv's policy choices, including NATO accession. Ultimately, the OSCE's involvement led to no practical solution or steps forward, becoming instead a platform for the exchange of mutual accusations between Russia, the US, and Ukraine. The Normandy-format negotiations had a similar fate, while the UN has been almost absent from the scene. Overall, Russia's talking of international organisations seemed to be part of Russia's acting out its own greatpowerness and stateness within the Ukraine scenario, rather than truly pursuing a negotiated, shared solution to the crisis.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, the belief of stateness also translates into the frequent resort to judicial references to back Russia's position. This is evident in the Ukraine case, where the Russian security elite made widespread use of legalistic terms to coat in legitimacy its military actions and challenge those of its opponents. Also, this legalistic narrative does not really support a resolution of the crisis on legal, equal terms; instead it is just another way of validating Russia's self-perceived greatness, authority, and supposed right to control the area. By denying the legitimacy of Kyiv's post-Yanukovych government, the Russian elite consistently downgraded Ukraine to a non-state; claims regarding the alleged abuse of Russian minorities and broader disregard for the country's stability added to this background assumption. On the basis of that, Moscow further claimed that its intervention in Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea, was legitimate, and challenged the legitimacy of Western support to Ukraine's 'non-government' (Allison 2014, pp. 1259-1265; Karagiannis 2014; Yost 2015).

These arguments have a clear dimension of instrumentality: by exploiting grey areas of international law and mocking the Western normative discourse, they aimed at achieving the minimum goal of limiting Western responses to Russia's actions (id.). But the very decision to resort to such legal talk is coherent with the Russian elite's consolidated tradition of emphasising international norms to foster the image of Russia as a just, lawful power that stands for responsible

behaviour. As Putin declared, "we proceed from the conviction that we always act legitimately" (quoted in Allison 2014, p. 1267) — a conviction that ultimately links back to the inherent rights and responsibilities that Moscow holds as the warrantor of the *russkij mir*. Overall, in the eyes of the security elite, Russia's actions in and around Ukraine acquire legitimacy not because of their objective coherence with established international norms; quite the opposite, this or that legal principle is to be considered valid in accordance with Russia's (self-attributed) rights over the *russkij mir*.

4.1.2. Scientific beliefs

Expectations about the Russian security elite's worldview are confirmed by the actions that Moscow undertook in and around Ukraine. Both holism and determinism shine through the Russian interpretation of the Ukraine crisis, which is framed as the result of multiple long-term processes cutting across domestic and global politics, whose convergence could not but be disruptive of international stability.

The Russian narrative provides ample evidence of the perceived multi-level nature of the Ukraine crisis. On the one hand, as I pointed out in previous pages, the elite framed the crisis as the product of Ukraine's internal dynamics and the opportunity they created for outside powers to interfere (JRL 2014h; MFA 2014b). On the other hand, the crisis was often labelled as a reflection of global problems, namely the inadequacy of the contemporary international order. "These developments were the logical consequence of serious, system-wide problems that have accumulated since the end of the Cold War" (Lavrov 2014f). On top of this dual explanation, further complexity is added by accounting for the Ukraine crisis not only as the *result* of pre-existing conditions, but also as a *cause* of the further deterioration of East-West strategic relations and of the socio-political situation within Ukraine (id.; Putin 2014a). The complex image of reality that results from this discourse fits well with a holistic and deterministic worldview.

Such worldview pairs with a pervasive sense of vulnerability that originates from the awareness that threats and conflicts easily spread in an interconnected world. This fear is further strengthened by the conviction that there is one international actor — the US — that is actively

conspiring to spread chaos globally and take advantage of it. Such background ideas find full confirmation in relation to Ukraine and boil down to the overall framing of the crisis as a 'colour revolution.' As such, the Ukraine crisis shook the cognition of the Russian security elite twice. First, as a revolution against the socio-political order favoured by Moscow — a status quo coherent with the political values of the *russkij mir* and supportive of the Russian control over the country. "Revolutions are bad," Putin (2014c) stated plainly, conveying the conservative message that the spread of domestic unrest across Moscow's civilisational area should be halted. Second, the Ukraine crisis hit the security elite by confirming the fear that the enemy is actively promoting regime change very close to Russia (Matveeva 2018, p. 720). According to Defence Minister Shoigu, the Ukraine crisis was following an 'Arab Spring scenario' — implying the artificial external manipulation of chiefly domestic problems, to pursue a geopolitical agenda (JRL 2014g). This opinion was echoed by other policy-makers, who insisted that the West was "impudently interfering in Ukraine's internal affairs and deliberately provoking destabilisation" (JRL 2014b; see also JRL 2014a; JRL 2014h). Taken together, these two assessments created a sense of imminent danger and urgency that will be key to explain why Russia reacted with disproportionate means to the events taking place in Ukraine.

Besides vulnerability, the beliefs of holism and determinism lead the Russian security elite to elaborate strategies of action that are as complex as the nature of the problems they are meant to tackle. This happened in reaction to the Ukraine crisis, too, wherein Russia has deployed "the entire arsenal of political, diplomatic and legal methods" at its disposal, plus economic and military means in order to achieve multilevel effects (Lavrov 2014c; for an overview, see Thomas 2015, pp. 448-451). Moscow used its economic weight and the energy leverage to influence the decision-making of Kyiv and the European powers, especially so after sanctions were applied. On the legal plan, as noticed above, the illegitimacy of Russia's interference/intervention in Ukraine was denied and the West accused of being the true criminal. As noted by S. Lewis (2019) when discussing the legal intricacies of the Russia-Ukraine dispute in the Sea of Azov, Moscow has been quite successful at "creating confusion between the various legal frameworks" via a system of judicial arguments that, notwithstanding their partiality, manages effectively to further "Russia's political agenda in the region while antagonising and demoralising its critics in the West" (p. 26). Diplomatically,

Moscow took full advantage of the US' hegemonic fatigue to delay and downsize their intervention in Ukraine, also by keeping them busy with the Iranian nuclear portfolio and the parallel development of the Syria war (Thomas 2015, p. 449). In this way, the Russian elite made sure that American intellectual and material resources were directed somewhere else, thereby buying more freedom of action for itself in Ukraine. Finally, informational operations and propaganda helped summon supporters across the West, thereby undermining the latter's ability to set up a prompt, cohesive response to Russian actions. Taken together, these measures hit Russian competitors at multiple levels contemporarily, multiplying the efficacy of each single measure. Moscow followed this *modus operandi* before and during the use of force in Crimea and Donbas, confirming the general expectations relative to the holistic approach to security of the Russian elite.

The discussion so far has hinted already at another key feature of the Russian worldview — the Huntingtonian reading of reality, which comes to be seen as an arena of competition among civilisational subjects. The preeminent role of ascriptiveness in the Ukraine case contributes considerably to such interpretative outcome, which is well exemplified by the narrative around 'colour revolutions' I illustrated above. In addition, a peculiar datum emerging from the Russian behaviour vis-à-vis Ukraine is the application of the Huntingtonian frame also to political economy (Pomeranz 2016). Differently from the EU, which tends to present economics as a de-politicised activity, for Russia the choice of an economic bloc has an inherent political, civilisational value. In the specific case, if Kyiv had signed the AA with Brussels instead of joining the EAEU, Moscow would have lost not only economic resources but also ideational capital. The civilisational clout covering the Russian approach to international trade made it impossible to accept any compromise: any European or Ukrainian reassurances regarding the compatibility between the two economic projects were rejected as nonsensical. There follows that, in Russian eyes, disagreement over Ukraine held a markedly zero-sum character. The application of such competitive logic all around the clock facilitated the early escalation of hostilities — as I will now explain.

4.1.3. Conclusion

The Ukraine case confirmed my hypotheses on the nature and development of Russia's politico-strategic beliefs. Ascriptiveness emerges the strongest, giving form also to the other constitutive beliefs. The security elite's assessment of the Ukraine crisis is grounded on an ethnocentric lens that sees Moscow as the rightful guarantor of stability within the 'geo-ideational space of Russianness.' The beliefs of greatpowerness and stateness move from there to emphasise Russia's authority and control over Kyiv and, in particular, Russia's perceived right to define Ukraine's political course. In the earliest phases of the crisis, the perceived Russian inability to set the course of events gave resonance to a narrative of 'unattained greatness,' which soon left space for a more direct assertion of Russia's higher status vis-à-vis other parties to the crisis — via rhetorical and practical means. Scientific beliefs got confirmation, too. Holistic, deterministic, and Huntingtonian traits are clearly recognisable in Russia's Ukraine narrative and policies. The framing of Ukrainian events as a 'colour revolution' brings together the security elite's perception of intermingling domains (of competition), a concern for the transmissibility of conflict, and the traditional Russian feeling of vulnerability. Russia's complex interpretation of the events leading up to the Ukraine crisis was matched by an equally complex, multi-domain set of responses deployed by Moscow — before escalating to the use of force.

4.2. Military-strategic beliefs

In the reminder of this chapter I test my hypotheses on Russia's military-strategic beliefs in the Ukraine case. In particular, I consider whether Russia's annexation of Crimea and war-fighting in Donbas are coherent with the behavioural lines prescribed by the intentional and operational beliefs enshrined in the Russian SC. The nature of such beliefs leads me to expect the rapid escalation to the use of force and an asymmetric, pro-active war-fighting style.

The reader should be aware that, in the absence of Moscow's official recognition of the full extent of its military involvement in Ukraine, *Russian* accounts on to the decision-making process leading to the invasion of Crimea and Donbas, as well as on the specifics of Russia's use of force, are lacking. This is different from the Georgia and Syria cases, where Russian military commenters have been prolific. This makes it more complex to open the 'black box' of Russian thinking on

Ukraine. Yet a series of insightful observations can be cast nonetheless, with the help of key secondary sources, deductive reasoning, and critical thinking.

4.2.1. Intentional beliefs

Though the exact process that led the Russian security elite to intervene in Ukraine in 2014 is difficult to disentangle, the SC-framed scheme proposed in Chapter 2 helps capture key elements of what happened. Available sources support my expectations about a rapid escalation from peace to war motivated by the heightened threat perception that characterises the security elite's outlook on the *russkij mir*.

On the basis of my conceptual framework, also the decision to use military force is influenced by SC, since the latter informs the assessment of threats and windows of opportunity. Hence to understand Russia's intervention in Ukraine, one should consider first of all the set of beliefs that gave shape to the Russian perception of its role, interests, and ongoing global dynamics in 2014/2015. I reconstructed such ideational landscape in the first half of this chapter. To sum up, the Russian security elite locates Ukraine very close to the centre of the 'geo-ideational space of Russianness,' yet subordinated to Moscow. This brings about a Russian approach characterised by extreme possessiveness and a top-down, assertive method to preserve relations with Kyiv. In a context already made uncomfortable by EU-Ukraine association talks and an even longer history of closing ties with NATO, Russia's jealousy was triggered by the Euromaidan revolution and the policies undertaken by the successors of Yanukovych. Assessed through a worldview that stresses the competitive dimension of world politics, these developments were seen as steps towards the loss of Kyiv to the West and, ultimately, the disruption of the *russkij mir*. With Ukraine leaving, the whole theory of the unity of Russian peoples would have crumbled, inflicting a huge blow both to Russia's own self-perception *and* regional position; these were necessarily to be preserved. In this sense, the Crimean take-over and the subsequent war in Donbas responded to the elite's concern for the integrity of Russia's primary community of reference. By intervening the Russian security elite validated its *katechonic* imagery (see 2.1.3), according to which Moscow is the upholder of the *russkij mir* in the face of nefarious external forces.

As per the findings presented in Chapter 2, the expectation is for Russia to respond disproportionately to threats in the 'geo-ideational space of Russianness,' escalating quickly from *bor'ba* to *vojna*. Since the Russian self is not confined within the Federation's borders but includes the whole *russkij mir*, Moscow perceives threats to the *russkij mir* as threats to Russia proper. Russian interests in that geo-ideational space acquire an 'important' or even 'radical' character — two descriptors typically associated by Russian military commenters with the emergence of regional and large scale (global) conflicts, respectively; by definition, both have a direct and potentially existential impact on Russia.

Such framing overinflated the elite's concerns about the potential consequences of the Ukraine events, thereby heightening Russia's proclivity to escalate. In fact, from a Russian perspective, 'normal tools' of competition (*bor'ba*) are inadequate to achieve success in such high-stakes scenarios: *bor'ba* alone pertains to the conduct of day-to-day competition, but is by definition insufficient to protect near-existential interests — which are better served by the use of military force (*vojna*). The success of pro-Western, anti-Russian revolts between November 2013-February 2014 signalled the failure of the (wide range of) non-military measures deployed till then to preserve Russia's hold on the country and presented a new context wherein the definitive separation of Ukraine from the 'geo-ideational space of Russianness' was more likely. Hence force had to be used swiftly to regain the upper hand and secure Russia's voice over Ukraine. In particular, the modalities of the Russian use of force in Crimea and Donbas responded simultaneously to two urges: one the one hand, defending Russia's 'important' interests in Ukraine and the 'geo-ideational space of Russianness;' on the other hand, avoiding a full-blown fight with the West (NATO) close to national borders. This difficult balance was achieved by deploying force in ways that will be analysed in the following section.

Similarly to the Georgia case, students of Russia have debated whether the decision to intervene militarily in Crimea and Donbas is really to be considered a choice dictated by the urgent need to fulfil Russian interests in such exceptional circumstances, or rather a move planned long before. Given Ukraine's relevance to Russia and its collocation on a strategic direction considered particularly dangerous by Moscow, it is reasonable to think that the Russian GS already had a draft plan for waging war in Ukraine — a broad operational framework to be adapted to circumstances, if

there ever be need. As Y.E. Fedorov (2019, pp. 389-390) reminds, a hypothetical Russian war plan against Ukraine leaked through the media already in 2008, when NATO 'opened the door' to Georgia and Ukraine at the Bucharest Summit. The plan included three possible scenarios, ranging from the seizure of Crimea to the occupation of Kyiv. The timing of the release makes it more relevant as a case of political coercion rather than as a reliable military source. Yet even if elements of the original, secret plan were included in the leaked version, that does not say anything about Moscow's keenness to invade Ukraine. All militaries, including NATO's, prepare war-fighting well in advance of any possible conflict; that's what militaries do, irrespective of actual warring intentions and the level of international tensions.

The spontaneity of Moscow's decision to rapidly escalate to the use of force in response to the Ukraine crisis was well depicted by S. Hosaka (2018) by reference to a wealth of leaked Russian governmental emails. Faced with the risk of Ukraine associating with the EU, and this being perceived as the further step of NATO accession, Russia firstly put into place a kaleidoscope of *bor'ba* measures aimed at halting Kyiv's Westward movement and keeping it solidly into the Russian world. These had been implemented since August 2013 but when anti-regime riots exploded in Kyiv in November 2013, the failure of such measures became evident to Moscow: *bor'ba* alone had not been sufficient to preserve the unity of the *russkij mir*. The importance of this goal required more radical means. As Hosaka (2018) concluded, only "when Russia found it impossible to achieve its strategic goals, it did not stick to flawed tactics and was quick to take another track" (p. 363) The security elite then started escalating the crisis artificially, manipulating the operational environment to make the active use of armed force easier — beginning with the annexation of Crimea (Bukkvoll 2016b, p. 275-276).

The Crimean takeover provided Russia with a stronghold from where to conduct or reinforce offensive military operations elsewhere in Ukraine — including Donbas, where anti-Euromaidan rebellions were on the rise. Indicators of Russia's readiness to further military moves were there already by the conclusion of the invasion of Crimea (Norberg 2014). The type and positioning of forces available to Russia along the border with Ukraine would have allowed a range of different options in Southeast Ukraine, ranging from large-scale invasion to the expansion or repetition of the Crimea *modus operandi* (Norberg & Westerlund 2014). At the same time, further

attacks were not to be given for granted, for the entailed considerable strategic and financial costs (id.; see also Allison 2014, p. 1281).

Three elements may have contributed to Russia's decision to escalate hostilities in Southeast Ukraine, too. Firstly, the enduring risk of Ukraine's slide Westwards. The annexation of Crimea granted Russia control over an historically important part of the *russkij mir*. Yet the loss of the rest of Ukraine to the West was still possible, even more so now that Kyiv was governed by pro-Western forces. Greater control over Donbas, without necessarily annexing it, could have granted a tighter hold on Ukraine as a whole. Secondly, in Southeast Ukraine, too, measures of *bor'ba* were proving insufficient to achieve such goal. Between March 2014, when the rebellion started, and August, it became clear to Russian decision-makers that local militias would have been unable to win against governmental forces if supported only via propaganda, financial, and other non-military means. Thirdly, the Russian security elite might have thought that the Crimean scenario could be successfully replicated in Donbas, achieving yet another easy win. The initial (weak) response to the revolts in the Donbas by Ukrainian forces could have contributed to such interpretation (Bukkvoll 2016b, p. 276). The interaction of Russia's overarching ontological concern for the preservation of control over Ukraine and Donbas-specific opportunities and risks resulted again in the decision to quickly escalate hostilities. In less than six months, Russia escalated from *bor'ba* and covert support to a fully fledged conventional intervention.

4.2.2. Operational beliefs

The Russian intervention in Ukraine broadly confirms expectations about the security elite's preferred ways to use military force — i.e., in an asymmetric and pro-active way, with an emphasis on conventional land operations, mass, manoeuvre, and command superiority, in order to prevail in the 'initial period of war' and then physically destroy the opponent. However, it is also important to acknowledge the differences that set the Crimea *modus operandi* apart from the type of operations conducted in Donbas. Here I analyse the Crimea operation first, then turn to the Donbas.

Ahead of the invasion, 15,000-22,000 Ukrainian troops were stationed in Crimea (Galeotti 2019, pp. 7-8; Kofman et al. 2017, pp. 5-6). They mainly belonged to the Navy and possessed considerable assets both for coastal defence and land operations. However, decades of underfunding and low morale resulted in a chronic lack of cohesion, inefficient C2, and low readiness. The small Ukrainian air-force component deployed in Crimea was almost completely non-operational. Crimea was a base for Russian troops, too. According to a 1997 agreement signed with Kyiv, Moscow could harbour in the peninsula the Black Sea Fleet and up to 25,000 troops. Actual Russian capabilities in Crimea prior to takeover counted around 12,000 troops of the Black Sea Fleet, including (parts of) one or two naval infantry brigades (id.). This force was considerably smaller than Ukraine's but better trained and equipped, as it was composed mainly of *kontraktniki*. The peninsula was base also to a few hundred Russian special operations troops. Such was the overall balance of forces when Russia launched the invasion in late February 2014. While inferior in numbers, Russian troops outclassed their Ukrainian counterparts in terms of preparedness to war.

Looking at the Crimea operation, a first element that comes to the fore is the fast pace and anticipatory intent of the Russian manoeuvres. According to some observers, the decision to invade Crimea was taken by a very narrow circle of the Russian security elite on 20th February 2014 (Bukkvoll 2016b, p. 273; Galeotti 2019, p. 7) and military authorities received the official order three days later (Fedorov 2019). Kyiv was notified no declaration of war or intent. Russian troops in Crimea were fully mobilised between 20th-24th February 2014 and active operations ensued immediately. Russia obtained exclusive control of the peninsula by 9th March 2014, well ahead of the local declaration of independence. During the first week of March, Russian troops cut off Crimea from both the Ukrainian mainland and sea, taking over logistic bottlenecks and implementing a naval blockade all around the peninsula (Fedorov 2019; Galeotti 2019, pp. 8-12; Kofman et al. 2017, pp. 6-12). With Ukrainian forces stuck in their bases and reinforcement impeded from entering the peninsula, the military side of the land-grab was effectively completed in less than two weeks. The military's high responsiveness to political inputs allowed Russia to seize and benefit from the initiative, presenting the Ukrainian opponent with a *fait accompli* unlikely to be reversed. The rapidity with which the Russian AF conducted this operation testifies

to their success in shortening the 'readiness gap,' coherently with expectations on Russia's pro-active military behaviour.

The swiftness of Russia's annexation was greatly facilitated by a passive operational environment that required no active combat engagement. But the presence of this very condition can be considered as a Russian achievement, resulting from the implementation of concurrent strategies of escalation dominance that fit with the Russian expected behaviour, as per Chapter 2. On the one hand, the operational terrain was prepared by pursuing and holding command superiority. At strategic-operational level, Russia engaged in the full spectrum of *bor'ba* activities. Playing on the region's socio-economic cleavages vis-à-vis the rest of Ukraine, Moscow stirred public discontent against Kyiv and delegitimised the pro-Western agenda; simultaneously, Russian propaganda was given resonance via the skilful use of new technologies, media, and agitators (Kofman et al. 2017, pp. 12-16; Kuzio 2019, pp. 489-490). Russia-friendly local groups were empowered and received material support, including weapons. At the tactical level, command superiority was achieved by means of *maskirovka*. By sending in troops with no insignia and blending them into indigenous forces, Russia limited hostile reactions from the local population and complicated external assessments of the situation, considerably delaying the decision-making process of Ukraine and its allies. Cutting across these levels was Moscow's ability to preserve the linearity of its own C2 system — both in terms of coordination between the political and military authorities, and on the ground, unit-to-unit. Such layered set of command superiority measures enabled Russia to control the flux of information in and around Crimea, thereby setting the prevailing narrative within the peninsula and hinder the opponents' decision-making. In its turn, this granted Moscow considerable room for manoeuvre.

On the other hand, Russia fostered a favourable operational environment by exerting strategic deterrence. The launch of massive military exercises in the Western and Central Military Districts represented the main dimension of such effort. Staged between 26th February - 7 March 2014, they served multiple purposes. First, the exercises diverted attention from what was happening in Crimea, casting doubts on Moscow's bellicose intentions. Notably, the Southern Military District — closest to Crimea — did not undergo any drills at that time. This diverted attention from Crimea, since many observers started worrying about a possible Russian strike

along Ukraine's Eastern border instead. By confusing the opponents' strategic assessment, this further strengthened the C2 advantage of Russia. Second, military exercises allowed Moscow to move and pre-position a strategic force that would have later helped consolidate the territorial take-over. Such manoeuvres intentionally left behind attack helicopters, armour, artillery, coastal and air defence missile units in the area of Kerch, towards Crimea (Westerlund & Norberg 2016, p. 592). These reinforcements strengthened considerably Russia's A2/AD and strike capabilities in the Black Sea area and would be later introduced in Crimea to consolidate territorial gains. Third, and relatedly, exercises were meant to make a show of Russia's military power, fulfilling the goals of what Cimbala (2014) defined as 'military persuasion.' By demonstrating its capabilities and the potential resolve to escalate, Moscow aimed at dissuading both Ukrainian forces and its Western allies from interfering with Russian operations in the peninsula.

Nuclear power contributed to Russia's exercise of deterrence as a background factor, yet played a limited active role in the Crimean case. While Putin reportedly indulged in nuclear threats (N/A 2016), the Russian nuclear arsenal was not put on alert at any point during the operation. A closer look at Putin's aforementioned declaration also shows that the PRF conveyed conventional, rather than nuclear, threats (N/A 2017a, p. 381). This is coherent with the Russian security elite's preference for conventional military means, also for the purposes of signalling and persuasion. As illustrated in Chapter 2, the elite believes that non-nuclear forces qualify as a relevant instrument to threaten the opponents, with the additional advantage that they imply lesser escalatory/reputational costs than nuclear weapons if threats are followed through.

A key, often overlooked, dimension of the land-grab executed by Russia in Crimea is conventional in nature. After the aforementioned measures of escalation control via command superiority and deterrence provided Russia with a favourable operational environment, the active phase of operations followed centred on the use of conventional military assets. The transition between these two stages of the takeover coincided with a transition from covert to overt use of military personnel — that is, from the covert use of Special Forces for the purposes of *bor'ba* to the overt (yet often deceived) manoeuvre of troops across the peninsula, in order to establish objective control (Ven Bruusgaard 2014, p. 84). The operational success of these forces was ensured by three factors. First, their professionalism and discipline — considerably improved if compared to Russian

performance in Georgia (Karagiannis 2014). Second, the emphasis put on mobility. Russia deployed highly mobile infantry vehicles (e.g., BTR-80/82, *Tigr*) to proceed with speed along multiple directions, in a coordinated way. Third, the close support they received from the Black Sea Fleet. It provided assistance from the coast, forcing naval blockades on key Crimean ports and performing as an advanced component of Russia's A2/AD bubble. Together, these factors allowed Russian forces to get the upper hand of larger and more heavily equipped Ukrainian forces until when massive reinforcements started flooding through the Kerch strait around 6th March.

It is worth noting that local militias played a secondary role only. By "providing the Russian forces with a local image," self-defence units helped Moscow to artificially raise the invasion's legitimacy, at least in the eyes of Crimeans (Bukkvoll 2016a, p. 17). However, such groups lacked the equipment, training, and organisation necessary to tip the military balance and pursue their goals independently; most importantly, they would have been unable to retain territory against Ukraine's defence and security forces, especially if reinforcements were to join from the mainland. Given these factors, the rapid, coordinated execution of land-sea conventional operations by Russian troops must be assessed as a necessary condition for the successful secession of Crimea — with local militias adding just one more dimension to the asymmetric nature of the Russian manoeuvres.

Force composition and *modus operandi* confirmed expectations regarding Russia's military preferences, as enshrined in SC. First, they validate the centrality of conventional power to the Crimea scenario, coherently with the overall spirit of the Russian SC. As Kofman and colleagues (2017, p. 23) nicely put it: "[t]he Crimean operation does not represent a case of hybrid warfare, but rather a fairly traditional covert operation to shape the battlefield for a conventional invasion." Second, an unusual level of confidence with operations aimed at seizing and retaining territory transpired from the Crimean case. When many contemporary militaries would not make of territorial conquest their key objective anymore, the Russian security elite demonstrated with facts that, for them, controlling territory is still the safest way to secure strategic objectives. Third, the tendency to employ military force in qualitatively asymmetric ways to achieve cross-domain results was confirmed. On this occasion it was obtained via the swift transition from *bor'ba* to *vojna* and the successful, coordinated use of different armed services. Fourth, while only in parts, the

quantitative aspect of Russia's preference for an asymmetric use of force was confirmed, too. Given the specifics of the Crimean scenario, Russian AF could neither operate under conditions of numerical superiority, nor prepare the battlefield with heavy artillery fires — as per Russian military standards. However, Moscow still managed to shock and overwhelm the Ukrainian opponent by emphasising mobility. This allowed for the rapid concentration of available assets and the conduction of simultaneous, in-depth manoeuvres across the whole peninsula. Moreover, Russia's A2/AD assets — deployed off-shore and in proximity of Ukraine — still gave Moscow the theoretical capability to carry out massive shelling of Ukrainian assets, if conditions required. Only the necessity to limit the conflict kept Russia's rather brutal military style in check (Ven Bruusgaard 2014, p. 84-85).

The Russian military campaign in Donbas, which started in August 2014, evolved differently than Crimea's. While the Crimean operation achieved its objectives decisively, rapidly, and in a bloodless manner, in Donbas Russia engaged in intermittent yet brutal operations that have all the characters of a high-intensity war.

Russia's emphasis on fighting in conditions of conventional asymmetry was broadly validated by the nature and use of AF in the Donbas scenario. Russian forces were typically organised in BTGs, whose composition and actions confirmed their rather self-sufficient, armour-heavy, and offence-oriented nature. *Inter alia*, they deployed: modernised T-72 and T72B3 tanks, along with a handful of last generation T-90; masses of artillery pieces, mainly self-propelled ones, but also wheeled and tracked MLRS systems; *Strela*-10 missile carriers, *Pantsir*-S1 anti-air systems, and 2B26 *Grad* launchers. As a result, Russian BTGs enjoyed "disproportionate fire and rear support" (Galeotti 2019, p. 39); in addition, highly mobile armoured vehicles granted infantry a certain degree of manoeuvrability. Overall, the outlook of these troops is consistent with the general Russian preference for the kind of Army-centred assault force outlined in Chapter 2.

The way rebel militias had been re-adjusted by Moscow since the Minsk I ceasefire also pointed in the same direction. Between September 2014 and January 2015 — when Russia launched a second major military offensive —, and then again following the Minsk II agreement (February 2015), Russia put considerable effort into transforming the separatist forces into a conventional army capable of both independent action and better coordination with the BTGs

(Kofman et al. 2017, pp. 44-45). The post-reform outlook of Donetsk's I Army Corps and Luhansk's II Army Corps is illustrative of this process (Galeotti 2019, pp. 23, 30).

The land-intensive nature of Moscow's offensive in Donbas partially compromised the qualitative asymmetry of the Russian *modus operandi*, which usually takes the form of inter-service operations. In fact, no large-scale joint operation involving land, air, and naval troops together was staged in Donbas. Theoretically, Russian vessels in the Black Sea could have provided assistance via off-shore fires or taken action to control the Sea of Azov completely. Russia's Western, Central, and Southern Military Districts also possess plenty of air assets, all of which could have easily intervened in Ukraine. However, even though Russia had these means available, none was deployed in Donbas. As Westerlund and Norberg (2016, pp. 594-595) noticed, such decision likely originated from the desire to preserve the 'plausible deniability' of the intervention. Three more factors should be considered. First, the geographical collocation of Donbas made naval support not-so-crucial to the success of the mission; instead the Navy had the rather important goal of protecting and consolidating the Russian position in the Black Sea — whose value increased in Moscow's eyes not only because of the Crimean annexation, but also because of the Syria crisis. Second, Ukrainian Air Force posed no threat to Russian and rebel forces; few in number and all in a very poor operational state, Ukrainian aircrafts did not feature in Donbas, whose skies were kept clean by Russia's anti-air assets and extended A2/AD bubble. Since the contestation of the air domain was not in sight, Moscow had one reason less to deploy its own Air-space Force. Third, by staging a fully fledged air campaign Moscow would have escalated the level of violence considerably. This ran counter the desire to keep the conflict limited (Freedman 2014).

Notwithstanding the absence of inter-service operations from the Donbas scenario, Moscow still followed a cross-domain approach, thereby achieving some degree of qualitative asymmetry. On the one hand, as in Crimea, Russia's military intervention was accompanied by a vast array of *bor'ba* measures. Peculiar to the Donbas scenario is the fact that Russia's Special Operations Forces not only contributed to *bor'ba* — e.g., fomenting the rebellion against Kyiv, training and equipping rebels — but also conducted direct action against pro-governmental forces; in other words, they were an integral part of Russia's war-fighting (Bukkvoll 2016a, pp. 18-19; see also Westerlund and Norberg 2016, pp. 593-594). On the other hand, Russian operations in Southeast

Ukraine were characterised by sustained action in the electromagnetic spectrum, more so than in Crimea (McCrory 2020, pp. 36-37). Russian EW pursued a number of objectives against Ukrainian forces — from jamming, in order to deliver highly effective but lowly escalatory non-kinetic effects, to contributing to the informational confrontation. Most notably, EW assets have allowed Russia to track and locate Ukrainian troops, thereby maximising the accuracy and lethality of artillery fire.

The actions of Russia's armed forces in Donbas confirm fully my hypotheses about Russia's quantitatively asymmetric military approach. The number of Russian troops in Southeast Ukraine grew from 3.500-6.500 to 10.000-12.000 between August-December 2014 (Sutyagin & Bronk 2017, p. 33). Especially at the beginning of the war effort, in 2014-2015, these numbers were sufficient to overcome a Ukrainian military barely able to muster its forces. What is more, the rapid pace of deployment in Donbas testifies to the reactivity of the Russian AF and the good shape of their long-range logistics across the Federation. In fact, while the main logistical hub of the operation lies in Rostov-on-Don — very close to the Ukrainian border —, the components of deployed BTGs have been drawn from units stationed all across Russia (Sutyagin & Bronk 2017, pp. 37-41). When assessing the numerical advantage enjoyed by Russia in Southeast Ukraine one should also consider that, with little forewarning, Russia could re-direct to Donbas almost 100.000 troops belonging to the Army and other agencies located in the vicinities, Crimea included. As M. Galeotti (2019) observed: "of a total Ground Forces field strength of 350.000, Moscow keeps almost a quarter directly engaged in the Donbas or within easy deployment range" (p. 35).

Besides sheer numbers, Russia's emphasis on quantitatively asymmetric effects is best illustrated by instances of war-fighting. Two battles are particularly relevant, namely those of Ilovaisk and Debaltseve. In the case of Ilovaisk, Russia intervened after a couple of governmental attempts to reconquer the city, during early and mid August 2014. Notwithstanding the poor performance of Ukraine's AF, rebel militias were being put under considerable pressure and may have lost eventually; hence Moscow decided to intervene directly, for the first time in Donbas. Departing from the area of Rostov-on-Don, an undefined number of Russian BTGs corresponding to the aforementioned characteristics crossed Ukraine's Southeastern border and manoeuvred through Amvrosiivka, Mnohopillya, and Donetsk to surround Ilovaisk. In the short timespan between 23-27 August, the city was bottled up and so were Ukrainian forces (Cohen 2016; see also

Hosaka 2019, p. 340). Russia's victory was clear-cut and came at a high price for Kyiv — whose forces were slaughtered while withdrawing after the defeat, notwithstanding Russia had agreed on their safety (id.). Overall, the battle of Ilovaisk represented a textbook case of Russia's preferred military *modus operandi*, which focuses on overwhelming the opponent with disproportionate man- and fire-power via wide, in-depth manoeuvres.

The same can be said about the battle of Debaltseve. It took place in January-February 2015, when Russia moved to re-take control of the city — which was lost to Kyiv during the previous summer. Three features of this battle are notable. Firstly, the massed, intensive use of artillery fire to inhibit the adversary and achieve breakthroughs. Secondly, the widespread reliance on *Spetsnaz* both to provide the artillery with precise target coordinates and as assault troops. Thirdly, the brutality of action, which resulted in a very high death toll across the camps, including civilians; the city was destroyed completely. In the case of Debaltseve, too, Russian troops achieved qualitatively asymmetric effects by overwhelming the adversary with their numbers and fire-power; the high number of casualties is a byproduct of such war-fighting style.

Finally, also the expected preference for a pro-active military-operational approach is validated by Russian actions in Donbas. There, Russia demonstrated in many ways its actual or potential ability to seize the initiative, anticipate the adversary, and ultimately retain escalation dominance. A chief contributing factor was Moscow's semi-permanent state of mobilisation along the border with Ukraine. The already-mentioned numerical advantage enjoyed by Russia in the Black Sea area was encompassed by the proven ability to deploy these forces within a short timeframe, deeply into Ukrainian territory. Ahead of Russia's military intervention in Donbas, Norberg and Westerlund (2014) assessed Moscow could deploy in Southeast Ukraine at least two armies with conspicuous manoeuvre and assault elements within ten days. Russia's fast deployment in direction of Ilovaisk and the incredulity with which these manoeuvres were allegedly met by Ukrainian commanders (Cohen 2016) well testify to the short 'readiness gap' of Russian forces and therefore their ability to benefit from the initiative.

Russia used such capability to control the level of violence in Donbas and influence not only the situation on the ground but also, via that, the broader strategic context around Ukraine. This happened consistently in proximity of each round of negotiations for the settlement of the crisis

(Hosaka 2019, pp. 340-346): while shelling Ukrainian troops at Ilovaisk and Debaltseve, Moscow was contemporarily discussing peace with Kyiv and its allies; the Minsk I and II agreements will follow, each bringing Russia closer to its strategic goals. As Malyrenko and Wolff (2018) commented: "escalation served the dual purpose of pushing for renewed negotiations that could be conducted from an improved Russian/rebel bargaining position and achieving agreements that would secure Russian influence in Ukraine more strongly in case of actual agreement implementation" (p. 204). Such dynamic illustrates quite well the interconnection between the military and political domains in the eyes of the Russian security elite. Far from being a means to score success on the battlefield only, the AF actively helped Moscow shape and steer the opponent's decision-making at a politico-strategic level, in order to agree on a settlement closer to Russian interests. In this sense, Russia's active use of military force in Donbas can be seen as an instrument of command superiority.

Moreover, Russia's keenness to employ its military power and the fast pace of such deployments also contributed to the credibility of the system of deterrence built around Donbas. My reflections above relative to the Crimean case are valid here, too. Moscow's strategic and snap exercises in the Western and Central Military Districts performed as the main dimension of deterrence signalling, which acquired a markedly conventional character. Permanent Russian capabilities stationing close to Southeastern Ukraine — such as the long-range S-300 missiles and the Eighth and Twentieth Guards Armies — further reinforced Moscow's leverage onto Kyiv and its allies, as they provided Russia with a readily actionable mechanism of retribution in the face of unwanted developments. The kind of EW hardware deployed in Donbas also sent a clear message in terms of preparedness to escalation (McCrory 2020, pp. 39-41). In fact R-934 and *Krasukha* jammers appear disproportionate means for an opponent like the Ukrainian armed forces, whose counter-EW capabilities are minimal; instead their targets were likely NATO's communications and surveillance assets, including E-3 Sentry AWACS. Given their specifics, these systems are rather to be seen as high-level pre-deployed capabilities to be fully activated in case of Western countries became militarily involved. Overall, Russia constructed around Southeast Ukraine a layered system of persuasion that, by signalling readiness to employ overwhelming capabilities,

imposed on the opposers restraint, thereby achieving deterrence and escalation control quite successfully.

According to some observers, Moscow's escalation control benefitted less from non-military means. Differently from Crimea, where the manipulation of public opinion played a considerable role preparing the area of operations, Russia's activism in the informational struggle did not contribute critically to the achievement of command superiority over Donbas (Kofman et al. 2017, p. 54). Given the socio-cultural specifics of the region and a sometimes limited territorial penetration, Russian broadcasting and other means of propaganda did not manage to fully mobilise the population in support of separatism and Russia's presence. While locals did clearly side against Kyiv's pro-Western drive, the idea of seceding and forming and independent government has never gained widespread traction (Kofman & Rojansky 2015). This contributed to the necessity of escalating the indigenous level of violence in the pursuit of politico-strategic goals — something that was not needed in Crimea. It must be recognised, though, that Russia's informational pressure did achieve success at the operational-tactical level. In fact, ahead of battle, Russian EW means would track, jam, and access the private communication devices of Ukrainian troops to send them threatening messages (McCrory 2020, pp. 36-37). By demoralising the opponent, this basic reflexive control technique helped the Russian armed forces achieve a degree of advantage on the battlefield.

4.2.3. Conclusion

The Ukraine case confirmed my expectations about Russian military behaviour and, in particular, the security elite's proneness to rapidly transition from peace to war in the *russkij mir*, using force in asymmetric and pro-active ways. Since Ukraine is perceived as a key component of the 'geo-ideational space of Russianness,' the Russian security elite attached utmost importance to the stability of Kyiv-Moscow relations, under conditions determined by the latter. The so-called Western interference and the overthrowing of Yanukovych's regime put these relations into question, triggering Russia's military reaction, aimed at imposing and securing its hold onto Ukraine for good.

The way the military intervention was carried out also confirmed hypotheses on Russia's preferred use of force, as per Chapter 2. Differently from the Georgia case, partial variations from the expected Russian *modus operandi* were not motivated by the structural problems affecting Russia's AF — which had improved their efficiency and effectiveness considerably since 2008. Instead limited variations in the conduct of military operations can be imputed mainly to the *sui generis* nature of the Crimea operation and the Russian elite's desire to keep the conflict limited. The prioritisation, respectively, of suddenness and escalation control (both prominent features of Russia's SC anyways) put brakes on the certain aspects of Russia's asymmetric approach. This notwithstanding, the overall style of Russia's war-fighting can still be traced back, in practice or intentions, to the operational beliefs I identified in Chapter 2.

4.3. Conclusion

This chapter discussed how strategic cultural beliefs shaped the Russian security elite's thoughts and deeds throughout the first iteration of the Ukraine war (2014/15). As much as the Georgia case study, the analysis contained in this chapter confirmed the expectations on Russian strategic and military behaviour that I built in Chapter 2, thereby highlighting the utility of strategic cultural beliefs for making sense of Russia's decisions and understanding their nuances.

The development of Russian SC in the Ukraine and Georgia cases is extremely similar, so much so that the core of the elite's narratives and actions in these two scenarios are exchangeable. There are only two main observable differences: one regards ascriptiveness — rendered in ethno-cultural terms mainly vis-à-vis Ukraine, as opposed to the historical register used in Georgia; the other regards the conduct of military operations — swifter but also more limited in Ukraine than in Georgia, due to the improved capabilities of the Russian AF and the theatre's specifics. Yet neither of these differences reflects a revolution in the Russian approach to strategy and war-fighting, inasmuch as the ultimate assumptions regarding Russia's self, the world, and the appropriate use of force have remained the same.

The consistency of Russian behaviour in Ukraine and Georgia might appear as striking, given the different historical contexts those events took place in, as well as the different combinations of actors and interests involved. The fact that the Georgia war was quickly forgotten

by the West, eager to sweep such memory under the rug of the (short-lived) US-Russia 'reset' and refocus on terrorism and the Middle East, provided fertile ground for a superficial reading of the 2014 Russian intervention in Ukraine — which came to be framed by mainstream commentary as surprising and unprecedented when in fact it is not, either at the level of strategic narratives, or in terms of military developments.

The consistency of Russian narratives and *modi operandi* across these two scenarios is hardly surprising against a strategic cultural framework. The persistence in power of the same Russian security elite, the general resistance to change of belief systems, and the common belonging of Georgia and Ukraine to the *russkij mir* account for the convergence of Russia's perceptions, escalatory patterns, and war-fighting principles. Indeed, in the eyes of Moscow, the Georgia experience arguably confirmed the idea that the rapid resort to armed force (*vojna*) is better suited than *bor'ba* to meet and resolve 'radical' concerns — by definition, the type of concerns emerging in the 'geo-ideational space of Russianness.' Such is probably the main lesson learned from the war in Georgia by the Russian security elite, which then put it into practice again in the Ukraine context, six years later.

Yet one might notice that the Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine have generated different outcomes in terms of post-war settlements. While, in Georgia, Russia facilitated militarily and immediately recognised the independence of the two breakaway republics — in Ukraine, one portion of the country was annexed directly to the Federation (Crimea), but the Donetsk and Luhansk People Republics did not see their independence formally recognised by Russia till 2022. However, notwithstanding the different forms of these settlements, in all such cases the ultimate goal of securing (political) control over the 'subordinate components' of the Russian civilisational space was achieved — by securing (in)direct territorial control. In this sense, the popular question of whether Moscow had/has an 'exit strategy' from the involvement in these conflicts scenarios is rather unimportant, when assessed from a Russian perspective: inasmuch as the Russian SC prescribes to obtain and preserve authority and control over the 'geo-ideational space of Russianness,' the nurturing of frozen conflicts and puppet administrations does not qualify as a long-term burden, but rather as a useful tool for securing the prolonged maintenance of control over these areas — thereby validating the security elite's SC-driven self-perception and interests.

In military terms, the swift implementation of the Crimean takeover and the rather successful operations conducted in Donbas were likely interpreted by the Russian security elite as a confirmation of the appropriateness (utility) of their force-intensive military *modus operandi*, further sustaining their self-perceived sense of might vis-à-vis neighbours. As noted above, possibly the only major problem encountered by the Russian AF did not concern the validity of their operational principles, but rather consisted of the very practical issue of coordination with Donbas militias — which oftentimes proved unable to pursue independently assigned campaign goals (see 4.2.2.). This led Moscow to guide the process of reorganisation of such militias into more structured and capable military formations, better interoperable with Russian AF, in support of future operations on Ukrainian ground. As the next chapter will show, the Russian security elite will also try to avoid the repetition of such problem by imposing onto allied forces its own operating standards right from the onset of a conflict.

Chapter 5

Russia and the Syria war

This is the last of three case studies aimed at testing my general expectations on Russia's way of war. This chapter focuses on the Russian involvement in the Syria war, starting from the 2011 Syrian uprising, in the context of the 'Arab Spring', till 2018, and passing through the Russian decision to deploy its AF in Syria in 2015. I explore the development of Russian narratives and actions in this context, assessing whether they reflect the the strategic cultural beliefs I identified in Chapter 2. Is it possible to make sense of the Russian intervention in Syria via my model of Russian SC? This case study is particularly relevant inasmuch as Syria's is the first (and only) war fought by Russia outside of the post-Soviet space since 1991, and in a non-priority geographical area. Notwithstanding contextual differences with Georgia and Ukraine, I expect the same strategic cultural beliefs to inform the Russian elite's assessments and military decisions — thereby confirming my hypothesis on the consistency of Russia's way of war across scenarios. The only partial exception to such consistency will concern the modality of escalation from peace to war (see 5.2.1) — but this difference, too, conforms to the expectations built in Chapter 2.

Russia's involvement in the Syria war is rather peculiar, if assessed against the low-profile history of Moscow's post-Cold War engagement with the region (for an overview: Dannreuther 2012). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow drastically downsized its presence in the Middle East, refocussing political, economic, and diplomatic resources onto the domestic front, the post-Soviet neighbourhood, and relations with the West. Consequently, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s Russia maintained a low profile in the Middle East, pursuing a "non-ideological," "pragmatic," and at times "opportunistic" approach that showed readiness to engage with most Middle Eastern actors in pursuit of economic deals (energy contracts, arms sales), without interfering with pre-existing political tensions (Kozhanov 2018; Stepanova 2018). Yet, though with less vocal tones than in the *russkij mir*, Moscow also voiced broader concerns regarding externally driven regime change and the link between state collapse and the spread of violent (religious) extremism — which the Middle East knew no shortage of. Oftentimes mistaken for a priori support to autocratic governance, such concerns rather reflected a widely articulated opposition to Western

military interventions and their consequences (Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya), as much as Russia's own direct experience with institutional collapse and Islamism in Chechnya (id.; Dannreuther 2015).

Some scholars complained that the Russian approach to the region has suffered from its subordination to the ups and downs of Russia-West relations, thereby not yielding any significant result for Moscow (Kozhanov 2018). While there is some truth in that, it is worth remembering two other factors. First, one reason for Russia's low-profile Middle East policy might be found in the region itself. In fact, historically, the turbulent nature of the region has frustrated the ambitions of external actors much more invested in the Middle East than Russia — including the US. Second, Russia has shown no interest in, and had no resources for rebuilding solid patron-client networks comparable to the Soviet Union's, in support of more ambitious regional goals (Charap 2015a). The only notable exception has been Syria, indeed, which has continued depending on Kremlin's generosity (in arms and money) even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Overall, the compound effect of these factors led Russia to take up a secondary role in the Middle East, behaving as a reactive player, pursuant (with relative success) only a narrow set of goals.

It is against this background that Russia found itself dealing with the emergence of the 'Arab Spring' in 2010. At first, Moscow's response was cautious (Dannreuther 2015). Since the initial protests showed a relatively peaceful character and the overthrow of regimes was not on the agenda of demonstrators, Russia framed these events as legitimate democratic processes and invited the international community not to interfere. Moscow was also open to accept turnover at the apex of select Middle Eastern governments (for example, in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen). In fact, those initial leadership changes were not seen as a product of Western social engineering but rather as examples of a transition towards more "pluralistic power-sharing solutions," coherently with "the traditional values of Middle Eastern societies" (Stepanova 2018, p. 41; Dannreuther 2015, p. 80).

Soon, however, the magnitude and violence of demonstrations started escalating, prompting a more vocal Russian approach. Not only did citizen take up arms to respond to growing governmental repression, but also the original motives of the Arab Spring mixed with sectarian and Islamist demands. Moscow started perceiving a threat to the very stability of Middle Eastern secular institutions, fearing that political chaos and militant Islamism could spread beyond the

region to reach Russia's southern borders. In Russian eyes, this was yet another example of the ongoing disintegration of the international order, whose expected outcome was the proliferation of conflict, rather than democratisation (Averre 2019a, pp. 399-400).

At the same time, the emergence of the R2P theme in Western narratives and the NATO intervention in Libya revived Russian concerns about a new phase of externally imposed regime change across the Middle East. This scenario ran counter to Moscow's traditional interpretation of international law, as much as its vision on how conflict in the Middle East was to be averted — i.e., via the strengthening of state institutions and facilitating grassroots dialogue, instead of the forceful imposition of new elites and systems of values (Averre & Davies 2015). As a consequence, the Russian position shifted from cautiously accepting the Arab Spring to condemning it as the chaotic result of misguided (or intentionally evil) Western policies. While continuing opposing external unilateral interference on the side of any of the parties in the Arab Spring, Russia started calling for an international counter-terrorist campaign — to be carried out within the remit of a UN mandate in support of locally-owned pacification processes (Putin 2015a).

Syria, too, had its 'spring.' Protests started in February 2011; limited in scale, they aimed at denouncing the regime's corrupt governance model. But by April, once peaceful demonstrations had transformed into a civil war, sparked by growing governmental repression. The diffusion of violence rapidly worsened an already critical socio-economic situation, simultaneously creating conditions for the involvement in the crisis of other local and international actors. Discontent with the regime merged with sectarian and Islamist recriminations and, by summer 2011, scenarios of regime change started being discussed in Western agendas, while other regional actors deployed resources in support of their local allies.

Originally Russia's position vis-à-vis the Syria crisis followed the same script outlined above. Initial criticism towards Assad's inability to implement needed reforms and restore peace (Medvedev 2011a) was rapidly replaced by hardened statements against forcible (Western) intervention and Assad's removal, as well as a growing preoccupation with the spread of militant Islamism. Within such a framework and until autumn 2015, Russia pursued a dual-track approach: on the one hand, it continued supporting the regime as it had done in the previous decades, via financial aid and arms deliveries; on the other hand, Moscow staged a strenuous international

diplomatic fight to block or contest any UNSC decisions potentially leading to the repetition of an Iraqi or Libyan scenario, while supporting inclusive talks among all parties to the conflict, included major regional and global powers. From a Russian standpoint, the 2013 initiative to dismantle, jointly with the West, Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles – following a lethal strike using toxic chemicals on the civilian population, apparently by Syrian government forces — responded to the very need of getting rid of a useful pretext for Western military intervention, while boosting Russia's image as a credible broker of conflict-settlement deals (Kozhanov 2018). However, even though these initiatives secured Syria from external military intervention, they did not suffice to secure Syria's internal front.

By the summer 2015, Assad's regime was close to collapse, unable to contain and push back anti-governmental forces and the Islamic State (IS). Hence Moscow decided to step up its commitment (Charap, Treyger, Geist 2019, pp. 5-7). Following negotiations with Iran and granted Syria's official permission, on 30 September 2015 Russia launched a military campaign against the 'terrorist formations' threatening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. By the end of the year the campaign started showing the first evident results and by February 2016 both the opposition and extremist groups were on retreat. Putin declared the success of the Russian military operations on 14 March 2016 but no complete withdrawal followed, as military activities have continued at lower intensity.

Military success helped Russia secure Syria from terrorist takeover and consolidate the regime; it also enabled greater leverage in international talks on Syria's future, held in Geneva and Astana formats. The UN-mandated Geneva peace process was launched in 2014 upon the initiative of the US and Russia, but it soon stalled, due to deep disagreements on the parties to involve in negotiations, their ideal outcomes, and the inability to stop violence on the ground. In January 2017, together with Turkey and Iran, Russia set up the parallel negotiating framework of Astana. It was meant to overcome the *impasse* of Geneva by sponsoring a more inclusive dialogue between governmental and anti-governmental forces, not least by leveraging the three powers' direct military involvement on Syrian territory. To date, the political settlement of the crisis lies far away and the durability of Russian (military) successes is still to be assessed — especially if Russia does

not aim at keeping boots on the ground on Syria over the long-term (Lovotti 2018; Stepanova 2018).

Far from providing a comprehensive account of Russia's dealings in the Middle East and its involvement in the 'Syrian spring,' the previous paragraphs highlighted preliminarily some enduring themes of the Russian approach, including: diplomatic flexibility (pragmatism), the consistent opposition to Western (military) interference in the region, as well as a concern for the disruption of statehood and the diffusion of (religious) conflict. In the remainder of this chapter I will analyse how Russia developed and nuanced these themes throughout the Syria crisis, highlighting their intimate connection with the more fundamental beliefs that characterise the Russian SC. I will also show how the categories of thought enshrined in such SC have led the Russian security elite to take the seemingly exceptional decision to deploy force in Syria, and the less-than-exceptional ways in which the Russian AF have been actually used. The conclusion to this chapter will discuss the overall coherence of my Syria-specific findings with my general model of Russian SC — and explain variation, if need be, also in comparison to the Georgia and Ukraine cases.

5.1. Politico-strategic beliefs

In this section I unpack the development of Russian narratives on the Syria crisis and analyse the politico-strategic beliefs underpinning them. I follow the same method of the two previous case studies, here looking at the speeches, writings, and actions of the Russia security elite relative to Syria, between 2011-2018. Again, as a quick reminder, a SC's politico-strategic beliefs consist of a security elite's self-perception (constitutive beliefs) and worldviews (scientific beliefs). In the case of Russia, these are, respectively, the beliefs of ascriptiveness, greatpowerness, stateness — and holism, determinism, Huntingtonism. By now the reader should be familiar with their meaning. The capacity to make sense of Russia's stance on Syria via these categories of thought will demonstrate the accuracy of my hypotheses on the Russian SC, as built in Chapter 2 and tested already against the Georgia and Ukraine cases.

5.1.1. Constitutive beliefs

Statements about Syria made by the security elite render clearly Russia's belief in its greatpowerness. It is communicated in multiple ways, compatible with the Georgia and Ukraine narratives I analysed in Chapters 3 and 4. In particular, three interconnected themes pointed to Russia's great power identity: the idea of Russia as a leading international player bearing global responsibilities; the actual successfulness, from the elite's perspective, of Russia's Syria policy; and a skilful mix of self-victimisation and anti-Western rhetoric, to diminish the latter's achievements.

At the most intuitive level, the belief of greatpowerness was narrated by depicting Russia as a leading international player who weighs in on the Syrian crisis. This idea was presented by deploying three inter-related arguments: first, by stressing Moscow's "historical role" in "fighting for freedom" – an ontological mission that has been fulfilled in Syria, too, by countering the spread of Islamic terrorism and (Western-engineered) political chaos (Kots 2016); second, by pointing to the actual results of the campaign, which allegedly demonstrate that Russia ranks among the top international military players (Putin, quoted in Vladykin 2018); third, by showcasing Russia's willingness and capability to take up political responsibility on the global stage.

This latter aspect, key to the Russian idea of great power, appears frequently in Russian commentaries and official statements on Syria. Steps forward in multilateral diplomatic engagements in Geneva and Astana formats, as well as the efforts made for the dismantlement of Syria's chemical weapons – just to name a few – are brought back to Russia's responsibility as a permanent member of the UNSC – i.e., a legitimate great power tasked with defending "the fundamental principles documented in the UN Charter" (Lavrov 2018b). The outcomes of these and other multilateral engagements are magnified by the security elite to foster the image of an influential Russia able to leverage power and prestige on the international stage (Averre 2019a, p. 404).

In connection with Russia's alleged responsibilities and diplomatic engagements, two observations are worth making. On the one hand, one can observe that Moscow resorts to the concept of responsibility also to justify its permanence on Syrian territory after the formal end of the original military operation. Its continued presence is in fact legitimised by referring to the

responsibility of Russia towards regional stability and Syria in particular. Given the fragility of the re-established status quo, Moscow fears that conditions on the ground could be easily reversed by hostile powers as soon as the Russian troops leave (Chesnokov 2018). This would turn the clock back to summer 2015 not only for Assad, but also for the Russian security elite, which would feel deprived of a wealthy endowment of (perceived) international *grandeur*.

On the other hand, I shall note that the Astana negotiations scored only limited achievements (Lovotti 2018; Stepanova 2018). In fact Moscow, Ankara, and Teheran failed to convince anti-governmental forces to come to terms with Assad and the creation of 'de-escalation zones' did not manage to bring the level of violence down effectively. Most importantly, Russia itself was well cognisant that, over the long term, the 'mini-lateral' format of Astana could not replace a more comprehensive (UN-sponsored) framework that, by bringing together a wider number of regional and global stakeholders, creates the conditions for a lasting peace that is not dependent on a foreign military presence. Notwithstanding these limitations, the Astana process undeniably achieved more results than Geneva. At the very least, the Russian ability to bring to the table the diverse interests of Turkey and Iran and achieve some degree of coordination in their military involvement did speak of Moscow's political investment in the resolution of the Syrian crisis and act 'responsibly,' along the lines of what a great power should do (according to the Russian imagery).

Relatedly, a second theme key to the communication of Russia's greatpowerness revolved around the representation of Russia as an international actor able to pursue independent policy courses successfully. According to Russian officials, Moscow's action in Syria was a success at all levels. As early as February 2016, only four months into the military campaign, the Kremlin's permanent representative to the UN stated that "if the Russian Aerospace Forces failed to go to Syria, none of the positive diplomatic steps that we are witnessing today would have been taken" (Churkin 2016; see also Syromolotov 2016). While the actual solidity of the 2016 'positive diplomatic steps' is questionable (see above), a similar opinion was echoed by other officials throughout the whole campaign, till the end of the timeframe of analysis. Both Shoigu (quoted in Tikhonov 2017c) and Lavrov (2018b) underlined that Russia fulfilled all the campaign's goals, harvesting gains not only within the Syrian theatre but also, via that, on a global scale.

In fact, in the eyes of the Russian security elite, the diplomatic and military actions undertaken in Syria served goals broader than the stabilisation of Assad's regime: first, the defence of the very principle of sovereignty, against the West's tendency to abuse of humanitarian arguments to infringe upon other states' independence; second, the eradication of a pocket of Islamist terrorism that could spread chaos and fundamentalist intolerance farther from Syria, if unchecked. That is why, in Moscow's interpretation, the diplomatic manoeuvring and purported military victory in Syria underscored a global success: because local action helped prevent the further weakening of two key principles of international relations at large, those of sovereignty and secularism (Averre & Davies 2015).

Russia's self-perception as a (successful) great power was sustained further by spreading two additional messages. First, the juxtaposition of Russian achievements and Western (alleged) failures, for the former to stand out more clearly. Both Minister Shoigu and Chief of the GS Gerasimov insisted on such diverging outcomes during the 2017 iteration of the military forum '*Armiia*,' when they detailed the poor job done by the US-led coalition in Iraq and Syria (Tikhonov 2017a). Since 2016 Russian officials insist that, while peace has been restored within the Russian area of operations, in the territories controlled by coalition/US forces the IS is still thriving and the toll of civilian casualties is unacceptably high. "Illegal occupation of Syrian vast areas by the United States have not done and will do any good to the Syrians" – so the story goes (MoD 2018; see also Lavrov 2017b). Therefore the Russian security elite believes that the West failed not only on the battlefield but also in humanitarian, hence moral, terms. The second, related supporting message implies that Western failures are due not only to the internal, structural inconsistencies of the US-led coalition (or the West as such), but also to effective Russian counter-action at diplomatic and military level. Typically assuming the existence of a hidden Western agenda, Moscow takes pride in stating that its involvement in the crisis prevented 'foreign masterminds' from implementing their designs. It is thanks to Russia that Syria has preserved its sovereignty and chaos has not unravelled further across the region (Gerasimov 2016; Lavrov 2015a; Tikhonov 2017b, quoting Shoigu).

Interestingly, while engaged in this taunting narrative, Russia has in parallel lamented an unfair treatment from the West, which is blamed for trying "to discredit and even to de-legitimise Russia" (Nebenzya 2018; see also Kots 2017). While these two discursive strains are apparently at

odds with each other, *de facto* they both support Russia's belief in greatpowerness: the former contributes directly to the representation of Russia as a successful global player capable of standing against (or even outperform) other leading nations; the latter conveys instead the concept of 'unattained greatness,' as presented in Chapter 2. The combination of these two aspects – i.e., Russia's ability to fulfil its goals even in the face of Western vexation – ultimately magnifies the Russian *grandeur*.

The belief of stateness emerges from Russia's Syria narratives as strongly as greatpowerness. Stateness manifests itself most clearly in Russia's consistent framing of the crisis as a battle for sovereignty. Reference to such theme, oftentimes paired by the negation of alternative readings, appears in the majority of statements pronounced by the Russian security elite within the research timeframe. As written by Putin (2013a) in an early article for *The New York Times*, "Syria is not witnessing a battle for democracy, but an armed conflict between government and opposition in a multi-religious country." In Russian eyes, and differently from the West, the fight staged in Syria is not one between a grassroots democratic movement and an autocratic regime, but rather a struggle between a legitimate government and anti-systemic forces, the latter being of both secular and extremist religious nature. Within this framework, Moscow's support for Assad is not to be confused with a sympathy for the man; instead it mirrors a principled position in defence of traditional sovereignty and its processes (Averre 2019a, pp. 401-402; Katz 2013, pp. 38-39). If the regime has to change, it has to happen in a constitutional, law-abiding way, without foreign meddling.

In Syria, as in the Georgia and Ukraine cases, Russia shows an understanding of sovereignty in terms of authority and control mainly. Syria's 'battle for sovereignty' is simultaneously portrayed by the Russian security elite as a fight for territorial control – i.e., regime survival – and external authority – i.e., international agency. The same conceptual dualism is re-proposed when narrating Russia's involvement in the crisis, which is framed by Moscow as a testbed for *its own* sovereignty. In this case, the element of control transpires from the need to halt the spread of Islamist terrorism further across the region and, from there, to the North Caucasus – an eventuality that would impair Russian internal stability and territorial integrity. The element of

authority links instead with the exploitation of the crisis as a venue for strengthening Russia's international image as a legitimate great power, as noted above.

The Russian belief of stateness emerges also from the constant request of UN involvement in the Syria context. Russian statements consistently portray the UN as the only international body having the capability (legitimacy) to mediate and settle the crisis in the long-term (Lavrov 2014b,d, 2016b,e, 2018c; N/A 2017c; Putin 2016a). As Lavrov (2015d) declared: "It is our firm stance that the solution to any global issue, including the fight against terrorism, must be based on international law and on decisions of the UN Security Council, which bears the brunt of responsibility for global peace and security." The authority bestowed on the UN by the Russian security elite does not merely convey a solidarist international attitude, but aims at reinforcing Russia's own international status and position vis-à-vis the crisis. In fact the UN(SC) acquires relevance as the place where Russia can coordinate its action with other permanent members (e.g., the US), find legitimation for its independent politico-strategic action (e.g., Astana negotiations), and balance against others (e.g., by vetoing UNSC resolutions that are not coherent with Russian beliefs and interests). Once again, stateness and greatpowerness intermingle.

Overall, as a result of the manifestation of stateness in terms of authority and control mainly, the Russian approach shows a starkly Westphalian interpretation of international relations — wherein the the principle of formal state equality and the disproportionate privileges of great powers find a difficult balance. On the one hand, one can spot the idea of formal equality hiding behind Russia's rejection of non-UNSC-sanctioned interventions in Syria and the call for strict adherence to collectively agreed decisions (at international and/or local level). Relevant to this case is the consistent push to hold intra-Syrian negotiations as the ultimate tool to settle the crisis. Putin (2013a) himself referred to formal equality when, writing about Syria, he noted: "There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessing, we must not forget that God created us equal."

On the other hand, Russia hardly behaves accordingly. In fact not even the US, Iran, and Turkey are considered as full peers by the Russian elite. While Washington's contribution was originally believed essential to the termination of the conflict (Vladykin 2015), enthusiasm for co-

managing the crisis with the US – the great power *par excellence* – soon faded away, replaced by a bitter resentment for Washington's (perceived) lack of willingness to find common solutions. Seen as abdicating their role, the US was framed by Russia as less than a great power – especially in moral terms (see also above). That is the very reason why Russia felt forced to search for allies elsewhere and found them in Iran and Turkey – "not really a couple of countries who are very much natural in doing something together" (Lavrov 2017c). But no matter how effective this trilateral cooperation might have been, Iran and Turkey *de facto* remain a second choice – second-tier powers coopted by the Russian leader to fulfil Syria-specific goals.

Finally, the belief of ascriptiveness, too, is confirmed by the Syrian case. However, here ascriptiveness is not communicated via widespread references to the Russian history and ethnos — as it was in the Georgia and Ukraine contexts. Instead it is rendered somehow more indirectly, via broader narratives that point to Russia's mission in the world and its moral superiority — which are ultimately rooted in the (here unspoken) assumption that Moscow lies at the centre of a civilisation of its own, as observed in Chapter 2.

On the one hand, ascriptiveness emerges from the moralising tones employed by Russian officials to detail the country's fight against the IS, which is depicted as a threat to the whole civilised world comparable to fascism (Notte 2016, p. 62; Pieper 2019, p. 374). The narrative surrounding the recapturing of Palmyra stands as a perfect example of Russia's civilisational mission in Syria, where Moscow revives the Soviet myth of the liberation of Europe during the Second World War (Williams & Souza 2016, p. 52). At times the emphasis surrounding this discourse acquires messianic tones typical of religious speech; and in fact the Russian Orthodox Church frequently expressed its support for Moscow's 'crusade' against IS (Notte 2016, p. 62). Not surprisingly, this kind of position brings with it also a binary framing of the enemy, whereby all anti-governmental groups — irrespective of their secular or Islamic extremist nature — blur together and are treated the same way; this eases the Russian efforts to depict the support for Assad as moral (or the others' as immoral), and justifies the indiscriminate military treatment of those groups (Notte 2016, p. 65).

In parallel, Moscow sets forth an image of itself as morally superior to Western nations, to the extent that, unlike them, it abides by the true norms of the international society — as per

stateness (Averre 2019b). As declared in quite direct terms by Lavrov (2014a) well before the military intervention, Russia "would like to avoid that another regime change is implemented because of somebody's personal enemies and hatred. *Adults do not conduct politics this way*" (emphasis mine). The scolding of Western leaders mirrors in somewhat parodic terms what Russia has consistently perceived as a comparable behaviour from the Western side since the 1990s. The Russian security elite tries to unveil the true nature of the old teachers. The "selfish considerations" (Lavrov 2017d) and preposterous re-interpretations of international norms that seemingly drive the US and their allies are contrasted with the Russian line of action, which is depicted as coherent, considerate, open to dialogue, and aimed at "promoting a positive, unifying agenda in international affairs," on the basis of consolidated principles (Lavrov 2014e, 2015c, 2016d; N/A 2017b).

5.1.2. Scientific beliefs

The security elite's interpretation of the Syria crisis renders an holistic and deterministic worldview. Moscow made sense of the Syrian 'spring' and the ensuing war as the result of intersecting historical and political trends, bearing the seeds of present instability.

At the most superficial level, this is evident in the variegated accounts that Russian commentators gave of those events — at once a crisis of local socio-political structures, regional equilibria, and global governance; a consequence of Assad's poor governance and US' malevolence; a threat to Syrian sovereignty as well as to sovereignty as a principle; an opportunity and a danger for Russia (Adamsky 2020). Such multifarious reading of the Syrian events might be seen as the result of a chaotic propaganda machine that tries to diversify its messages, in the attempt to convince the widest possible audience of the Russian perspective. Of course, it would be naive not to assume a certain degree of instrumentalism in the Russian narratives, but even so they still say something of the way the security elites thinks. Besides finding its equivalents in the Georgia and Ukraine cases, the interpretation of the Syrian crisis as 'many things at once' did not result in a chaotic mess of disconnected propagandistic tales, but detailed a complex and rather orderly view on those events and their violent outcome. In particular, the Russian security elite placed the Syria war at the end of a linear succession of crises purposefully orchestrated according to an evil design

that takes advantage of pre-existing tensions to trigger and exploit instability. Once again, the concept of 'colour revolution' recapitulates this view.

In a famous article, Gerasimov (2016) detailed the Syria crisis as a textbook case of colour revolution — i.e., "a state coup, organised from the outside," within the framework of a hybrid campaign that, first, destabilises already fragile countries via economic pressures and social engineering, and then capitalises on chaos to take control of state institutions, also militarily. According to the Russian Chief of the GS, the transformation of spontaneous peaceful demonstrations into organised armed revolt and the subsequent intervention of terrorists testify to the artificial, foreign-led character of the Syria crisis. By taking advantage of pre-existing socio-economic cleavages, the US are sowing 'controlled chaos' across Syria (and the region), in order to implement regime change and accomplish forcefully their democratisation agenda (Lavrov 2013; Shoigu quoted in Tikhonov 2017b). Besides being detrimental to intra- and inter-state stability, such practice is also fundamentally amoral, in the eyes of Moscow, inasmuch it leads to the forceful imposition of Western values and governance systems onto societies who are alien to them, thereby relativising the principles of sovereignty and pluralism upon which international relations shall be based (Averre & Davies 2015). Open discussions about replacing Assad among Washington and allies only consolidated such a view across the Russian security elite.

The interpretation of the Syria crisis as a colour revolution reflects a more comprehensive view on the recent history of international relations. In fact the Syria events were not seen as a unique case; quite the opposite, they were framed as yet another episode in the patterned succession of American attempts to 'engineer global geopolitics' (Lavrov 2015b, 2016c, 2017a, 2018a). In other words, the Syria crisis was understood by the Russians as a follow-on of the same destabilising US foreign policy that led to colour revolutions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Georgia, Libya, Ukraine. Not by chance the same exact argument was expressed by the Russian security elite also in the contexts of the Georgia and Ukraine wars (see Chapters 3 and 4). There as here, events were perceived as the necessary, intentional outcome of an actor (the US) that conspires against international stability to its own advantage.

Two corollaries of holism and determinism are confirmed in the Syria context. The first is serious concern regarding the transmissibility of conflict. Russia's security elite voice a serious

concern about the potential ramifications of the crisis and its horizontal/vertical escalation. Russian commentators soon started to label the events unfolding in Syria as more than a civil war, but rather as an armed conflict approaching regional breadth (e.g., Gerasimov 2016). The same perception transpires, under a more positive light, from statements regarding the effects of the intervention, by which Moscow is said to have stabilised the situation not only in Syria but in the whole region (Vladykin 2015); the implicit assumption is that the crisis was far more than local. Yet even when recognising the alleged containment of the Syria crisis, the eventuality of a new escalation or its re-appearance somewhere else are not ruled out completely. The perceived endurance of such risk stems from two aspects of the crisis. On the one hand, its 'coloured,' foreign-led nature: to the extent that the US have enough resources to back their nefarious policies, similar events will remain highly likely (Shoigu, quoted in Tikhonov 2017b; see also my prior observations regarding Western interference). On the other hand, the same outcome is explained by the cancerous nature of the terrorist threat, which by definition has a global outreach.

The second corollary points to Russia's perceived vulnerability. Moving from the considerations above, the Russian security elite develops an associated, deeper concern about the security of Russia itself — not only because of the traditional fear that (foreign-led) regime change could happen also within the Federation, but also because of the potential grip of extremist Islamic instances in territories lying closer to Moscow, namely Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the North Caucasus (Lapin 2018a,b). The threat of returning jihadists has been stressed throughout by Russian officials, highlighting once again the strict correlation between Russian and Syrian security (Putin 2013a; Syromolotov 2016, 2017; Rogachev 2017). As Putin stated during an official visit to the troops in Syria: "Here, in Syria, far from your native borders, you are fulfilling precisely this task — you are defending your country. Because by helping the people of Syria to preserve its statehood, to repel the attack of terrorists, you are inflicting and inflict a devastating blow, defeating those who directly, impudently, and openly threatened our country" (quoted in Molchanov 2017).

The holistic component of Russia's worldview finds expression also in the consistent verbal and practical validation of the strong nexus between the military and political domains. To begin with, members of the security elite have frequently stressed that the success of military operations

was a necessary precondition for a stable political settlement (Churkin 2016; Lavrov 2015e; Putin 2015b, 2017). For how trivial this may sound, it represents a consistent feature of Russian discourse on Syria, and a creed attended with dedication in order to solve the conflict *on Russian terms*. In this sense, the early proposal of peace talks made by Moscow to the US just one month after the start of military operations is not to be seen as an attempt to disengage as quick as possible, but rather as a way to capitalise politically on military gains since the early stages of the campaign (Kofman 2016). Similar instances have repeated themselves throughout the referent timeframe, showing a direct correlation between Russia's success on the battlefield and its ability to force Washington into agreements of sorts. Indeed, in light of the high political value recognised to the military campaign, Moscow never stopped its operations even when engaged in peace talks or agreeing ceasefires — or after announcing its withdrawal. The underlying rationale was always the same: to take credit for creating the conditions to settle the crisis while retaining the ability to stir the course of its very settlement by shaping the military situation on the ground (MacLeod 2016).

As noted by Gvosdev (2015), even the timing, speed, and targets of the Russian sorties have aimed at conveying a strong political message (to the West). In terms of timing, it is worth observing that the Russian aerial campaign officially started two days after B. Obama warned Russia that the US would not tolerate a military intervention in support of Assad. The rapid pace and high density of the Russian bombings, besides being in line with the country's mil-strategic beliefs, can also be interpreted as one more attempt to distance Russia from the US — the latter being considered as slow-to-react and ultimately ineffective in their engagement against IS. Finally, the choice of targets demonstrated that, for the Russian security elite, there was no significant difference between rebel and extremist religious forces; hence the practice of bombing backed with facts the Russian political and moral stance about the absence of a 'moderate opposition' to the (legitimate) regime, and the framing of the whole Syria crisis as a clash between governmental and anti-systemic forces.

The other pillar of the Russian worldview is the Huntingtonian belief – which is associated with a competitive, culture-sensitive, and ultimately pessimistic outlook to international relations. This belief, too, is reflected in the way the Russian security elite interpreted the Syrian events.

Previous paragraphs of this chapter showed already a good deal of Russia's mindset and interests in the Syria context. The Russian elite perceived that scenario as being quintessentially competitive, mirroring a broader zero-sum dynamic ongoing at regional and global level.

Western commentaries have most frequently seen in a realist type of strategic competition focused on material interests the main factor behind Russia's actions in Syria. According to that perspective, Russia supported Assad's regime for three main purposes: securing access to its only naval base in the Mediterranean, the port of Tartus; securing the regime's survival long enough for it to pay back its financial debts with Moscow; and increasing regional leverage, in order to place more energy and arms contracts (e.g., Borshchevskaya 2018; Mason 2018, p. 104; Valenta & Friedman Valenta 2016). While these factors undoubtedly featured in the constellation of Russia's concerns, I believe they did not occupy central stage in the security elite's thinking and decision-making on Syria.

First, from a narrative point of view, the Russian elite did not insist on the material and hard-strategic aspects of its involvement in the crisis/war. Except for the (successful) testing and export of modern Russian weaponry – which is referred to as a demonstration of Russia being a first-rank military power (Putin, quoted in Tikhonov 2018) – material self-interest was discussed in connection with Western and terrorist (IS) aims only. Second, from a factual point of view, Russia reaped very modest material gains from its involvement in Syria (Allison 2013, pp. 805-808). Damascus was and remains a low-tier buyer of Russian weapons; rivals, or not exactly allies of Assad, including Israel and Turkey, entered with Russia into much more conspicuous defence-commercial relations — and yet Moscow was ready to endanger these by intervening in Syria, hence signalling that those deals were no essential interest. Moreover, saving Assad's regime from collapse will hardly grant Russia its money back, as the lack of high (oil) revenues and post-war destruction did and will hinder Syria's ability to pay back its debt. Finally, while the naval facility in Tartus (as well as Khmeimim's airbase) does provide the Russian AF with an advanced stronghold in the Mediterranean, its strategic utility should not be overestimated. Not only is it of limited size, capable of harbouring only small naval contingents, but also its operability is totally dependent on the Russian Black Sea Fleet's access to the Mediterranean, through the Bosphorus. Since both are under *de facto* NATO control, Tartus appears more of a liability than an asset.

Ideational and cultural-civilisational factors have a greater role than material factors in the Russian elite's assessment of the competitive, zero-sum game being played in Syria. On the one hand, the variety of Russian diplomatic and military moves that Moscow made to obtain and secure greater leverage on the Syrian portfolio indicate that the definition of Syria's fate was the ultimate aim for Russia. Quite the opposite, that was seen by the elite as an intermediate step towards the broader goal of regaining regional and global clout — coherent with the self-perception of greatpowerness (Charap 2015a; MacLeod 2016; Mason 2018, p. 105; Melamedov 2018). In particular, to Moscow the participation in the Syrian dispute was instrumental to the reacquisition of a voice in high level global politics, breaking from the post-Crimea isolation that the West tried to enforce (Charap, Treyger, Geist 2019, p. 7; Kofman & Rojansky 2018). Theoretically, the Russian security elite could have tried to achieve the same goal by different means, potentially even accepting the Western crisis management recipes. Yet no such option appeared on the Russian agenda: even in those instances when Moscow tried to approach the West constructively, 'act responsibly,' and broker a diplomatic solution, the Russian position always developed in opposition to the West — thereby following an exclusive, zero-sum approach to regaining international voice.

On the other hand, the strong ideational and cultural-civilisational dimension of the competition envisioned by the Russian elite was well represented at narrative level. Two such aspects are given particular relevance. First, the conflict between pro- and anti-regime forces on the grounds of Syria is understood as more than a mere civil war, being depicted instead as an existential clash between a secular, multi-confessional model of statehood and the 'evil' forces of religious extremism (Putin 2013a; Notte 2016). Second, and grafted on that interpretation, the Russian elite perceived a broader ongoing confrontation between civilisational models: that represented by the global fight against international terrorism and Russia's own struggle against the (post-Westphalian) re-interpretation of international norms and principles sponsored by the West. Either case, a *katechonic* narrative portraying Russia as engaged against the forces of moral evil (terrorism) and political chaos (following Western attempts at normative engineering) surfaces, in conformity with the general directions of Russian SC.

5.1.3. Conclusion

The Syrian case validated all politico-strategic beliefs enshrined in the Russian SC. Greatpowerness and stateness are the two constitutive beliefs emerging most strongly from Russian words and deeds. In particular, these insist on Russia's responsibilities as a leading international actor, and the defence of the Westphalian interpretation of the principle of sovereignty. It is worth noting that the theme of responsibility is developed more in terms of Russian duties to preserve regional and global stability, rather than rights; the opposite is true in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. Likewise, the belief of ascriptiveness plays a less relevant role in the Syrian context, but still finds resonance in Moscow's predicaments around its higher moral qualities vis-à-vis the West and the civilisation nature of the fight against terrorism.

The previously identified scientific beliefs inform Russia's Syria policy, which displays clear holistic, deterministic, and Huntingtonian traits. In fact the framing of the Syrian conflict as a 'colour revolution' brings together the security elite's perception of intermingling domains (of competition), a concern for the transmissibility of conflict, and the traditional Russian feeling of vulnerability. The normative, ideational dimension of the Syrian conflict is given more attention than the competition for material power and resources.

5.2. Military-strategic beliefs

In this section I verify whether the Russian use of force in Syria conforms to the expectations cast in Chapter 2. In particular, I check whether the decision to deploy in Syria and the actual use of armed violence in that theatre followed the behavioural expectations I built based on the identified Russian intentional and operational beliefs. The former contain information on *when* a security elite would make use of military force. In the case of Russia, two scenarios were identified, each implying a different proclivity towards (the escalation of) conflict: higher in the geo-ideational space of Russianness, lower in the geo-ideational space of non-Russianness — which Syria belongs to. Instead operational beliefs set preferences on *how* to employ military force, which Russia would do in an asymmetric and pro-active way. As I show below, the Syrian case confirms all these

expectations.

5.2.1 Intentional beliefs

The analysis of the Russian SC (Chapter 2) led me to hypothesise that in the 'geo-ideational space of non-Russianness' — i.e., outside of the *russkij mir* — the Russian elite would display a low proclivity to war; if deciding to employ force, it would do so following a gradualist approach more respectful of the international judicial standards of legitimate intervention — compared to the *russkij mir*, where the legitimacy of the issue was decided 'internally,' according to Russia's own logic only. The way Russia behaved throughout the Syria crisis and then employed military force confirms this expectation.

Also in this case, to understand the dynamics of Russia's growing involvement in the crisis it is worth remembering that the assessment of threats, costs, opportunities is shaped by the identity and worldviews held by the security elite. The first half of this chapter reconstructed the beliefs underpinning such perceptions. These observations will be essential to put back together the likely set of considerations that led Moscow to react to the Syrian events via *bor'ba* mainly, shifting to *vojna* comparatively much later and less abruptly than in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine.

To begin with, it is worth observing that Syria does not fall within the *russkij mir*. First, geographically, Syria sits far from Russian borders, in a region which has never been at the centre of Moscow's concerns (see Introduction). Second, and related, there is no history of Russian control over Syria. It was not a federated unit of the Soviet Union and had not been part of the Russian Empire. While Syria is the Middle Eastern state with which Moscow has had the closest relationship since the 1950s, these ties have entailed a rather pragmatic and limited nature. Third, no cultural or ethnic frame drives Russia-Syria relations. On select occasions, the Russian elite referred to the religious and human ties between the two countries — including the large number of Christian Orthodox believers and Russian citizens living in Syria (Allison 2013, p. 804). But the presence of these groups is no sufficient condition for Syria to climb up the ladder of Russian interests and be included in the *russkij mir*. Both demographics are quite small and are not

comparable with those living, for example, in Georgia, Ukraine, and even other Middle Eastern countries (e.g., Israel) (Dannreuther 2012, p. 551). Moreover, ethnic Russians and Russian passport holders in Syria seemed not to be under such grave danger as they were, according to Moscow's narrative, in Georgia and Ukraine. Early estimates by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that the Russian diaspora in Syria largely supported Assad's opposition, and therefore were not heavily targeted by anti-governmental forces (Allison 2013, p. 804). Hence, no urgency to protect 'Russianness' surfaced in the Syria context.

Based on the above, one can safely conclude that Syria lacked the geographical, historical, and ethno-cultural attributes to belong to the 'geo-ideational space of Russianness.' Select aspects of bilateral relations might have justified Moscow's comparatively higher interest in the Syrian destiny (compared to other Middle Eastern countries), but conditions were absent for the Russian sense of self to embrace Syria — differently from the Georgia and Ukraine cases. In fact, as noted at the end of section 5.1.1., the belief of ascriptiveness was not prominent in the Russian Syria narrative. This is relevant inasmuch as such belief and the perceptions it fostered played a key role in the definition of Russia's decision to intervene in Georgia and Ukraine (see 3.2.1 and 4.2.1). Given the absence of a similar ideational framework, the Russian security elite did not perceive the Syria crisis as inherently 'important' or 'radical' since the beginning — i.e., a crisis having direct, even existential consequences for Russia's self-perceived role. As no extraordinary threat to Russia emanated from Syria, no extraordinary counter-measures had to be taken: Moscow stuck with means of *bor'ba* as the prevalent form of acting in the Syria context, as appropriate under any 'normal scenario' of international competition — according to the Russian SC (see Chapter 2).

This reasoning helps make sense of the nature of the Russian involvement of the Syria crisis till 2015, hence of the reason why Moscow did not intervene militarily in support of Assad right at the onset of the civil war and for quite some time after that. Yet, eventually, Russia did intervene in Syria. What kind of considerations likely led the Russian security elite to break its military abstentionism and deploy its AF in theatre, four years later? I argue that Russia's decision to eventually intervene in Syria was prompted by two long-term background factors and two context-specific conditions that consolidated around 2015 — and their interaction with the Russian SC.

On the one hand, two long-term factors provided the Russian elite with a very strong interest in the events. First, as noted above, even though Russia-Syria bilateral relations were nothing like the ones between Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine — Moscow's relation with Damascus was long, close, and unique enough to make the level of Russian attention to and awareness of local events higher than in other non-*russkij mir* countries. In a sense, Russia was pre-invested in the crisis scenario.

Second, and more importantly, even if the Russian view on the crisis was not strongly influenced by ascriptiveness, the elite's self-perception and worldview coalesced to frame the Syria events as something more than an unimportant historical accident. As observed in the first part of this chapter, the idea of Russia's righteous responsibility as a barrier to chaos featured prominently in the elite's narrative, underpinned by the belief of greatpowerness; likewise, the belief of stateness magnified the Russian elite's horror in the face of collapsing Syrian state institutions and their loss of control over the nation's territory, delivering the country in the hands of terrorists and foreign intruders (see 5.1.1.). Moreover, the Russian worldview framed Syria as more than a local war happening far from Russian borders — as such theoretically irrelevant to Moscow — but rather as yet another instance of the ongoing international fight to (re)define the parameters of global order (see 5.1.2.). Depending on the outcome, the Syria conflict would either contribute to re-establish the principles of traditional sovereignty and secularism — supported by Moscow — or lead to their substitution by the West or, worse, Islamist terrorists.

This complex perception of the events emerged right after the Syrian 'spring' turned violent and was consolidated in the following years, up until when, in early 2015, two contextual events tipped the Russian security elite's assessment of the conflict's evolution: first, the blatant inability of Assad's forces to regain control over Syria and, second, enduring indications that regime change was still on Western agendas. Both trends became increasingly evident by summer 2015, notwithstanding Russia's measures of *bor'ba* (see Introduction). These events did not bring about a fundamental change of the Russian Syria narrative but rather were incorporated into the aforementioned original framing of the crisis, bringing the elite to conclude that the battle for order of which Syria was a discrete instance was soon to be lost. While, *per se*, the limited geographical and military nature of the conflict did not justify the direct use of force, *bor'ba* alone was proving

insufficient to prevent the collapse of Syrian institutions, fulfil Russia's great power mission, and prevent the important ramifications for global order of such failure. In other words, even though not taking place in the *russkij mir*, the Syria war started being associated with consequences exceeding its local nature, more similar in scale to the 'important' and 'radical' implications proper of regional and global conflicts. In the face of this realisation, the Russian elite decided to deploy military force — as *vojna* is deemed an appropriate method to resolve such high-stake controversies, in line with the Russian SC.

Not only is the (slow) pace of transition from *bor'ba* to *vojna* in Syria coherent with my expectations on Russia's behaviour outside the *russkij mir*, but also the modes of such intervention are. In fact the Russian AF intervened in Syria only after the Syrian government had formally invited Moscow to provide military support — as mandated by the UN Charter. In other words, Russia intervened in accordance with the universally recognised standards of legitimate intervention enshrined in the *jus ad bellum*. This mode of intervention is completely different from the Georgia and Ukraine cases — where references to international law, while certainly rooted in Russia's strategic cultural insistence on judicial formalism, appeared as rather weak attempts to sell to the international audience a decision taken on the grounds of Russia's own ascriptive logic only. But besides this initial divergence in the modes of intervention, in none of the three case studies did Russia conduct war in conformity to the prescriptions of the *jus in bello* — which testifies to the bloody, destructive nature of the Russian way of war, irrespective of the specifics of a theatre of operations. This is what I turn to now.

5.2.2. Operational beliefs

Though oftentimes depicted by mainstream commentary as an unusual operation for the Russian military, the Syria campaign displayed stark elements of continuity with the earlier Georgia and Ukraine campaigns — thereby confirming my expectation about the consistent application of Russia's operational beliefs (military preferences) across theatres. In particular, the pursuit of an asymmetric, pro-active use of force emerges from the analysis of Russian (accounts on) military doings in Syria. As in the other cases, and only with partial deviations, the Russian AF emphasised

conventional land operations aimed at physically destroying the opposition by means of mass and manoeuvre, while taking advantage of a decisive command superiority.

Russian operations in Syria display an asymmetric approach focused on the land domain of the conventional military spectrum. While in the early stages of the Syrian crisis enemy forces employed insurgent tactics mainly, by the time of the Russian intervention clashes gained momentum and transformed first into a civil war, and then into a fully-fledged conflict. According to a number of Russian officers — including the Chief of the GS and the operation's commanders — 'terrorist groupings' carried out actions comparable to those of a regular army, staging open-field, high intensity, and technologically modern operations (Baranets 2017; Lapin a,b; Pochiniuk 2019; Tikhonov 2017e,f). Supported by heavy weaponry and an armoured component worth about 1500 tanks and infantry vehicles, terrorists operated in an organised way, exploiting the terrain's features to conduct complex offensive manoeuvres aimed at concentrating man- and fire-power (Baranets 2017; Tikhonov 2017f).

The actual capability of rebels and IS militants to conduct such operations was likely magnified by the Russian military for self-interested purposes, but this narrative and the actual military measures employed by Moscow to confront them testify to the security elite's focus on the conventional sphere — even to the point of forcing enemy capabilities into pre-conceived interpretative frames. Russian commentary on Syria *virtually lacks* any references to the theme of counter-insurgency as framed in Western doctrines (Clark 2021, p. 28). With the exception of a few notes on terrorist tactics and the special requirements of the Syrian battlefield (Dvornikov 2018; Pochiniuk 2019), the Russian military has followed a well-known operative script. Reference to the allegedly revolutionary character of Russian 'humanitarian operations' (*gumanitarnye operatsii*) should not mislead the reader, as they merely qualify as (fire-heavy) combat operations in a urban environment, (ideally) anticipated by the evacuation of civilians (Pochiniuk 2019). Even when discussing the potential reappearance of a threat similar to Syria's closer to Russia, military professionals propose remedies falling firmly within the conventional spectrum (Lapin 2018a,b).

The conventional, land-centred character of the Russian operations in Syria will emerge clearly in the remainder of this section. Yet it is worth clarifying immediately one aspect of partial deviation from the operational preferences outlined in Chapter 2. In apparent contradiction with

my hypotheses, the Russian Air-Space Forces — not the Ground Forces — have played the main role in the Syrian theatre. Both Western and Russian commentaries focus on this aspect, noting that the strikes performed by the Air-Space Forces established "the prerequisites for the change of the correlation of forces on the ground," thereby ensuring victory (Pukhov 2017). But while heavy reliance on air power was indeed unprecedented for Moscow, this should not be mistaken for a change of Russia's 'comfort domain' of military operations. In fact the relative increase of the appreciation of air operations took place within an inter-service campaign still based on the assumption that the control of land and ground operations are key to modern conflict — and Syria in particular, where the chief military objective was to re-establish governmental control over territory.

Consequently, Moscow has contributed land forces to the operation — including tanks, artillery, engineers, military police, and *Spetsnaz*;[62] and while the brunt of combat was taken by the Syrian AF (together with Iranian colleagues and Hezbollah fighters), all ground operations have been carefully planned and supervised (executed) by Russian 'advisers.' These specialists were embedded in all levels of the Syrian military establishment, tasked with framing military actions within "a single thought" (Gerasimov, quoted in Baranets 2017). In so doing, Moscow established a tight control on the functioning of the Syrian AF and, consequently, on the conduct of land operations. Their implementation in accordance with Russian operational preferences is illustrated below, and further demonstrated by a recent military exercise re-staging Syrian operations (Falichev 2020). The enduring key role of the Ground Forces in the Russian military establishment and their actual contribution to the Syrian campaign are further testified to by the fact that the Army – not the Air-Space Forces – suffered the majority of battle deaths and received the greatest share of medals and honours (Ramm 2019, p. 2). Overall, then, the Syria campaign does not show any change of the relative weight between Air-Space and Ground Forces in the Russian SC, but rather a different, context-sensitive way of approaching ground operations.

Both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the Russian approach to asymmetry are confirmed by the Syrian case. In *quantitative* terms, Russian operations showed the expected

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[62] The relative decrease in the intensity of operations was not matched by a reduction of the ground contingent. Quite the opposite, between 2016-2018 Russia deployed more ground units, with the aim of strengthening the hold on territory (Melamedov 2018, p. 6).

emphasis on mass and manoeuvre, to destroy enemy assets by pursuing the convergence and concentration of manpower, hardware, and fires. As declared by Gerasimov, the "destruction of combatants" (*unichtozhenie boevykov*) was the only possible means to achieve peace (quoted in Baranets 2017). Virtually all Russian accounts highlight the destructive nature of the operations conducted, insisting on the high volume of air-strikes and the number of objectives destroyed (e.g., Sevast'ianov 2016; Shoigu 2017; Tikhonov 2017c). As noted by many analysts, the real proportion of precision strikes against the total number of bombs dropped is liminal. Russia preferred to carry out massed strikes with 'dumb bombs', in accordance with "a clumsy strategy of indiscriminately bombing whole neighbourhoods and towns" under rebel and terrorist control (Williams & Souza 2016, pp. 49, 54). According to one analyst, the resulting use of air assets resembles more the industrial-type frontal aviation support of the XX century, than the accurate and dynamic targeting of modern (Western) operations (Shield 2018, p. 227). the disproportionate payload of the missiles delivered by Russian aircrafts is also coherent with the campaign's absolutist military goal, which was further pursued by staging simultaneous, converging, in-depth attacks (Thomas 2020, pp. 7-10, 14).

Accounts of the battles for the liberation of Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo stress the importance of such manoeuvres to confuse, pressure, divide and finally obliterate hostile groupings, especially in urban settings (Dvornikov 2018; Tikhonov 2017d,g). Breakthroughs were achieved by concentrating mechanised assault detachments reinforced by engineering units armed with flamethrowers and backed by direct artillery fires and air strikes along the whole depth of the enemy line (Tanenia & Uriupin 2017; Tikhonov 2017f,g). Noticeably, continuous and sustained fire damage has been achieved in the land domain by the alternate, coordinated shots of two or more heavy artillery or tank units, implementing the so-called 'carousel' (*karusel'*) technique; the rhythm and density of carousel fire aim at destroying enemy forces and installations, as well as lowering the morale of the adversary (Falichev 2020; Thomas 2020, p. 14).

As the previous paragraphs have already hinted at, *qualitative* asymmetry surfaced from the consistent staging of complex operations involving two or more military services or security forces. As recognised by Colonel General A. Zhuravlev, the Syrian experience validates the Russian consolidated practice of conducting such kind of inter-service/-force operations (Pochiniuk 2019).

Coordination has not taken place only between the air and land domains, as illustrated above; special, irregular, and naval assets have been involved, too (Dvornikov 2018; Tanenia & Uriupin 2017, p. 20). I will develop further on the latter's role when discussing the deterrence complex deployed by Russia around Syria. Here suffice to notice that the flotilla positioned by Moscow in the Eastern Mediterranean has participated actively in combat operations since October 2015 (N/A 2015; Sevast'ianov 2016) and contributed, *inter alia*, to the liberation of Deir ez-Zor with preparatory fires of *Kalibr* cruise missiles (Dvornikov 2018). The stress on the coordination of efforts in the pursuit of set goals is brought one step further in Syria by the coalition nature of the operation, and is given further resonance by the holistic approach enshrined in the Russian SC.

Russian operations in Syria also confirm the general preference for a pro-active use of military force. Pro-activeness – i.e., seizing the initiative – is seen as both a cause and consequence of the aforementioned asymmetric operations (Gavrilov 2016). As noted by Colonel General A. Lapin (20180424), the joint use of forces and the massive employment of firepower "made it possible to seize the initiative and ensure the offensive actions of government forces in all directions." Irrespective of such connection, the suddenness (*vnezapnost'*) and rapidity (*stremitel'nost'*) of military actions are consistently identified as key factors of successful operations (Tikhonov 2017g). This retains validity both at the operational-tactical and strategic-operational level, as Russian officers frequently remark that the overall secrecy (*skrytnost'*) and swiftness of the re-deployment of hard power and man-power in the Syrian theatre allowed to develop a material and psychological advantage over competitors, thereby gaining the upper hand on the battlefield (Baranets 2017; Sevast'ianov 2016; Lapin 20180424). Besides the efficiency of (re)deployment, another factor enabling pro-active military operations was the conduct of in-depth, continuous reconnaissance, in order to "identify and destroy" enemy assets "in a minimally short time" (Solomatin, quoted in Tikhonov 2017f). The type of surveillance assets deployed in Syria may seem disproportionate relative to the kind of targets to be hit (Groll 2015). Yet such choice is coherent not only with the Russian fear of conflict escalation — as in a higher intensity conflict those assets would be much needed — but also with the will to keep extensive situational awareness over the theatre of operations. By enjoying a complete informational landscape, Russia

was able to set the tempo of the armed conflict in Syria. This intimately links to the specific theme of C2, to which I turn now.

The Syrian experience testifies to the key value attributed by Russia to C2 and the achievement of command superiority, coherently with the expectations built in Chapter 2. This is evident in two ways at least. First, Russian military commentary detailed at length the "colossal and highly effective efforts" of national C2 bodies, suggesting that their structure and functioning were necessary preconditions for achieving high combat readiness and, ultimately, military success (Pukhov 2017). A three-level C2 system linking Moscow to the Syrian battlefield enabled the continuous flow of information, distribution of orders, and coordination of actions from the strategic to the tactical level (Dvornikov 2018; Sevast'ianov 2016; Tikhonov 2017d; see discussion in Adamsky 2018b, pp. 18-19; Clark 2021, pp. 8-23).[63] The NMDC and the GS sat at the top of the C2 hierarchy, tasked with coordinating Russia's military and non-military efforts and setting the overall goals of the campaign. Upon reception of these military-strategic guidelines, the Russian commander of the Syrian campaign, supported by the staff of the Khmeimim command post, developed detailed plans for the use of Russian (and Syrian) forces in theatre. Such plans were then executed by the operational groups dislocated across the Syrian territory; while formal leadership of (land) operations was entrusted to the Syrian GS, *de facto* Russian military advisers maintained a firm grasp on the execution phase, too. As a whole, this layered system of C2 enabled the Russian security elite to centralise decision-making while retaining a diffuse awareness of the developments on the ground. By ensuring the vertical and horizontal flow of information, Russia granted itself both the ability to elaborate and adjust decisions in relatively short timeframes, and the capability to coordinate complex military actions. In other words, the specific arrangement of the Russian C2 in Syria supported pro-activeness and asymmetry simultaneously.

Second, emphasis on C2 shone through Russia's externally oriented efforts to establish command superiority – i.e., the consistent attempt to disrupt or destroy the adversary's C2 system. On the destructive side, one should note that the Russian air and naval strikes targeted extensively the critical infrastructures and logistical nodes of terrorists (Tanenia & Uriupin 2017, p. 20).

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[63] See specifics of some of the automated C2 systems deployed by Russia in Syria in Ramm (2019, pp. 31-32), Thomas (2020, p. 4).

During the first month of operations only, Russia destroyed circa 2.000 terrorist facilities, including more than 250 command posts, with the clear aim of offsetting the adversary's C2 (Lapin 20180424). Non-kinetic operations oriented towards command superiority relied heavily on EW. Notable the deployment of the *Krasukha*-4, reported to be able to jam and take over the adversary's communications and EW systems (Stupples 2015); together with the *Krasukha*, other fixed and mobile systems were deployed (Gundarov 2021; Suomenaro & Cafarella 2018). As in the case of missile payloads and surveillance assets, also the EW complex built by Russia in Syria seems to overmatch terrorist capabilities. Besides being coherent with Russia's preference for quantitative asymmetry, the quantity and quality of Russian EW assets also responded to the operational need to contrast not only terrorist groupings but also, potentially, more sophisticated parties in the conflict, that is, Western forces — so as to dominate escalation in case of need (Groll 2015; McDermott 2015a). In fact the use of such EW capabilities resulted in the drastic reduction of the situational awareness and decision-making capabilities of competitors, now slower to react and exposed to Russian reflexive control. Overall, the roll out of destructive and disruptive operations prevented the adversaries of Russia from gaining command superiority over the Syrian theatre, instead easing Moscow's task to seize the initiative.

Finally, Russia's peculiar approach to strategic deterrence finds practical validation in the Syrian case. A deterrence bubble very similar to the one established in the Baltic region had gradually taken shape in and around Syria following the air incident with Turkey in November 2015 (Cimbala & McDermott 2016, pp. 538-539; Suomenaro & Cafarella 2018). This bubble developed across multiple domains, relying on the aforementioned EW complex and a variety of ground- and sea-based ballistic systems. These include the S-300 and S-400 air defence systems, the *Bastion* coastal defence system, vectors like the *Tochka* and *Iskander-M* ballistic missiles, as well as *Kalibr*-type cruise missiles. The positioning of launchers and the differing ranges of these missiles constituted a layered deterrence complex locking Syrian territory and airspace, as well as the Eastern Mediterranean off external interference. Once again, the high profile of this deterrence complex was at odds with the low-value targets on the Syrian territory, no matter their resemblance with a conventional army. As with the timing, speed, and choice of targets of the airstrikes (discussed above), this operative choice matches the security elite's asymmetric

preferences and simultaneously supports broader politico-strategic goals vis-a-vis the West (Clark 2021, p. 25; Suomeraro & Cafarella 2018; Thornton 2019). The escalation control granted to Russia by this A2/AD bubble increased the costs (risks) of action of non-allied parties in and around Syria, while signalling Moscow's willingness to deploy (employ) disproportionate means in defence of its objectives. This facilitated the conduction of military operations in the Syrian theatre, at the same time strengthening the diplomatic leverage within the region and possibly beyond.

Before closing this section, it is worth observing that the successful, pro-active implementation of asymmetric (conventional, mass-heavy, concerted) operations in the Syrian theatre was enabled by a renovated system of military logistics. As noted by R. McDermott (2015b), the so-called 'Material-Technical Support' (*Material'no-Tekhnicheskogo Obespecheniia*, MTO) was developed around 2010 and then perfected on the basis of Russia's own military experiences (mainly exercises) and an attentive analysis of the logistic challenges faced by NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The MTO shows a move beyond the traditional Russian over-reliance on railway infrastructures, in favour of a more even repartition of tasks with sea and air lines of communication — in the Central Military District. Moscow's renewed ability to exploit multi-domain logistical vectors allowed the deployment, sustenance, and withdrawal of troops in a theatre relatively close but not contiguous to the Russian mainland, without impairing their ability to conduct operations in accordance with consolidated operational beliefs (Cimbala & McDermott 2016). The (original) secrecy, rapidity, and effectiveness of Russian manoeuvres largely benefitted from the MTO.

5.2.3. Conclusion

Russian intentional and operational beliefs are verified by the Syrian case. As per expectations, Russia demonstrated a relatively low proneness to engage in war directly — compared to the *russkij mir*. This different behaviour is linked with the smaller role that the Russian belief of ascriptiveness played in Syria: since the country and its peoples were not framed as part of the Russian community, there was no sudden perception of a relevant, direct threat being directed to Russia through Syria (differently from Georgia and Ukraine). The later decision to intervene was

linked instead with the fact that the Syrian theatre, though not presenting Russia with a purported existential threat, gradually became to be perceived as part of a contest over the very principles of global order. Russia, as a self-perceived great power, could not allow itself to lose this contest. In a way, the mode of Russia's entrance in the Syrian war (upon formal invitation of Assad's government) symbolised the very principle of traditional sovereignty Moscow claimed to be defending on Syrian ground.

The analysis of the Syria case also confirmed my SC-driven expectations on Russia's asymmetric and pro-active use of military force. Indeed Syria is probably the case study that confirmed Russia's operational beliefs the fullest. This is particularly relevant considering the semi-irregular nature of the enemy fought by the Russian AF and the purportedly exceptional nature of their conduct, centred on the Air-Space Force. Yet the preceding pages have shown that Russia did not conduct airstrikes only and that land forces played a crucial role in the campaign. Moreover, the Russian security elite stuck with its XX century-style war-fighting even in the face of an adversary quite different from the Georgiana and Ukrainian AF, or even the ultimate conventional enemy — NATO. This testifies to a highly conservative approach to war, based on the (rather blind, yet efficacious in this case) re-proposition of consolidated military ideas rather than their adaptation to the conditions unfolding on the ground.

5.3. Conclusion

This chapter explored the development of Russian strategic cultural beliefs in relation to the Syria war, analysing how they affected the security elite's narratives, posture, and military operations. The Syria case was particularly relevant because it considered the only war Russia has fought in the 'geo-ideational space of non-Russianness' (i.e., outside the *russkij mir*) since 1991. This case study, too, confirmed and gave practical relevance to the expectations about Russian behaviour that I developed in Chapter 2. Moreover, the fact that, in Syria, the Russian security elite displayed the same approach to strategy and war-fighting shown in Georgia and Ukraine also strengthens the conceptual claims that underlined my analytical hypotheses — which saw SC as a ready-made cognitive framework informing a security elite's assessment of strategic interests and military

courses of action *irrespective of the specific referent scenario*. The consistency of Russian behaviour across the three different case studies testifies to the homeostatic outcomes of the security elite's beliefs system, and their resistance to change.

Russian behaviour in Syria differed from that in the Georgia and Ukraine cases across three dimensions only. Two of these are nuances in the development of the beliefs of ascriptiveness and greatpowerness. The former belief — which mirrors Russia's self-perception as a civilisational hub — occupied central stage in the Russian approach to the crises in the *russkij mir*; but in the case of Syria it played a secondary role, merely providing indirect support to the security elite's broader argument about its nation's might and global role. The relatively minor role of ascriptiveness in the case of Syria is coherent with the fact the latter does not belong to the *russkij mir*. Greatpowerness was key to the Russian narratives and actions in the Syria context but, differently from the Georgia and Ukraine cases, its development emphasised more the aspect of great power responsibilities, rather than great power rights or special prerogatives. But in all three cases, greatpowerness ultimately pointed to Russia's essential role as a (re)maker of international order.

The third peculiarity of this case study is somehow related to the previous two, and regards the lesser proclivity to engage in direct armed conflict demonstrated by Russia in Syria. As explained in the previous pages, the long-lasting abstention from military intervention in Syria was ultimately rooted in the latter's non-civilisational value for Moscow, so the eventual decision to deploy the AF stemmed from the maturation of the idea that the Syrian war — while not a direct threat to Russia — still was key to the Russian fulfilment of its great power mission as a defender of the 'true,' Westphalian principles of global order. Failure in Syria would have meant the failure of Russia as a great power — and this could not be allowed.

From a military perspective, it is interesting to notice that early Russian commentary framed Syria as an example of the changing forms of state confrontation. Gerasimov himself (2016; later quoted in Khudoleev 2018) defined the conflict as an instance of Western new generation or hybrid warfare and, on the basis of such assessment, he called for a change in Russia's approach to warfare. Surely, partial novelties and organisational re-arrangements at tactical-operational level helped Russia 'do more with less' – compared to previous Russian and Allied missions in the Middle East (Iddon 20171229; Sinclair 2020). It is precisely the detailed study of the Soviet war in

Afghanistan, Russia's own experience in Chechnya, as well as NATO campaigns in Kosovo and across the Middle East that allowed for such swifter tactical performances. This, however, did not reflect a fundamental reorientation of the Russian approach to war-fighting. As my analysis has shown, the Russian AF fought the Syria war following the same operational beliefs already displayed in Georgia and Ukraine (for a snapshot, see also: Shield 2018, p. 216). Unsurprisingly, Russia's ability to score some degree of success even in the absence of theatre-tailored military solutions might have contributed to the further ossification of a XX-century war-fighting style in the security elite's SC, producing an unrealistic faith in the capabilities of the Russian AF. Recent Russian analyses of the lessons learned in Syria and the rather sloppy military performance in the latest iteration of the Ukraine war (2022) seem to point in that direction. I will discuss these in the Conclusion of the thesis.

Conclusion

This thesis provided a SC-framed reinterpretation of the Russian way of war (2008-2018) — offering a map of the intellectual underpinnings of Moscow's approach to strategy and war-fighting and assessing their influence on the campaigns conducted in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria.

My research tackled two limitations of the existing scholarship on Russia's military-strategic behaviour: first, a tendency to disregard the nuances and inner logic of the Russian military-strategic mindset; second, a generally low conceptual thickness and limited recourse to Russian primary sources. Together, these limitations have obfuscated our understanding of the motives and nature of Russia's actions, as well as their degree of continuity and change across time and scenarios.

Chapter 1 introduced my conceptual framework, presenting an original model of SC. Chapter 2 applied such model to interrogate Russian narratives and military practices, thereby identifying the strategic cultural beliefs held by the security elite. Chapters 3 to 5 tested the accuracy of my reconstruction of Russia's SC by checking whether said beliefs actually capture the nature and development of the Russian narratives and operations in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria.

This concluding chapter proceeds as follows. First, I address the conceptual part of this research, summarising the theoretical assumptions that underpinned my work and reflecting on my contribution to the literature on SC and Strategic Studies at large. Second, I overview my main empirical findings and elaborate on them to cast additional insights into the Russian way of war. Lastly, building on the above, I put forth some preliminary observations regarding the war Russia is currently waging on Ukraine.

i. Theoretical arguments and contribution

This theory-driven, deductive piece of research was based on the assumption that social structure is constitutive of human behaviour. Put differently, the latter can be understood in light of the social structure that underpins the referent society and makes up the mindsets of its members. This holds true also in relation to strategy and war-fighting. Historical evidence and scholarly

research support this claim, highlighting the impact of belief systems and institutionalised practices on major strategic and military-related matters. These include the definition of threats and interests, the establishment of military doctrinal preferences, as well as how weapons and troops are used on the battlefield.

I expanded on this argument in strategic cultural terms. SC scholarship argues that different states respond to military-strategic inputs in differently, because the categories of thought held by these states' decision-makers are different. This view challenges mainstream approaches to Strategic Studies, which are characterised by a rational-materialist lens and predicate the existence of a universal military-strategic logic. Notwithstanding its merits, SC scholarship has been afflicted by a series of problems that hampered its progressive development and full realisation as a tool for rigorous empirical analysis. In Chapter 1 I tackled these limitations and proposed a refined model of SC — to be later applied to the Russian case.

This research endeavour resulted in five main conceptual contributions. First, at the most general level, I was able to develop and ground in theory an alternative framework for interpreting Russia's way of war. Through my model of SC, researchers can make sense of Russia's behaviour on its own terms, without forcing it into pre-packaged logics of action. SC does not assume the interests and preferences held by the Russian elite, but provides a guide to interrogate sources and identify the original nature of Russia's logic and its implications. Second, and related, the utility of my model of SC is not limited to the Russian case. Instead it has general applicability: it can be employed to analyse the way of war of any states — irrespective of their geographical and historical collocation, regime type, resources, and so on. Other researchers are invited to test this model against other cases.

Third, I offered a new definition of SC that, while coherent with previous formulations, represents an improvement in terms of clarity and parsimony. At a glance, my definition allows to understand what SC is made of (beliefs), who holds it (a state's security elite), and what it is about (security policy and the threat or use of force). It also communicates three important points: by stressing beliefs, it reaffirms SC's ideational nature and allows to link this concept with broader scholarship on social structures; by mentioning the role of elites, it states unequivocally the top-down nature of my conceptualisation; by mentioning both security policy and the use of force, it

allows to bridge between the political and military realms — thereby stressing SC's *strategic* character. No other existing definition of SC accomplishes all these tasks together.

Fourth, I also elaborated an original operationalisation of SC that, moving from the definition above, further breaks up the concept into its constituent beliefs. This provides the researcher with a precise indication of what to look for when analysing sources, as well as why and how a SC's different components are conceptually interrelated. This is a relevant step forward with respect to the previous scholarship on SC, which tended to employ the concept in rather vague terms, thereby failing to support analytical rigour fully.

Fifth, I improved the understanding of how SC emerges, changes, and how it influences state behaviour. The latter aspect has never been a mystery to students of SC, but the specific process via which such influence extricates itself has traditionally been taken for granted. By specifying this process and stressing the role that socialisation and group dynamics play in it, I filled an important gap in the scholarship and strengthened the link of SC with Social Sciences at large.

My contribution to the question of how a SC emerges and how it changes was more limited. In the former case, I simply suggested that researchers should accept culture's over-determined nature and stop insisting on identifying the individual factors that might generate strategic cultural beliefs. The most accurate, if rather general statement one can make is that SC emerges from the long-term stratification of historical experiences. With regard to the issue of continuity and change, I reiterated SC's tendency to homeostasis. Importantly, I pointed out that a relevant (yet not the only) indicator of SC change is elite change: since security elites embody SCs, elite change cannot but be matched by strategic cultural change. Absent elite change, a SC's radical mutation is possible but rare, and necessarily accompanied by powerful exogenous shocks.

Overall, I believe that the theoretical work I carried out in this research contributed to the progressive improvement of the scholarship on SC. My model of SC also demonstrated its utility as a tool for empirical analysis — to which I turn now.

ii. Empirical findings and further observations on Russia's way of war

Framed by the concept of SC, my empirical research contributed to a fuller understanding of the Russian way of war (2008-2018) in several ways.

First, I provided a reconstruction of the make-up and inner mechanics of the Russian security elite. Findings support two key insights. On the one hand, the Russian decision-making is not all about Putin. The PRF does wield enough power to influence Russian strategic choices heavily, but these can be understood best as the result of a decision-making process that involves multiple institutions, whose members share a similar mindset. In this sense, Putin's personal agency should be seen as an expression of the power and beliefs held by the elite group he belongs to — not an indicator that the Russian security policy is determined by one man only.

On the other hand, and related, my analysis shows the very small, insulated and homogeneous nature of the Russian security elite. It is so because of a dense web of formal and informal socio-institutional interrelations that runs across the elite, ensuring the pre-selection, socialisation, and behavioural convergence of its members. In light of this, one should expect the Russian security elite to be scarcely open to adapting its ways of thinking and acting. Case studies have confirmed the resistance to change of the Russian SC across time and the elite's tendency to interpret new developments via traditional categories of thought — instead of reforming the latter to accommodate new realities. This casts serious doubts on the security elite's ability to be receptive of outside influences at all — be they bottom-up pressures, inputs from other elite groups, or even the sanction currently imposed by the West.

Second, the analysis of narratives and behaviours showed that Moscow's military-strategic logic of action is not driven by mere realist or anti-democratic arguments, but by a nuanced set of beliefs about Russia's role, the essence of international relations, and war — whose complex interaction influences the definition of what Russia should or must do. Select aspects of the Russian SC are worth pinpointing here.

Russia's identity is centred on a static, ethno-religious definition of self that extends beyond the Federation's border to include other post-Soviet state's territories and peoples. The protection of such 'extended self' from dissolution, rather than sheer power-oriented land-grabbing, lies at the root of Russia's preoccupations about the post-Soviet neighbourhood. This trait of the Russian identity is compounded by the interpretation of real sovereignty not as a synonym for state-to-state

equality, but as a token of privilege for those states who are able to assert their authority internationally and control global dynamics. In Russian eyes, sovereignty is an attribute of great powers — a group Russia allegedly belongs to. Interestingly, Moscow believes that greatpowerness gives rise to both special rights *and* responsibilities. There follows the tendency to impose violent solutions onto 'lesser states,' as much as a proclivity to engage in dialogue with other great powers to set the course of global politics. Such dialogue, however, is inherently hindered by the rather opposite interpretations of identity, sovereignty, state relations that Russia and the West hold. Successful interaction would require from both sides a substantial effort of calibrating one's stance in accordance with the other's lexicon.

The worldview held by the Russian security elite sees international reality as the sum total of multiple interconnections. Superficially, this view is similar to those prevalent in the West; what sets them apart is the character of these interconnections, which for Russia is negative. In Russian eyes, interconnectedness means exposure; in its turn, this motivates a pervasive sense of insecurity. It follows that the Russian elite sees competition, not peace, as the normal state of things in global politics. Western policy-makers should take that into consideration when engaging with Moscow. At least this should lead to rethinking the West's traditional approach to de-escalation vis-à-vis Russia, centred on verbal reassurances. Since these are scarcely credible to a Russian elite that sees the world as malign, they should be either coupled with more practical de-escalatory steps or dropped completely — in favour of a more confrontational approach.

The latter, however, should be pondered in light of Russia's belief in the enduring utility of military force. Since uninterrupted competition is seen as the default condition of international reality, descent into fully-fledged war is for Russia more of a tangible possibility than it is in the Western imagery. This implies not only a certain sensitivity vis-à-vis confrontational measures, easily framed by Moscow as preparations for war, but also the very acceptance of armed violence as a tool of statecraft. While the Russian proclivity to initiate war varies on the basis of the geo-ideational space wherein the threat is perceived, the use of force always is an instrument for protecting key Russian interests. Overall, then, one shall consider that the risk of (unintended) escalation in the relations with Russia is high.

It is also important to note that, contrary to mainstream opinion, the Russian security elite has not perceived any fundamental changes in the character of war over the last decades: war was and is a kinetic clash between AF, at the service of politico-strategic goals. Irrespective of the nature of such goals, the scale of operations, and the specific theatre of war, the Russian security elite believes in the continued utility of the same XX century-like war-fighting style. The latter's unchanging (perhaps outdated) nature is coherent with the aforementioned assessment on the (unchanging) character of war. Russian campaigns in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria testified to such thinking. Evidence also highlights the strategic mistake the West has committed by not taking Russian conventional capabilities more seriously. While Russia's AF are evidently struggling in the current Ukraine war, operations confirm the destructiveness of their war-fighting style. This calls for stronger Western investments in conventional military capabilities, as well as a doctrinal review. With Russia in mind, rapid reaction forces, long-range A2/AD capabilities, and the establishment of a widespread system of territorial defence should be prioritised. These should be devised to pre-empt, stop, and roll back a potential Russian aggression before it entrenches on the victim's territory, causing long-lasting damage.

Overall, the breadth and depth of my analysis supported a nuanced reconstruction of the Russian strategic and military mindset. No comparable mapping of the Russian SC or analyses of the Georgia, Ukraine, Syria campaigns exist to date. The conceptual thickness and the wealth of primary sources supporting my findings strengthen the value of this research further.

iii. Reflections on the current iteration of the Ukraine war

The most recent iteration of the Ukraine war (2022) was not included in the case studies of this thesis. Since the conflict exploded in the terminal phases of my research and still continues to date, it was unfeasible to analyse it fully, achieving the same standards fulfilled in the previous pages. Nonetheless, the knowledge I acquired during the course of this research allows me to cast some preliminary observations.

The Russian narrative has developed according to my strategic cultural expectations, largely re-proposing the same arguments put forth in 2014-2015. Two key speeches delivered by Putin in

February 2022 (a,b) highlight the enduring validity of the politico-strategic beliefs I identified in Chapters 2 and 4. Ascriptiveness shines clearly from the representation of Russia as the protector of the *russkij mir* and Ukraine as an object in need of such protection. At once, Ukraine is portrayed as a key component of the Russian existential community, Moscow's vassal, and the cradle of nefarious political forces that endanger the whole community of Russianness.

By intervening, Russia is said to be aiming at ending long-lasting sources of regional instability, thereby fulfilling its great power responsibility. This was earlier attempted via a diplomatic approach equally representative of Russia's belief of greatpowerness — namely the proposal of new osecurity treaties via which the US and NATO were called to decide on Ukraine's future together with Russia; a Ukrainian *droit de parole* was absent (N/A 2021a,b). Stateness, and in particular Russia's peculiar interpretation of sovereignty, underpins all these initiatives. Ukraine is expropriated of any political authority and Russia, 'real sovereign,' takes on the right to control the former's destiny.

Also the worldview underpinning Russia's interpretation of current events is interchangeable with the one displayed during 2014-2015. Indeed, this year's recrudescence of the conflict is explained in light of the persistence of the same conditions that led to the 2014 intervention — from the risk of Ukraine's accession to NATO to the abuse of ethnic Russians by Kyiv's allegedly illegitimate government, passing through the purported, consistent attempt of the West to weaken Russia (N/A 2022). Though just a hypothesis, the granting of MAP status to Ukraine in Summer 2021 might have re-ignited the Russian perception that Western machinations to dismantle the *russkij mir* had restarted. Later that year, Washington's and Brussels' rejection of the aforementioned treaty proposals only confirmed, in the eyes of Moscow, suspicions about the pending danger. Invasion followed suit.

Russian actions are broadly coherent with my strategic cultural expectations also on the military level, as I argued elsewhere (Fasola 2022). This has been particularly evident since when Russia has refocused its operations on South-Eastern Ukraine. In fairness, the initial choice to make of the seizure of Kyiv the main line of effort remains difficult to explain: decapitation operations do not lie at the core of the Russia's military-strategic thought and the Russian AF are hardly fit for such purpose. More evidence is needed to shed light on this point.

It is clear, however, that the Russian AF have entered this war carrying with them structural problems that a highly conservative SC had not managed to fix. Two of these are worth noting. First, a cumbersome system of C2. At least in the initial phases of the campaign, Russia's rigid, top-down system of military planning and execution (see 2.3.2) hindered efforts to rapidly adjust operation to the changing conditions on the ground. Ukrainian AF have exploited this flaw skilfully, offsetting Russian operations via a more flexible war-fighting style.

Second, Russia entered the war with the idea to achieve victory via its usual military *modus operandi* — without realising than one of its key components, mass, was missing. While Russian preferences on the use of force have remained constant since 2008, the number of troops in the AF has diminished. With less than one million active personnel at its own disposal, Moscow did manage to build mass in Georgia, Syria, and the previous Ukraine conflict, whose scale was limited. Yet in today's war, whose scale is much broader than the previous ones, Russian AF do not have the numbers to pursue a mass-centred approach. To call for general mobilisation would help overcome this problem, but the Russian security elite is not ready to incur in the political costs of such decision yet.

Of course quantity is no synonym for quality, but this is a relative problem in the Russian SC. Some Western commenters have looked at the seemingly low level of training and skills displayed by Russian soldiers as an indicator of the poor state of the AF. The bulk of Russian troops, conscripts in particular, are indeed likely to be less skilled than their Western counterparts. However, this does not result from the failure of Russia's military educational system; it follows from a different interpretation of the role of soldiers. While the latter are seen by Western militaries as assets to invest in — for Russia they are expendable resources aimed at achieving mass on the battlefield; as such, they do not require specialisation. This mentality also hints at Russia's readiness to accept huge battlefield losses in the pursuit of military objectives. If that is true, the conflict might extend over a protracted period before the security elite assesses that the military costs of fighting outweigh the gains.

Differently from the wars analysed in this thesis, Russia today faces the risk of being defeated on the battlefield. With the Russian machine suffering heavy human, financial, political, and military losses, the Ukrainian AF have managed to regain momentum and stage an effective

counteroffensive, while keeping allies close. Western measures of military assistance to Ukraine and the sanctions imposed onto Russia certainly deserve merit for this. However, I still doubt they will prove decisive. Even assuming the continuation of Western support to Ukraine, I believe Russia will not stop fighting anytime soon. The ontological nature of this war makes defeat or surrender no viable options for Russia. More likely, Russia will continue raising the level of hostilities, in the attempt to bend the will of Ukraine and its allies once and for all. This would be achieved via the further weaponisation of energy resources, increased propaganda, the call for general mobilisation and, as *extrema ratio*, the use of (tactical) nuclear weapons. If even these steps will fail, then the Putin regime might face the serious threat of collapse. This, however, would not be a guarantee of peace. To the extent that Putin is just an expression of a broader security elite, its removal would not cancel the sense of *revanche* that underpins Russia's war.

Overall, this succinct overview of the current Ukraine war confirms the relevance of my research project. By knowing the ultimate categories of thought underpinning the Russian SC, one can better grasp the peculiar logic that drives Russian actions and cast hypotheses on their potential development — without obfuscating such understanding with pre-packaged analytical frames. In the foreseeable future, I will analyse this conflict further, with a double aim: first, expanding the breadth of this research and the scholarly understanding of the Russian SC; second, disseminating additional insights across the wider public and the policy-making community, in order to support the Western engagement with the crisis.

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