

Moscow's views of the war of tomorrow

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Andrew Monaghan

NDC Senior Non-Resident Associate Fellow

What does the “war of tomorrow” look like? For many in the Euro-Atlantic community, the answer to this question is clear: It means a war with Russia. An array of senior Euro-Atlantic officials and observers anticipate an imminent Russian attack on a NATO member state. For some, Moscow is capable of a “limited attack as early as tomorrow” and a “large-scale” assault by 2029.¹ Scenarios depict a Russian ground

Summary

Russia’s vision of “tomorrow’s war” differs sharply from NATO’s. Moscow envisions not a localized conflict in north-eastern Europe but a large-scale global confrontation with geoeconomic roots with the United States as the primary driver of instability.

Russia’s core scenario is a U.S.-led “21st-century blitzkrieg”: waves of missile strikes coordinated with highly mobile, multi-domain forces, with particular emphasis on maritime threats.

Russia is preparing for full mobilization warfare, modernizing its nuclear triad, reconstituting large ground formations and tightly integrating the armed forces into the state’s socioeconomic fabric.

Doctrinal innovation remains limited despite Ukraine. Adaptations are tactical, not strategic — formal doctrine is unchanged.

¹ “German General Says Russia Could Launch Limited Attack on NATO Any Time,” *Reuters*, 7 November 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/german-general-says-russia-could-launch-limited-attack-nato-any-time-2025-11-07/>; “Germany Prepares for Russia to Attack NATO in Two Years”, *The Times*, 26 January 2026, https://www.thetimes.com/world/europe/article/germany-russia-attacks-nato-commander-preparing-lhjdztzmm?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWetsqffbak9_Sb0IreHLC-gkwiM6G9K-Kd5-4gJU12JmrhLgNpRLMPeo0m2fAl4gZY%3D&gaa_ts=69a5d6d6&gaa_sig=h2z6pPYyGjmG44wiZPg3F3SjCikbNdkXqDcDa3VZ8Kk0fkq9G5jK_109N1ftgSDa9oOm0XVipROPBCnJ2IMika%3D%3D.

assault on the Baltic states or seizure of a land corridor to Kaliningrad or a move to occupy Svalbard or Gotland while media report on war games in which Russian forces “break” NATO within three days.

Moscow's intent in waging such a war, depicted as largely located in north-eastern Europe, would be to recover lost territories, enhance its prestige, fracture the Alliance and improve its position along its periphery. An important characteristic of this war of tomorrow is that Russian forces are learning from campaigning against Ukraine and adapting their practice, especially incorporating drones.²

These views certainly reflect the high level of tension in NATO-Russia relations, even though many of the scenarios echo a consensus that took shape a decade ago.³ At the same time, they suffer from a significant drawback: All too rarely, they feature Moscow's views of future war and strategic imperatives beyond abstract ideas. But the adversary has a vote, and without factoring this in, preparations for deterrence and defence become one-dimensional and brittle, and NATO risks planning for the wrong type of conflict.

So, the question arises: What are Moscow's views of the “war of tomorrow”? And from that flow other questions: What are Moscow's dilemmas and scenarios? To what extent should we expect substantive change in the Russian understanding – and waging – of war as a result of Russia's campaigning against Ukraine? Are lessons being learnt, and if so, what are they? What, in fact, does Moscow mean by “war” – and what are the implications for NATO?

The “Special War Operation” and the future of war

At first glance, Russian debates seem to mirror those underway in NATO. Defence Minister Andrei Belousov has stated, for instance, that Russia's armed forces must be ready for any events, “including a possible war with NATO in the next decade.”⁴

Likewise, campaigning in Ukraine has stimulated much debate about the changing character of war, especially due to the impact of new technology. Some assert that it is a

“milestone” marking a “tectonic shift” in warfare, the most significant moment since the Gulf War of 1991, showing a “new face of war.” As such, the war of tomorrow would look very different from the war in Ukraine and the wars from the past. Some say digital war is the new reality, necessitating a fundamental revision of the entire system, the structure of forces and their logistics as well as tactics; the “time of the big battalions has passed.”

This Russian debate often mirrors the central questions underway in the Euro-Atlantic community – the challenges of an increasingly transparent battlefield for concentration and surprise, and thus breakthrough and exploitation, for instance, or how technological innovation is affecting the value of platforms from tanks to capital ships.⁵

Moscow's scenarios of the war of tomorrow

Delving a little deeper, however, reveals noteworthy variations and important caveats about continuity and change in how Moscow sees a potential war of tomorrow. The first difference is that since the late 2000s, Moscow's official forecasts have framed a long-term horizon of intensifying conflict and war through the 2020s and into the 2030s. In this view, conflict and war are caused by geo-economic competition and related changes in the international order: The primary driver of instability, conflict and war in international affairs is the United States' effort to retain unipolar dominance.⁶ This means that the campaigning in Ukraine is generally considered to be the “prelude” to what is sometimes described as a 21st-century version of the Thirty Years' War.⁷

On this basis, Moscow's scenarios of the “war of tomorrow” can be framed in three interconnected categories. The first reflects Moscow's concerns about the Pacific region, such as the possibility of a “great power” war between the U.S. and China. The second, similarly reflecting Moscow's wider global horizon, comprises simmering local conflicts that have the potential to escalate quickly into wider regional conflagrations, drawing in major states, including in regions that are strategically vital for Russia. This includes conflicts in the Caucasus, the Middle East and North Africa or a resumption of the Korean War.

- 2 “Russia Attacks a NATO Country in a War Game. It Doesn't End Well,” *Politico*, 13 February 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/02/13/russia-nato-wargame-germany-simulation-00778818>; Hooker, R. *Putin's Next Move? Five Russian Attack Scenarios Europe Must Prepare For*, Atlantic Council, 12 February 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/putins-next-move-five-russian-attack-scenarios-europe-must-prepare-for/>.
- 3 Shirreff, R. 2017: *War with Russia: An Urgent Warning from Senior Military Command*, London: Hodder & Staunton, 2016; Shlapak, D. & M. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: War Gaming the Defense of the Baltics*, RAND, 2016. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf.
- 4 “Belousov ne isklyuchaet konflikta Rossii s NATO v blizhaishee desyatiletie”, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 16 December 2024, https://www.ng.ru/politics/2024-12-16/1_9157_belousov.html.
- 5 Baluyevsky, Y. & R. Pukhov, “Tsifrovaya voyna” – novaya realnost’, *Rossiia v globalnoi politike*, No.6, 2025, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/czifrovaya-voyna-baluyevskij-puhov/>; Frolov, A. “Vitok istoricheskoi spirali”, *Rossiia v globalnoi politike*, No.1, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/vitok-istoricheskoi-spirali/>.
- 6 “Vystuplenie i diskussiya na Myunkhenskoi konferentsii po voprosam politiki i bezopasnosti,” *Website of the Presidential Administration*, 10 February 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>; “Statya Sekretarya Soveta Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii v ‘Rossiiskoi gazete’”, *Website of the Russian Security Council*, 12 November 2019, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2677/>.
- 7 Kashin, V. “Pervy god Bolshoi voiny”, *Rossiia v globalnoi politike*, No.3, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.ru/issues/2023/3/>; Kramarenko, A. “Geopolitika novoi Tridsatiletniei voiny: kontury nashei strategii”, *Rossiia v globalnoi politike*, 21 February 2023.

The third category relates directly to Russia and is the one that includes the possibility of a NATO-Russia war. The base scenario is that of a U.S.-led large-scale air-ground or air-sea operation against Russia: waves of massive missile and air strikes, supported by highly mobile, multidomain groups of forces. Senior officials have described this as a form of “21st-century blitzkrieg” since the early-to-mid 2010s. Its roots reach back to 1941, reinforced both by subsequent conflicts (including the Gulf War of 1991) and by Moscow’s interpretation of U.S. globally integrated operations.⁸

In the third category, Moscow shapes more specific scenarios, including a U.S.-led attack on Russia’s Northern Sea Route or a crisis in the Baltic Sea. The latter could be triggered by the sabotage of Russian infrastructure or by NATO false-flag operations, for instance an alleged Russian torpedo attack on a U.S. navy ship or alleged Russian mines blowing up a foreign vessel. Senior figures in the Russian leadership assert that NATO is trying to establish a blockade against Russia to deny it access to the sea – a “traditional Western strategy” against Russia.⁹

The evolving Russian strategic culture

What about war itself and how it might be waged? Care is due when interpreting Russian debates about the changing character of war and its implications for how Moscow actually wages war. We have been here before with assumptions about purported new “doctrines” and “generations” of war, hypnotized by hype about technology and sophisticated Russian concepts. We too often confuse debate with doctrine and theory with practice and so lose our focus on what the state is actually trying to achieve.

Officials and experts are certainly debating the impact of robotization and drones and the need to adapt the structures of the armed forces. Indeed, adaptations are already underway: New branches and units are being established in the Ministry of Defence and the services. Likewise, the armed forces are learning from campaigning and seeking to disseminate better practice,¹⁰ and there is debate about how to reintroduce offensive manoeuvre to campaigning.¹¹ The question is whether this brings substantive or lasting change at the operational level.

The parlous general condition of Russian military theorizing about war must be considered here. Senior officers, including Valerii Gerasimov, spent much of the 2010s lamenting the limitations of Russia’s war science capacity; in fact, debate has persisted since the 1990s about its ongoing “crisis.”¹² Makhmut Gareev – the doyen of Russia’s post-Cold War Academy of War Sciences – died in 2019. Gerasimov formally replaced him as President of the Academy, but there is currently no heavyweight serving officer who carries sufficient influence to drive a coherent cross-service innovative theoretical or conceptual agenda. Instead, senior officers are focusing (largely) on tactical and technical questions within their own services.¹³

While there is plenty of evidence of adaptation, therefore, there is little indication so far that there is innovative operational, let alone strategic thinking to be converted into practice. What discussion there is proceeds very much within the grooves of long-standing debates about network-centric warfare and the reconnaissance-strike complex. Furthermore, this is not the same as a revision of doctrine. In Russian, doctrine is the officially accepted, long-term system of regulations that defines the state’s view of the application of the means of armed violence to political goals. Doctrine also seeks to define the essence and character of future wars. The current discussion is instead shaped by the top political leadership and how that leadership interprets international conditions, which leads us to the final point: the need to delineate between “operations” and “war.”

To Moscow, “war” (*voina*) is a socio-political phenomenon rooted in the socio-economic capacity of the state. If a “war” is defined by the shift to the use of armed violence to resolve a policy dispute, it is understood in terms of levels of whole-of-state effort. Thinking about war, therefore, is guided not by the armed forces’ leadership but by national security specialists and civilian industrialists.

This has two implications. First, interpreting Moscow’s “war of tomorrow” requires looking at levels of state capacity and effort and at how the armed forces are being bound more tightly into the state body. This means looking beyond the Ministry of Defence (now overseen by Andrei Belousov, an industrialist who emphasizes state influence in the economy) to the wider socio-political and socio-economic landscape, from the establishment of the Maritime Collegium (which oversees the shipbuilding industry and the development of the navy) to movements such as the Popular Front.

Through this lens, we can see what the state is prioritizing in terms of its thinking about future war. It is encap-

- 8 “Defense Ministry Reveals Possible Scenario of Attack on Russia,” *Sputnik International*, 5 March 2024, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20240305/defense-ministry-reveals-possible-scenario-of-attack-on-russia-1117138312.html>; Gerasimov, V. “Tsennost nauki v predvidenii,” *Voenno-promyshlenny kuryer*, 26 February 2013; Idem, “Po opytu Sirii,” *Voenno-promyshlenny kuryer*, 7 March 2016.
- 9 In this scenario, Ukraine provides Soviet-era torpedoes and mines for the UK to use. “Ukraina i Evropa gotovyat izoshchrennie provokatsii protiv Rossii,” *Website of the SVR*, 16 June 2025; “Geopoliticheskaya situatsiya trebueta prinyatiya dopolnitelnykh mer,” *Izvestiya*, 16 August 2024; “Strategicheskaya glubina. Patrushev nazval novye tseli dlya rossiiskogo flota,” *Argumenty i fakty*, 9 June 2025, <https://aif.ru/politics/russia/strategicheskaya-glubina-patrushev-nazval-novye-celi-dlya-rossiiskogo-flota>.
- 10 Kireev, N. *Rabochaya tetrad mladshego komandira*, Novosibirsk: Zima, 2025.
- 11 See Jonsson, O. “A New Face of War – Russian Military Strategy Post-Ukraine”, NDC Outlook, 2026-02, 5 February 2026, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/a-new-face-of-war-russian-military-strategy-post-ukraine/>.
- 12 Gerasimov, V. “Po opytu Sirii,” *Voenno-promyshlenny kuryer*, 7 March 2016; Gareev, M. “Voina bez sroka davnosti,” *Voenno-promyshlenny kuryer*, 12 May 2015; Budkin, E. & A. Popov, “Glavnoe trebovanie k voennoi nauke,” *Voennaya mysl*, No. 1, 2022.
- 13 Yevmenov, N. “Kharakter vooruzhennoi borby na more i tendentsii eyo razvitiya,” *Voennaya Mysl*, No. 12, 2023; Dronov, S., et al., “Osobennosti taktiki aviatsii v sovremennykh boevykh deistviyakh i puti eyo sovershenstvovaniya,” *Voennaya mysl*, No. 1, 2024.

sulated in the “progressive development plan” of 2022, which effectively provides the policy framework looking to the medium-term future. This includes:

- Improving coordination of the state’s policy-making apparatus, embodied in the Government Coordination Council,
- Modernizing and developing the nuclear triad,
- Improving command and control with the armed forces,
- Improving the mobilization system,
- Reshaping headquarters command and control (the re-establishment of the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts),
- Returning to scale with the (re-)creation of large unit structures in the armed forces.

If some argue that the “time of the big battalions has passed,” the state appears to have concluded that it is to be replaced by the “time of the divisions and combined arms armies.” President Putin has repeatedly stated that there are no funding restrictions on this programme, and procurement suggests that warships and submarines, aircraft,

missiles and tanks should all be added to the inventory in large numbers through the next decade.¹⁴

By no means will this prove straightforward in implementation. Senior officers repeatedly assert the difficulties of implementing reforms: “In this country, everyone is for radical reforms until some issue touches their department.”¹⁵ Dysfunction and poor coordination within the system, as well as waste and theft of resources, continue. Furthermore, although the relationship between the state and the armed forces leadership is supposed to be interactive, the state has often placed the armed forces in disadvantageous positions at the outbreak of wars. Nevertheless, this is the strategic policy context which is already shaping the armed forces and defining the horizon for their future development.

The second implication is that “war” is a mobilization-level event and an escalatory phenomenon. Official doctrine elaborates both a periodization of war, building through “war danger” and “war threat” before war erupts, and then through four levels of conflict and war [see Figure 1]. Within this, authoritative figures have fleshed out an indication of what possible escalation might look like. As illustrated in Figure 1, in this broad category-

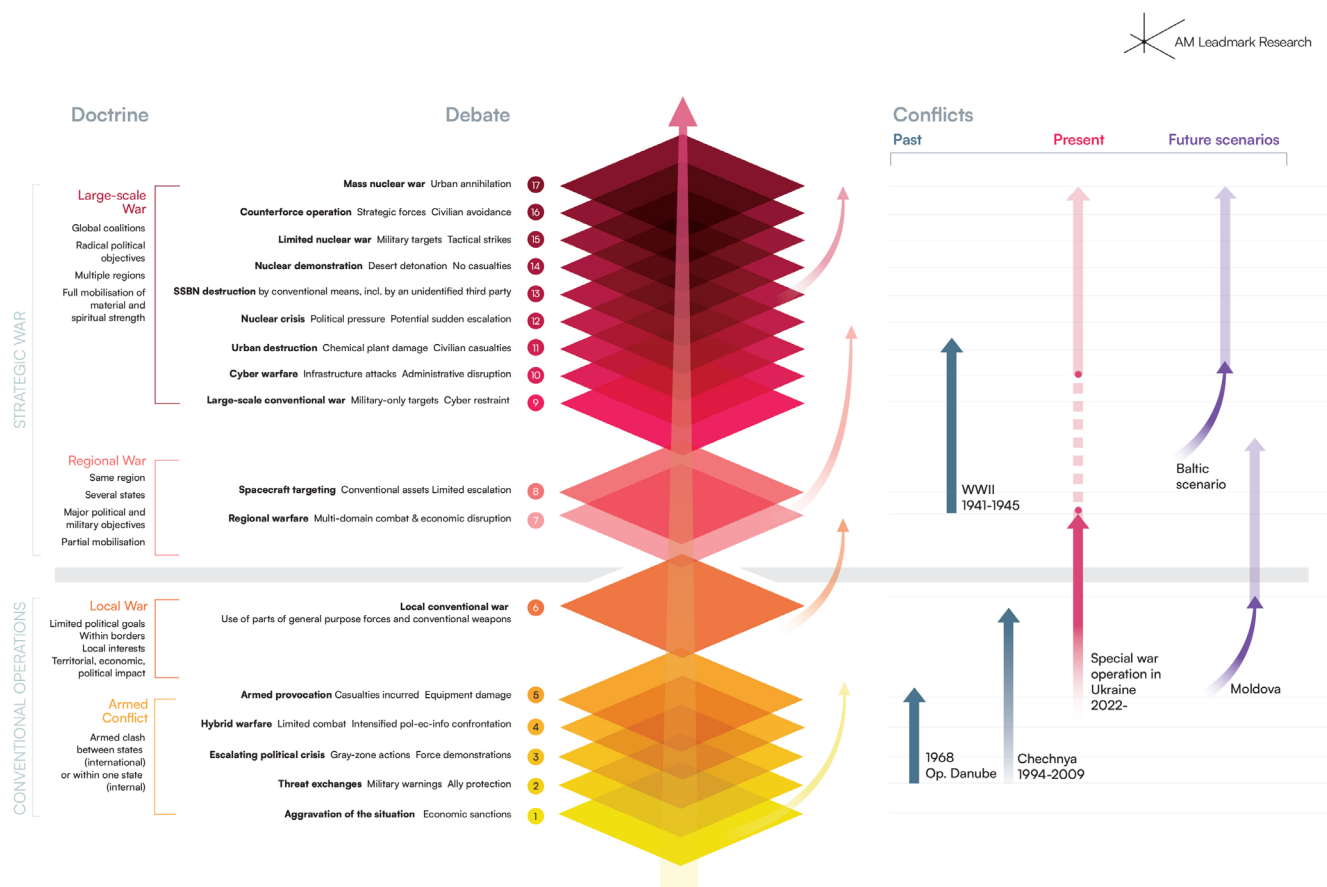


Figure 1. State effort and levels of war.

Author's design, sources: Voennaya doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii, No. Pr2976, 25 December 2014, Website of the Russian Security Council, <http://scrf.gov.ru/security/military/document129/>; Kokoshin, A. et al, Voprosy eskalatsii krizisnykh situatsii, vooruzhennykh konfliktov i voyn, Moscow: URSS, 2021.

¹⁴ “Zasedanie kollegii Ministerstva oborony,” Website of the Presidential Administration, 21 December 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70159>.

¹⁵ Gareev, M. “23 yanvarya 1994 goda ushol iz zhizni vydayushchiysa sovetski voenachalnik Marshal Sovetskogo soyuza Nikolai Ogarkov,” Arsenal Otechestva, 23 January 2019.

rization, a war between Russia and NATO – even including a “local” Russian attack on the Baltic states – would constitute a “regional war” that would be theatre-wide and have strategic implications. Given the combination of alliances and the escalatory nature of war, however, this could quickly become a “large-scale war”: a global, strategic conflagration.¹⁶

Conclusions

Taken altogether, the implications of this view for NATO are clear: Moscow's picture of a “war of tomorrow” differs notably from NATO's version. NATO militaries, instead of talking of the “battlespace,” as they do, should more accurately think in terms of a “warspace,” with the full socio-political and socio-economic implications that suggests. Such a war would likely be neither localized in, nor limited to north-eastern Europe. It would be a wider conflagration, in which Russia would fight for major political and military objectives – not simply to recover lost

territory, “enhance its prestige” or “fracture the Alliance.” To interpret this and shape effective, future-oriented deterrence, the Alliance will need to fortify and empower its Red Teams to go beyond wargaming and begin actively to explore how adversaries apply foresight to strategy generation.

This would have at least two points of focus: One would be to interpret and guide the Alliance's assessments of the visible shifts underway in Russian strategic culture as well as the changing characteristics of Russian power. This includes the growth in influence of the economic-industrial sector in Russian state war preparation, combined with the tighter binding of the armed forces into the socio-economic body of the state [see Figure 2]. The Russian leadership appears to be positioning Russia as a military patriotic fortress, and if the state is not currently mobilized, it does show signs of mobilization preparation.

Another would be to decipher Moscow's scenarios. This is particularly important: If the campaigning in Ukraine is a “prelude,” it must be considered whether Moscow sees itself to be in a “war threat” period and what this means for any initial period of war. In this context, Moscow's

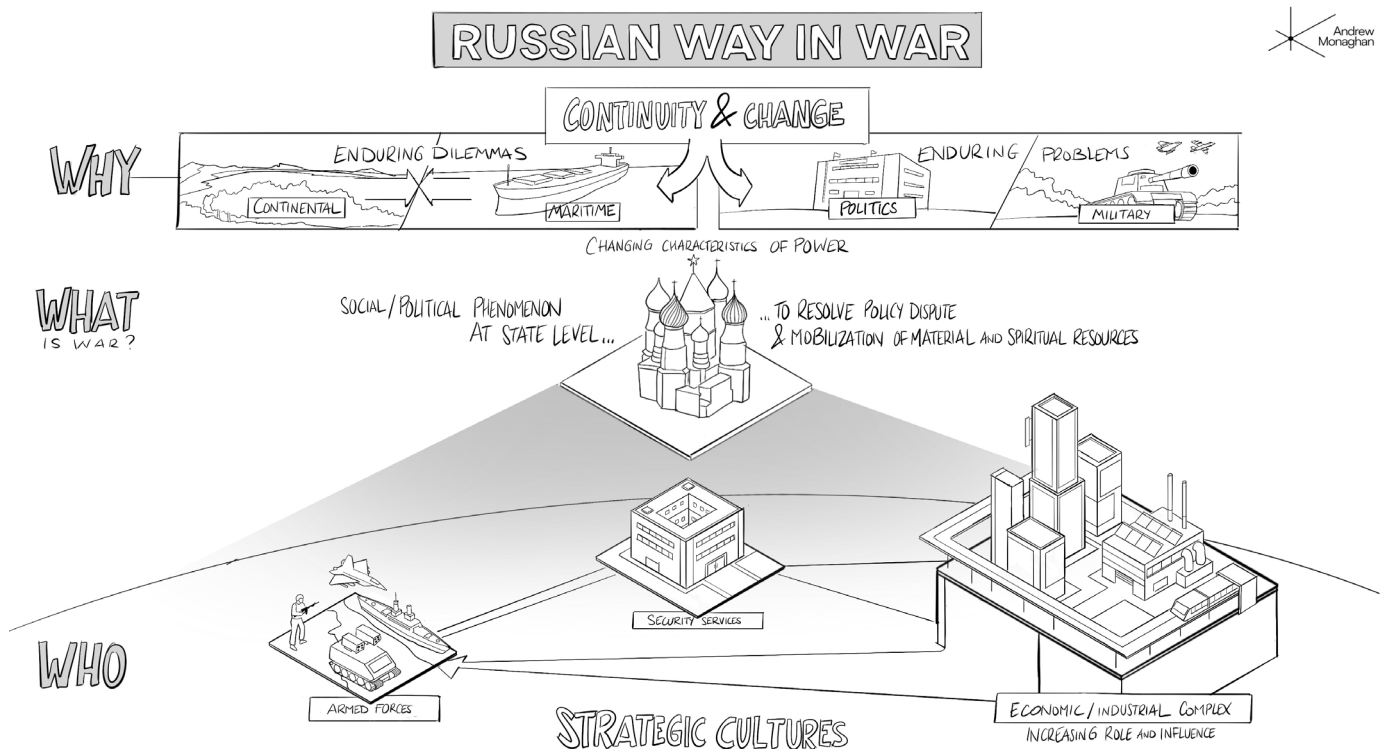


Figure 2. The Russian way in war.

Source: Author.

¹⁶ Voennaya doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii, No. Pr-2976, Website of the Russian Security Council, 25 December 2014, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/military/document129/>; Kokoshin, A. et al., *Voprosy eskalatsii krizisnykh situatsii, vooruzhennykh konfliktov i voyn*, Moscow : URSS, 2021.

scenarios illuminate three specific points about how the Russian leadership views the possible war of tomorrow. First, its roots are likely to be (geo)economic, reflecting a long-term struggle to secure geostrategic bridgeheads and to control and protect access to resources, transit routes and markets.¹⁷ Second, while the scenario of war with NATO is an important one, it is just one among

several: According to Moscow, the global horizon is full of potential conflicts that challenge Russian security in a 360-degree manner and into the 2030s. And third, perhaps the most notable characteristic of these scenarios is how they reflect Moscow's maritime dilemma, as the majority depict a threat to Russia from the sea, or even a crisis at sea escalating to war.

- ¹⁷ Gerasimov, V. "V period do 2030 goda uroven potentsialnoi voennoi opasnosti znachitelno povysitsya – Valerii Gerasimov", *Voenno-promyshlenny kuryer*, 18 February 2013, https://vpk.name/news/84463_v_period_do_2030_goda_uroven_potencialnoi_voennoi_opasnosti_znachitelno_povysitsya_valerii_gerasimov.html; Baklanov, A. "Voina budushchego", *Rossiia v globalnoi politike*, 18 November 2013, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/vojna-budushhego/>.

Research Division

NATO Defense College
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1
00143 Rome – Italy

www.ndc.nato.int

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