

The Paths of Russian Militarism

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Abstract

Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine has generated a resurgence of interest in militarism, which can be defined as a belief system justifying demonstration of a country's military power by the use of force and measures to strengthen its military capabilities. Militarism arises when society and its leaders decide that they can no longer count on peace to solve their country's problems. The subject encompasses the causes and types of militarism, the conditions for its effectiveness, Russia's relations with the outside world during and after this phase of the military conflict, and more. Militarism has historically contributed to state-building and development in Russia. The understanding of militarism as inextricably linked with state-building has roots in the sociology of international relations. This article considers Russia's experience with militarism, focusing on its social and international aspects.

Keywords: Russia, militarism, war, Special Military Operation (SMO), state-building, international relations.

The Russian intellectual and political community is actively discussing matters related to military conflicts in general and to the Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine in particular. The discussion has revealed considerable support for continuing the SMO until its victorious conclusion, including by military and even nuclear escalation. According to a June 2024 Levada Center¹ survey, 34 percent of Russians supported the possible use of nuclear weapons. Yet many others advocate peace talks and a compromise to end the conflict, appearing to believe that the SMO cannot go on until Kiev's surrender.

The SMO has aroused interest in various aspects of militarism. Militarism can be understood as a belief system that justifies a direct demonstration of a country's military power by using force and a set of measures to strengthen its military capabilities. It arises with the realization of society and its leaders that their country's objectives cannot be peacefully achieved. The subject encompasses the causes and types of militarism, the conditions for its military and economic effectiveness, Russia's relations with the outside world during and after this phase of the military conflict, etc. Militarism has solved various problems throughout Russian history as a foundation for state-building and a driver of development. The linkage of military activity to the emergence and development of the state has long been rooted in the sociology of international relations, both in the West and Russia. Despite different sociological interpretations of militarism, many researchers have sought to study the problem in all its social, political, and military aspects.

While not purporting to be a systemic study of militarism, this article offers some considerations based on Russia's historical experience. It allows us to judge the scale of the phenomenon, its nature and causes, and its possibilities and limitations in solving the tasks facing the country. At the same time, the Russian experience calls for a comprehensive study of militarism not only by military specialists but also by experts in various fields of social science.

¹ Entered into the Registry of Foreign Agents by the Russian Ministry of Justice on 5 September 2016.

This is all the more important because militarism has become one of the significant global trends today. Without diminishing the significance of contemporary discussions about the military and technological dimensions of the SMO and future conflicts (Kashin and Sushentsov, 2023; Karaganov, 2024a, 2024b), the article analyzes examples of Russian militarism with an emphasis on its social and international aspects.

NEW OLD RUSSIAN MILITARISM

Construed as an ideology of enhancing and utilizing military power, militarism is intended to answer the most critical and urgent problems concerning national survival, dignity, security, development, fulfillment of international obligations, etc. As a system of views and practical politics, militarism has been part of international relations since ancient times. In modern European history, militarism has been associated with expansionism at least since Napoleonic France. However, each society develops its military capabilities according to its objectives and development specifics. These objectives may include not only expansionism but also the strengthening of security from external threats or the maintenance of international peace. In general, militarism can legitimately be viewed as an essential attribute of a traditional great power; hence, its intensification in tandem with great-power competition. Other characteristics of a great power include political status, prestige, leadership potential, the generation of new ideas and projects, etc.

As a measure of great-power status, militarism has many essential and interconnected facets: military, social, political, economic, cultural, and others. The military aspect consists of the pursuit of military superiority over other states. The political and economic elements often involve the military-industrial complex and a particular model of relations between the state and big business. The ideological aspect includes the development of nationalism or national chauvinism. The social and cultural elements involve cultivating the ideals of public service, sacrifice, and patriotic support for potential mobilization and participation in combat.

Modern militarism in Russia combines at least three interconnected beliefs. *Firstly*, that militarism spurs economic and social growth, helping the country become a real great power with a robust military-industrial complex and a national ideology of victory. *Secondly*, that the SMO's successful—even if slow—conclusion will allow Russia to rid itself and the world of the Western “yoke” by devising new rules for the post-Western world order. And *thirdly*, that victory's demonstration of Russian military power will convince Eurasian nations and the rest of the world of the need to respect Russia's interests and political decisions.

None of these beliefs, voiced by pundits during the SMO, is fundamentally new to Russian thinking. They grow from the same root: recognition of the state's inability to ensure security and growth through civilian development. Proponents of this approach are openly critical of the late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian state as having fallen into economic and ideological dependence on the potentially hostile West.

The current situation is unique in that many of the adherents to this view (a fraction that is directly proportional to the advance of the Russian army) are convinced that Russia can not only decisively win the SMO but also crush the West economically and morally bankrupting it and destroying its international military-political and other institutions. The latter should be replaced with a novel multipolar world order to guarantee peace and prosperity for humanity. It is assumed that such a world order will emerge due to the collapse of Western domination. It seems, however, that Russian militarists apply a geopolitical perspective of the conflict only to the West, not beyond it—they at least do not consider it necessary at the moment to seriously discuss possible conflicts between Russia and rising non-Western powers.

TARGET TYPOLOGY

It is impossible to understand militarism without clarifying its goals and forming an appropriate typology of its variants. It would be a mistake to link Russian militarism exclusively to expansion by force.

The mythology of Russian expansionism—described by thinkers like Marquis de Custine, George Kennan, and Henry Kissinger—overemphasizes one facet of Russia’s foreign policy. However, Russian history knows many examples of defensive militarism or militarism related to international obligations. As for expansionism, Western imperialism often pursued new markets and resources for development. In Russia’s case, such commercial and economic considerations were at least complemented by the desire for a zone of security from other great powers.

Many of Russian militarism’s objectives stem from the need to ensure the security of Russians as a people. Throughout their history, Russians have had to protect their physical survival, national borders, way of life, and ideological and cultural values. Before the Golden Horde’s hegemony, many Russian wars and campaigns were waged to unify the Russian principalities and combat threats from nomads. During the Time of Troubles, Russia defended itself from interventionists seeking to cast down both its statehood and its Orthodox faith. Russia’s participation in the European system featured military campaigns primarily directed at protecting its borders—especially in the south and the west—and protecting the religious and political rights of Slavic and Orthodox peoples in the Balkans. In Soviet times, only a militaristic policy could defend the country from Western anti-Bolshevik interventions, the German invasion, and Western efforts to undermine the Soviet system and sphere.

Many of the SMO’s official goals are also defensive of the Russian state and/or people, including the containment of Western military infrastructure’s eastward movement and the protection of the life and rights of people in eastern Ukraine who are close to Russia and share its values. Responding to the West’s involvement in post-Soviet Ukraine, Russia has been seeking to defend its position and influence in Ukraine and Eastern Europe as a whole.

After defense, the second kind of Russian militarism seeks to uphold international order through coalitions to preserve the status quo. The first manifestations of Russia’s desire to establish a just regional and

global order were Prince Vladimir's military alliance with Byzantium and the baptism of Russians to convert them to Orthodox Christianity at the end of the 10th century. The military alliance with Byzantium ended the Russian raids on Constantinople and ushered in a period of peaceful religious, cultural, and economic exchange that lasted until Byzantium's defeat by the Crusaders in 1204.

After the Russians had shaken off the Mongol yoke and joined the European system, Russian militarism pursued the same goals of upholding order and existing norms and principles. Throughout the 18th and 20th centuries, Russia repeatedly participated in European coalitions against troublemakers—Sweden, Prussia, France, and Germany—until the collapse of European hegemony in the early 20th century. As the “gendarme of Europe,” distinguished by the size of its army and willingness to use it (Dushenko, 2021), Russia, unlike the abovementioned countries, never aspired for hegemony in Europe. Not even after the defeat of Napoleon, which was accomplished principally by the Russian army that had fought its way to Paris. Instead of dictating his will to Europe from there, Alexander I withdrew his troops and co-inaugurated the Concert of Europe that endured until the Crimean War.

The Russian Empire was crucial in containing Wilhelmine Germany, and the USSR played the foremost role in defeating Nazi Germany. However, the postwar order established in Yalta soon began to fall apart. Once the Cold War was replaced by a “rules-based” world order imposed by the U.S., Russia's military activities in post-Soviet Eurasia and Syria sought to restore and protect the principles of Yalta and the UN Charter: states' sovereignty, equality, and great powers' unique role in maintaining global stability. Russian government officials also stressed these principles in criticizing the West's activities in Ukraine and justified Russia's military support for the Syrian government since 2015.

Finally, the third kind of Russian militarism seeks to facilitate the country's development by securing access to markets, resources, and territories. Expansionism is an important motivation, but not the only one. Since the raids on Byzantium and the rivalry between

principalities, the Russian people had sought to improve the conditions for their growth and development. In the post-Mongol period, Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great fought for access to the Baltic, Azov, and Black Seas, which would strengthen the country economically and commercially in the face of other powers' possible dominance. Many of Russia's wars for the Caucasus and Central and East Asia had expansionist motives but also sought to contain rivals such as Britain, the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Japan, or China.

This thread of militarism can be easily traced into the Soviet period but not so quickly beyond that. In Soviet times, expansionism opposed the West and was seen as delivering economic growth and prosperity to the "world system of socialism." The post-Soviet period instead saw Russia searching for a new identity and role in the world. Contrary to many assertions, neither the conflict in Georgia in 2008 nor the SMO in Ukraine constitutes imperial or expansionist militarism. While there is no documentary evidence of such intentions by the Russian leadership, there is a great deal of evidence for post-Soviet Russia's pursuit of Western security guarantees (Hill, 2018; Tsygankov, 2018; Sarrotte, 2021; Sakwa, 2023; Royce, 2024). Although the conflict in Ukraine has become a territorial one, its roots lie primarily in the desire to protect Russia's security, its economic (including energy-related) influence, and the rights of culturally close people in the east of Ukraine.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ROOTS

The social and political origins of Russian militarism merit some further consideration. As demonstrated above, the phenomenon is rooted in the Russian state's need to survive and develop. As the requirements for these things changed throughout history, so did the ideas and values that united Russians.

During the period of feudal disunity, the external threat of the Polovtsy and other steppe peoples and wars with them proved insufficient to unite the Russians. It was only the dramatically increased threat from the Mongols in the southeast and from the

Lithuanians, Teutonic Knights, and Swedes in the northwest that initiated the Russians' gradual transformation into a politically united Orthodox people.

After the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380 and the Great Stand on the Ugra River a century later, the Russian civilization-state had to assert itself against rising neighbors. Lithuania and Poland began to merge in the late 14th century, and in 1453, the Turks conquered Byzantium. Gradually, the Tsardom of Russia became strong enough to refuse tribute to the Horde and to enhance its unity and sovereignty. Now, the Russians could focus on developing trade and other ties with the outside world. The growing Russian state needed new markets, especially in burgeoning 16th-century Europe. However, Moscow's expansionist aspirations met with the European powers' resistance, leading to the long and unsuccessful Livonian War.

Having survived that defeat and the ensuing Troubles, the Russian state again needed strengthening and development. It accomplished the former, defeated Poland in modern Ukraine in 1662, and Sweden in the early 18th century, and entered the European system. Now, the Russians had to, firstly, confirm their status as a European power and, secondly, maintain the European order with the resources available, primarily their army. Until the Crimean War in 1853, and again from about 1900 until World War I, Russia played a significant, sometimes decisive, role in maintaining order in the continent.

In the post-1917 system of international relations, the Russians again faced threats to their survival that eclipsed efforts at development or expansion until after World War II. And the Soviet Union was eventually unable to resist the pressure of the overall more powerful West. However, history was already entering a new cycle. Having gone through a period of weakness and having largely ensured their survival, the Russians began to think about securing new conditions for their development, but encountered the West's opposition again, including in Ukraine.

This created conditions for the revival of Russian militarism to preserve and develop the state in the face of external pressure. As before, this new militarism was the product of confrontation with the

West. The SMO continues the tradition of containing the West's global ambitions, which became particularly manifest in the 20th century and throughout the Cold War. After the post-Soviet crisis, Russia's confrontation with the West continued, as did the West's pursuit of global dominance. Moscow's first step in this confrontation was its operation to "force Georgia to peace" in August 2008. This was followed by further steps to assert Russia's military power after NATO had rejected President Medvedev's proposal of a European Security Treaty and instead continued expansion. A significant factor was the Russian leadership's growing desire to make clear to the West (especially the U.S.) its ability to change regimes in Eurasia if mutually acceptable compromises cannot be reached.

Other popular theories of Russian militarism focus on Russia's pursuit of hegemony or the "autocratic" nature of its government. Hegemony and expansion theories concentrate solely on one kind of Russian militarism, ignoring all others and making overly broad generalizations on this basis. As for the autocracy-based explanations of militarism, they focus entirely on the political leadership and, therefore cannot comprehend the structural tasks of the state, its project of state-building, or the conditions of international conflict (Tsygankov, 2012; Gunitsky and Tsygankov, 2018). Apart from the political leadership and the decision-making style, there are other factors that should be considered. A significant part of Russian militarism comes as a response to them.

CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVENESS

Militarism produces different results, ranging from crushing victories to defeats, with truces and interim results. Such a variety of outcomes is not surprising in the case of Russia since, as historians like Mikhail Pogodin and Vasily Klyuchevsky say, the Russian state has fought for about half of its existence.

To assess the effectiveness and costs of militarism, it is crucial to understand factors that include the international system, political leadership, and the present requirements for state-building. Militarism can be effective if there is no civilian alternative to it,

if it can accomplish many of a country's strategic objectives, and if it is not intended as a permanent solution. These criteria can be satisfied, in turn, only if at least the following conditions are met: internal popular support is sufficient, there is a constellation of powerful supportive states, and there is a clear understanding of when to switch from military to civilian solutions. On the contrary, militarism cannot be considered effective if it fails to solve the most critical problems and even creates new ones. Reasons for ineffectiveness may include insufficient public support, weak international support, or a lack of understanding of when, exactly, civilian solutions should be enacted.

Political leadership and military strategy play a significant role in determining militarism's effectiveness. The experience, convictions, character, and personal style of a state's leader seriously affect its military and foreign policy. Those of contemporary Russia prominently feature special, intelligence, and information operations. The scale of Russian activities partly depends on how Vladimir Putin and his inner circle see the world and their country's capabilities. The structure of international relations compels Russia to defend its sovereignty, but the specific mechanisms and style may vary between leaders with different professional experience, convictions, and characters. For instance, if someone like Yevgeny Primakov led the country, his statesmanship style would be different.

Historically, Russian militarism has often proven quite effective in driving social development. For example, before the Livonian War started by Ivan IV, Muscovy's wars helped consolidate the state, free it from the Horde, and open opportunities for it in the west, the south, and Siberia. After Europe's ascent to global hegemony, of which the Russian Empire was an integral part, Russia often fought successfully for security, new markets, and the rights and independence of Slavic and Orthodox peoples.

Wars that were successful in foreign-policy terms did not always facilitate internal growth and prosperity (Tsygankov, 2022). Peter the Great's wars were supported by a poll tax and an almost 30-percent increase in taxes on peasants. Serfdom was abolished only after Russia's

defeat in the Crimean War. Soviet collective farms, reproducing some features of serfdom, were a cause and consequence of Soviet militarism. Problems in the development of the civil and consumer economy during the late Soviet period are also well known.

Even more damaging are the lost wars that imposed immense casualties, physical destruction, and societal degradation. The lost Livonian War presaged the Time of Troubles; the lost Russo-Japanese War portended the 1905 Revolution; and the failures of World War I eventually led to the February and October Revolutions. In between, the 1853-1856 Crimean War exposed Russian economic, technological, military, and administrative backwardness. Having lost half a million soldiers, the country also lost its great-power status and found itself on the verge of bankruptcy. Russian Chancellor Alexander Gorchakov was convinced that “Russia cannot play an active role in foreign policy if there is ruin and turmoil inside the country.”

Faced with the often high price of militarism, Russian rulers repeatedly withdrew from international coalitions contrary to their obligations. The first to do this was Catherine the Great, who, on the advice of Nikita Panin, pulled out of the war with Prussia to solve urgent domestic problems. Alexander II similarly avoided European entanglements.

Soviet leaders did not consider themselves bound by severe commitments to the Europeans and initially sought to reforge the continent in revolution. But they, too, sometimes paused for internal recovery. In the interwar period, there were two such pauses: Lenin’s New Economic Policy and Stalin’s Socialism in One Country. In both cases, the Bolsheviks considered it necessary to reduce revolutionary activity in Europe for internal strengthening.

When wars were inevitable, they were often fought carefully. Western support for Kiev is quite strong, and it is not clear as yet where the threshold lies to put an end to the SMO.

TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF MILITARISM

The study of militarism requires systematically rethinking its nature, causes, possibilities, and limits, as well as clarification of

the above-described conditions for its effectiveness. The agenda would encompass both Russia's experience and cross-national studies. Greater global instability and great powers' military buildup necessitate a better understanding of militarism. The role of military force and diplomacy increases immensely in an uncertain and imbalanced world.

Militarism is clearly important enough to merit study by military historians, political scientists, sociologists, and other social scientists. Such comprehensive research can help bridge the long-standing divide in Russian thought between the partisans of militarism's utmost importance and the partisans of its a priori ineffectiveness. There is a common belief among Russian social scientists that militarism creates more problems than solutions, especially in the long term. Militarists are often correct about possible military solutions, but they often fail to consider the conditions and scenarios details of the eventual civilian transition. Both sides may be correct, under certain conditions, which require thorough study. Global political, military, and economic uncertainty necessitates a rejection of non-negotiable certainties and a search for complex strategic solutions.

This is why it is important to assess militarism in the broad contexts of foreign policy and state-building.

Militarism is one foreign policy mechanism alongside diplomatic, economic, informational, and 'soft power' ones. A successful foreign policy requires flexibility and the use of all available resources. Understanding the limits of militarism requires expert discussion of scenarios for transitioning from military to other solutions, including peace talks.

The limits of militarism in fulfilling domestic tasks must also be understood. Under certain conditions, it can impede state development. While military Keynesianism can temporarily spur industrial growth, it can also overheat the economy. Militarism may also ignite ruinous arms races, inhibit social and entrepreneurial initiative, feed corruption in government bureaucracies, and nurture a cult of strength.

An armed conflict is a temporary solution that cannot displace the whole range of long-term foreign-policy and state-building objectives. Russian state-building remains historically unfinished. Because of international competition, Russia has often had to rely on militaristic decisions, leaving civilian projects for later. An analysis of militarism requires the identification of objectives that can and cannot be achieved by military means. Many of the latter, the physical and institutional improvement of people's lives, remain unaddressed. They may include the attraction of foreign technologies and investments, the acquisition of access to new markets, and the creation of a comprehensive institutional environment for long-term development and a safe and comfortable life. Researchers interested in the comprehensive study of militarism should seek a wide base of empirical material on which to consider the entire range of development problems facing the country, both solvable and unsolvable within the framework of militarism.

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