

Russia's Geopolitical Ambitions: Aggression Against Ukraine as an Instrument for Achieving Great Power Status

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Introduction

The Russian Federation is increasingly transforming hot war – currently against Ukraine, but potentially against other states as well – into a key instrument of its foreign policy. Through this instrument, Russia seeks to enter the circle of architects of a new world order.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not a deviation from the strategic mainstream of Russia's foreign policy. On the contrary, it is a means of strengthening Russia's international subjectivity in the form in which it is perceived by the majority of political elites and a significant portion of the population.

War is the main, but not the only, instrument of Russia's foreign policy. The Russian government operates through various bilateral and multilateral formats in interaction with China, BRICS countries, expands its presence in Africa, maintains contacts with Latin America and Southeast Asia. In particular, these steps are aimed at developing economic ties outside the Western economic orbit. In the spring of 2025, Russia actively attempted to take advantage of the new US administration's interest in resuming bilateral dialogue.

A common logic can be traced in all these foreign policy actions: non-military instruments are viewed by Russia's leadership primarily as a means of strengthening positions in the war it is waging against Ukraine.

Russian policy is based on geopolitical ambitions and on the notion of the state's "proper" place in the world order – as defined in official doctrines, political rhetoric, and propaganda. War serves as an instrument for demonstrating capability, determination, and claims to the legitimacy of global aspirations. Through it, Russia seeks to take an equal place alongside the United States and China in the global system.

The question remains open: how long can this aggressive trajectory last? Is it capable of changing – and within what historical timeframe?

Doctrinal Military Ambitions of the Russian Federation

The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (2023) enshrines the aspiration to form a new system of international relations based on the right to its own system of values. The Maritime Doctrine (2022) extends Russia's strategic presence from the Arctic to the Indian Ocean, insisting on the global role of the Russian Navy as a mechanism for projecting influence. In Putin's speeches at the Valdai Forums and St. Petersburg International Economic Forums (SPIEF) in recent years, Russia is presented as a civilizational alternative to the West – a kind of separate bastion of historical continuity, traditional values, and Russian "sovereign truth".

Putin, following Chinese ideology, constantly insists on international respect for civilizational diversity. However, Russia is significantly more aggressive than China in denying the West recognition of its civilization. Conceptually, Russia views NATO and the EU as instruments of American hegemony and sources of instability. In public speeches, Putin has called the Western model "outdated" and called for the emergence of "new centers of decision-making". This same rhetoric was supported by statements from Lavrov and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, making the rules-based world order a particular object of attack. Personally and through spokesmen of the Russian government, Putin regularly hints that Western civilization is vulnerable to Russian nuclear weapons.

Russia's claims as a separate "civilization" are global. It seeks to transform its "civilizational" self-perception into a real instrument of influence – primarily through interaction with countries outside the Western world. Kremlin and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation protocols in 2022-2025 demonstrate a consistent emphasis on relations with China, India, the African Union, and ASEAN countries.

Putin emphasizes the importance of BRICS as an alternative to Western financial and regulatory systems. SPIEF sessions include panels on dedollarization, alternative trade mechanisms, and integration with African and Middle Eastern countries. Economic themes are embedded in the civilizational narrative: multipolarity is interpreted not only as political, but also as a financial, technological, and cultural alternative. Russia uses this not only as a format for cooperation, but also tries to promote an "axis of resistance" against "Western evil" – similar to what Iran had been doing until recently.

Russia is not seeking integration into Western civilization. It demands recognition as a separate civilization. War, diplomacy, and rhetoric act as coordinated instruments for achieving this goal.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was not simply a security maneuver or an attempt at territorial expansion. The US and Europe pressured Russian leadership, convincing them not to start a major war. Russia remained deaf to Western logic, despite all the risks. That is, this was a deliberate geopolitical step – a demonstration of a bloody, irreversible claim by Russia to great power status.

More than three years of large-scale war have led to semantic evolution in official rhetoric – from "special military operation" to "civilizational struggle". According to the British analytical center RUSI, Russia has transformed war into a platform for international communication, in which military actions replace diplomacy. In turn, RAND research concluded that for Russia, war has become an ordinary instrument of governance, rather than the exceptional measure that Russian authorities still call it – a "special military operation".

In the rhetoric of Russian authorities, war is presented as the defense of "Russian civilization". In his speech at Valdai 2023, Putin described the invasion as a necessary step to "protect the Russian world from the decline of the West". In statements by the Russian Foreign Ministry during 2022-2025, the war was presented as an allegedly forced response to NATO expansion and an attempt to protect Russian sovereignty from Western colonization. In public speeches, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov constantly emphasized that Russia's war against Ukraine is part of reformatting the world order, not a localized conflict.

War declares Russia's determination and autonomy despite significant losses. Human losses at the front alone reached one million people in June 2025. Russia's economy is adapted to war, not peace: socio-economic priorities have shifted, possibly irreversibly within the current power model – weapons instead of welfare.

This logic of Russian confrontation is confirmed by the still unsuccessful attempts by the US to act as a peacemaker. Despite receiving an attractive ceasefire proposal from Donald Trump in the spring of 2025 for the Russian authorities – which could have allowed Russia to consolidate achieved territorial gains in Ukraine and take a step toward lifting sanctions – Putin deliberately chose to continue the war. His motive was obviously the expectation of even more favorable conditions thanks to a new Russian offensive. This is evidenced by numerous statements by Putin and spokesmen of Russian authorities, which speak of Russia's alleged strategic advantage and the imaginary possibility of not only "pressuring" but also "destroying" Ukraine. This repeats the logic of preparing for Russia's large-scale attack in 2021 – contrary to Western pressure and without a realistic plan for quick victory, only with faith in the ability to shape reality through propaganda and information operations. Both then and now – Russia's choice in favor of war was not a reaction to a threat, but a deliberately chosen policy instrument.

Through war against Ukraine, Russia mobilizes internal legitimacy for its policy and forms an external context for making global decisions. Russia's war destroys Western civilization, which after World War II, in its pursuit of lifelong peace, created an order based on universal rules that replaced the right of force.

Russia Between China and the US

Russia's positioning regarding China and the US reflects its aspiration to rise higher in the global hierarchy.

In numerous meetings and communications with Xi Jinping, Putin emphasized the principles of "multipolarity" and "respect for sovereignty". However, Russia and China avoid the language of alliance, instead promoting what can be called coordination in global governance. There is ideological affinity between Russian and Chinese narratives regarding world order. Xi Jinping has repeatedly proclaimed: "The East is rising, the West is declining" – a formula that underlies his vision of the world as civilizational pluralistic. Putin readily adopted this thesis and overlaid it on his own confrontation with the US and Europe. He, and even more so – the ideologized spokesmen of Russian authorities – define Russia's historical mission as protecting the world from the alleged moral decay of the West. Russia's foreign policy rhetoric constantly portrays the US as an empire that is degrading and unable to recognize multipolarity.

Against the backdrop of ideological convergence with China, Russia is increasingly distancing itself from Europe and the US. In Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, the United States is defined not simply as a geopolitical rival, but as the main source of global instability through the imposition of liberal universalism. The Kremlin describes US-led democracy promotion as cover for interventions and a mechanism for eroding other civilizations.

For their part, recent US national strategic documents, including the 2022 National Security Strategy, identify Russia as a military threat and an authoritarian state seeking to destroy the rules-based international order. The US National Security Strategy for Donald Trump's current term has not yet been formulated in a separate document, and given current political changes, it is important what the formulations regarding Russia will be. The US still declares support for democratic values and opposition to autocracies trying to change borders by force. Currently, the ideological dichotomy between the US and Russia persists and will likely be confirmed in the future "Trump Doctrine", if it is formulated.

Despite value divergence, Russia's perception of the US is selectively flexible. As evidenced by Putin's communications with Donald Trump and high-level consultations in 2025, Russian authorities demonstrate openness to dialogue – but only insofar as the US offers conditions that undermine American values and distance the United States from Europe. In statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and Putin-controlled media, positive mentions of Trump's position appeared only when it could be interpreted as doubts about Western values and basic Western institutions.

This pattern demonstrates the constancy of Russian logic: Russia's antagonism toward the US is mediated by the degree of US unity with Europe. If Washington demonstrates

readiness to distance itself from European allies and weakens its liberal ideological position, the Kremlin perceives this as an opportunity for rapprochement. Thus, the possibility of partnership with the US is interpreted in Russia not as recognition of American strength, but as rejection of the foundations and alliances that support it.

During the period from March to May 2025, many direct and indirect contacts took place during which Donald Trump made proposals that, in his opinion, could be attractive to Russia. The strategic goal, as can be judged from American comments, was to "tear" Russia away from China. As can be seen from Russian statements, Russia was preparing in advance for such a strategic proposal. Putin at this time selectively strengthened narratives of dialogue with the US, created an illusion of multiple rapprochement options that concealed the emptiness of intentions. There were no signs that Russia was even rhetorically distancing itself from China. After all, in those same spring months of 2025, communications between Putin and Xi Jinping were no less active, and the culmination of this was the Chinese leader's multi-day visit to Russia in May.

It is possible that Trump's attempts to "tear" Russia away from China were countered by coordinated efforts by China and Russia to "tear" the US away from Europe. Both proved unsuccessful.

However, from the perspective of Russian policy, an important process was taking place, which may be the greatest result of the American maneuver. Putin divided the elites into groups: for negotiations with Ukraine on ending the war and for negotiations with the US on normalizing bilateral relations. That part of the elites that communicated with the US may have sincerely been ready to abandon war as the main instrument of Russian policy. At the same time, Russian negotiators with Ukraine tried to pressure, proclaiming Russia's readiness to fight forever.

With high probability, the selection of Russian communicators for contacts with the US was a deceptive maneuver by Russian authorities aimed at avoiding new sanctions and creating conditions for a new military offensive. But for this, a status part of Russian elites was used, which has personal communication with Putin. This part of the elites certainly does not consider itself "clowns" who were appointed to distract the US while Russia tries to defeat Ukraine in war. Trump's rapprochement maneuver demonstrated that there is elite potential in Russia for ending the war, but currently it is insufficient even for unconditional cessation of hostilities.

Russia does not fully integrate with China and avoids direct confrontation with the US – instead maneuvering between them, reducing the likelihood of achieving an American-Chinese consensus. Russia does not choose a final side, although its affinity with China is obviously greater than with the US. Instead, it actively exploits US-China rivalry, particularly on the issue of the Russia-Ukraine war, to expand its maneuvering space, strengthen influence, and weaken Western unity.

New Containment Strategy for Russia

The question of whether Russia's foreign policy can change – particularly its dependence on war as a key instrument – is related to interconnected factors of different nature: the structure of the political regime, the state of the economy, the geopolitical context, and, broadly speaking, the situation on the battlefield.

The orientation toward war as the main form of external action is inseparable from the personalist architecture of Putinism. Confrontation with the external world serves not only as an instrument of foreign policy, but also as a means of internal consolidation: war cements elite loyalty, suppresses opposition, legitimizes authoritarian governance. Therefore, as long as Putin remains in power and as long as Russian elites see in him or in a person with a similar vision their leader – the role of war in foreign policy is unlikely to diminish.

The war economy reinforces Russian inertia. Russia has restructured its industry and budget policy to a regime of constant mobilization. This creates new dependencies: defense production, regional budgets, security structures – all of them need to maintain tension or conflict for their own viability. Extensive social layers of war beneficiaries have formed in Russia. They do not constitute a majority, but they influence public sentiment. Abandoning war would require not only changing the external course, but also dismantling entire sectors of the internal system. Such a social and economic construction is inevitably headed for decline – and probably quite rapid, as has happened with other aggressive authoritarian regimes. But while the system has resources – a significant human mass with low incomes and still high revenues from raw material exports – it tends to move inertially, without changing trajectory.

The choice of war as an instrument of communication with the external world in Russia is inscribed in the geopolitical context. Russian ideology asserts that in the presence of the US in Europe, the existence of NATO and the EU, Russia is deprived of the necessary "living space" (although propaganda avoids direct mentions of Lebensraum). Russia rejects the Western order as existentially threatening. Under such conditions, war is interpreted as a means of preserving subjectivity. Ideology gives militarism a normative character. The image of Russia as a "besieged civilizational pole", "defender of traditional values", and "heir to historical justice" – rationalizes war in the eyes of Russians. For most elites and population, aggressive war is not aggression, but geopolitical necessity – even destiny. In this framework, war is not an exception, but a form of national self-expression.

The weak point of this construction is dependence on results. "Victory" is a mandatory attribute of war for Russians, built into national self-perception. Spokesmen of Russian authorities claim that Russia can fight forever. But even if so, Russia cannot lose forever. Results in the war against Ukraine must be significant in the foreseeable future. Otherwise, war may destroy the entire internal structure of power. This is the new

meaning of containment Russia: war must not bring it any results – none of its goals, neither military nor political, should be achieved.

Proof that Russia perceives war exclusively as victorious is, for example, its complete unwillingness to fight for Bashar Assad's regime in Syria when it found itself on the verge of collapse in the fall of 2015. Similarly, Russia showed no signs of readiness to defend the ayatollah regime in Iran in the summer of 2015. This sharply contrasts with Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015, when a coalition was being formed to support Assad – with Iran and Türkiye, with Israel's tacit consent.

Currently, Russia is waging only one hot war – against Ukraine, a hybrid one – against Europe, and threatens provocations against the Baltic states. In all these cases, it counts on results – unlike Syria or Iran. Depriving Russia of faith in results in the war against Ukraine and Europe will with high probability stop the war itself. This can be ensured both by the situation on the battlefield and by the balance of forces around Ukraine and other countries perceived by Russia as potential victims of new – hot or hybrid – aggression.

The following factors may separately or collectively force Russia to abandon war as the main instrument of foreign policy:

► **Political crisis in Russia and elite transformation (probability – low or medium, impact potential – very high)**

Russia's foreign policy is closely linked to the personalist nature of Putin's regime. Strategic culture, decision-making system, and the habit of military options are formed from above. Changing the composition of elites – especially with a change of leader – could open space for revising this paradigm. The absence of succession institutions and the strength of loyalty verticals make this unlikely without a large-scale crisis: economic collapse, military defeat, or internal conflict. But if such transformation happens – it is capable of quickly changing the external course.

► **Economic and social exhaustion (probability – medium or high; impact potential – high, but not decisive)**

Russia's economy demonstrates resilience, but not long-term viability. Demographic losses, displacement of labor force to the front, technological degradation, and raw material dependence gradually create tension. At a critical moment, economic logic may prevail – especially among technocratic or regional elites. But without political imbalance, economic crisis will not become an independent factor of course change.

► **Coordinated external pressure (probability – low; impact potential – high)**

American, European, and Chinese influences can be decisive, but only if synchronized. The US is capable of isolating and punishing aggressive Russian elites, Europe and China – of limiting Russia's access to markets and capital. Pressure from China can be especially powerful if Russia begins to threaten its strategic interests.

But currently, US, EU, and Chinese policies regarding the Russia's war are not coordinated. Their coordination requires a broader balance – primarily in the economic sphere. At the same time, achieving this balance in the foreseeable future looks realistic.

► **Failure of Russia's 2025 offensive (probability – high; impact potential – high, as a catalyst)**

The legitimacy of the Russian regime rests at least on a sense of progress. If the summer campaign brings no results or ends in defeat – faith in war as an instrument may disappear even among loyal elites. Defeat does not guarantee immediate end of war, but changes the internal calculations that feed it.

Deep political crisis with elite transformation is the most powerful factor of Russia's possible abandonment of war, but it requires combination with others. Coordinated external pressure is strong, but only if implemented. Economic exhaustion is a slow, accumulative factor that can trigger political crisis. Military defeat is not only potential cessation of hostilities, but also a catalyst for strategic changes.

None of these factors alone guarantees Russia's abandonment of war as an instrument of geopolitical positioning. But their combination is capable of breaking the current strategic logic. When this happens, Ukraine, Europe, and the world must be ready for rapid changes in Russian policy – including a possible new attempt to rely on war. This moment may come quickly – provided consistent containment of Russia by depriving it of victories and inflicting defeats.

Russia will not be able to wage a losing war – not forever, but not even for any considerable time.

Conclusions

The Russian regime lives by war. It is ready to wage a victorious war for life, but will not withstand any prolonged losing war in which defeat follows defeat. Putin's regime is supported by Russia's war beneficiaries who receive significant profits from capturing territories, people, economic assets, and political space. There are few of them, but they determine the agenda of Russian politics – and have no choice but to continue the war. The socio-political meaning of war for Russia is the external expansion of the "feeding base" of Putin regime supporters against the backdrop of shrinking their internal "feeding base".

Depriving Russia of military victories and inflicting defeats on it during a relatively short period, which in historical terms is an instant, deprives war of meaning for Russia itself. This will force it to either renew or even change the political regime that has currently merged with war and is inseparable from it. The new regime may not be better than the current one in terms of development level, but it will most likely have an "allergy" to war – and this allergy will last much longer than the period needed to inflict continuous defeats on Russia.

This is an updated application of George Kennan's containment theory: Russian autocracy, deprived of military victories, becomes exhausted at an accelerated pace and is eventually forced to change policy.

Today, when Putin's regime is inseparable from the war Russia is waging against Ukraine, and war is inseparable from Russian troops advancement at the front, a limited in time but stable military success of Ukraine's Defense Forces is sufficient for Russian authorities to not withstand the tension and choose the path to lasting peace. No other instruments of peace exist except Russia's military defeat. As long as Russia has a situation at the front that it can interpret as expansion, Putin's regime will reject any policy options that exclude war.

Russia's military defeat does not necessarily mean its collapse, but necessarily means abandoning war as a form of socio-political and economic organization of Russian life. This would mean losing chances for territorial expansion for decades. In such case, captured territories, population, and economic assets would become an unbearable burden for Russia, and Russia itself would become an unbearable burden for the sponsor of its aggressive policy, which is China.

The alternative to Russia's military defeat is a new impulse of viability for Putin's regime, inseparable from aggressive expansion, and continuation of "victorious war" through attacks on vulnerable countries that will not be able to count on support from Europe and the US, demoralized in case of Ukraine's defeat. Instead, China may be inspired by Russian victories – though not so much as to allow Russia's attack on the sphere of Chinese interests, such as Central Asia. In such case, European countries will become

most vulnerable to Russian offensive, which as US allies are simultaneously objects of Chinese pressure.

The United States' attempt to "tear" Russia away from China was used by Putin's regime to involve China in traditional Russian policy of separating the US and Europe. The American maneuver toward Russia yielded minimal results – revealing a part of Russian elites who, having the same quality as the rest, do not consider war the main instrument of policy. This part of the elites is insufficient even for unconditional cessation of hostilities.

Russia is China's aggressive vanguard. It recognizes Chinese leadership but hopes to outplay China in regime endurance. Russia is much more aggressive in foreign policy than Beijing. Ideologically, the Kremlin copies Chinese language of "multipolarity" but promotes it by force. Russia is not a civilization. It is a source of global, potentially nuclear destabilization. The Kremlin may well be counting on its policy contributing to direct military confrontation between the US and China. This, in the Russian vision, could open a geopolitical "window" and restore hope for the future.

Ukraine, by deterring Russia from further aggression in Europe, simultaneously restrains China from geopolitical adventurism.