

RAIDING AND INTERNATIONAL BRIGANDRY: RUSSIA'S STRATEGY FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION

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COMMENTARY

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No one knows if the next six years of Vladimir Putin's reign will be his last, but signs suggest they will be the most difficult for Washington to navigate in what is now widely acknowledged on both sides as a long-term confrontation between Russia and the West. Moscow has weathered an economic crisis brought on by low oil prices and Western sanctions, domestic political scandals, and international setbacks. More importantly, just as America's own national security documents begin to frame great power competition as the defining challenge to U.S. power, Russia is yet again adapting its approach based on the experience of the past three years. Russian leaders may not have something that would

satisfy the Western academic strategy community as a deliberate “grand strategy,” but they nonetheless possess a strategic outlook and a theory of victory for this competition. That theory is based less on direct competition and more on raiding, a stratagem that holds promise for revisionist ambitions and the weaker side in the conflict.

Raiding is the way by which Russia seeks to coerce the United States through a series of operations or campaigns that integrate indirect and direct approaches. Modern great power competition will thus return to forms of coercion and imposition reminiscent of the Middle Ages, but enacted with the technologies of today. Although raiding will be Moscow’s principal approach to competition, international brigandry may be the best term to describe elements of Russian behavior that the West considers to be “bad” or “malign.” These are acts of indirect warfare, both centrally planned and enacted on initiative by entities within the Russian state empowered to shape policy – often in competition with each other. Brigandry may come with negative legalistic connotations, a byword for outlaw, but here the term is meant to define a form of irregular or skirmish warfare in the international system conducted by a partisan.

Russia is, at times, miscast as a global spoiler or retrograde delinquent. Delinquents commit minor offenses and have no plan. Spoilers react to plans, but have little strategy of their own. Raiders, by contrast, launch operations with a strategic outlook and objectives in mind. And while often weaker than their opponents, raiders can be successful. The structure of the international system and the nature of the confrontation lends itself to the use of raiding, which increasingly appears to be the chosen Russian strategy. By focusing on deterring the high-end conventional fight and restoring nuclear coercive credibility, both important in and of themselves, the United States national security establishment may be fundamentally overlooking what will prove the defining Russian approach to competition.

Raiding as a tactic is not a new experience for the United States, but considered in a strategic context, the concept may lend itself more useful than the hodgepodge of gray zone, and other neologisms the community is often stuck referencing to explain the modern character of war. More importantly, raiding is a long established concept at the operational and strategic level of warfare, unlike “Russian hybrid warfare,” which has devolved into a kitchen sink discussion about Russian bad behavior. Indeed, raiding was once the principal form of warfare throughout Europe. Raiding is new in the sense that it is actually quite old as a strategy for competition between powers before the prominence of industrial scale

warfare. Today, in our manuals, a raid is viewed as an operational tool rather than strategic concept, as can be seen in *Joint Operations* (JP 3-0), which describes a raid as “an operation to temporarily seize an area in order to secure information, confuse an adversary, capture personnel or equipment, or to destroy a capability culminating in a planned withdrawal.”

Raids are often conducted over phases, including infiltration, denying the enemy the opportunity to reinforce, followed by surprise attack and withdrawal. Raiding plays much more to Russian strengths, leveraging agility and a simplified chain of command (i.e. deinstitutionalized decision making, and a strong desire to achieve political ends, but not to get stuck with the costs of holding terrain). This is a strategy of limited means and it is also lucrative. Thus, raiding is not about territorial expansion or global domination. We should consider this term when seeking to understand how classical great powers like Russia use their toolkits in strategic competition.

Great Power Spoiler or Great Power Raider?

Once the Cold War ended, Washington became accustomed to seeing Russia as a largely irrelevant power, unable to contest American foreign policy and too weak to effectively pursue its own interests. However, the 1990s and early 2000s were an anomalous period of time, with Russia missing as an actor in European politics, and taciturn on the international stage. In truth, it was not simply Russia’s absence from international politics, but the dearth of other powers in general that made this a period of unipolarity and the primacy of one state in international affairs well above and beyond the power of others. Denizens of Washington tended to forget or ignore the second word in the term Charles Krauthammer coined in 1990 to describe American primacy in the post-Cold War period: the “unipolar moment.” He wrote:

The most striking feature of the post-Cold War world is its unipolarity. No doubt, multipolarity will come in time. In perhaps another generation or so there will be great powers coequal with the United States, and the world will, in structure, resemble the pre-World War I era. But we are not there yet, nor will we be for decades. Now is the unipolar moment.

That moment lasted longer than many had expected, but the decades did pass, and great power competition has reemerged.

The Russo-Georgian War in 2008 led to a turning point in bilateral relations. There was a sense in Washington that somewhere things had gone awry in Russia policy, and a desire emerged to reset relations with Moscow, in the hope that successful cooperation on areas of mutual interest would demonstrate the benefits of integration with the West, and into a U.S.-led international order. Suffice it to say that dream did not come to fruition.

Around 2015, after its intervention in Syria, Russia became increasingly seen as a global spoiler. Still the view prevailed that Moscow was resurgent, but brittle in terms of the foundations of power. This is a hubristic and overly optimistic interpretation. Such a vision is borne of the consistent mythos in America's outlook that Russia is dangerous, but no more than a paper tiger that will eventually fade from the global stage. The endless trope that Russia doesn't have a long game is a self-serving delusion. As Russia seeks to navigate through mounting international challenges posed by its confrontation with the United States it is increasingly forcing Washington and its allies to respond to a series of operations, campaigns, and calculated and not so calculated gambits.

Effective nuclear and conventional deterrence has long resulted in what Glenn Snyder described as a stability-instability paradox. This holds that the more stable the nuclear balance, the more likely powers will engage in conflicts below the threshold of war. If war is not an option and direct competition is foolish in light of U.S. advantages, raiding is a viable alternative that could succeed over time. Therefore, Russia has become the guerrilla in the international system, not seeking territorial dominion but raiding to achieve its political objectives. And these raids are having an effect. If Moscow can remain a strategic thorn in Washington's side long enough for Beijing to become a global challenge to American leadership, Washington may have no choice but to negotiate a new great power condominium that ends the confrontation, or so Moscow hopes.

At the heart of a raid is the desire to achieve a coercive effect on the enemy. Even if unsuccessful, a raid can positively shape the environment for the raider by the damage and chaos it can inflict. At the tactical level, it is about military gains, but large raiding campaigns in the past sought political and economic impact on the adversary, typically ending with a withdrawal. The French word for this form of warfare was chevauchee, or mounted raid, describing an approach to conflict that eschewed siege warfare. The *chevauchee* was prominent in the 14th century, and the quintessential raider of that time was the English Black Prince, Edward III's son. The Black Prince led two extensive raiding

campaigns in 1355 and 1356 during the Hundred Years War, looting, burning and pillaging the French countryside. He was forced to adopt this form of warfare in part because the English lacked the means to siege French cities. Thus, the goal became to destabilize France to convince its feudal sovereigns that they were on their own. He did this with raids that targeted economic resources and thereby destroyed the political credibility of the French monarchy.

In Spain, the term for this form of warfare was *cabalgadas*, prolonged raiding operations conducted by infantry, a common feature of the War of the Two Pedros (1356 to 1379). In North Africa, raids were called *razzia*. America's martial traditions are also rooted in raiding, from Roger's Rangers during the French and Indian War, to the Revolutionary War, or the famous cavalry raids of the Civil War.

Russia has extensive experience in raiding as a form of warfare. The Russian term for raiding is *nabeg*. Long before the Mongol invasion in 1237 to 1240 and the formation of the Russian Empire, the first raids by the Rus began in 860 against the Byzantine Empire. These raids went on until 1043. Peter the Great was also no stranger to raiding operations in wartime. Hundreds of years later, during the latter years of the Great Northern War, Russian galley fleets with thousands of raiders successfully attacked Sweden, including Gotland, Uppland, and the Stockholm archipelago. The Red Army had its armored raids of World War II, like the 24th Tank Corps raid on Tatsinskaya during the last stages of the Battle of Stalingrad in December 1942.

Raiding is an effective riposte to a strong but distracted opponent, and becomes popular when the technologies of the time create a rift between the political objectives sought and the means available to attain them. This makes traditional forms of warfare too costly, too risky, or unsuitable to the goals desired. Raiding proved prevalent before the modern nation-state system was formed in 1648 and subsequently exported by Europeans to the rest of the world. However, today the modern nation-state construct is weak. Do states truly have economic, information, or cyber borders? How do you demark these borders, defend them, and deter adversaries from crossing them? Much of the infrastructure for this digital age lives in exposed global domains, lies under the sea in international waters, in space, and cyberspace. All of it is vulnerable and ripe for exploitation.

The Modern Chevauchee

Russia will continue to use other instruments of national power to raid the West as part of a coercive campaign intended to at minimum weaken and distract Washington and, at maximum, coerce it into concessions on Russian interests. This is not a short-term strategy for victory, and it would be wrong to assume that these raids are centrally directed given the diverging security factions, clans, and personalities seeking to shape Russian foreign policy. Mark Galeotti cleverly coined “adhocracy” to describe this system. The image of Putin sitting in the Kremlin pulling knobs and levers, or the mythical Gerasimov Doctrine (a linguistic invention that its author has forsworn), have become tragic caricatures in the current zeitgeist. On the contrary, raiding has historically been conducted by detachments with a simplified chain of command, pre-delegated authority, and substantial leeway in how to prosecute their campaign. Raiding is not for deliberate strategists, but for those able to capitalize on leaner, fail fast, and fail cheap approaches.

Russia is not raiding to erode the liberal international order, at least not intentionally. That is the inevitable consequence of Russian behavior from a Western perspective, but not its objective. Such evaluations are frankly expressions of Anglo-Saxon political ideology more so than astute analysis of how Moscow actually tries to influence the international system. Russia does not believe there is any such thing as a liberal international order, nor does it see NATO as anything other than America’s Warsaw Pact, an organization structured around the projection of U.S. military power. As such, what the Kremlin understands the current international order to be is simply a system built around American unipolarity, and the best way to change this construct is to accelerate a transition from unipolarity to multipolarity (or what their policy establishment now calls a “polycentric” world).

Suffice it to say this transition will take a long time because, as William Wohlforth argued in 1999, unipolarity is more stable than it seems. Before 2014, many in Moscow thought they could just wait for this shift in power to happen. It’s important to understand that Russian elites too believe time is on their side. Many misread the 2007-2008 financial crisis as the beginning of rapid decline in the West. The confrontation has now forced Russian leadership to become active in pursuing the long-stated objectives of its own foreign policy, and they won’t stop until a settlement is made.

The center of gravity, in Russian military thought, is the adversary’s will to fight and a country’s ability to engage in war or confrontation as a system. Therefore, the purpose of operations, particularly at a time of nominal peace, is to shape adversary decision-making

by targeting their economic, information, and political infrastructure. Senior Russian officers see the modern character of war (correlation of forms and methods) as placing greater emphasis on non-kinetic means, particularly when compared to warfare in the 20th century. Russia's chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, famously had this posited as a 4:1 non-military to military ratio in one article. Another important trend in Russian military thought identifies the decisive period of conflict as the confrontation or crisis preceding the outbreak of force-on-force violence and the initial period of war. Much of this Russian discourse focuses on non-contact warfare, the ability of long range precision weapons, paired with non-kinetic capabilities in global domains to inflict damage throughout the enemy's system.

This vision seeks to reconcile the natural proclivities of a General Staff (i.e. planning for high-end warfare, buying expensive capabilities, and seeking larger conventional formations) with an understanding that modern conflicts will play out without set battle lines and meeting engagements. Russia seeks to shape the environment prior to the onset of conflict, and immediately thereafter, imposing costs and inflicting damage to coerce the adversary, in the hope that an inherent asymmetry of interests at stake will force the other side to yield. Russian officers are certainly not partisans, nor do they vocally advocate for raiding, but it is hard to escape the fact that the central tenets of current Russian military thought resemble more the coercive theory of victory of a chevauchee than they do of industrial scale warfare.

Raiding should not be confused with hybrid warfare. Raiding is an established historical approach to warfare, with discernible phasing, objectives, ways, and an overall strategy. The application of hybrid warfare to describe Russian operations has usually been confusing and disjointed in practice. Today, the term is increasingly relegated to European conversations about Russian information warfare and political chicanery.

The Strategic Terrain of Great Power Competition

Moscow is constrained by the structural realities of its competition with Washington. There is no way for Russia to fundamentally alter a balance of power that dramatically favors the United States. America's GDP is more than five times that of Russia's adjusted for purchasing power parity and ten times greater in raw terms. Washington sits at the head of

the world's most powerful network of allies in Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific. And U.S. conventional military superiority is underwritten by a defense budget that is many times the size of Russia's.

This is why Stephen Walt was right when he argued in March that the current competition is dissimilar to the Cold War (China, however, might prove a different story). It is not borne of a bipolar system, has no universalist ideological conflict behind it, and will not shape international politics as that period of confrontation did. Despite shrill cries by Max Boot, this is also no war, and the United States should do its best to keep it that way. We are still in what can broadly be described as a great power peace. Ever since the great powers built nuclear weapons, large-scale warfare has proven too risky and costly, thereby displacing competition into a host of proxy conflicts or actions short of warfare. Occasional conflicts do occur, such as the Sino-Soviet border conflict 1969, or Kargil War in 1999, but these have tended to be among young, and relatively minor nuclear powers, during the early stages of their nuclear arsenal development. Major nuclear powers, with established nuclear deterrents, eschew conventional wars because they understand that no one wins a nuclear war.

International orders historically have been created from the ashes of a great power war. As such, powers that want to create a multipolar world order have no quick or easy way of realizing such a vision. Therefore, Russia is stuck playing on a largely fixed strategic board, where the rules and institutions created by the West both favor the United States and constrain revisionism. That's the end of the good news.

However, not all is well with the U.S.-led liberal international order. One need only to look to Russia's war with Ukraine, successful projection of power in Syria, and sustained efforts at political subversion. Russia's strategy is aimed at pursuing a great power condominium, seeking to secure former Soviet space as a de facto sphere of influence and its status as one of the principal players in the international system. The approach is rooted in convincing the United States that Russia is a great power with special rights, including the primacy of its security over the sovereignty of its neighbors and a prominent role in organizations governing world affairs. The Russian dream is to return to a status and recognition the Soviet Union held during a very particular time of its history, the détente of 1969 to 1979, when Washington saw Moscow, albeit reluctantly, as a co-equal superpower. In the face of

structural constraints, Russia has found a viable path to getting what it wants from the United States via a strategy of coercion, leveraging raids and a wider campaign of international brigandry to impose outsized costs and retain Western attention.

In the early 2000s, when Russia was weak, Putin hoped to make a deal, trading Russian support for the U.S. so-called War on Terror in exchange for certain prerogatives: being treated as a great power, a free hand in its near abroad, and a U.S. 'hands off' approach in the former Soviet space. Back then, Moscow sought to explain why Russia deserves a seat at the table, but it was judged in Washington as too weak and irrelevant. When that approach didn't work, Russia sought to demonstrate that its power and influence was grossly underestimated. Starting with the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, Moscow began using force to prevent NATO expansion. In Ukraine and Syria, Russia illustrated to what at times seems an overly post-modern Western political establishment that military power is still the trump card in international relations, despite what then-Secretary of State John Kerry had to say about 19th century behavior.

Russia's successful use of force got the West to rethink Moscow's capabilities and intentions, but it did not lead to a recognition of Russian interests, or a renegotiation of the post-Cold War order and Russia's place in it, as the Kremlin had hoped. In place of a great power condominium, Russian leaders earned a lasting confrontation. Russia may have the power to filch Crimea from Ukraine, but it is still judged too weak to force a renegotiation of the security framework in Europe or attain major concessions from the United States. After Congress passed sanctions in the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act in July 2017 and the executive branch closed ranks to prevent any rapprochement, it became clear that no deal was in the offing between the Kremlin and the White House.

Russia still seeks recognition of its great power status in the international system, believing that with it will come privilege, security, and a privileged sphere of influence over its neighbors. The Russian leadership's strategic outlook has not changed, but demonstrating renewed military strength and resolve has proven insufficient for their country to get a deal with the United States. Washington is still full of policymakers who see Russian power as brittle, believing Moscow doesn't have a long game. The Russian leadership has no alternative but to settle in for a prolonged geopolitical confrontation, banking on their own resilience, and the ability to impose costs on the basis of an old and familiar strategy of raiding.

Goodbye Nation-State, Hello Raiding

Ironically, as the driver of globalization and the growth of global interdependence, it is the West that has done the most to make raiding against itself so lucrative. Global connectivity, labor flows, migration both legal and illegal, proliferation of information technologies such as social media, together with the creation of supranational entities like the European Union are all enabling factors. Great powers like China and Russia often strive for autarky, seeking to fence off their kingdoms from influences that might create interdependence and allow uncontrolled outside influence. Beijing built the "great firewall of China," while Russia has also sought to wall itself off and impose statist control over the invisible ties that connect it to the rest of the international community.

Moscow's latest battle that sparked protests was its attempt to censor Telegram, a popular messaging app, a contest which has escalated into millions of IPs blocked. These countries seek to create advantage in the great power competition by securing themselves from those technological trends which make modern states borderless. They are building forts. At the same time, they have come to recognize that liberal democracies are open plains ripe for raiding. The 21st century, with all its technological advancements and global interconnectedness, is naturally reviving forms of warfare that shaped Europe in 13th and 14th centuries.

Cyber operations are perhaps the most obvious instrument for modern day raiding. Both Russia and China have made good use of it to raid the U.S. politically and economically, pillaging and looting like in the days of yore. Those Russian attacks not intended to damage are perhaps even more worrisome intrusions designed to gain access and lay the groundwork for future strikes against critical infrastructure such as "energy, nuclear, commercial facilities, water, aviation and manufacturing." Russia's recently closed San Francisco consulate was reportedly an intelligence hub for physically mapping fiber optic networks, and a host of activities described as "extraordinarily aggressive intelligence-collection efforts" considered to be "at the very forefront of innovation."

However, military raiding is back as well. The Russian campaign in Ukraine's Donbass region is only posing as a form of industrialized warfare. In reality, this was meant to be a raid. It began with infiltration, and its strategic centerpiece is a low-cost effort to coerce Ukraine into federalization in a bid to retain control over Kyiv's strategic orientation. Moscow never wanted to hold on to the Donbass and still does not. If anything, it long

sought to return it to Ukraine in exchange for federalization, though, at minimum, Russia is happy at the destabilizing effect that this conflict has on Ukraine's policy and economy. Put aside cyber and political warfare campaigns, the four-year conflict in Ukraine is at face value a sustained raid that Moscow had hoped to close out with the Minsk I and Minsk II agreements. Russia empirically lacks the manpower to take over Ukraine, nor did it want to own and pay for parts of the country either. At its core the war in the Donbass is the modern equivalent of the Black Prince's great chevauchee campaigns in France.

Raiding is not a direct imposition by conquest, nor is it a *fait accompli*. Behind a raid lies neither the desire for domination nor for limited territorial gains. From the outset, the adversary seeks to withdraw. This is why Crimea does not fit this model, although there is much evidence to suggest that Russia initially seized Crimea without the intent to annex it (i.e. it was first meant as part of a game of coercive diplomacy). That said, Ukraine illustrates the fundamental problems with raiding: Raids are easier to launch than they are to manage. The fitful and messy escalation in Ukraine is a hallmark of raiding, when the character of war is not defined by two armies meeting in the field, or a militarily superior power seeking to simply impose its will on a weaker adversary via large-scale industrial warfare. If Russia wanted to crush the Ukrainian military, it could do it, but instead it wants to raid. Since 2015, the conflict has evolved to unconventional warfare throughout Ukraine's territory, with state-sponsored assassinations, acts of terror, and industrial sabotage becoming the norm.

As Russia grows more confident, and the confrontation intensifies, raiding may become more military in nature. Moscow's position in Syria is ideal for campaigns elsewhere in the Middle East where it can establish itself as a power broker on the cheap, with countries in the region already choosing to hedge and deleverage from their dependency on relations with the United States. This is ultimately an iterative experience: Some raids or acts of brigandage have clearly backfired. The best recent example of blowback was the failed Russian mercenary attack on February 7 east of Deir Ezzor. That night in the desert was the brainchild of one of Russia's "mini-garchs" and infamous backers of the Wagner mercenary group, together with the internet troll factory, Yevgeny Prigozhin. While not exactly the brightest horseman, he has been closely linked to Russian efforts in information, political, and other forms of indirect warfare.

The Middle East is a flanking theater in the competition, one where the United States is visibly weak, and its allies are interested in any alternative external power to reduce their own dependency on Washington. Russia will look for ways to raid America's influence there without taking ownership, security responsibilities, or otherwise over extending itself. The military campaign in Syria came cheaply, taught Russia that it can indeed project power outside its region, and challenged America's monopoly on use of force in the international system.

The Black Prince's Strategy

Forget the decisive Mahanian battle. The typical conventional wars, which the United States frequently wargames, but probably will never get to fight (thanks to nuclear deterrence), are poorly aligned with how adversaries intend to pursue their objectives. Avoiding disadvantages in direct competition is undoubtedly important, as Russia and China have equally invested in conventional and nuclear capabilities, but it is precisely because of our investments in these realms that we have made raiding lucrative. The surest way to spot a raid is when the initiating power doesn't actually want to possess the object in contest but is instead seeking to inflict economic and political pain to coerce a more important strategic concession out of their opponent. This is not to say that limited land grabs or conventional warfare will disappear from the international arena, but raiding poses a more probable challenge to the United States and its extended network of allies.

Great power raiding is not meant to represent a unified field theory of adversary behavior in the current competition. Not everything aligns neatly with this concept, nor can the actions of a country with numerous instruments of national power be reduced so simply.

Nonetheless, raiding for cost imposition and outright pillage, together with other behaviors by intelligence services and elites that may be summed up as international brigandry, do encapsulate much of the problem. The Russian long game is to raid and impose painful costs on the United States, and its allies, until such time as China becomes a stronger and more active contender in the international system. This theory of victory stems from the Russian assumption that the structural balance of power will eventually shift away from the United States towards China and other powers in the international system, resulting in a steady transition to multipolarity. This strategy is emergent, but the hope is that a successful campaign of raiding, together with the greater threat from China, will force Washington to compromise and renegotiate the post-Cold War settlement.

Can Russia win? If winning is defined as Moscow attaining influence and securing interests in the international system not commensurate with the relative balance of power, but rather based the amount of damage they have inflicted by raiding – quite possibly. If the raider has staying power, and makes a prolonged strategic burden of itself, it can get a favorable settlement even though it is weaker, especially if its opponent has bigger enemies to deal with. Throughout history, leading empires, the superpowers of their time, have had to deal and negotiate settlements with raiders.

Here, conventional military might and alliances count for a lot less than you might hope. Today, you don't need mounted riders for a raiding campaign or for acts of international brigandry. Moscow successfully rode past NATO, all of America's carrier strike groups, and struck Washington with a campaign of political subversion. The technology involved may be innovative or new, but this form of warfare is decidedly old. To deal with it, Washington will not require panel discussions, new acronyms, and the construction of a center of excellence, but instead to revisit the history of conflict, international politics, and strategy.

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