

The Concept of Grand Strategy and the Specific case of the Russian State

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Abstract: When talking about International Relations, for the last decades, the popularity of the concept of *grand strategy* has continuously increased. This led to the present situation when we have a disputed term with multiple distinct definitions. In this context, the central objective of this paper is to select and evaluate the existing analyses of the *grand strategy* of the Kremlin between 2000 and 2019. Another important goal is to clarify the main elements of this concept. To identify the relevant literature, we used a series of academic journals such as Cambridge Journals, ProQuest Central, Sage Journals and others. The present analysis shows that one category of authors argue that the grand strategy of the Russian Federation has become more assertive. According to their opinion, the Moscow administration is willing to use all means available in order to achieve the main objectives: the status of great power; the return to the spheres of influence; and the return to a multipolar international system. A second category explores sub-elements of grand strategy such as the importance of Ukraine, or the impact of the war in Georgia. Finally, one researcher argues that Russia does not have a grand strategy at all. In conclusion, this paper shows that many elements remain to be explored in relation to a topic of such complexity as the grand strategy of the Russian Federation.

Keywords: grand strategy; the Russian Federation; literature review

1. Introduction

The subjects related to the Russian state have always attracted attention and, in light of the problematic international events as those of the last two decades, the focus of the researchers has been on the past, present, and future actions/visions of the Kremlin. However, at an initial research, the number of papers that used the concept of *grand strategy* (extremely popular in post - 1991 reality) for the study of the Russian case, can be evaluated as limited. The situation is strongly different from

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that of the literature on the American grand strategy, which can be found in a vast amount of studies. Simona Soare (2011) highlighted this fact suggestively, saying about the American case that: "(...) there are few new things that can be explored in relation to such a theme that was so researched in the field of contemporary international relations" (p. 45). In this context, the following question naturally arose: what are the main ideas and approaches of the literature on the Russian Federation's grand strategy?

Thus, the main objective of this paper was to select and evaluate the contributions that analyzed the grand strategy of the Kremlin for the period from 2000 to 2019. A second objective was to employ the concept of *grand strategy* in a clear and unproblematic way. The beginning of the new millennium corresponds to the time when Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia.

To achieve the assumed objectives, we took the following steps: the identification of relevant bibliographic references (by searching a specific word/phrase; inclusion criteria) and the analysis of the literature. For a detailed identification, but far from an exhaustive one, we used international databases (ProQuest Central; ScienceDirect; Scopus; SpringerLink Journals; Web of Science; Wiley Online Library; Sage Journals; Cambridge Journals) and the Google Scholar search engine, where we searched for the key words, "*Russian Federation's grand strategy*". Even though the number of results was in the tens of thousands, we noticed that these high values were because some references addressed related topics derived from the search phrase. For example, there were works that analyzed the concept of *strategy*, or topics related to the Russian Federation, the grand strategy of other states such as China, India, Iran and so on.

To select the necessary references, the following inclusion criteria were used: (1) the papers are full-text; only the works that present, in the title, the term of *grand strategy* in relation to the Russian state were retained; (2) publications in English; (3) were selected only the contributions that analyzed the Russian Federation in the period 2000-2019; (4) the papers present sufficient information related to the established search phrase to be analyzed.

The analysis procedure of the selected papers, among which we can find academic resources, as well as "*gray references*", aimed to highlight the main ideas and arguments invoked to support the various positions, and to outline the possible limitations of those papers.

Finally, this paper was structured according to the temporal dimension of the evolution of the literature about the Russian Federation's grand strategy. This option is selected from the wide range highlighted in "*The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. Sixth Edition*" (2013), in which it is argued that literature review "(...) can be arranged in various ways (e.g., by grouping research based on similarity in the concepts or theories of interest, methodological similarities among the studies reviewed, or the historical development of the field)" (American Psychological Association, 2013, p. 10).

2. The Concept of *Grand Strategy*

The notion of *grand strategy*, like other concepts from the field of International Relations, is often used in an instinctive manner, without a clear/relevant definition and adjusted to the specific context in which it is mentioned. This happens, most of the time, in the case of articles published in mainstream media or in the publications and analyzes of various think tanks. In the literature of political science, we find a much more nuanced and carefully developed approach for the concept of *grand strategy*.

The present paper did not explore the entire intellectual history of the term of *grand strategy* (which can be traced back to the nineteenth century), but it has to be mentioned that at this evolution have contributed a series of authors such as Alfred Thayer Mahan, Julian Stafford Corbett, Edward Mead Earle, John Frederick Charles Fuller, Basil Liddell Hart, John Collins, Edward N. Luttwak, Barry R. Posen, Paul M. Kennedy, and more recently Thomas J. Christensen or Hal Brands (for a detailed perspective see: Lukas Milevski, "*The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought*" - 2016).

This concept appeared for the first time in the study of military strategy and history but later was also adopted by the field of international studies, where the main objective of the researchers, according to William C. Martel (2015), was to "(...) explain grand strategy in universal terms, applicable across time and space, and to use these explanations to make predictions about the grand strategy and actions of states" (p. 11).

These developments have unfortunately led to a dilution of the substance of the concept, and, for the moment being, multiple definitions can be identified. This conclusion is shared, albeit in a much more pessimistic light, by Lukas Milevski

(2016), who highlighted the current state of the term of *grand strategy* which, in his view “(...) remains a standardless, incoherent concept, whose popularity surge after the end of the Cold War multiplied the lack of rigour with which it was employed” (p. 141). Also, Nina Silove, in an article from 2018, in which she analyzed the intellectual history and the contemporary way of using this term, showed that there is no consensus on the definition of *grand strategy*. Silove identified the existence of three distinct perspectives: *grand plans* – “are the detailed product of the deliberate efforts of individuals to translate a state’s interests into specific long-term goals, establish orders of priority between those goals, and consider all spheres of statecraft (military, diplomatic, and economic) in the process of identifying the means by which to achieve them” (Silove, 2018, p. 49); *grand principles* – “are overarching ideas that are consciously held by individuals about the long-term goals that the state should prioritize and the military, diplomatic, and/or economic means that ought to be mobilized in pursuit of those goals” (Silove, 2018, p. 49); and *grand behavior* – “is the long-term pattern in a state’s distribution and employment of its military, diplomatic, and economic resources toward ends” (Silove, 2018, p. 49). These possibilities of understanding the concept of *grand strategy* started from the fact that all three categories are understood in terms of means and objectives. Also, these definitions have characteristics such as “long term” (in the approaches offered by Basil Liddell Hart and Paul M. Kennedy – the grand strategy is seen as acting for decades), “holistic” (includes military, economic and diplomatic dimensions) and “important” (it is concerned with compromises aimed at advancing the most important/vital interests of the state). These definitions are also the ones that this paper uses.

Despite this problematic situation, the elements presented up to this point help us establish some definitions and separate the grand strategy of a state from other related concepts such as military strategy, the strategy necessary to achieve a certain particular objective, tactics, and so on. Before going any further, it is useful to mention that, over time, several authors have expressed skepticism about the very ability of states to formulate a grand strategy (mainly referring to the US case).

In 1998, Robert Jervis stated that it would not be possible for the United States to develop a coherent grand strategy over the next decade. This does not mean that the US foreign policy would be without a pattern. Jervis (1998) argued, in support of his position, that America “(...) has a fragmented political system in an external environment in which no single interest, threat, or value predominates” (p. 31).

Stephen D. Krasner, in the article “*An Orienting Principle for Foreign Policy*”, from 2010, said that it is often difficult for a state to develop a successful grand strategy. Moreover, he stated that even in the case of the United States of America, on which his analysis focuses, it is not possible to have a grand strategy because there are “(...) disagreements among the major powers, different ideological perspectives, dynamic power changes, uncertain policy options (...)” (Krasner, 2010). Krasner supported the usefulness of orienting principles as an alternative to grand strategy.

Walter A. McDougall starts, in an article, from the question of whether the relevant actors within the United States can design, coordinate, and execute a grand strategy. At the end of the analysis, in which he showed that the US, in its history, had a varied experience regarding the grand strategy, McDougall (2010) emphasized a pessimistic vision, stating: “(...) I nurture no hope that a great burst of grand strategic creativity lies just ahead” (p. 182).

Richard K. Betts, in “*American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security*” (2012), highlighted the need for a more temperate/restrained policy for the United States. Regarding the concept of *grand strategy*, he emphasized, in the last chapter of the book, that: “Any general plan that relies on tight control of causes and effects, by adept orchestration of many moving parts, is likely to fail. Acting at their best, leaders may stipulate a vague grand strategy at the level of a bumper sticker – such as containment and deterrence (...)” (Betts, 2012, p. 291).

Regarding the situation of the Russian case, there are points of view such as the one nuanced by Celeste Wallander (2007), who stated that “Russian grand strategy is neither great, nor strategic nor sustainable” (p. 140), or like the one of Stefanie Ortmann (2011), who, in the conclusions of a chapter, stated that “(...) the enmeshment of public and private, and the identification interests of the state with the interests of ‘states people’ within the networks, served to produce a ‘fuzzy’, somewhat contradictory and predominantly reactive foreign policy at odds with the ‘grand strategy’ of a Great Power” (p. 162).

It can be stated with ease that the concept of *grand strategy* is a problematic one. However, this paper is in line with a vision which argues that a state can design and follow a grand strategy. We do not deny that this term is in a slightly unclear/confusing situation, but it retains its usefulness (even if it is a limited one, compared to the main concepts in the field of International Relations).

3. The Russian Federation and Grand Strategy

In addition to the contributions that will be analyzed, we have also consulted the following ones: Brian MacDonald – “*The grand strategy of the Soviet Union*” (1984); Raymond Taras, Marshal Zeringue – “*Grand strategy in a post-bipolar world: interpreting the final Soviet response*” (1992); Fakiolas E.T. – “*Continuity and change in soviet and Russian grand strategy*” (1998); Henrikki Heikka – “*The Evolution of Russian Grand Strategy and its Implications on Finnish Security*” (1999) and “*The Evolution of Russian Grand Strategy – Implications for Europe’s North*” (2000); Albert L. Weeks – “*Stalin’s other war. Soviet Grand Strategy, 1939-1941*” (2002); John P. LeDonne – “*The grand strategy of the Russian Empire 1650-1831*” (2004). Despite the fact that they may represent useful introductory works in the study of the Russian Federation’s grand strategy, these references were not included because they exceed the objectives of this paper.

Andrei P. Tsygankov, in his article from 2011, “*Preserving Influence in a Changing World. Russia’s Grand Strategy*”, started his analysis from the literature for grand strategy and foreign policy. More specifically, he analyzed the hard and soft dimensions of Russia’s power – energy; military; cultural and historical capital; diplomacy and international organizations; technological expertise. The paper highlights both the possibilities for the development of the Kremlin’s grand strategy and its inherent shortcomings. Employing a clear definition for the concept of *grand strategy*, Tsygankov’s (2011) main argument was that “(...) since the 2000s, Russia’s central objective has been to become an independent center of power and influence by creating flexible international coalitions” (p. 29). The author also outlines that during Medvedev’s presidency of the Russian Federation, and in the context of divergences between him and Vladimir Putin, regarding the approach to politics, the main elements of grand strategy remained constant. However, considering the reality up to 2011, when this article was written, Tsygankov (2011) stated that “Although Russia has completed the transition from communism and found a coherent international strategy, the future challenge is to assemble the will to act on it” (p. 42).

Brian J. Ellison touches tangentially the subject of grand strategy in the article “*Russian Grand Strategy in the South Ossetia War*” (2011), which tries to answer the question: whether the war of 2008 is the product of a *grand design* of the Russian Federation. Using various explanatory models to analyze the Russian decision-making process and the course of events, Ellison (2011) concluded that “(...)

Russia's action in Georgia was not part of a grand strategy *per se*, but absolutely particular to the local situation" (p. 359). Thus, Brian J. Ellison points out that Moscow's grand strategy after 2008 is not aggressive.

Itai Z. Saltzman in his paper "*Russian Grand Strategy and the United States in the 21st Century*" (2012), aimed to identify the international and domestic factors that would support, in his vision, the assertive behavior of the Russian Federation. At the domestic level it is specified that "(...) the Russian economy experienced high levels of growth, the political system was stabilized even if it was less democratic (...) and the Russian Army underwent fundamental reforms and modernization (...)" (Saltzman, 2012, p. 560), while at the external level are invoked elements such as the Iraq War; the American initiative to deploy NMD systems in Europe and the withdrawing from the ABM Treaty; and the war in Georgia (Saltzman, 2012, pp. 553-560). Regarding the concept of *grand strategy* – which would involve a return to multipolarity even through the limited employment of military force (Saltzman, 2012, p. 547) – Saltzman's article approach can be characterized as superficial. This is because the Russian grand strategy is not explored in more detail, the author seems satisfied by the mere use of expressions such as: "imperial ambitions", "spheres of influence".

Andrew Monaghan, in "*Putin's Russia: shaping a grand strategy?*" (2013), analyzes the commitment of the Russian Federation to strategic planning, while asking whether the Kremlin's administration has a grand strategy. This concept is perceived as "(...) both the shaping of a clear and coherent vision that coordinates the necessary appropriate personnel and resources and the process of implementing that vision in an evolving context to create power" (Monaghan, 2013, p. 1228). The author argues from the beginning that he focuses more on the process of strategy (strategic planning and implementation) than on what it contains. After analyzing the official plans (which, in his opinion, contain contradictions (Monaghan, 2013, p. 1231)) and the implementation process (whose problematic nature is suggestively illustrated, in Monaghan's view, by the "failure of the 'vertical of power'"), the paper concludes with the fact that the Russian Federation does not possess a grand strategy yet. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, Monaghan reiterated these ideas in a 2014 paper, "*Defibrillating the Vertikal? Putin and Russian Grand Strategy*".

Matthew Sussex and Roger E. Kanet published, in 2015, two closely related volumes, which aimed to explore the dynamics of the former Soviet space, with an obvious emphasis on the Russian Federation. The volume "*Power, Politics and*

Confrontation in Eurasia. Foreign Policy in a Contested Region” focuses mainly on the dispute between the Russian Federation and the West in the area perceived as the “common neighborhood”, and it is divided into three chapters: “*Russian politics and foreign policy*”; “*Institutions and architecture in Eurasia*”; and “*Confrontation in Ukraine*”. In the last section, we find the sub-chapter “*Russian Grand Strategy and the Ukraine Crisis: An Historical Cut*”, signed by John Berryman, who aims, as suggested in the title, to highlight the place of Ukraine and Crimea in the grand strategy of the Russian Empire/of the Soviet Union/the Russian Federation. This research starts with the definitions proposed by Posen and Walt, who see grand strategy as being concerned with identifying the possible threats and with ensuring state security, using a wide range of national power resources (Posen, 1984, pp. 13-33; Walt, 1989, p. 6, cited in Berryman, 2015, p. 187). Focusing primarily on the hard dimension of security, Berryman points out that Ukraine and Crimea (“(...) territory which Russia had controlled for the previous 350 years with no obvious detriment to Western security (...)” (Berryman, 2015, p. 197)), represented a central focus point in the grand strategy of the Russian state, whether we refer to the former Empire, the USSR, or more recently to the Russian Federation, and thus now the Kremlin’s administration is not prepared to “(...) accept lectures on double standards from those Western powers which have undertaken fiercely contested interventions in Kosovo, Iraq and Libya (...)” (Kinzer, 2006, cited in Berryman, 2015, p. 202).

The book “*Russia, Eurasia and the New Geopolitics of Energy. Confrontation and Consolidation*”, aimed to analyze the themes of the main actors, the fundamental processes and the developing architecture (Kanet and Sussex, 2015, p. 7) in relation to Eurasia (the focus being on Central Asia). This approach was divided into two main chapters: the first discussing the emerging conflict situation between East and West, and the second, focusing more on the energy dimension of the region. The first sub-chapter emphasized Matthew Sussex’s contribution, “*From retrenchment to revanchism and back again? Russian grand strategy in the Eurasian Heartland*”, which analyzed the “*revanchist*” Russian grand strategy in Eurasia. Sussex started in this analysis from the revanchist behavior, which he defined as a rapid return after a period of decline. He identifies four conditions for this situation: a relatively short ‘rebound’ time; a strategic emphasis on territory; re-establishment of local primacy through institutions and alliance structures; and the extent of domestic elite consensus over national interests (Sussex, 2015, pp. 21-22). By analyzing the post-communist Russian state, his conclusion was that “Russian power has indeed experienced a power reversal of a kind that facilitates revanchist behavior, and this

is borne out by its desire to take action – rather than just issue threats – in relation to security affairs on its semi-periphery” (Sussex, 2015, p. 37), also emphasizing that “(...) although Russia has certainly attempted to establish a firm sphere of influence in Eurasia, it has only been partially successful in doing so. Rather than attaining total dominance, it has instead engineered a sort of constrained primacy” (Sussex, 2015, p. 37). This “constrained regional hegemony” is largely due, according to Matthew Sussex’s research, to the institutional architecture of Eurasia, which is a mixture of different members and organizations with distinct goals and functional capabilities. However, the author also points out that the internal consensus on the foreign policy of the Russian Federation facilitated this revanchist line.

In an article from July 20, 2017, entitled “*Russia’s Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will it Work?*”, Dmitri Trenin argued that 2014 was a decisive moment for the foreign policy of the Russian Federation and for the two post-Cold War visions: the integration into a wider West and reintegration of the former Soviet republics, leading to the country’s new geopolitical framework - *Greater Eurasia* (which extends geographically from Portugal to Korea and from the Arctic to the Indian Ocean (Trenin, 2017)). Trenin (2017) stated that this vision is still in the design phase, but that the elements on which it is built can be noticed, respectively “(...) the self-image of alone, great power in a global world; outreach to Asian partners to create a continental order free from the dominance of the United States; and calculated patience toward Western Europe”. Without a clear delimitation of the meaning of *grand strategy*, Dmitri Trenin’s article follows the elements of this “Eurasian strategy” with the impediments it might encounter.

Joseph Roger Clark claimed, in his paper, “*Russia’s Indirect Grand Strategy*”, from 2019, that the Russian Federation is a revisionist, if not even a revanchist power with a grand strategy that “(...) seeks to avoid direct conflict with the United States until Russia possesses the requisite strength to control the necessary domains to achieve its political objective. Until then, Russia hovers as a threat on the horizon seeking to identify and then strike America’s sources of strength (...)” (Clark, 2019, p. 226). By using a clear definition for the concept of *grand strategy*, Clark (2019) pointed out that an indirect approach “(...) seeks cumulative changes in relative power in one domain via spillover effects created by activity in another. It shifts, and potentially re-shifts, the locus of action to select the arena in which national resources and instruments are most likely to generate increasing levels of control” (p. 227). By invoking a series of official documents and speeches of the Russian political actors, the author argued the main objectives of the Russian Federation are

to return to great power status and to obtain regional dominance (Clark, 2019, p. 231). Furthermore, whereas in the classic fields of grand strategy (military, economic and diplomatic), the Russian state's position is rather peculiar compared to the one of the USA, the article focuses on other two subjects – cyber and domestic-political fields – in which the advantage of the US leadership is questionable. The author claims that, for the time being, these fields are a viable alternative to the national interests of the Russian Federation. Clark mentioned examples such as the 2014 Ukrainian elections, the 2016 US presidential elections, and so on, which support the existence, in his view, of an indirect grand strategy.

Conclusions

The academic literature on the concept of *grand strategy* is substantial, but in the specific case of the Russian Federation, we have identified only a limited number of papers. At the conceptual level, there is no generally accepted definition for the term *grand strategy*. This problem is also reflected in the mentioned papers, mainly by the fact they have employed slightly different approaches regarding this concept or have used it without a clear specification of its meaning.

The analyzed contributions can be classified according to several categories. Thus, regarding the first series of authors, it can be stated that there is some consensus between them because they believe that the Moscow administration has a grand strategy which implies a more involved/assertive approach on the international stage. On the one hand, Andrei P. Tsygankov, Ilai Z. Saltzman, Matthew Sussex, Dmitri Trenin and Joseph Roger Clark identified a Russian grand strategy which is willing to use all the available capabilities in order to achieve these main objectives: to regain the status of great power, the return to multipolarity, and to have a sphere of influence at the regional level. On the other hand, the works of Brian J. Ellison and John Berryman focus on sub-elements of the grand strategy, exploring the impact of the conflict in Georgia or the relevance of Ukraine for the Russian state. Finally, Andrew Monaghan concludes that, by the time of his analysis, the Kremlin administration was still in the process of developing a grand strategy. It should be noted that some of these contributions have a series of shortcomings. In the context of the problematic nature of the term *grand strategy*, precision is extremely important in defining/operationalizing and employing the concept, and, as we have seen, some authors have even skipped this part entirely. Moreover, the attribution with ease and without additional detailed nuances, of some characteristics such as “the objective

to restore the spheres of influence” – which is a contested concept in International Relations – it only complicates the explanatory approach. Also, to support as truthfully as possible some conclusions, we consider necessary the use of a varied and substantial range of sources (both primary and secondary). In the case of some of the analyzed papers, such an approach cannot be identified. Cumulating those presented up to this point, it can be stated that regarding the grand strategy of the Russian Federation, many things remain to be researched.

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