



The Kremlin's Own Rationality:

Understanding and Countering Russian Ressentiment

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Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing freeze in bilateral diplomatic relations, SURF adjusted its format to carry on with its core mission: fostering systematic intellectual exchange between American, Russian, and Russia-focused future leaders at a time when knowledge and informed analysis are badly needed in devising U.S. and European policy toward Russia.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2022, the Western policy toward Russia has been based on a promising and not naive assumption—that the Kremlin, facing enormous economic and military losses, would ultimately reconsider its geopolitical strategy and genuinely soften its stance. However, the Kremlin perceives and publicly reinterprets current Western countermeasures as a validation of its own strength. Russian leaders publicly call the record number of sanctions a trophy, while state propaganda explains battlefield failures by claiming that Russia is at war with all of NATO.

This memo explains Moscow's behavior as being driven not by irrationality, nor by a desire to strengthen Russia's position toward achieving a mutually beneficial peace with the West, but by *Ressentiment*. This mindset reflects a deeply rooted logic with its own internal consistency and a perspective on rationality that differs from the Western cost-benefit approach.

To prove its main argument, this memo, **covering up to July 15, 2026, inclusive**, first provides a clear definition of *Ressentiment* and describes its features, Russian context of this phenomenon, and how it differs from other concepts in the field of international relations. Then the analysis examines Russian *Ressentiment* through the prism of the Russian war economy (including the “deathonomics”), Western sanctions regime against Russia, U.S. efforts to promote rapprochement with Russia, the “Reverse Kissinger” strategy, and Russia's relations with China.

This research results in identifying the actionable weak spots of Russian *Ressentiment*, as well as the means to counter it. It also builds these weak spots into a model of the Kremlin's behavior.

KEYWORDS: *Ressentiment*, “deathonomics,” hybrid warfare, selective enforcement, sanctions evasion, transactionalism, “Reverse Kissinger,” “Nevsky doctrine,” entrapment model.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FROM FEBRUARY 2022 TO JULY 2026 RUSSIA FACED

>1.4M

Total
military
casualties

>\$100B

Budget
deficit
(2025 only)

>\$130B

Sanctions-
evasion
spending

~\$1T

Real
military
spending

~\$280B

Frozen
sovereign
assets

~21,000

Western
sanctions
imposed

KEY TAKEAWAYS



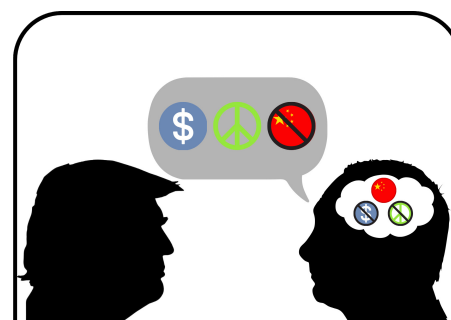
Pressure Works, But Cannot Change The Kremlin's Policy

Anti-Russian sanctions have proven effective. Yet Russia is now too militarized to survive peace. Russia is economically dependent on war against Ukraine and ontologically committed to it.



The Talks Peak, But Russian War Machine Accelerates

Despite surging U.S.–Kremlin diplomacy and persistent sanctions backdoors, Russia's war on Ukraine and its hybrid warfare against NATO have only intensified.



Moscow Plays Washington, But Locks Into Beijing

Moscow exploits U.S. transactionalism and fear of a Russia–China axis to extract concessions, project equality with Washington, split NATO, while deepening its dependence on Beijing.

The Kremlin acts on a controversial yet coherent logic, driven by *Ressentiment*: a mindset that combines an inferiority complex, shame, envy, and hatred, all directed at the same target. This target could be simultaneously perceived as superior and as a true counterpart, yet its recognition remains elusive. *Ressentiment* cannot be redirected as long as the object of its focus is also the object of its desire.

In the Russian context, *Ressentiment* is genuinely felt across parts of the elite and segments of society to varying degrees, cultivated by a sense of belonging to a centuries-long, self-sacrificing struggle to preserve the Russian way of life and values against the West. Meanwhile, Russian elites widely view the United States as a desirable model of global hegemony (excluding its democracy)—one they seek to surpass or join on equal terms, demanding official acknowledgment from the U.S.

Under *Ressentiment*, the Kremlin may reinterpret any received damage as proof of its own sovereign superiority and civilizational defiance. This explains Moscow's readiness to accept enormous costs: from sanctions and heavy military losses to economic dependence on China and the erosion of influence over allied states (Venezuela, Syria, Armenia).

The Kremlin acts in a typically Western, pragmatic way while securing resource logistics and sustaining revenues—given Russia's critical dependence on energy export markets. Yet this Western-style pragmatism steps back whenever it conflicts with *Ressentiment*. Moscow sees economic stability and prosperity not as a strategic end, but as a tactic to pursue its geopolitical ambitions.

Russian *Ressentiment* has several weak spots:

1. The Kremlin's refusal to publicly recognize its secondary role to China and its dependence on Beijing, alongside China's interest in avoiding nuclear escalation by Russia;
2. An inability to end or freeze the war against Ukraine without Ukraine's capitulation, coupled with an inability to sustain the war for another few years;
3. Domestic disputes and conflicts regarding the best way to fulfill Russia's geopolitical ambitions;
4. The Russian leader's obsession with self-preservation and longevity.

These weak spots provide the basis for a model of the Kremlin's behavior and scope to counter Russian *Ressentiment* within acceptable risk parameters (see **Figure 11, Recommendations I–II, pp. 33–53**).

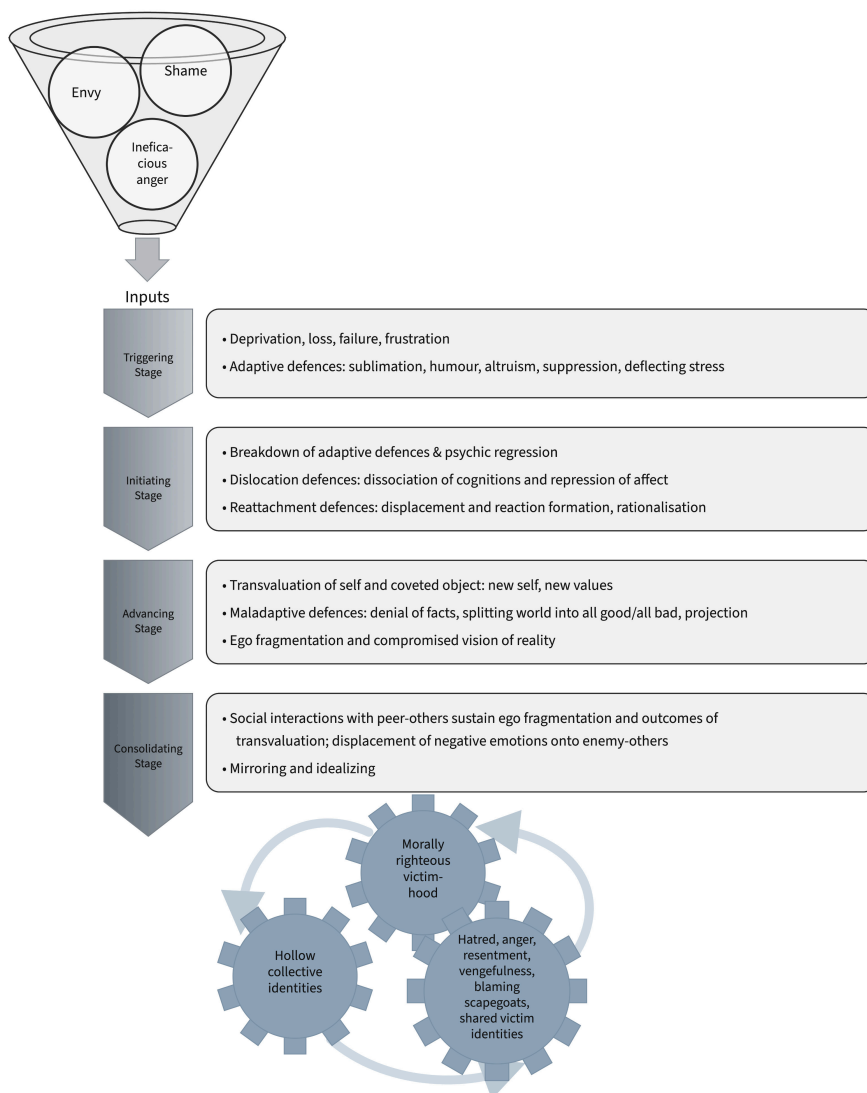
RESSENTIMENT: THE RUSSIAN CONTEXT

Ressentiment is a distinct psychological setup characterized by an inferiority complex, a persistent sense of grievance, hatred, shame, and envy toward a rival that cannot be defeated, but on whom one remains dependent and whom one perceives as superior.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1887) placed *Ressentiment* at the root of what he called “slave morality,” which arises from impotence toward “masters” and an inability to change the reality—thus potentially becoming the dominant, self-sustaining meaning of life.¹ Such a meaning implies that the sufferer (*Ressentiment* carrier) is weak, dependent on a “superior” rival (*Ressentiment* target), does not receive the rival’s respect, constantly dwells on grievance, hatred, and envy, and is compelled to deny its own vulnerabilities to avoid looking weak (**Figure 1**).

Seeking to compensate for or deny their own weaknesses, the sufferer seeks to form a personal set of moral principles that reject the rival’s values and blame the rival for the sufferer’s own failures. If the rival is clearly weaker than the sufferer, *Ressentiment* usually fails to arise.

Figure 1. *Ressentiment*: A Mechanism of Emotional Transformations



Source: Tereza Capelos, Mikko Salmela, Anastaseia Talalakina, Oliver Cotena, “Ressentiment in the Manosphere: Conceptions of Morality and Avenues for Resistance in the Incel Hatred Pipeline,” *Philosophies*, March 2024 - Scientific Figure on ResearchGate. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Ressentiment-a-mechanism-of-emotional-transformations_fig1_378945703

Nietzsche's concept was not merely socio-psychological but also political. The main *Ressentiment* achievement of the “slaves,” for Nietzsche, was the transvaluation that overthrew the aristocratic value system and gave rise to modern egalitarianism, represented by democracy and socialism. German philosopher and sociologist Max Scheler in his essay on *Ressentiment* (published in 1912, expanded in 1915) further developed this concept, extending it to the level of nations.²

Scheler argued that the gap between two realities—the proclaimed equality of citizens and the actual inequality (in terms of power, education, and wealth)—leads people to feel a sense of powerless grievance and envy toward those who are more successful, especially those above one in the social hierarchy.³ For Scheler, *Ressentiment* is a collective phenomenon that can affect entire social classes, generations, and nations, thereby potentially giving rise to a political system driven by *Ressentiment*. In 1917, Scheler treated *Ressentiment* as one source of one nation's and its elites' hatred of another—while cautioning against reducing all hatred to *Ressentiment* alone.⁴

While refining the concept, Max Scheler put special emphasis on the Russian Empire, mentioning that no literature was as overflowing with *Ressentiment* as Russian literature.⁵ In his view, this was a consequence of the secular oppression of the people by the absolute monarchy and an inability, due to the absence of a parliament and a free press, to express the feelings that arose under the pressure of state authority.

The Russian journalist, political scientist, and historian Sergei Medvedev, commenting on Scheler's conclusions in his 2014 article, argued that Russia is “a country of classic resentment,” which has been replicating various forms of class-based slavery for centuries—ranging from the Russian Empire's serfdom and the Soviet Union's compulsory residence registration system to the current corporate state under Vladimir Putin.⁶ The Russian authorities can prioritize their own whims over the interests of both society and the elites, including industrial and commercial groups.

In tandem with this, Russian society and its elites have traditionally contrasted themselves with the West through three main historical trends of distinction, which this memo defines as:

- **Religious-political distinction** between Russian and Western Christianity—against Byzantine leadership in Orthodoxy (once Constantinople accepted union with Rome, 15th century)⁷ and, later, against Western European Catholicism (“Moscow, Third Rome,” 16th century).⁸
- **Cultural-civilizational distinction** between Russian and Western ways of life—against Peter the Great's pro-Western reforms (the trauma of “catch-up modernization,” 17th–18th centuries)⁹ and, later, against Western influence on the Slavic peoples (Pan-Slavism, 19th century).¹⁰
- **Compensatory-messianic distinction** between Russian and Western geopolitical models—against the collapse of the Russian Empire (Eurasianism, 1920s),¹¹ against Western capitalism (Bolshevism, 20th century),¹² against the collapse of the USSR and Western global hegemony (Neo-Eurasianism, late 20th–21st centuries),¹³ and, later, against the Westernization of the post-Soviet space (the ideology of the “Russian World,” 21st century).¹⁴

Historically, all these trends arose from technological, military, cultural, and economic gaps with the West, or from a sense of being its perpetual junior partner—despite all efforts to grow closer—leading to a constant desire to both emulate Western models and, at the same time, deny this emulation. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had a temporary opportunity to turn away from this path of envious hostility, but it was not fully realized.

The Clash of Trends in the 1990s

The Russian researcher and historian Dmitry Dubrovskiy, in an interview with the SURF research team, argues that *Ressentiment* was not yet a dominant or inevitable force in the development of the Russian state during the first half of the 1990s.¹⁵ At that time, according to Dubrovskiy, Russian political elites were engaged in a sharp ideological struggle between various factions, each proposing its own vision of national greatness.

- **The liberal wing**—associated with then-Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev—sought to define Russia’s greatness through its equal integration into the Western community.
- **Right-wing conservative groups**—which later rallied around then-Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Yevgeny Primakov—insisted that Russia should be an alternative, independent center of power against Western hegemony.

The defeat of the liberal transition in Russia and the rise of the right-wing conservative movement were, in Dubrovskiy’s view, largely caused by the victorious behavior of the Western states that won the Cold War. The Russian historian argues that the West never seriously considered genuine strategic cooperation with Moscow, and this dismissive stance significantly undermined the efforts of Russian reformers, thereby strengthening the radical conservative wing of the Russian elite. As a result, Russia became afflicted with a “delayed Weimar syndrome”—an aggressive psychological reaction to the loss of imperial status, similar to the processes that took place in Germany before the Nazi Party came to power.¹⁶

Sergei Medvedev expressed an alternative viewpoint in his previously mentioned 2014 article.¹⁷ He noted that since the 1990s, the West had regularly attempted to integrate Russia into its institutions, offering Russia privileged terms of partnership with both NATO and the EU. Meanwhile, the Russian elite, despite a serious domestic economic crisis and a sense of “humiliation,” eagerly bought real estate in the West, acquired Western citizenship for their families, and secured Western education for their children. The expert attributed the reason for the heightened Russian *Ressentiment* to Russia’s own inability to adapt to Western institutional and democratic standards due to systemic corruption and an authoritarian legacy. Faced with its own lack of competitiveness and an unwillingness to acknowledge it, Russia’s state system declared “unattainable” Western values to be “false” and “corrupt.”

Dubrovskiy and Medvedev’s views, however, are by no means contradictory; taken together, they reveal the complexity of post-Soviet Russia’s *Ressentiment*. Despite its own attempts to join the West—and despite the West’s real efforts to assist Russia in doing so—the Kremlin blames the entire West for Russia’s failures, both domestic and foreign, not only to cover up its own corruption, mistakes, and vulnerabilities. The core reason is that Moscow pictured, expected, and failed to receive an “honorable defeat” in the Cold War.

Because the Cold War did not end with a Western triumph in a direct war against Russia, Russian elites attempted to reframe the obvious bankruptcy of the Soviet model—which resulted from a systematic cover-up of mistakes and an exaggeration of successes—as a voluntary decision to cease confrontation against the West. This false premise that Moscow was “virtuous” by “allowing” the West to triumph peacefully fostered an ambitious expectation that the West should reward Russia with a significant consolation prize—such as automatic recognition of Russia’s former sphere of influence in Europe—which the West legally could not (and was not obliged to) grant.

The most convincing evidence of this logic comes from the disclosed 1990s archives covering private talks between then-U.S. President Bill Clinton and the first President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, about NATO enlargement to the East.

- Yeltsin—a committed advocate of a pro-Western path who sought to transform Russia into a market economy, secure Russia’s admission to the G8, and establish a “strategic partnership” with Washington—told Clinton at a bilateral summit in Moscow in May 1995: “How do you think it looks to us if one bloc (NATO) continues to exist while the Warsaw Pact has been abolished? I see nothing but humiliation for Russia.”¹⁸
- At the Helsinki summit in March 1997, two months before the Russia–NATO Founding Act was signed in Paris—a document that proclaimed the absence of hostility between the two powers and fostered mutual trust and cooperation—, Yeltsin told Clinton: “It remains a mistake for NATO to expand eastward. But I need to take steps to alleviate the negative consequences of this for Russia. I am ready to enter into an agreement with NATO, not because I want to, but because it is a forced step. There is no other solution for today.”¹⁹ After that, Yeltsin proposed a “gentleman’s agreement” to Clinton, under which the U.S. would not admit former Soviet republics into NATO, but his proposal was rejected.
- Finally, at the OSCE summit in Istanbul in November 1999, during a bilateral meeting with Clinton, Yeltsin explicitly demanded that Russia have an unlimited sphere of influence over all of Europe, not merely over the former Soviet states: “I ask you one thing. Just give Europe to Russia. The U.S. is not in Europe. Europe should be the business of Europeans... You can take all the other states and provide security to them. I will take Europe and provide them security. Well, not me, but Russia... Bill, I’m serious.”²⁰



Russian President Boris Yeltsin and U.S. President Bill Clinton after a private meeting at the Ciragan Palace in Istanbul, November 18, 1999. Photo: David Scull (William J. Clinton Presidential Library)

This gap between the Kremlin's aspirations and post-Cold War geopolitical reality contributed to a mindset within the Russian leadership in which any Western assistance—whether financial, technical, or diplomatic—seemed, in advance, to be insufficient; in which no loans or support programs could outweigh or compensate for the loss of the empire. The Kremlin increasingly perceived the West's attempts to offer integration on general, bureaucratic terms as an effort to keep Russia in a subordinate position and preserve its weaker status.

Feeling “betrayed” by the West, the Russian elite declared the very idea of integration with the West to be a hostile trap, blamed their failures in domestic and foreign policy on a Western conspiracy, and fostered within Russia an aggressive isolationist narrative that the country stands alone against the entire Western world. Meanwhile, the Russian elite did not deny themselves the material benefits of the West, widely transferring their capital, properties, and families there—showing that the West remained for them an unattainable ideal and a symbol of the power they desired, which they publicly denounced but quietly emulated.

With Vladimir Putin's rise to power, *Ressentiment* became the dominant logic of state governance, while the narrative of grievance emerged as dominant in the public sphere. This trend was openly evident even within pro-Kremlin discourse itself.

An August 2013 publication by the Valdai Discussion Club—Russia's premier think tank forum on foreign policy and security—argued that “adopting the U.S. political and economic model in the 1990s” led to a massive social crisis, and the response to it was *Ressentiment*, which “formed the foundation for the rise in anti-Americanism among the Russian elite, which then spread to the general public.”²¹ Another article from July 2014 describes the United States as “both an ideal enemy and a model to emulate” that “helps strengthen Russia's national identity.”²²

As Dubrovskiy explains, such an attachment cannot be redirected to another target as long as the primary target of one's *Ressentiment* simultaneously remains the object of one's envy and desire.²³

Russian *Ressentiment* Carriers

Treating Putin's regime and Russian society as a single entity of total ideological mobilization is a serious methodological error. Internally, the system is divided by a deep rift in values between the ruling elite and the broader population. While for the security establishment, anti-Western *Ressentiment* has become a governing logic, the general public experiences this mindset as a passive coping mechanism that helps alleviate its daily feelings of vulnerability and poverty.

However, with the outbreak of the full-scale war against Ukraine, the state-imposed narrative of a besieged fortress has caused a profound distortion of Russian public consciousness. Applying Max Scheler's “social law,” the scale of public *Ressentiment* grows in direct proportion to the gap between the declared imperial status and citizens' actual ability to influence the state's course.²⁴

The following page (**Figure 2**), based on sociological data from 2021–2026, illustrates the transformation of Russian consciousness through several key shifts, including the narrowing of the prewar gap between “a comfortable life” and the status of “a power to be feared” to a de facto parity (48% versus 49%), as well as the paradox of perceptions regarding peace in Ukraine—where 61% prefer negotiations and nearly the same proportion advocate for escalation if peace on Russia's terms is unattainable. Most importantly, the infographic shows the estimated number of people with *Ressentiment* (the core group and the outer layer).

Figure 2. Russian Ressentiment: Status Over Prosperity

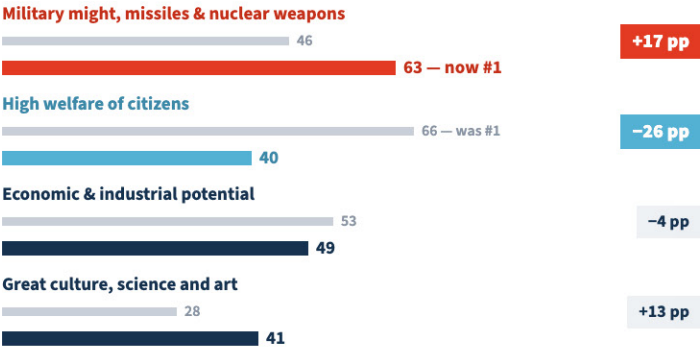
Since 2022, mass consciousness has reorganized around defiance: being feared matters more than living well, and any concession reads as weakness.

Ressentiment (Nietzsche → Scheler): the unappeased resentment of perceived powerlessness, in which concession is experienced as humiliation. Scheler's law: it grows with the gap between claimed status and actual power.

1 · WHAT MAKES A GREAT POWER

“Being feared” overtakes “living well”

Multiple answers allowed — shares don't sum to 100%. Feb 2021 (■) vs Jul 2024 (■). Δ in percentage points (pp).



2 · GREAT POWER OR A GOOD LIFE

The 34-point gap closed to ≈0

“What would you like Russia to be first of all?” — 2021: 66–32 for “a good life”; 2024: near tie.



3 · THE CORE PARADOX — JANUARY 2026

61%

want to move to peace talks now · 31% — continue military action

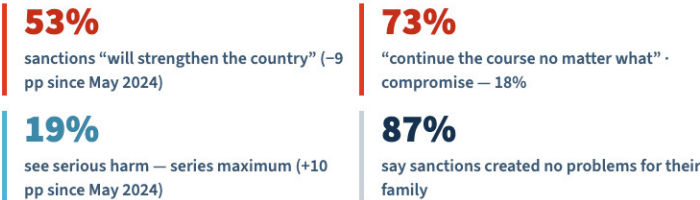
...if peace is unattainable:

but 59% escalate — intensify strikes, incl. new weapons (31 definitely + 28 rather)
21% accept additional concessions (5 + 16; 20% undecided)

No contradiction: “peace” means victory on Russia's terms — not compromise. 76% support the armed forces' actions · 74% expect the war to end in Russia's victory (stable since Apr 2022).

4 · SANCTIONS: DAMAGE → DEFIANCE

Cost is reframed as proof of resolve



Levada, 15–23 Jan 2026, n=1617. Not worried about sanctions: 63% (worried 35%, +9 pp/year).

6 · COUNTER-CURRENTS

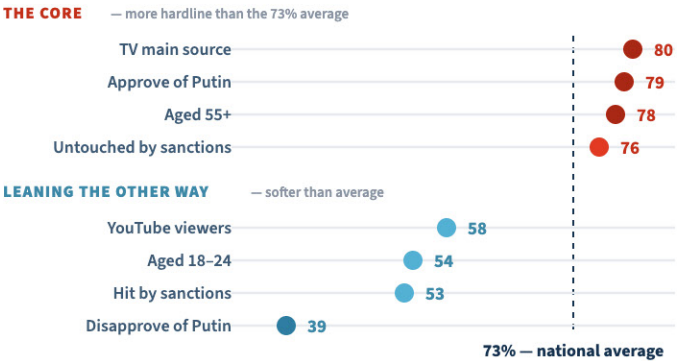
What pulls the other way

61% want talks now; perceived harm and worry at series highs (19% / 35%)
87% → 79% Putin approval, Aug 2025 → Apr 2026 (Levada via CSIS)
20% → 41% report worsening personal finances, 2024 → 2026 (CSIS); ~⅓ back a ceasefire via mutual concessions
...but 22% vs 66% — only 22% would cede territory for quick peace; 66% refuse even at the cost of continued war (ExtremeScan, 2025). A hardened plurality-to-majority, not a consensus — and cost-sensitive at the margin.

5 · WHO CARRIES THE RESENTMENT

Older, pro-Putin, TV-fed, cost-insulated

“Continue the course despite sanctions”, % by group · national average 73% (dashed)



Read it left-right: dots right of the dashed line stay the course more than the average Russian; dots left of it lean to compromise. Two nuances behind the low blue dots — among families hit by sanctions, 34% want compromise (vs 18% nationally); among Putin critics, “seek compromise” (43%) actually outpolls “stay the course” (39%), the only group where it does. The escalate-vs-concede question splits the same way (escalate: men 67%, 55+ 68%, TV 65%; concede: 18–24 34%, Putin critics 42%, YouTube 33%).

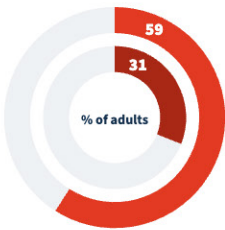
7 · HOW LARGE IS IT — A PROXY ESTIMATE

A hard core near a third; a broad pole near three-fifths

Ressentiment isn't a survey question. Each ring is a real Levada answer standing in for one layer of intensity — and the inner ring is genuinely part of the outer one, not a separate slice.

Hard core ≈ 30–32% — would “definitely” intensify strikes, including new weapons (31%, Jan 2026); the same size as the pre-war third who already put great-power status above prosperity (32%, 2021)
Broad pole ≈ 55–60% — choose escalation over concessions if peace is unattainable (59%); its passive upper bound is the 73% who would “continue the course despite sanctions”

How to read the rings: 59% = 31 who would “definitely” escalate + 28 “rather”, so the 31% core sits inside the 59% pole — a true subset. Shown as context, not a ring: 63% define a great power through military-nuclear might (2024) — a different question, about how widespread the mindset is rather than a larger group that contains these two.



Methodology & sources. Levada-Center: Jan 2026 releases (face-to-face, 15–23 Jan 2026, n=1617, 137 municipalities, 50 regions, error ≤3.4 pp) · Russian Public Opinion 2024 yearbook, Table 13.10.1 & Graph 13.10.2 (criteria wave Jul 2024; “power vs living standards” Aug 2021, n=1619; 2024 values approximate) · “Ukraine conflict in January 2026”, 04.02.2026 · “Perception of Western sanctions: January 2026”, 16.02.2026 · press release 10.09.2021 · E. Koneva / ExtremeScan, Feb–Mar 2025 · CSIS, “Russian Attitudes Are Shifting...”, 2026. Credit: Hleb Fitsner / SURF

The security elites are both the primary carriers and the instigators of Russian *Ressentiment* toward the West. This hostility is well illustrated in the book by CIA veteran Sean M. Wiswesser, *Tradecraft, Tactics, and Dirty Tricks: Russian Intelligence and Putin's Secret War*, which recounts the author's conversation with a Russian intelligence officer after the collapse of the USSR. The officer stated that the U.S. "was the GP (*glavnii protivnik*—*main enemy*), is the GP, and always will be the main enemy of Russia. Forget about the other threats; America comes first for us."²⁵

Speaking to the authors of this memo, Wiswesser attributes this persistent hostility to the specific nature of the security elite's upbringing: "Putin and his *Siloviki* (security forces) were raised as KGB elites in a system built where all were equal but some are more equal." Wiswesser argues that such an environment convinced this group of "its right to unlimited power and wealth," where serving the interests of their own "mafia-like power circles" completely pushes aside any considerations for the people. For Wiswesser, free elections and democracy are perceived by this group as a "mortal threat," and the United States irritates them precisely because they see it as a global bastion and source of that threat.²⁶

Other experts surveyed by the authors expand on this point, exposing the underlying belief system of the security establishment.

- Michael McFaul, a professor at Stanford University and former U.S. ambassador to Russia, argues that ideology—not cost-benefit calculation alone—shapes every leader's foreign policy, and that Putin's own framework was neither fixed nor inherent: in 2000, he proposed that Russia join NATO. In McFaul's reading, Putin never regarded NATO enlargement itself as a genuine military threat; what changed was his threat perception of Western governance promotion. The overthrow of the then-Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević (2000) and the "color revolutions" in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), followed by U.S. support for election monitoring during the 2011 Bolotnaya protests in Russia, were read in the Kremlin as a coordinated campaign to unseat Putin at home. From that point, the protection of autocracy became, in McFaul's view, indistinguishable from Russia's national security.²⁷
- Alexander Gabuev, Director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin, stresses that this logic is entrenched far beyond one man, although Putin's "journey is also very important." Over two decades, the "core ruling loop"—the permanent members of the Security Council, including its Secretary Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov—has accumulated a shared record of confrontation with Washington, from the arrest of then-Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the dispute over missile defense to Georgia in 2008 to the situation in Libya and Syria. Moscow's resulting conviction, in Gabuev's account, is that the West threatens not merely the men in power but Russia as a country—which is what makes the system's course resistant to pragmatic or economic pressure. These are not products of irrationality but of "preset frames" that, once accepted, render each subsequent decision internally rational; within them, any compromise with the West reads as defeat.²⁸

Another elite group stands outside the security establishment. Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina's technocrats manage inflation and defend the state's solvency;²⁹ export-oriented industrialists such as Oleg Deripaska publicly criticize the war economy's mismanagement;³⁰ more loyal oligarchs, like Andrey Melnichenko, offer their services to the state and reframe Russia's future in terms of wounded sovereignty.³¹ Yet none of them truly sets policy, prioritizing their assets and access to power, occasionally criticizing the state's course merely in terms of the costs of the chosen path, rather than blaming those responsible for the path itself.

None of the six lenses from international relations theory examined below can comprehend all the nuances of the behavior described.

WHY RESENTMENT?

Six explanatory frameworks from international relations theory, presented below, clarify specific features of Russia's behavior; however, none of them explains all of the patterns at once. *Ressentiment* neither denies nor intends to replace other frameworks; it operates at a different level—integrating their partial insights and addressing the gaps left unexplained.

Regime Security

The concept of Regime Security³² explains decision-making by authoritarian leaders who prioritize preventing coups or popular uprisings. As such, it effectively explains the Kremlin's fear of "color revolutions," the repression of civil society, and the unchecked powers of domestic security services, which often disregard the Russian Constitution. It also explains Russian tactics used to sustain the war against Ukraine, including "deathonomics" and the smart mobilization system, and even some expansionist ambitions intended to ensure the regime's survival. What Regime Security does not explain is why the Kremlin treats confrontation with the West as a permanent default and routinely rejects Western de-escalation offers—including those that would strengthen the regime's own stability. *Ressentiment* fills this gap: the economic damage and costs of war translate into moral capital, rendering the traditional "cost-benefit" calculus secondary for the Kremlin.

Imperial Revisionism

The Imperial Revisionism framework³⁴ convincingly explains Russia's territorial claims in the post-Soviet space. What it does not explain is the form and intensity of anti-Western rhetoric, which extends far beyond any specific post-imperial territory. In 2014, Putin said that Russia was "not simply robbed, it was plundered" once Crimea became Ukrainian, and that Western partners were "constantly trying to sweep us (Russia) into a corner."³⁵ Both register as civilizational trauma rather than a territorial dispute. *Ressentiment* shows that the Kremlin's strategic goal is not only to reclaim a particular territory, but to compel the West to recognize Russia's civilizational equality—or superiority. Such a demand cannot be satisfied by any territorial concession and therefore defies traditional instruments of a revisionist settlement.

Balance of Power

The Balance of Power theory³⁷ assumes that states respond to military threats proportionally to their actual scale; its balance-of-threat refinement³⁸ adds perceived intentions, geography, and offensive capability to that calculus. It would be accurate to say that NATO's expansion shifts the balance of power in Europe in its favor. Even so, neither variant explains why the expansion creates cognitive hostility so far in excess of the material threat—an animosity that persists regardless of the alliance's declared intentions. *Ressentiment* demonstrates that NATO remains an existential threat not merely due to the alliance's military capacity, but because expansion—and the alliance's very existence—permanently reinforces the traumatic symbolism of the post-Cold War order, in which Russia is not considered an equal.

Authoritarian Legitimation

The Authoritarian Legitimation theory³³ describes how authoritarian regimes convert external interactions into self-legitimacy: battlefield losses can be recast as symbols of national greatness, the partnership with China as a "multipolarity" policy, while BRICS+ summits or meetings with U.S. officials as proof of self-significance and the futility of any attempt to isolate Russia. Yet this theory does not explain the Kremlin's willingness to accept and continuously deepen a dependence on China, whose geopolitical vision hardly takes Moscow's interests into account. The very fact that Moscow is compelled to deny this dependence means that it does not function as a tool of self-legitimization but rather imposes a structural constraint on it. *Ressentiment* explains why this dependence is accepted nonetheless: the Kremlin treats its submission to Beijing as an acceptable price for keeping its civilizational confrontation with the West going.

Status Inconsistency

The theory of Status Inconsistency³⁶ applies to a situation in which a state's self-perceived status diverges from the recognition it receives from international actors, giving rise to revisionism. This framework most closely resembles *Ressentiment* and captures Russia's quest for recognition of its perceived great-power status. However, in authoritarian regimes, perception anxiety may persist even once external status recognition has been achieved—and this is a fundamental limitation of the Status Inconsistency theory. It does not expect that recognition might be perceived as a ploy or as an insufficiently gratifying gesture, nor that the very offer of recognition might be seen as confirmation of the counterpart's weakness and may result in even greater aggression on the part of the revisionist regime.

Strategic Culture

The concept of Strategic Culture³⁹ explains Russian siege mentality, the Kremlin's logic regarding spheres of influence, and a persistent distrust of Western intentions by seeking evidence in the history, geography, and culture of Russia's internationally recognized lands. According to the concept, the sense of national greatness in Russia serves as a compensatory mechanism against a chronic feeling of humiliation and poverty. In this sense, it does not contradict *Ressentiment*, but the two frameworks only enhance each other. The limitation of the Strategic Culture concept is its static nature: while it can explain why Russian foreign policy has retained certain features over the centuries, it fails to explain sudden changes in the intensity of these features, which can be mistakenly interpreted as irrational or overly emotional behavior.

What sets *Ressentiment* apart from the six frames is how it treats accommodation. Even the stickiest Status Inconsistency and Strategic Culture do not read any rival's concession as provocation. *Ressentiment* does: recognition, concessions and win-win offers are perceived as signs of the counterpart's weakness or a trap, and tend to increase aggression rather than defuse it. 2022–2026 Russia–West relations best reflect this framework.

“DEATHONOMICS”: RUSSIA’S NEW REALITY

Since February 2022, the U.S., the EU and their allies have imposed more than 20,000 sanctions on Russia—the most extensive regime of restrictive measures in modern history—and have frozen over \$280 billion of Russian foreign exchange reserves.⁴⁰ Western states have bypassed traditional trade embargoes to target the most important financial, energy, and technological pillars of Russia. The Kremlin has reacted by switching to “military Keynesianism.” Under this regime, record-high defense spending artificially inflates economic growth, while the civilian economy steadily declines over the long term.⁴¹

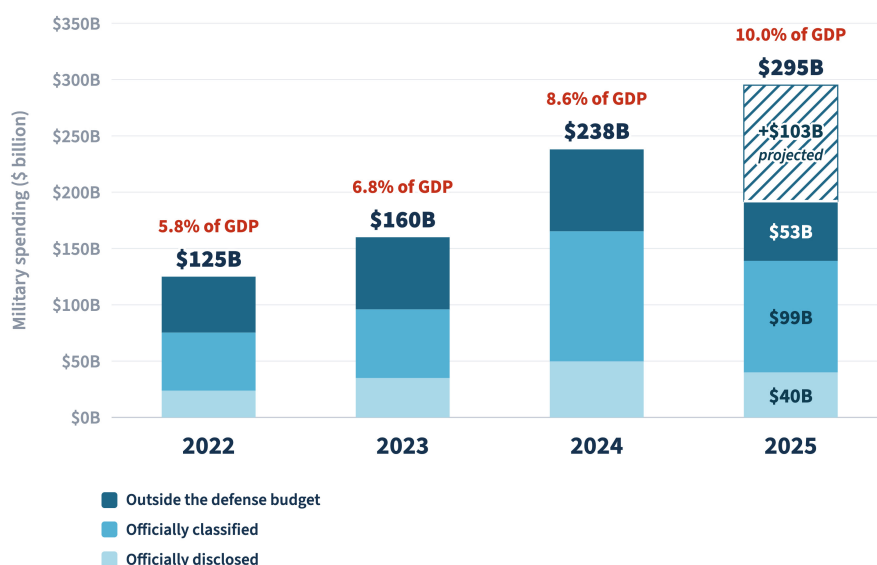
Officially, Russia reported GDP growth of 4.1% in 2023 and 4.3% in 2024.⁴² Putin himself noted that in Q2 2023, non-resource sectors—including manufacturing, transport, construction, communications, and utilities—accounted for 54% of GDP growth. Meanwhile, another 44% came from what he called supporting sectors, such as trade, catering, and professional services, leaving only 2% for extractive industries. These indicators reflect primarily the expansion of Russia’s military-industrial complex (MIC), a conclusion echoed by the pro-Kremlin Russian Center for Macroeconomic Analysis and Short-Term Forecasting (CMASF), which found that positive industrial growth in April 2026 was concentrated in sectors with dominant defense participation.⁴³

To contain inflation, which reached 9.5% in 2024,⁴⁴ the Central Bank raised its key interest rate to a maximum of 21% in October 2024 and held it there until June 2025. A subsequent cycle of gradual easing brought the rate down to 14.25% by June 2026.⁴⁵ Even so, this borrowed growth had subsided by the second half of 2025, with GDP expanding by just 1.1% in Q2 and 0.6% in Q3.⁴⁶

Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service (BND) assessed the Russian federal budget deficit for 2025 at 8.01 trillion rubles (\$104.8 billion at ₴76.44 to the dollar, the 2026 average Bank of Russia rate used for ruble figures except where a source’s own basis applies)—41.8% above the official figure, or some 3.7% of GDP.⁴⁷

The BND also concluded that Russia’s real military spending in 2025—including both classified defense budget items and those not reported as defense spending—reached nearly \$295 billion, or roughly 10% of Russian nominal GDP and half the entire federal budget, with the Q4 results projected (Figure 3). The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) put the same year’s spending at 7.5% of GDP and 38% of the federal budget.⁴⁸ Based on BND’s data, Russia’s real military spending in 2022–2025 could exceed \$800 billion, while the total could approach \$1 trillion by July 2026 if extended at the 2025 rate.⁴⁹

Figure 3. Russia’s Real Military Spending (2022–2025)



Source: Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service (BND), February 2026. GDP share for 2025 as published by BND; shares for 2022–2024 are the SURF memo authors’ calculation from BND spending figures and Rosstat nominal GDP. BND converts Russian budget data at a fixed rate of €1 = ₴85 and publishes in euros; dollar figures here convert BND’s euro series at a fixed €1 = \$1.18. Both are constant-currency series and do not represent year-of-expenditure dollar values. “Outside the defense budget” covers military spending recorded under other budget lines. Data run through Q3 2025; the Q4 2025 figure is BND’s projection.

The core of this system is “deathonomics,” a term introduced by the Russian economist Vladislav Inozemtsev in 2023.⁵⁰ This phenomenon occurs when death and injury on the battlefield become the most rational available economic choice for a substantial share of Russia’s population. War zone service pays a guaranteed minimum of 210,000 rubles a month—about \$2,750—with combat days adding as much as 8,000 rubles each, while the death gratuity for a soldier killed at the front has reached 14–15 million rubles, or \$180,000–200,000. Before the war such a payment amounted to 2.2–3 times average annual per capita income; now it amounts to 15–24 times.⁵¹

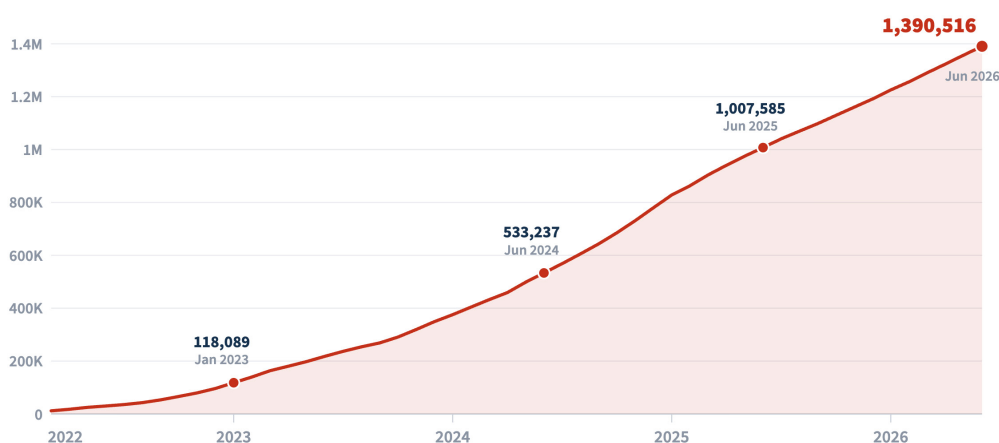
“Deathonomics” and the digital enlistment system, integrated with all of Russia’s key databases, allow Moscow to continuously and quickly replace combat losses without declaring martial law or provoking social unrest.⁵² The BBC Russian Service and Mediazona have independently confirmed the names of 230,624 Russian soldiers killed as of July 2, 2026,⁵³ while NATO governments estimated total Russian casualties since the start of the full-scale invasion had reached nearly 1.4 million by June 2026 (Figure 4).⁵⁴ Both statistics may rise by the time this memo is published.

“Deathonomics” is the Kremlin’s principal instrument of social and political control over the population, and it costs the state least where it works best. The losses fall on the regions that were poorest before the war, not on those paid most to fight. Tyva has lost more men per head than anywhere else, and its one-time sign-up bonus—about \$10,500, half of it the federal payment—is worth barely a year of local pay, against four years in Chuvashia, which has lost a quarter as many. Chechnya, also above the national poverty rate, has lost a seventeenth of Tyva’s toll at about the median payment (Figure 5).

However, the CMASF concluded that, until July 2026 inclusive, the Russian economy was “very likely” to enter a protracted recession.⁵⁵ Russia’s wartime policies are exacerbating an already existing demographic crisis and may trigger a banking crisis.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the Kremlin has successfully converted economic damage into moral capital. At the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSPP) Congress in March 2025, Putin described the record number of sanctions Russia has been subjected to (he counted 28,595) as evidence of Russia’s special status, adding that sanctions have “even become a kind of additional catalyst for positive structural changes.”⁵⁷ This framing is consistent with *Ressentiment*: the worse the economy performs, the more the state can demand collective sacrifice in the name of defiance.

Figure 4. Estimate of Russian Casualties (Killed, Wounded, and Missing)

Cumulative total, February 2022 – June 2026



The first hundred thousand took 11 months, the most recent—just three. Half of all Russian casualties have come since November 2024.

Source: CSIS estimates; UK Ministry of Defence; analysis of data collected by Russian news outlet Mediazona and the BBC Russian Service; and interviews with U.S., European, Ukrainian, and other government officials

Confirmed military deaths per 100,000 residents and the share of population living below the poverty line, by region. Excludes annexed and occupied territories.



Confirmed deaths per 100,000 residents

--- Fitted trend across all 83 regions

$r = -0.32 \cdot p = 0.003 \cdot R^2 = 10\%$

Regions labeled (from top to bottom, left to right): Tyva, Chukotka, Buryatia, Zabaykalsky, Altai Rep., Nenets AO, Jewish AO, Kirov, Magadan, Kurgan, Komi, Murmansk, Moscow, Chechnya, Ingushetia, St Petersburg, N. Ossetia, Chuvashia, Krasnodar, Kabardino-Balkaria.

Bonus measured in years of the region's average wage

Average wages: Rosstat, average monthly nominal accrued wage by region, full circle of organisations, 2025; the ratio uses twelve times the monthly figure. Official wages exclude undeclared pay, which is more common in the poorest regions, so the ratio is somewhat overstated there. All correlations unweighted; each region counts once, from Nenets AO (~42,000 residents) to Moscow (~13 million). Excludes annexed Crimea and other occupied territories of Ukraine.

Credit: Hleb Fitnsner / SURF

SANCTIONS EVASION AND SELECTIVE ENFORCEMENT

Despite the unprecedented scale of the sanctions regime, Western restrictions have not closed the economic channels that also sustain Russia's military institutions. This paradox is driven by several interrelated features: Russia's legalized parallel imports and re-export networks passing through third countries (such as Belarus); a shadow tanker fleet partly assembled from vessels sold off by European shipping companies; the selective enforcement of sanctions by the second Donald J. Trump administration, alongside resistance to their expansion from individual EU member states; and Russia's direct goods trade with both the U.S. and the EU, which has continued uninterrupted since February 2022.⁵⁸

According to data from the Latvian Constitution Protection Bureau (SAB), based on non-public assessments by Russian authorities, between 2022 and 2025, Russia spent an additional \$130 billion (approximately \$32.5 billion per year) solely purchasing sanctioned Western goods through more expensive alternative supply chains. Furthermore, it could lose at least \$136 billion more via these channels by 2030. These figures do not include costs resulting from the long-term unavailability of certain imports, the loss of export markets, rising domestic prices, declining profitability, and reduced budget revenues.⁵⁹

The Bank of Finland Institute for Emerging Economies (BOFIT) August 2025 research found that prices for export-controlled goods shipped from China to Russia rose by a median of 87% between 2021 and 2024, compared to just 9% for the same categories of Chinese goods shipped to other destinations.⁶⁰ In some cases, prices rose while volumes declined: in 2024, Chinese ball bearings cost Russia 76% more than in 2021, even though their volume fell by 13%. This indicates that Western restrictions made Russian channels narrower and more expensive without completely cutting them off. A March 2026 investigation by The Insider identified more than 6,000 foreign exporting firms trading directly with sanctioned Russian companies and defense suppliers, with approximately 4,000 of the identified entities being registered in China and Hong Kong.⁶¹

According to the February 2026 report released by BelPol—an initiative of former Belarusian security officers—Belarus became a dedicated shadow hub for the parallel import segment of the Russian MIC.⁶² Belarusian intermediary firms procure Japanese and Taiwanese infrared focal plane arrays (thermal imaging sensors) through Georgian financial channels, pass them to the optical manufacturer “Peleng” for assembly into panoramic tank sighting systems, and ship the finished optics directly to Russia’s “Uralvagonzavod” for installation on T-72 and T-90 tanks. Civilian enterprises in Belarus, such as the tire manufacturer “Belshina” and the metalworking firm “Rukhservomotor,” have been subordinated to the same defense procurement order. The Belarusian state enterprise “Spetssviaz” physically transports cash for Russia’s shadow arms transactions, while cargo airlines “Rada” and “RubiStar” move sensitive goods discreetly.

Western sanctions coverage of the Belarus–Russia shadow network remains deeply uneven. Major Belarusian flagships—such as Peleng, BelOMO, and MZKT—already face hard blocking measures, but the majority of the 120 documented logistics operators, civilian subcontractors, and penal institutions (where political prisoners are also exploited to fulfill Russian defense contracts) remain outside Western restrictions. This gap allows Minsk to provide Moscow with sovereign institutional cover that Russia’s evasion networks operating through Turkey, China, or Central Asia cannot replicate.

Figure 6. How the Kremlin Perceives Western Selective Enforcement

Claims documented in Russian state and pro-government media, January 2026 – July 2026

■ The West is split ■ Sanctions don't work ■ Foreign voices ■ Shadow fleet / Oil



Credit: Hleb Fitsner / SURF • Source: Russian state and pro-government media and reprint platforms

Western selective enforcement reinforces Moscow's expectations that its *Ressentiment*-driven endurance could ultimately compel the West into making significant political and economic concessions. Furthermore, it extends Russia's time horizon and substantially reduces the perceived cost of prolonging both the war against Ukraine and hybrid warfare against NATO.

The selective enforcement by the U.S. in 2025 transformed pressure into a diplomatic bargaining chip with diminishing returns. For the first nine months of its term, the Trump administration imposed no new sanctions targeting Russia.⁶³ Secretary of State Marco Rubio argued that was necessary to preserve leverage in peace negotiations on Ukraine.⁶⁴ In goods alone, U.S.–Russia trade reached \$4.4 billion in 2025, a 23% increase from the previous year, while EU–Russia trade stood at €58.1 billion, with mineral fuels making up 71.8% of the EU's imports from Russia.⁶⁵

In the energy sector, Russia utilizes a "shadow fleet" of over 700 oil tankers,⁶⁶ which operates through Automatic Identification System (AIS) signal blackouts, constant changes of vessel names and countries of registration, and illicit ship-to-ship transfers in international waters. A notable share of the fleet's tonnage has come from secondhand vessels sold by European shipping companies, especially Greek, to shell firms in lax jurisdictions.⁶⁷ In 2026 several European states inspected and detained more shadow-fleet vessels than in any previous year, and Russia began sending warships to escort tankers through the Baltic and the English Channel.⁶⁸ Washington seized at least seven tankers between December 2025 and January 2026, but under authorities built for Venezuela and Iran: a presidential blockade order along with a terrorist designation for the Venezuelan government on December 16, and forfeiture warrants resting on the vessels' links to Iran and its proxies (like Hezbollah).⁶⁹ Nothing comparable was established for Russia, and Moscow could read that as a sign of Western hesitation rather than restraint.

The joint U.S.–Israeli campaign against Iran, launched on February 28, 2026, quickly reshaped sanctions policy toward Moscow. Russia entered the year under severe fiscal pressure: Urals averaged \$41 in January and \$44.6 in February against a 2026 budget assumption of \$59 per barrel, forcing the government to consider spending cuts. After Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz, Russia's oil tax benchmark surged by roughly 82% within nine days, while Asian refiners shifted to Russian crude as the closest option.⁷⁰ On March 5, the U.S. Treasury authorized four Indian refiners to discharge Russian cargoes already at sea before extending the measure globally on March 12–13. Although the licenses remained temporary and limited to cargoes already afloat, they eased pressure on Russia's wartime budget at its critical moment.⁷¹

Certain EU states also resist the expansion of sanctions against Russia: Greece objects to the extension of the price cap on Russian oil and the ban on the carriage of Russian liquefied natural gas; France and Spain oppose denying visas to anyone involved in Russia's invasion of Ukraine; Bulgaria rejects the imposition of sanctions on Patriarch Kirill (Vladimir Gundyayev) of the Russian Orthodox Church; while Germany, Poland, and Portugal oppose restrictions on imports of Russian fish.⁷² These disagreements have not gone unnoticed by Russian propaganda (Figure 6).

U.S. TRANSACTIONALISM FOR THE KREMLIN

From the beginning of 2025, the Kremlin has been pursuing a consistent strategy of diplomatic self-legitimization. Every interaction with the Trump administration has turned into a spectacle designed to secure recognition of Russia's status as a great power, rather than serving as a genuine step toward resolving the war in Ukraine.

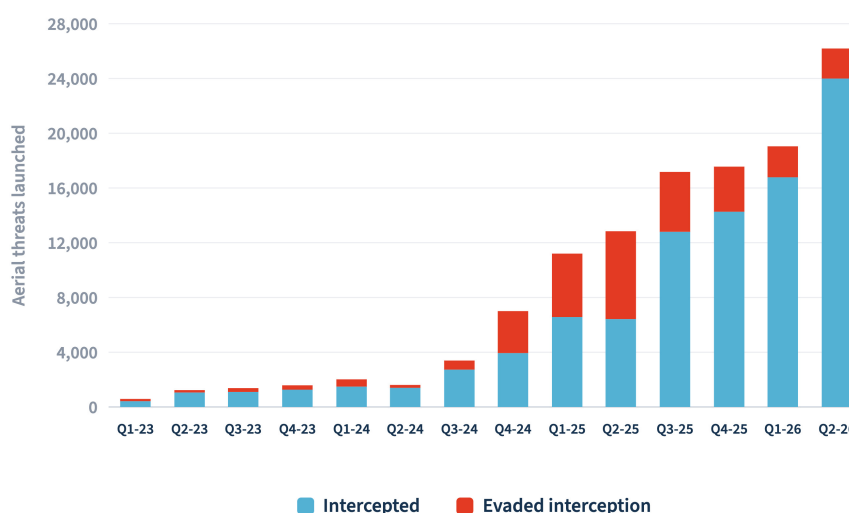
The U.S.–Russia ministerial meeting in Riyadh in February 2025 excluded both Ukraine and Europe—the format that Moscow had been striving for since 2022.⁷³ Speaking to the authors, former U.S. ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul argues that Russian strategy of playing along with the White House's transactionalism was clearly evident in the involvement of Kirill Dmitriev, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund—a man with no diplomatic or military experience “who knows nothing about Ukraine, but does know about money.”⁷⁴ By offering economic deals (Ukrainian intelligence assessed the package presented by Russia at some \$12 trillion; Dmitriev himself—\$14 trillion),⁷⁵ the Kremlin sought to attract Trump with the illusion of enormous benefits from bilateral cooperation, making European security merely a byproduct of commercial bargaining.

The summit in Anchorage in August 2025 marked the culmination of this Russian strategy. Despite an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC),⁷⁶ Putin was welcomed at a U.S. military base with a red carpet and a fighter jet escort. Russian state media broadcast this scene as definitive proof of the collapse of Western isolation. A Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) analysis from late 2025 concluded that the correct sequence of actions would have been to first increase pressure and only then begin negotiations with Russia.⁷⁷ In reality, Washington did the opposite, while Russia brought escalation with Ukraine and NATO to an unprecedented level.

Official monitoring data from the UN reported that 2025 was the deadliest year for the civilian population of Ukraine since 2022. The total number of victims increased by about 31% compared to 2024 and by 70% compared to 2023.⁷⁸ From Donald Trump's inauguration (January 20, 2025) through June 30, 2026, Russia launched 102,294 drones and missiles at Ukraine—accounting for 82.5% of all launches recorded since January 2023 (**Figure 7**). Diplomatic interaction by the West, like selective enforcement of sanctions, is perceived as a signal of “weak position,” which the Kremlin systematically transforms into maximalism on the battlefield.

Figure 7. Russian Aerial Attacks and Ukrainian Interceptions

Drones, cruise and ballistic missiles of all types launched per quarter, Jan 2023 – Jun 2026



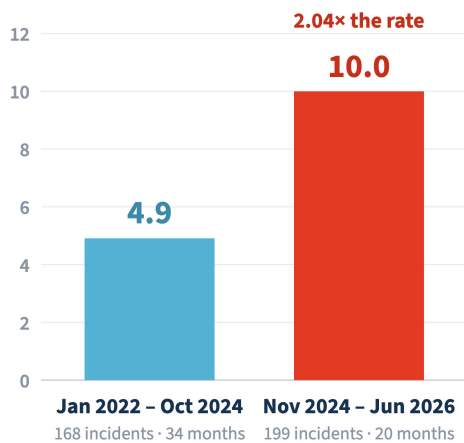
Credit: Hleb Fitsner / SURF • Source: Ukrainian Air Force daily reports

Figure 8. Russian Hybrid Warfare Against NATO

Verified incidents of sub-threshold warfare, 1 Jan 2022 – 30 Jun 2026

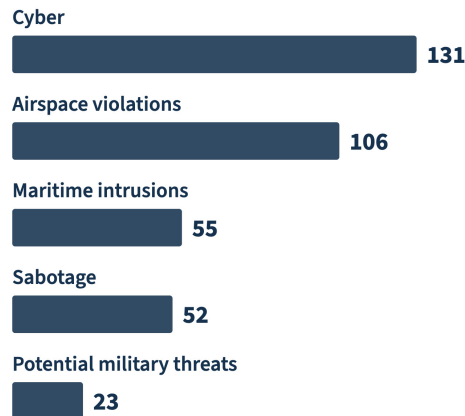
Average incidents per month

Monthly rate more than doubled after the November 2024 U.S. election



Incidents by type

Full period, 367 incidents total



Credit: Hleb Fitsner / SURF • Source: SAHA hybrid-attacks tracker, sahasec.org/tracker. Periods split at the U.S. presidential election, November 5, 2024

Since the U.S. presidential election in November 2024, the average monthly number of recorded Russian hybrid attacks against NATO has more than doubled (**Figure 8**). At the same time, both Moscow and Washington have intensified their contacts with Eurosceptic and nationalist-populist forces in the EU.⁷⁹ According to the Kremlin’s internal documents obtained by the U.S. Department of Justice, Russia aims to exploit the political agenda of Make America Great Again (MAGA) supporters, highlighting that key aspects of that agenda coincide with the Kremlin’s own objectives.⁸⁰

The destruction of NATO’s internal cohesion—one of Russia’s key strategic goals for decades—was partly achieved not through direct military pressure. EU states were systematically excluded from negotiations over Ukraine despite the fact that the outcome would define Europe’s own security. The Trump administration reopened direct contacts with Moscow and structured the process around separate U.S.–Russia and U.S.–Ukraine channels rather than a traditional transatlantic format. Russia’s subsequent opposition to the participation of the EU became a test of whether Washington would defend Europe’s role in the process—and it did not.⁸¹

Meanwhile, the U.S. pursued a tough tariff policy toward the EU and raised doubts about the invocation of NATO’s Article 5 on collective defense to protect Europe if Russia were to attack. In 2025–2026, military aid to Ukraine shifted toward Europe, as U.S. support dropped sharply while European contributions increased to compensate for the gap.⁸²

The Greenland crisis in January 2026, when the Trump administration was actively demanding sovereignty over the island, became, in the words of Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, a moment risking the entire future of Western cooperation.⁸³ Denmark secretly deployed special forces with explosives sufficient to destroy the airstrips in Nuuk and Kangerlussuaq—such measures were intended to prevent a potential U.S. invasion. Prior to this, Washington had periodically made statements regarding Canada that read as territorial claims and a threat to the country’s sovereignty.⁸⁴

Russian propagandists made no secret of their delight, portraying Trump as accelerating the erosion of the post-Cold War order.⁸⁵ By late 2025, a RIA Novosti article described Trump as “promisingly similar to Boris Yeltsin”—a leader dismantling a superpower from within.⁸⁶ In March 2026, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) concluded: “Moscow almost certainly remains confident that it will prevail on the battlefield in Ukraine and force a settlement on its terms.”⁸⁷

To understand what the Kremlin is actually pursuing, it is necessary to return to December 2021. That month, Russia published two draft treaties, one for the United States and one for NATO, setting out an exhaustive list of demands. These included a legally binding bar on Ukraine and other post-Soviet states joining NATO, the withdrawal of alliance forces from members admitted after 1997, and a ban on U.S. intermediate-range missiles in Europe. Additionally, Moscow demanded the return of all U.S. nuclear weapons to American territory, an end to NATO's nuclear-sharing, and a commitment to open no bases on former Soviet territory.⁸⁸

These terms are similar to the model Moscow has followed since the 1990s. The Two Plus Four Treaty, which allowed Germany to reunify as a single state, contains a requirement insisted by the Kremlin: a ban on the deployment of foreign armed forces and nuclear weapons or their carriers on the territory of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), including Berlin.⁸⁹

On December 30, 2021, Putin pressed then-U.S. President Joseph Biden for “legally binding guarantees ruling out NATO’s eastward expansion.”⁹⁰ Based on the memoirs of then-NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, he agreed to discuss with Moscow in 2021 the creation of buffer zones and the withdrawal of NATO troops from Eastern Europe as part of a Russian ultimatum, without notifying Poland or the Baltic states.⁹¹ Despite this willingness at the top of the alliance, the West ultimately refused the Kremlin’s core demands, and then in 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine. The Brookings Institution later judged Moscow’s ultimatum to have been drafted for rejection, to give the Kremlin a pretext for war.⁹²

Since then, Moscow has only added new demands tied with its war against Ukraine. In 2025–2026 peace negotiations, the Kremlin has been insisting on the full withdrawal of Ukrainian army from the four southeastern Ukrainian regions partly occupied by Russia along with their international recognition as Russian. Moscow also demands the demilitarization, “denazification” (a change of government in Kyiv to a pro-Russian), and neutral nuclear-free status of Ukraine.⁹³

According to FDD, Russia remained the primary obstacle to peace, and renewed diplomacy made it more entrenched rather than less: without enforcement mechanisms, each round of peace talks confirmed that Putin’s bet on time was paying off. Moscow uses diplomacy to gain advantage in the war, treating compromise as beside the point.⁹⁴

Even if Russia’s 2021 ultimatum, Two Plus Four Treaty and declared war goals in Ukraine are fully met today (Figure 9), this would not signal the end of Russian expansionism; rather, it would only further embolden it. *Ressentiment*, by its nature, has no point of saturation.

Putin himself gave the sharpest description of this in November 2016 at a Russian Geographical Society ceremony, during an exchange with a nine-year-old contestant, who claimed to know every country’s capitals and outlines. Asked where Russia’s ended, the boy answered, “At the Bering Strait, by the coast of the United States.” Putin put an arm around him and corrected him: “Russia’s borders don’t end anywhere.” Then he added: “That is a joke.”⁹⁵

The formula has outlived the moment: in October 2025, during a Washington visit, the Kremlin’s Special Envoy Dmitriev gave U.S. Representative Anna Paulina Luna chocolates printed with Putin’s sayings—with this one among them.⁹⁶ Joke or not, it captures the *Ressentiment* Washington is trying to negotiate with more faithfully than any diplomatic document.

Figure 9. Map of Europe if Russia's Demands Are Fully Met



■ **NATO European Members Before 1997:** retain full collective-defense guarantees under Article 5, with no restrictions on hosting foreign troops or infrastructure. However, the U.S. nuclear weapons and infrastructure (under NATO Nuclear Sharing) are completely withdrawn from this territory.

■ **NATO European Members After 1997:** remain formally in NATO but are barred from hosting foreign troops, military bases, intermediate-range missiles, or nuclear weapons, leaving Article 5 effectively unenforceable on this territory.

■ **Russia's Aligned and Annexed Territories:** Union State of Russia and Belarus; Crimea and Russia's "New Regions" (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions)—Ukrainian territories fully annexed by Russia; unrecognized Transnistria as a Russia-aligned separatist territory of Moldova.

■ **Ukraine:** "Denazified" (a pro-Russian regime installed); "Demilitarized" (Ukrainian armed forces radically reduced, Western arms deliveries halted, NATO or any military bloc membership prohibited); "Denuclearized" (no foreign or domestic nuclear weapons on Ukrainian territory).

■ **Former GDR territory:** no foreign troops (including soldiers from other NATO member states) or nuclear weapons under the 2+4 Treaty. Officially, the territory remains part of NATO with protection under Article 5 of the alliance.

■ **Neutral States:** a ban on NATO admitting them as new members.

— **1997 NATO's Eastern Border**

The map shows a hypothetical scenario in which Western states agree to Russia's full achievement of its war goals against Ukraine, the ultimatum Russia issued to the United States in 2021, and the Treaty 2+4 regarding the status of the GDR and Berlin following the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the reunification of Germany. Credit: Hleb Fitsner / SURF

WASHINGTON'S "REVERSE KISSINGER"

The current U.S. administration's strategy for engaging Russia is based on the "Reverse Kissinger" hypothesis, which describes the possibility, or at least the belief, that the United States can team up with Russia to counterbalance a growing China.

Fred Fleitz, Trump's former National Security Council Executive Secretary and Chief of Staff, stated that the president "correctly sees the growing Russia-China alliance as a far greater threat to U.S. and global security than the Ukraine War and therefore wants to find ways to improve U.S.-Russia relations to weaken or break that alliance." Reinforcing this perspective, Alexander Gray, another former NSC chief of staff, has also explicitly confirmed that the U.S. followed this logic: "There is a longstanding kind of U.S. strategic train of thought that says that having Russia and China working together is very much not in our interests."⁹⁷

In December 2025, Russian Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov described the Trump administration's revised National Security Strategy—which stopped viewing Russia as a threat and focused on confronting China—as "largely aligned with Russia's vision," marking for the first time since the end of the Cold War that the Kremlin had publicly endorsed a U.S. strategic document.⁹⁸

The "Reverse Kissinger" approach pushed by the White House has found in Moscow not just a potential partner, but an audience eager to play along to maximize the strategic window during which Russia is unlikely to face serious penalties from Washington for its aggressive policies against Ukraine and NATO allies in Europe.

Speaking to the authors, a source well-informed about the ongoing U.S.–Russia negotiations who wished to remain anonymous, noted that Kirill Dmitriev had privately expressed to Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff that Russia prefers the pre-war era of active cooperation with the U.S. to its current partnership with China. More specifically, Dmitriev indicated that Moscow finds it quite difficult to trust Beijing and cooperate with it. Another source, granted anonymity, also confirmed this episode.⁹⁹



From left to right: Jared Kushner, U.S. President's Special Envoy for Peace; Kirill Dmitriev, CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) and Special Presidential Envoy on Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation; Steve Witkoff, U.S. President's Special Envoy for Peace Missions and the Middle East. Moscow, December 2, 2025. Photo: Kristina Kormilitsyna (Rossiya Segodnya) via Wikimedia Commons

However, Washington has long misread Moscow's strategic intentions. Nearly every administration since the USSR's collapse has attempted a version of engagement, and each has failed—not because the outreach was insincere, but because Russian *Ressentiment* converted even genuine engagement into fresh evidence of “Western arrogance.” The U.S. approaches differed, and this difference matters.

- The presidency of Bill Clinton (1993–2001) built the most ambitious framework of engagement with Russia, encompassing democratic transformation, economic integration, and the NATO Partnership for Peace program. Meanwhile, declassified Clinton-era records released by the National Security Archive in 2024 show that U.S. officials called Russia's opposition to NATO enlargement “deep and profound,” yet proceeded regardless.¹⁰⁰ Then-senior State Department official Dennis Ross noted that enlargement without a Russia–NATO deal would “demonstrate Russian weakness and irrelevance.”¹⁰¹ The Kremlin's concern was not enlargement itself but what *Ressentiment* made of the gap between the language of partnership and a reality in which the decisive questions—who joins the alliance, on what terms, and who decides—were settled in NATO and post-Soviet candidate countries without Moscow's involvement. Those questions were not Moscow's to decide, and this SURF memo shows why the Kremlin could not accept that: the demand was for a recognition the West was neither obliged nor able to grant. Engagement that did not deliver it was registered by the Kremlin, in advance, as a betrayal.
- The presidency of George W. Bush (2001–2009) launched its engagement framework with a genuine post-9/11 alignment: Putin offered intelligence cooperation and Central Asian basing before Washington asked for either. The Moscow Treaty of 2002, the G8 summits, and a war on terror in which Russia was a front-line partner—none of these were cynical. Still, the Kremlin continued to receive neither the recognition nor the equality it had expected. As stated in a memorandum by Donald Rumsfeld, who served as U.S. Secretary of Defense from 2001 to 2006, the choice seen by Moscow was binary: either integrate into the American-led order, or “consort with Cuba, North Korea, Iran, and Iraq.”¹⁰² NATO's 2004 expansion to the Baltic states, the “color revolutions,” and the U.S. exit from the ABM Treaty were read in Washington as a liberal order following its own logic. For Moscow, they were a sign that the U.S. wanted Russia to be not an equal partner, but a compliant participant. Putin's 2007 Munich speech, dismissed in Washington as an aberration, was one of the loudest public expressions of this trauma driven by *Ressentiment*. Robert Gates—who served as U.S. Secretary of Defense under both Bush and Obama—attributed Putin's Munich speech to “deep and long-term resentment and bitterness at Russia's fall from superpower status.”¹⁰³
- The presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017) and its reset with Russia were the most self-aware engagement attempt, opening with an admission that the prior approaches had failed. Its first-term results were real, especially the New START agreement limiting the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads on both the U.S. and Russian sides,¹⁰⁴ because they were structured as trades that did not require Russia to concede Western primacy.

According to Michael McFaul, who negotiated New START and was present at its signing in Prague in April 2010, then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev told Obama that the treaty was “a win-win,” but objected that joining UN sanctions on Iran was “unfair” and “asymmetric,” since Russia “has way more vested with Iran than the U.S. does.” Obama's reply, in McFaul's account, was that “we are going to help you (Russia) on things that you care more about.” In return for Moscow's vote for UN Security Council Resolution 1929 on Iran on June 9, 2010, the United States lifted sanctions on a couple of Russian companies, committed to a “123 Agreement” on nuclear cooperation between Russia and the U.S., and backed Russia's WTO accession.¹⁰⁵

Yet the “Obama reset” carried a triangular logic: the 2011 Pivot to Asia¹⁰⁶ named China as the coming challenge and cast Russia’s role as managerial—stabilizing the European flank and avoiding pushing Moscow toward Beijing—while offering nothing that aligned with what Russia had expected from the West since the USSR’s collapse. The transactionalism under Obama seemed successful. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea regardless.

The lesson is not that the “Obama reset” offered too little. It is that its trades settled specific disputes but never the essence beneath them—whether Russia would accept the post-Cold War order or destroy it. The conventional explanations for the 2014 failure—NATO’s open-door policy, Ukraine’s Maidan, the Kremlin’s insecurity after the 2011–2012 protests,¹⁰⁷ Putin’s return to the presidency, and the intervention in Libya—each gave Moscow an occasion to act, but none explained the genuine motivation. That came from *Ressentiment*: once the Kremlin judged confrontation more rewarding than a nominal “partnership,” a relationship built solely on transactionalism had nothing to fall back on, because the underlying hierarchy had never been resolved and could not be, even with the West’s concessions. The reset succeeded on the deals and failed on the order they left untouched—which is why *Ressentiment*, a governing logic and not a bargaining position, cannot be transacted away.

Donald Trump’s first term (2017–2021) is a case in point. It was an early attempt to launch “Reverse Kissinger”: warmth toward Moscow ran alongside the harshest anti-China posture since the normalization of relations in 1979. It failed, however, not merely because Russiagate constrained Trump’s political freedom of action (though it did), but because it lacked the architecture the original Kissinger maneuver required. In the 1970s, then-U.S. President Richard Nixon’s opening to China worked because it exploited a preexisting Sino-Soviet split, which had manifested itself in open military clashes. Nixon offered Beijing something specific and measurable—relief from strategic encirclement—and paired it with a concrete deliverable, the Shanghai Communiqué.¹⁰⁸ Neither during Trump’s first term nor during his second have Russia–China relations experienced a comparable reality. Rather than outmaneuvering Russia, Trump and several of his associates have faced serious allegations over their contacts with Russia that a bipartisan Senate committee assessed to have “represented a grave counterintelligence threat.”¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, Russia has continued to pursue its expansionist policies for over a decade.

The most recent attempt by the Biden administration (2021–2025) used the opposite method and met the same wall. Where Trump sought to court Moscow, Biden read Russia’s deepening partnership with China as an unwanted cost the Kremlin was trying to minimize and assumed that pressure would drive Russia to seek a Western exit.¹¹⁰ However, driven by *Ressentiment*, Moscow became even more entrenched, seeking to prove the opposite and demonstrate its strength—as evidenced by the aforementioned 2021 ultimatum, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the shift to a war economy, and heavy combat losses on the front line. Biden’s sanctions did not push Russia into China’s arms; they removed the last barrier to a pivot the Kremlin had already chosen.

Each approach, whether it offered partnership or applied pressure, assumed a Russia that could be moved by cost and benefit, and none survived contact with a Kremlin for which confrontation with the West is not a price but a purpose. This memo argues that the reason is *Ressentiment*. However, even if this argument is rejected, assuming that the Kremlin is not guided by such logic and, if it had the opportunity, would indeed break away from China’s orbit and turn toward the West—even then, “Reverse Kissinger” is a strategy for a world that does not exist.

MOSCOW'S "NEVSKY DOCTRINE"

Since the war began, China–Russia bilateral trade has grown by more than half, rising from nearly \$147 billion in 2021 to roughly \$228 billion in 2025, with a peak in 2024 at approximately \$245 billion (**Figure 10-a**). Almost all of this trade now clears in rubles and yuan.¹¹¹ The European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) notes that China can wind the relationship down whenever it likes, while Russia has nowhere else to turn. NEST Centre calls the arrangement a “marriage without love,” held together by need rather than trust, while the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE) describes Russia as “a junior partner and a price taker in the relationship.”¹¹²

The “Pivot to the East,” announced by the Kremlin after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the first wave of Western sanctions,¹¹³ was never intended to break ties with the West. Instead, it was a symbolic move to demonstrate the existence of an alternative partner, exemplified by the Power of Siberia gas pipeline and the historic 30-year gas contract with China worth \$400 billion.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, the Russian elite viewed China’s “Belt and Road” initiative skeptically, choosing to promote its own Eurasian Economic Union as an alternative for regional economic integration.¹¹⁵

Before the invasion of Ukraine, the European Union accounted for roughly 38% of Russian exports and 37% of its imports, while China accounted for nearly 14% of exports and 25% of imports.¹¹⁶ This balance allowed the Kremlin to convincingly frame its partnership with China solely as strategic diversification. Simultaneously, Russia and China officially declared a “no-limits” partnership.¹¹⁷ The invasion itself almost ended such a duality in China’s favor.

According to the Gaidar Institute’s calculations based on Chinese customs data, Beijing has become Moscow’s largest trading partner. By the end of 2025, China accounted for 27% of Russia’s exports and supplied 36% of its imports, while Russia’s own share of China’s exports fell to 2.7%—roughly matching Mexico’s share and representing less than a fifth of the United States’.¹¹⁸ Energy is the backbone of this trade: when Europe stopped buying, China became the market that took the redirected oil and gas, and it pays a discount no other customer is offered. While in Q1–Q3 2025 the Russian oil flowing to China was priced 3.2% lower than the oil China purchased elsewhere, by Q4 2025 the discount had risen to 8.3%, and by December 2025–February 2026 it stood at 12–15% (**Figure 10-b**). Volumes show the same tendency: a record 31.9 million tonnes in Q1 2026 at \$451 per tonne, the lowest unit price since the invasion, while pipeline gas rose from \$1.5 billion in 2021 to \$9.4 billion in 2025 (**Figure 10-c**).

Bloomberg reports that roughly 90% of Russia’s sanctioned-technology imports now pass through China, up from 80% a year earlier.¹¹⁹ Dual-use goods—from integrated circuits to machine tools—keep the Russian war economy running. Chinese customs (GACC) show shipments dipped whenever the U.S. Treasury threatened secondary sanctions, then climbed back as trade was rerouted, clearing \$4 billion in both 2024 and 2025. Between December 2021 and March 2022, aerospace and optical components collapsed by 93% and never recovered—rerouting rather than a halt—while imports of CNC machine tools and chip-making equipment¹²⁰ tripled within months of the fall 2022 “partial mobilization,”¹²¹ their heaviest twelve-month accumulation falling six to twelve months before Russia’s intensified 2024 offensives in Ukraine (**Figure 10-d**).

The Telegraph valued Chinese technology and equipment deliveries supporting Russian military production and sanctions circumvention at no less than \$10.3 billion. This sum included \$4.9 billion in microchips and memory components critical to guided-missile and Su-series fighter production, \$130 million in precision ball bearings, and \$97 million in piezoelectric crystals for radar and electronic warfare.¹²² According to Reuters, engines for “Garpiya” drones—used against Ukraine at 500 monthly—arrived from China disguised as “industrial refrigeration units.”¹²³

In May–July 2026, Reuters also revealed that the Chinese military had covertly trained 200 Russian servicemen in Beijing and Nanjing. The courses covered drones, electronic warfare, and explosives—some trainees have since returned to the front to fight against Ukraine. The investigation found that Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov personally approved the program.¹²⁴

Figure 10. Russia's Growing Economic Dependence on China

(a) bilateral trade by direction; (b) China's discount on Russian crude; (c) crude oil volume and unit price, and pipeline gas; (d) Chinese dual-use exports to Russia. Quarterly or monthly, 2021 – Q1 2026.

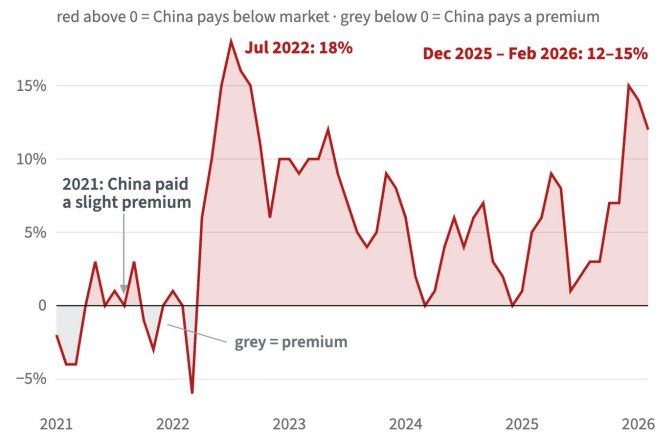
(a) Bilateral goods trade, by direction

Goods trade by direction, US\$ bn per quarter. Annual totals: 2021 \$147bn · 2024 peak \$245bn · 2025 \$228bn



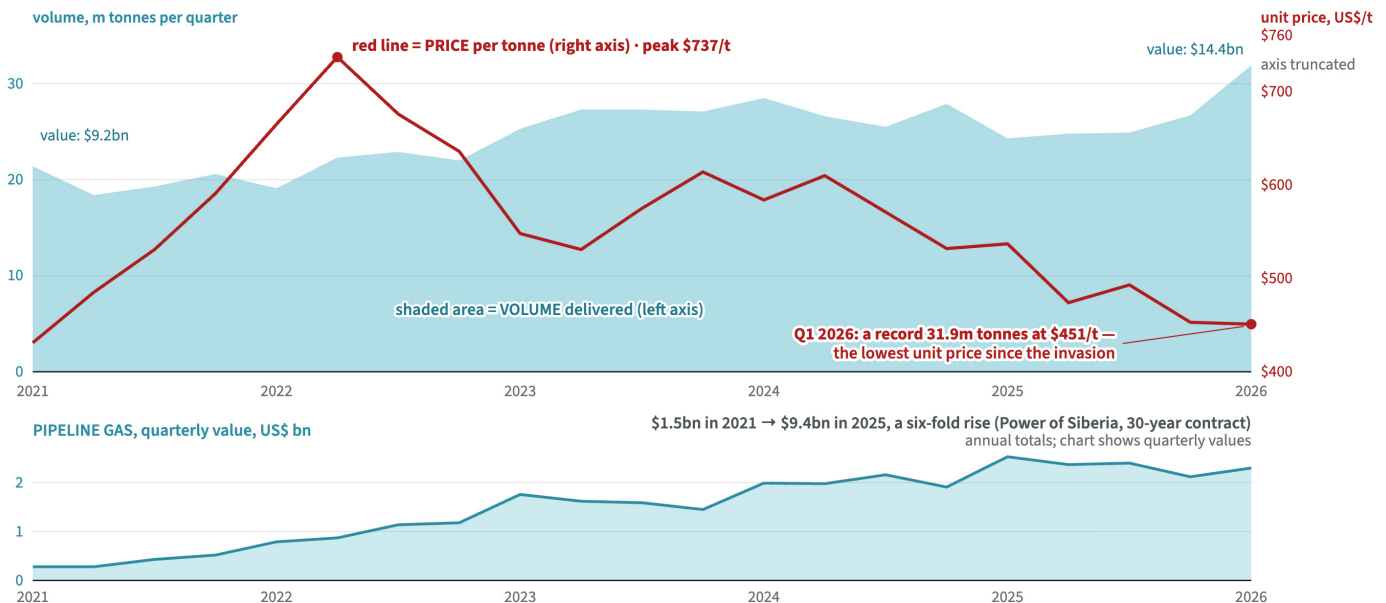
(b) China's price discount on Russian crude

How much less China pays for Russian crude than for crude from its other suppliers, % per month.



(c) Crude oil: record volumes, falling prices; pipeline gas

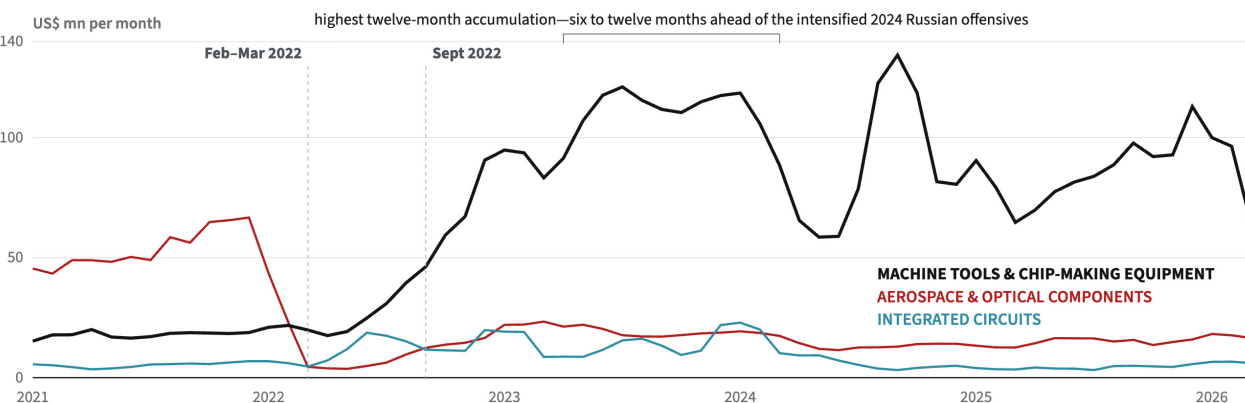
Russian crude delivered to China: volume, million tonnes per quarter (area, left axis), against its unit price, US\$ per tonne (line, right axis).



Unit price is quarterly value divided by tonnage delivered, across all grades; it is not directly comparable with the discount series in panel (b), which is calculated monthly against non-sanctioned suppliers.

(d) Dual-use exports: production equipment against components

High-priority dual-use goods shipped from China to Russia, US\$ mn per month; three of the six priority tiers (T1; T3B; T4A+T4B of six). Tiers as defined by the EU/G7 Common High Priority Items List (50 HS codes found in Russian weapons systems).



Feb–Mar 2022: aerospace and optical components (tier T3B) fall 93%, from \$66.7 mn in Dec 2021 to \$4.5 mn in Mar 2022, and do not recover; that fall may reflect reclassification or rerouting through third countries as much as a genuine halt.
Sept 2022 mobilization: machine-tool and chip-equipment imports triple.

Source: China customs (GACC) via the MERICS–OSW–UI China–Russia Dashboard, July 2026; Gazprom (volume figures cited in the text); discount series calculated by MERICS from GACC data; dual-use tiers per the EU/G7 Common High Priority Items List. Credit: Hleb Fitsner / SURF

Despite the proclaimed “no-limits” partnership, Russian intelligence services perceive China as a long-term strategic threat. Leaked FSB documents reveal a dedicated counterintelligence program, codenamed “Entente-4,” which was approved three days before the 2022 invasion. The directive explicitly labels China as an “enemy” and details Chinese efforts to recruit Russian officials, steal military technology, spy in the Arctic, and promote territorial claims to the Russian Far East. FSB officers were instructed not to publicly mention Chinese intelligence services as a potential adversary, “so as not to damage bilateral relations.”¹²⁵

The ongoing war in Ukraine has accelerated Beijing’s expansion into Central Asia, which for centuries had lain deeply within Russia’s sphere of influence. In 2022, the C+C5 format—which unites China and the five Central Asian states, excluding Russia—was elevated to the heads-of-state level. Beijing increased arms exports to the region, established a military base in Tajikistan, and launched construction of the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway—a southern overland corridor that feeds the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) to Europe while bypassing Russia.¹²⁶

The Power of Siberia 2—which is of vital importance for Russia and its state corporation Gazprom—aims to redirect gas exports to the Chinese market to help Moscow survive the EU’s rejection of Russian gas. However, Beijing is in no hurry to approve the project, dragging out negotiations to make Russia accept terms more beneficial to China.¹²⁷

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a former oil tycoon and now one of Russia’s opposition leaders, speaking to the authors, argues that Moscow–Beijing contacts are “situational and almost at their highest point”: China sees Russia as an industrial competitor and will not invest heavily; trade is near its peak; the realistic maximum is “a balance of the Kazakhstan type—but nothing more.” For Khodorkovsky, Beijing’s interest in the United States is “incomparably” greater than in Russia: “The Kremlin understands this, which is precisely why it gets so nervous when China begins talking to the U.S.”¹²⁸

The Kremlin faces a seemingly insoluble contradiction: it perceives Beijing as a potential threat, but does not (and is unable to) act in accordance with this perception. Any pivot away from China is prohibitively expensive: \$228 billion in goods trade with China compares with a paltry figure of \$4.4 billion for the United States¹²⁹ and leaves no room for near-term replacement. India—the only buyer keeping Putin from total dependence on China, and the destination for 37% of Russia’s crude exports since December 2022 (against China’s 48%)—offers no substitute for the industrial, financial, and technological backing that Beijing provides.¹³⁰

Speaking to the authors, Alexander Gabuev estimates overall Chinese investment in Russia at \$30–50 billion—far less than prewar Western volumes: “Putin chose Beijing not for money but out of two decades of grievance. Reversing the choice would take long-term trust building for Russia, and the key question is whether Putin is capable of that—in his mid-70s, surrounded by people like him.”¹³¹

In November 2023, Putin explained Russia’s path by pointing to Alexander Nevsky, the 13th-century prince who, in Putin’s words, accepted the *yarlyk*—the Golden Horde’s permission to rule the Russian lands—to “resist the invasion from the West effectively.” “The Mongols were arrogant and cruel, but they left untouched our language, traditions, and culture—the very things the Western conquerors sought to destroy. Much the same is happening today.”¹³² In this sense, alignment with China is acceptable if it spares Russia’s domestic order and supports the confrontation with the West. It is a conscious choice that, as Gabuev argues, no money can undo: “I do not see a magical figure where the U.S. just writes Putin a \$50 billion check and then the resentment goes away and Russia is happily playing Team West.”¹³³

WEAK SPOTS OF RUSSIAN RESENTIMENT

Given all the evidence and arguments presented, Russia's ability to absorb the enormous costs of its geopolitical ambitions through *Ressentiment* is real, yet it is not unlimited. There are four interlocking constraints which define the feasible frontier of the Kremlin's own rationality.

1. Subjection to China that Russia cannot officially acknowledge.

Despite the “Nevsky doctrine” through which the Kremlin rationalizes its alignment with China while hiding its dependence on it, this status quo strips Moscow of freedoms it cannot admit to having lost—while forbidding the admission itself. It is shown in four dimensions.

- **War economy.** Russia's MIC has become overly dependent on technologies and dual-use goods from China. This means Beijing now holds a controlling stake in both Russia's war against Ukraine and the Russian economy itself, where the defense sector is the main driver of economic growth. Whatever China's motives for keeping Russia afloat might be, the true peace in Ukraine—even if the Kremlin were genuinely willing—cannot be reached by Moscow's decision alone.
- **Nuclear escalation.** Beijing has enforced one explicit red line: following Putin's September 2022 mobilization speech and his threat to use “all available means” to defeat Ukraine, China together with some NATO states, including the U.S., privately warned the Kremlin against any tactical nuclear strike. Chinese President Xi Jinping then said so publicly, calling on the world to “oppose the use of nuclear weapons or threats to use nuclear weapons.”¹³⁴ The ceiling is real, observed, and—for Moscow—unmentionable: invoking it would concede that sovereignty over the ultimate escalation is shared with the very power whose seniority Russia denies.
- **Negotiating autonomy.** In any settlement bargaining with the West, Moscow's strongest theoretical card—the offer to loosen its alignment with Beijing—cannot be played openly, because it requires naming the dependence. The Kremlin is left hinting at what it cannot say, through intermediaries and deniable channels (see p. 22). Even if Russian *Ressentiment* is removed, Moscow cannot break away from Beijing for objective reasons. Meanwhile, deepening alignment will proceed with or without Russian threats in this regard.
- **Domestic coherence.** The security services document the Chinese threat in classified channels while being barred from naming it publicly—meaning the institution charged with defining Russia's enemies operates under a gag rule about one of them. The narrative discipline required to sustain it must be enforced downward, indefinitely, against the grain of what the enforcers themselves believe.

Each quarter the war continues, the dependence deepens, and the gap widens between what the elite knows and what it may say. Unlike sanctions damage, subordination to Beijing cannot be reframed as moral capital, because the entire Russian *Ressentiment* narrative is built on Russia's refusal to be anyone's junior. Damage from the adversary ennobles, because it can be displayed as proof of defiance. Dependence on the “no-limits” partner only degrades: it contradicts the very myth the war in Ukraine exists to defend. The hand that feeds the Kremlin's war also caps it—at the nuclear threshold above all (at least until proven otherwise).

The objection that all alliances constrain their members misses the specificity here. NATO members debate their dependencies openly and price them politically. Moscow's dependence is load-bearing, escalation-capping, and unspeakable at once—and it is the combination, not the dependence alone, that makes it a weak spot. A constraint that may not be discussed cannot be managed, hedged, or renegotiated in public view; it can only accumulate.

2. Inability to end the war without Ukraine's capitulation.

Historically, Russian rulers have survived famine, terror, and economic collapse, but military defeat has repeatedly proven the one cost the system could not metabolize—from the Crimean War, which forced the Great Reforms, to 1905, 1917, and the Afghanistan shadow over the Soviet collapse.¹³⁵ In none of these cases was Russia crushed or occupied; defeat registered not as territorial loss but as the acknowledged failure to prevail.

The Kremlin describes its war against Ukraine as an “existential struggle,” but maintains the legal and media framing of it as a “Special Military Operation”—while criminally prosecuting Russian citizens for using the word “war” in public and seeking to convince the entire world that Russia can defeat a “weaker” opponent like Ukraine without declaring war.¹³⁶ To sustain this contradictory narrative after years of failing to achieve its stated military objectives, Russia has reached a point where ending or freezing the war without Ukraine's capitulation would simultaneously result in multiple outcomes disastrous for Moscow.

- Peace short of victory would instantly raise the question of what the sacrifices were for—before a society in which 74% expect the war to end in Russia's victory and 59% prefer escalation over concessions if peace on Russia's terms proves unattainable (Figure 2, p. 10).
- By 2026, defense and security together absorb nearly 40% of federal spending, up from roughly a quarter before the war, and for the fourth year running the military budget exceeds the social one.¹³⁷ The Russian MIC remains the last significant driver of economic growth, but its impact has largely faded: after defense-led expansion in 2023–2024, GDP growth slowed to around 1% in 2025, while facing a high risk of recession and banking crisis if wartime spending continues (see pp. 13–14). Meanwhile, “deathonomics” has transformed military service into the most economically rational choice for many working-age men across Russia's regions, where civilian alternatives remain scarce (Figure 5, p. 15). A freeze of the war in Ukraine would remove the sole working engine from a Russian stalling economy.
- More than 700,000 men are deployed in the war zone (by Putin's own count).¹³⁸ Among those recruited are more than 180,000 inmates, a scale consistent with the Russian penitentiary service's own admission that its prison population fell from 465,000 to 282,000 and that the option of enlisting had “a certain influence” on the decline.¹³⁹ The main threat for the Kremlin is not joblessness—unemployment stands at a post-Soviet low of 2.1%—but an income collapse.¹⁴⁰ Even in Moscow, where civilian labor markets are Russia's most diversified, replacing wartime earnings would be difficult; across many regional labor markets, it would be considerably harder—especially for soldiers returning to underfunded healthcare and a social system already strained by wartime labor shortages, growing dependence on Asian migrant labor, and anti-migrant campaigns the Kremlin can exploit but cannot fully control.¹⁴¹ The entire Soviet war in Afghanistan cycled 620,000 men through the country over nine years—fewer than Russia deploys in Ukraine at any single moment. The wave of veteran crime that followed it, and the similar waves after the two Chechen wars of the 1990s–2000s, are the closest precedents.¹⁴² Current returning Russian veterans from Ukraine have already killed at least 551 people at home and severely injured 465 more.¹⁴³

The Kremlin understands this risk. It has never demobilized the servicemen since September 2022: four years on, they remain at the front, because the system cannot absorb their return in large numbers. Even if, hypothetically, that were possible, broader segments of the population shaped by *Ressentiment*—and especially their most radical adherents—would pose another challenge. For some of them, a freeze on the war, interpreted as Russia's defeat, would serve as final compelling evidence that the leadership had “betrayed” the country and abandoned its “historical mission.”

3. Internal competition over *Ressentiment* leadership.

With the outbreak of the full-scale war, the Kremlin's monopoly on defining how Russian *Ressentiment* goals are to be pursued came under serious internal challenge. The anti-Western grievance itself remains uncontested; what is contested is who may judge whether the state is serving it faithfully.

The actual competitors—the radicals (or ultranationalists)—populate the *Ressentiment* core (Figure 2, p. 10). They are conditionally loyal to the state at best, and their lineage predates the war. Many trace their identity to the “Russian Spring” of 2014, when the Kremlin's refusal to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine to support the Donbas “uprising” was experienced as the first betrayal of the “Russian cause.” Igor Girkin, a former Russian intelligence officer sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment by a Dutch court for the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014, became one of the loudest voices of this grievance against the Kremlin.¹⁴⁴

Today the current includes Wagner Group veterans and others sustaining the martyr cult of Yevgeny Prigozhin; some volunteer war correspondents and Z-channels outside state television's ranks; paramilitary formations such as Rusich Group that fight the state's war while openly despising its initiators for their “restraint”; and, in the middle, legally operating vigilante networks like the “Russian Community,” which the security services appear to have created, and which they task and could dissolve at will.¹⁴⁵

The Kremlin's first line of defense against radicals is not repression but a loyalist belt—the *okhraniteli* (“protectors”): ultraconservative media empires such as Konstantin Malofeev's Tsargrad, state-aligned “public opinion leaders,” and official propagandists who direct grievance exclusively outward, never at the Kremlin, and whose function is to preserve the state's monopoly over the Russian *Ressentiment* narrative.¹⁴⁶ Some of them are true believers, but their belief is embedded in a hierarchy where, whenever creed collides with instruction, instruction wins, and the collision itself is almost never allowed to become visible. Moreover, radicals and protectors might even have a tight connection: Girkin ran security at Malofeev's investment fund, Marshall Capital, just before leading separatist militant operations in eastern Ukraine in 2014.¹⁴⁷

The radicals' critique is more dangerous than liberal opposition, because it attacks from within the regime's own value system. Liberals dispute the Russian *Ressentiment* goals and can be repressed as foreign agents; the radicals share the goals and accuse the state of betraying them—corruption in the Defense Ministry, lies about battlefield failures, softness in negotiations. Every battlefield setback, every rumor of talks with the West or Ukraine transfers moral authority from the state to its most radical auditors. At the same time, any escalation raises the bar radicals will demand next. By repressing radicals, the Kremlin only serves to prove them right in the eyes of even its own loyalist belt. On the other side, granting radicals real political weight would create the alternative power center the system exists to prevent.

The Kremlin's standard leverage tools fail in the long run: the radicals can be neither shut down nor fully satisfied. For Moscow, suppressing radicals means cutting off the war zone in Ukraine and other theaters abroad from the most effective fighting groups, whose influence also promotes pro-war propaganda. In 2023, on the eve of the Wagner mutiny, 58% of Russians approved of Prigozhin—just short of the 60% recorded for then-Defense Minister Shoigu—and nearly one in five said they would back Prigozhin for president. When his column moved on Moscow it met no resistance on the ground, and the paralysis of the state system was visible to everyone. After the mutiny failed, Prigozhin acquired a martyr cult, while the assault model the army had already begun copying from Wagner never reproduced its results—the penal Storm-Z detachments proved undermanned and poorly equipped, and expendable infantry turned out to be a supplement to regular forces rather than a substitute for them.¹⁴⁸

4. Vladimir Putin's personal survival calculus.

When Andrey Kartapolov, the chair of Russia's State Duma defense committee, explained in May 2026 that neither Ukraine's parliament nor its presidential office was "a decision-making center" worth "expensive ammunition," radicals and even some *okhraniteli* remained quite skeptical. Since 2022, many of them have been asking why Russia is not targeting Ukraine's leadership—a sentiment that has grown louder amid U.S. operations in Venezuela and Iran—while *okhraniteli* have offered their own explanations: from "reluctance to risk unnecessary Ukrainian casualties" to "the wisdom of the Russian leadership."¹⁴⁹ But there is another version, spread among certain radicals, which, according to a source requesting anonymity, has a "grain of truth": elimination of Ukraine's leadership could provoke a response directed specifically at a single person.¹⁵⁰

According to Dmitry Dubrovskiy, Putin does not fear for his life in the ordinary sense—"he intends to live forever." The "endless investments in eternal life" reflect the evolution of the regime into what Dubrovskiy calls "a personalistic gerontological dictatorship": unlike the Soviet dictatorship, which remained collective, this one is tied to a single body.¹⁵¹ On the day of the invasion, when Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was asked how this could have been planned within so narrow a circle, he reportedly replied that Putin "has three advisers. Ivan the Terrible. Peter the Great. And Catherine the Great."¹⁵² A ruler who places himself in that line guards not merely his private life but himself as a messiah—like the 17th-century French monarch Louis XIV, the Sun King, in whom person and state were held to be one.¹⁵³ With the difference that the Sun King accepted mortality and prepared his succession, while Putin invests in never facing either.

Putin's extreme caution was evident in many episodes. The COVID-19 pandemic: two-week quarantines for every visitor, identical offices built in different residences so that nobody could tell where the president actually was.¹⁵⁴ The Wagner Group 2023 mutiny: Putin disappeared from public view—flight tracking reportedly followed his aircraft out of Moscow toward Valdai—and reappeared only when the outcome was clear.¹⁵⁵ In January 2026, when U.S. forces arrested Russia-allied then-Venezuelan ruler Nicolás Maduro, Putin, according to a source close to him, was spooked and tightened his personal security, without commenting on Maduro's capture at all.¹⁵⁶ After the U.S.-Israeli elimination of Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in February 2026—who had been tracked through AI analysis of hacked Tehran traffic cameras—Putin adopted tighter security measures, including prolonged stays in hardened bunkers, greater reliance on prerecorded appearances, and the temporary shutdown of parts of his closed surveillance network.¹⁵⁷

In 2024, the Kremlin launched the 2-trillion-ruble (\$26 billion) national program "New Health Preservation Technologies," led by Mikhail Kovalchuk, president of the Kurchatov Institute, and Putin's eldest daughter Maria Vorontsova, whom the U.S. Treasury describes as leading genetics programs "personally overseen by Putin."¹⁵⁸ The Health Ministry simultaneously ordered state research institutes to submit all anti-aging works under an exceptionally tight deadline.¹⁵⁹ In 2025, at the military parade in Beijing, a live broadcast caught Putin and Xi Jinping talking about longevity. "These days, at 70 you are still a child," Xi said, as relayed by a Russian interpreter. Putin replied that with the development of biotechnology "human organs can be constantly transplanted, so that people can live younger and younger—and even become immortal."¹⁶⁰

Putin's well-documented obsession with self-preservation occasionally comes into conflict with the broader state's anti-Western *Ressentiment*, temporarily restraining certain forms of escalation but not stopping the overall trajectory of *Ressentiment* itself. This weak spot exists as long as Putin lives, while Russian *Ressentiment* will outlive Putin. "Nothing is likely to change with his passing, or moving on from power," Sean M. Wiswesser, a former senior CIA officer, told SURF memo authors;¹⁶¹ Dubrovskiy pointed out that the vulnerability of such dictatorships is the transfer of power, a narrow window the system will most likely pass "seamlessly"—unless an elite split, of which "there is no sign yet," widens it.¹⁶²

CONCLUSION

The starting point of this memo was to reject the idea that Russia's behavior is irrational. What the West may perceive as madness or miscalculation is, in fact, a coherent system: *Ressentiment* can turn damage into moral capital, view concessions as confirmation of weakness (either one's own or that of the opponent), and treat any de-escalation gesture as an invitation to raise the stakes. That is why policies of appeasement resulted in escalation, and that is why Moscow continues a war with costs that would bankrupt many states operating by Western standards. The Kremlin is rational and pragmatic within its own system.

However, this rationality is constrained by factors of its own design. Moscow depends on Beijing more than it can either reduce alone or acknowledge, and the very hand that supports Russia's war may limit its escalation. Russia cannot end the war without Ukraine's surrender while avoiding the shocks it has been postponing for years. The Kremlin no longer monopolizes *Ressentiment* toward the West: pro-war radicals are criticizing the regime using its own ideological framework. Meanwhile, the whole system is permeated by a single person's obsession with self-preservation and longevity—a person who may view his own fate as inseparable from that of the entire state.

These four constraints not only coexist, but also reinforce one another, so that removing any one would bring the rest against the regime. Suppressing pro-war radicals, for example, risks a repeat of the “Wagner” precedent: that pressure led to a mutiny, while the removal of Wagner's leadership gave rise to a martyr cult and weakened combat effectiveness on the front lines. The Kremlin's five out of six potential ways out of the deadlock are thus blocked from within, while the sixth—limited non-nuclear action against NATO—is the most strategically attractive remaining option under current constraints (Figure 11). The logic behind a cautious ruler's decision to make such a choice is called “gambling for resurrection”: when each less risky option leads to greater probability of losing everything, a choice with the highest risk no longer seems irrational.¹⁶³

Perhaps the primary finding of this memo is that certain of Russia's critical constraints are, at the same time, the constraints of the West. Neither side wants a nuclear war, the complete loss of each other as trading partners, or an escalation beyond their control. More precisely: scenarios the West considers unacceptable from the perspective of global security—civil war in Russia, state collapse, loss of control over the world's largest nuclear arsenal, or more radical forces than Putin becoming the new Russian leadership—are also scenarios the Kremlin fears equally. Yet the West is capable of openly acknowledging its fears, while Moscow conceals its own and cultivates the counter-image of a risk-taker with nothing to lose.

The Kremlin's strategy is to use the image of a risk-taker with nothing to lose—fueled by *Ressentiment*—to make the West believe that it fears catastrophic scenarios more than Russia does, thereby pressuring the West to accommodate Russia's demands to avoid putting that belief to the test.

History knows only one cure for *Ressentiment* of such depth—complete external reconstruction: occupation and the dismantling of the regime, followed by decades of controlled reconstruction, as was the case of Germany after 1945. However, considering the risks and costs involved, such an option is unlikely for a large nuclear power (at least until proven otherwise). The Kremlin knows this well, which is why its nuclear arsenal serves more as insurance for the system's survival than as a weapon. In other words, Russian *Ressentiment* cannot be cured from the outside at this time, just as it would not heal on its own from within. Reports of “cracks” in the regime or rumors of a split among the elite do not provide a convincing basis for expecting otherwise.¹⁶⁴ The system was created to withstand situations like these, and it may even fabricate them to hunt down genuine traitors within its own ranks, and deter the West from putting pressure on the Kremlin.

Russian *Ressentiment* can only be restrained or manipulated, as the following recommendations outline. They do not promise a regime change in Russia, but merely emphasize that countering Moscow is a contest of resilience to shared risks, in which the West can prevail by understanding the Kremlin's own rationality as well as the Kremlin understands Western fears.

Figure 11. Russian Ressentiment Trap

The Kremlin can neither safely end its war in Ukraine nor win it. Russian Ressentiment, with its uncompromising nature, has led to this situation, marked by a multitude of factual constraints. The scheme below maps the four weak spots (“walls”) of the Kremlin’s current decision-making that block five of the six ways out—and why the sixth, a limited non-nuclear action against NATO, is the one the walls leave open.

KEY NOTE: “Ressentiment”—grievance, hatred, and envy turned into identity—describes the decision logic of the Kremlin’s ruling core and security elite, not of Russian society as a whole.

Part 1—the trap and the mechanism. Part 2—probability estimates, the time window, and the indicators that would change them.

THE TRAP: FOUR WALLS, FIVE BLOCKED EXITS



The bind: ending the war triggers collapse quickly; continuing it postpones collapse at rising cost. The four circles are the walls, in the order of the columns below.

WALL 1 · DEATHONOMICS	WALL 2 · CHINA	WALL 3 · ULTRANATIONALISTS	WALL 4 · PUTIN’S SURVIVAL
The war economy is now the main economic growth engine. A freeze means payments stop and defense plants stall; no civilian wage matches front-line pay. Ending the war would trigger the collapse that the war postpones.	Beijing sustains the Russian war economy, making a freeze unsurvivable without its support. Yet China benefits more from a Russia at war than at peace, while firmly opposing nuclear escalation.	For pro-war radicals, a freeze is a betrayal. Putin’s removal could empower radicals seeking to punish the elite for corruption, military failures, and perceived treason—while the Kremlin cannot silence or satisfy them completely.	Putin’s survival calculus once blocked both exits: a settlement that seems like a defeat invites a removal attempt, while a direct move against NATO risks a Western response that could end the regime. The latter no longer looks like a major threat.

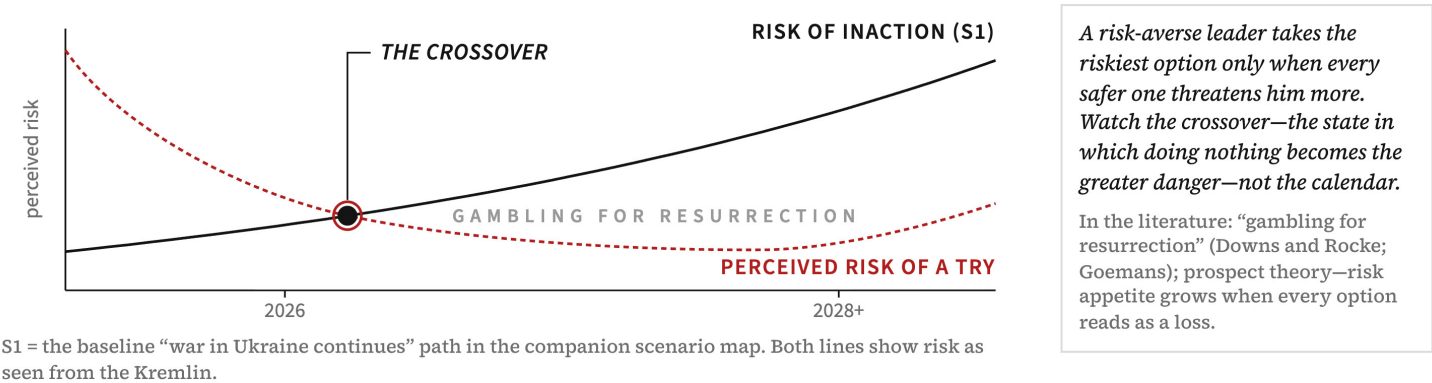
FIVE EXITS FOR THE KREMLIN, EACH BLOCKED—the numbers name the walls in the way.

♣ 1 · Freeze the war in Ukraine blocked by walls 1·2·3·4	♣ 2 · Replace Putin blocked by 3·4	♣ 3 · Break with China blocked by 1·2·3·4	♣ 4 · Crush the pro-war radicals blocked by 1·3·4	♣ 5 · Use a nuclear weapon blocked by 2·4
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Each attempted exit (♣) runs into its walls and falls back to continued war.

THE INVERSION OF WALL 4—THE WEAK SPOT HAS ALSO BECOME AN ACCELERATOR

Wall 4—Putin’s need to survive in power—long made any move against NATO unthinkable: the Western response could end the regime. That calculus held only while doing nothing was safe. It no longer is: staying the course now carries its own growing risk, while doubt about NATO’s response has cut the expected cost of a try against Europe.



S1 = the baseline “war in Ukraine continues” path in the companion scenario map. Both lines show risk as seen from the Kremlin.

WHAT RAISES THE RISK OF INACTION (black line)

- Jan–Feb 2026, Caracas and Tehran: operations to remove sitting heads of state were demonstrated in practice.
- European NATO members are aware of Russia’s escalation plans and are actively rearming.
- Ukrainian military technology (drones and missiles) and strikes against Russian rear areas are improving.
- Internal radical flank’s ledger of grievances grows with ongoing stalemate on the front.
- Economic and demographic problems are steadily worsening.
- U.S. domestic political constraints tighten toward the 2026 midterms and the 2028 succession.

WHAT LOWERS THE PERCEIVED RISK OF A TRY (red line)

- 2025–2026, trust crises in NATO caused by disputes over Greenland, Canada, Venezuela, and Iran, as well as pressure on Russia and tariff policy: allies openly doubted the U.S. guarantee—Article 5 credibility eroded.
- Dec 2025, the U.S. National Security Strategy stopped listing Russia as a threat. Also, Russia is counting on U.S. commitment to the “Reverse Kissinger” approach.
- European NATO members remain highly dependent on the U.S. defense industry.
- The U.S. exhausts its munitions on Iran, which takes time to replenish, thinning the reserve available to protect Europe and Taiwan.

ONE SCENARIO THE WALLS DO NOT BLOCK: A LIMITED, NON-NUCLEAR ACTION AGAINST NATO

What counts as a “Try”: any limited but overt military action against NATO territory—seizing a border town such as Narva (Estonia), cutting the Suwałki corridor (Poland), or landing on a Baltic island (e.g., Gotland, Sweden). Scale is secondary: each version of the probe forces NATO to make a choice—invoke Article 5 (an attack on one member is an attack on all) and respond, or hesitate and show the guarantee hollow. This scenario appears the most promising for Russia because:

IT CALMS THE PRO-WAR RADICALS

a visible “win” against NATO outranks anything still achievable in Ukraine.

IT DISRUPTS WESTERN AID TO UKRAINE

a crisis inside Europe forces money and weapons to stay home.

CHINA DOES NOT FORBID IT

Beijing’s one hard limit is nuclear use; a European crisis also pulls U.S. attention from Taiwan.

PROBABILITY ESTIMATES

How to read: E1–E4 order events by escalation, not by time. “12-mo” = probability August 2026–July 2027; “by 2030” = cumulative probability by then.

ESCALATION LADDER (E1–E4)	12-MO (BY JUL 2027)	BY 2030 (inc. by JUL 2027)
E1 · Deniable “incident” on NATO soil (can be treated as justifying E2 or E3)	8-10%	35-45%
E2 · Limited operation (a “Try”)	6-9% · central 7%	10-20% · central 15%
E3 · Full-scale invasion of the Baltic states (see Important Note below)	≤2%	3-4%
E4 · Nuclear use of any kind (does not include threats of use)	0.5-1%	2-4%

IF A “TRY” (E2) HAPPENS—HOW ITS PROBABILITY MASS DIVIDES:

during the war in Ukraine ~73% (autonomous ~40%; Taiwan-synchronized ~33%)

after a freeze ~27%

Important note: the “freeze the war in Ukraine first” scenario is the least likely, because it poses a direct threat to the Russian economy, domestic stability, and Putin’s survival (Walls 1–4). A “Try” during the war requires no redeployment from the Ukrainian front. Moscow may classify even a full-scale invasion as a “limited operation” (based on the example of Ukraine); the line between E2 and E3 is the objective—paralyzing Article 5 vs inflicting defeat on a country; E1 can go with either E2 or E3; in each case, the percentages are summed up; after a “successful” E2, Moscow may proceed with E3.

TWO HAZARDS AND THE MOST FAVORABLE WINDOW FOR RUSSIA

A “TRY” HAZARD (E2)—the relative likelihood of the Russian limited operation against NATO

LARGE-WAR HAZARD (E3)—the probability Russia could sustain a large regional war against NATO (per Western estimates)

RUSSIA’S WINDOW—the period when a “Try” is likelier than a large war: it closes where the curves meet (mid-2029 or later), depending on the pace of European rearmament

MODAL WINDOWS—months when a “Try” hazard peaks: Taiwan amphibious weather windows and the U.S. election calendar

relative hazard

A “TRY” HAZARD

LARGE-WAR HAZARD

European rearmament closes the window

2026 2027 2028 2029 2030

OCT 2026 · Taiwan window + U.S. midterms (Nov 3)

APR 2027

OCT 2027

APR 2028

OCT 2028 · Taiwan window + U.S. presidential election (Nov 7)

Taiwan amphibious weather windows recur each spring and autumn. Two fall on U.S. election dates, when Washington’s attention is most divided.

Key note: Western estimates converge on 2027–2029 as the earliest window for a limited Russian operation against NATO, and most tie it to a freeze of the war in Ukraine that frees Russian forces for redeployment. The SURF memo diverges: a freeze would be fatal to the Kremlin, and a “Try” scenario requires an element of surprise and NATO members’ doubts regarding Article 5—both are at their peak in 2026 multiplied by Europe’s unfinished rearmament, the U.S. midterm elections, and its high consumption of munitions against Iran. Nothing obliges the Kremlin to follow the Western estimates.

Why are the Taiwan windows included? Russia is not bound by them, but China is. Cross-strait operations are feasible only in spring and fall, while Western intelligence considers 2027—the Chinese army’s centenary—the most likely year for a Chinese invasion (“the Davidson Window”). No synchronization is required for mutually reinforcing actions in the Baltic and Taiwanese theaters of war: whoever—Russia or China—moves first, the other reads a distracted West as its opening.

PROBABILITY SWITCHES

Forward-looking indicators: if the event is observed, the estimate moves as stated.

In 2026, Russia adopts new laws tailored for mobilization → E1–E2 by Jul 2027 grow by 2-5%, E3—by 0.5-1%. New mobilization declared → E1–E2 by Jul 2027 grow by 5-15%, E3—by 2-5%

Imports of semiconductors and CNC machines from China, along with munitions from North Korea, rise sharply beyond front-line replacement in Ukraine → E1–E2 grow by 2-5%, E3—by 1-2%

The U.S. defeats Iran, or deals with it to completely cease its interference in maritime traffic by the end of 2026 → E1–E2 drop by 2-5%, E3—unaffected

Restoration of Article 5 credibility to the pre-2025 level, paired with growth in U.S. MIC and in shipments to Europe/Ukraine → a “Try” hazard goes down earlier, large-war hazard unaffected

FALSIFIERS

The model is built to be falsifiable. Retire it if any of the following holds for 12 months or more:

Durable de-escalation in Ukraine with no major backlash from the ultranationalist flank

The war economy is unwound without systemic destabilization

Russia loosens its dependence on China without regime-threatening cost

Article 5 credibility erodes further while all four walls intensify—and no “Try” or large-scale war follows over a sustained period

Sustainable win-win with the West becomes acceptable and survivable for the Kremlin and Putin

Not falsifiers: arrests, purges, or leaks indicating Russian elite dissent. The system itself may create such incidents to justify further repression or to deter Western pressure. If Putin leaves power, the model is also not falsified—it must be updated around succession.

Methodology: authors’ own probability estimates, informed by interviews with eight experts and all sources (with data through July 15, 2026, inclusive) listed in the SURF memo “The Kremlin’s Own Rationality: Understanding and Countering Russian Ressentiment”; pp. 13–31, 45–53; August 2026. Credit: Hleb Fitsner / SURF

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RECOMMENDATION I

The recommendation presented herein does not seek to redirect Russian *Ressentiment* from the West toward China. As the Russian elite and society do not strive to imitate China, such a redirection is unlikely to be possible.

The proposed strategy maintains the West as the primary object of Russian *Ressentiment*, but with one critically important difference: it places China on the imaginary line drawn between Russia’s present position and the status of global hegemony—modeled directly on that of the United States—that it desires (Figures 13–14).

It thus portrays China as a competitor to Russia, one that has not only overtaken Moscow in achieving the strategic goals of its *Ressentiment* by becoming a more equal adversary to the West, especially in economic, technological, and military terms, but has also consistently displayed a disparaging attitude toward Russia, exploiting Russia’s dependency. China’s role is further reinforced by the fact that Moscow has historically viewed Beijing as a junior partner, while Russians continue to see their country as “greater” than China (Figure 12).¹⁶⁵

Figure 12. Which Country Do Russians Consider “Great” (2002–2023)

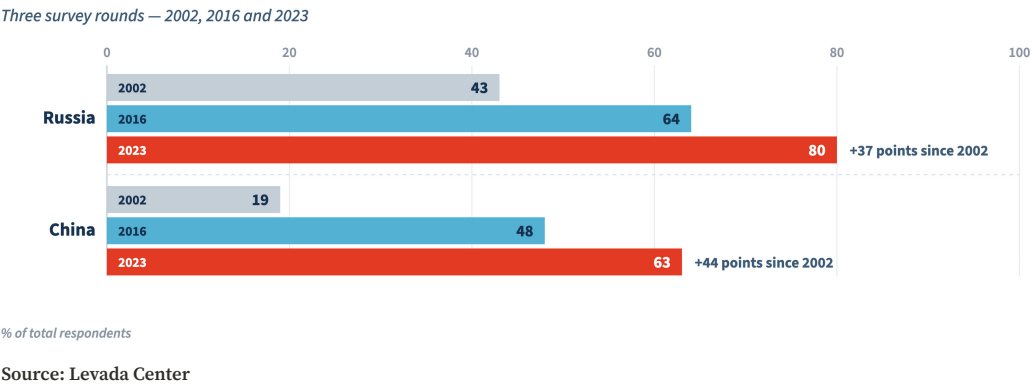
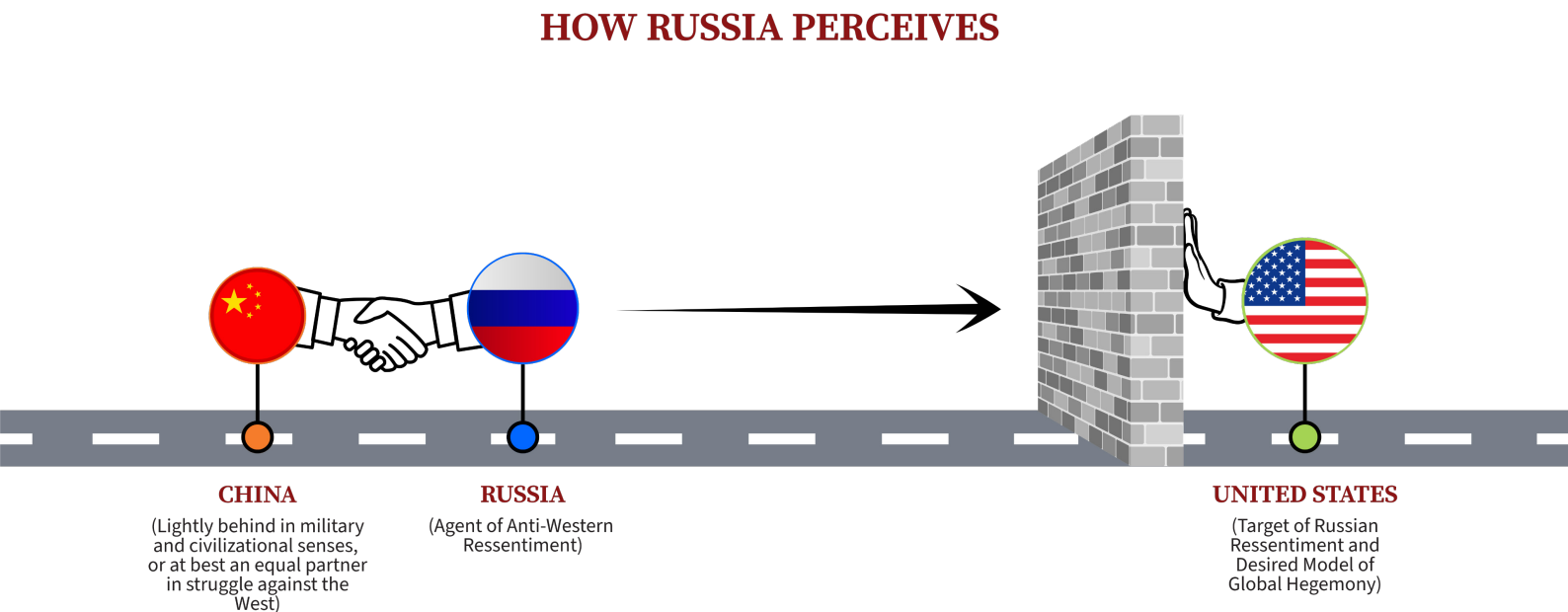


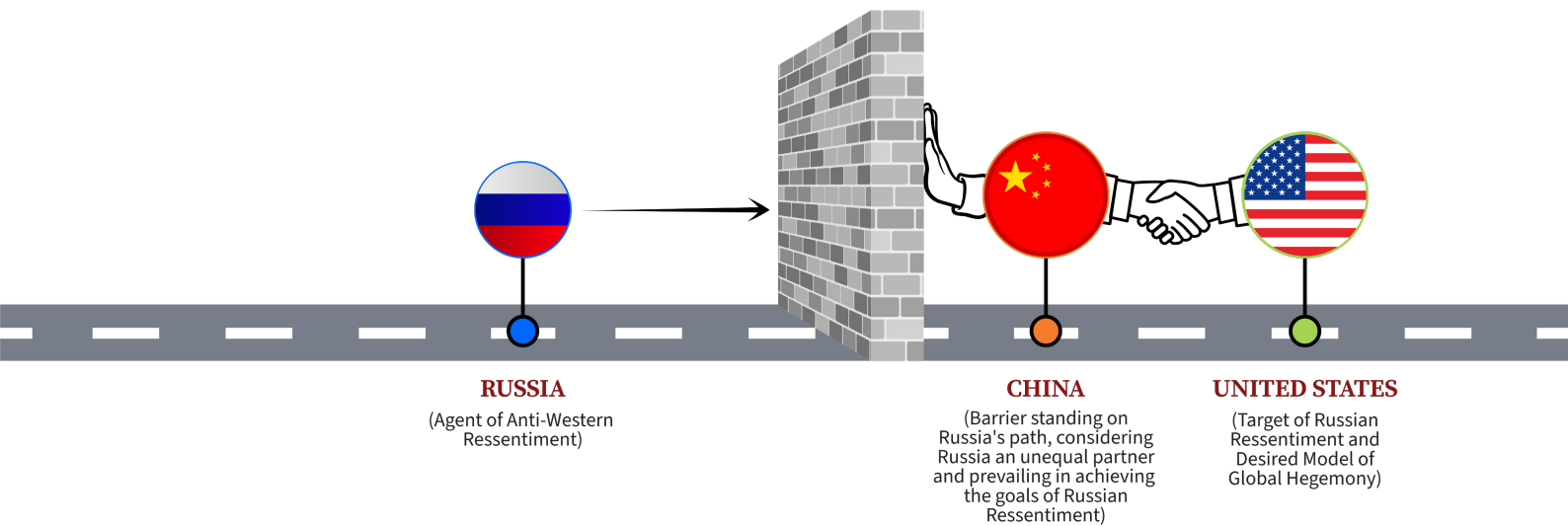
Figure 13. Standard Model of Russian *Ressentiment*



Credit: Hleb Fitsner / SURF

Figure 14. Upgraded Model of Russian *Ressentiment*

HOW RUSSIA SHOULD PERCEIVE



Credit: Hleb Fitsner / SURF

Two factors are essential for developing a working strategy:

1. **The institutional origins of Communist China.** The political project that is now imposing economic conditions on Moscow was essentially created by the Kremlin in the 20th century. The Moscow-led Comintern facilitated the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921, the USSR provided significant support for CCP uprising in China up to its victory in 1949 and then directly assisted Communist China in developing its postwar industrial and scientific-technical potential.¹⁶⁶
2. **China's exploitation, manipulation and humiliation of Russia.** Against the backdrop of Western sanctions, the cumulative volume of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Russia has fallen sharply. If FDI flows to Russia amounted to \$498 billion before the invasion of Ukraine, by early 2025 they had declined to \$216 billion; Beijing, meanwhile, has not evinced a strong desire to fill the gap.¹⁶⁷ China has prohibited its state-owned enterprises from investing in Russia's oil and gas sector, has continuously delayed the completion of the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, and has seen its carmakers refrain from expanding production and building factories in Russia.¹⁶⁸ Beijing buys Russian raw materials on favorable terms, demanding completely Russian domestic market's prices for itself. Meanwhile, while Russia is distracted by its confrontation with Ukraine and the West, China is seizing influence over Central Asia, scaling up its intelligence operations inside Russia, and quietly establishing contacts with the Russian elite, bypassing Putin.¹⁶⁹

Recommendation I seeks to make this asymmetry—which is perceived but not publicly acknowledged by the Russian elites and the wider Russian society—more visible by drawing on the complex layers of shared historical entanglements between Russia and China, which Moscow and Beijing strategically seek to keep under wraps.

Component 1: Official Reclassification of the Russia–China Partnership

Official sources, intelligence assessments, parliamentary hearings, private-sector reports, and academic discourse in NATO member states should formally and publicly acknowledge the current state of Russian–Chinese relations, attributing Russia’s present and future strategic decisions to its structural dependence on China rather than to its fully independent sovereign choice. Each specific case must be based on verifiable facts.

This mechanism is based on a denial trap. A denial of Chinese influence by the Kremlin necessarily leads it to involuntarily recognize the nature of the dependent relationship that it has so far refused to openly acknowledge. In an interview with the SURF research team, Alexander Gabuev said that Russian officials, privately, view the asymmetry in relations with China as an acceptable cost for resisting the West.¹⁷⁰ However, such an argument may lose its force the moment this asymmetry becomes the dominant public discourse rather than a piece of insider knowledge.

Three cases show the facts on which an effective public discourse can rely.

1. In February 2023, the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources instructed government agencies to use traditional Chinese names for eight Russian cities: Vladivostok was designated as Haishenwai, Khabarovsk as Boli, and Nikolayevsk-on-Amur as Miaojie.¹⁷¹ China presented this directive as a cartographic standardization measure. Taking advantage of Moscow’s limited ability to protest, Beijing unambiguously reaffirmed its claim to the historical Chinese territories that were annexed by Russia in the 19th century.
2. Following Putin’s visit to Beijing in September 2025—portrayed by the Russian side as a strategic breakthrough—Russian state-owned companies, including Rosatom, Gazprom, and Rusal, failed to attract Chinese investors to their yuan-denominated “panda bond” issuances; Chinese regulators and bankers cited the risk of secondary U.S. sanctions.¹⁷² Negotiations over Power of Siberia 2, underway since the early 2010s, have still produced no binding agreement on pricing, despite the memorandum signed in September 2025.¹⁷³ Moreover, at the summit in Beijing in May 2026, Putin once again failed to secure a final contract from Xi. Talks have clearly slowed down due to disagreements over price, timing, and guaranteed purchase volumes. Beijing insists on rates of around \$120–130 per thousand cubic meters, while Moscow demands terms similar to those of the Power of Siberia, which are twice as high as the Chinese offer.¹⁷⁴
3. In April 2026, 200 Chinese workers at the Rosneft-affiliated refinery in Komsomolsk-on-Amur staged an unauthorized protest march over unpaid wages.¹⁷⁵ This incident appears to be highly unusual for Russia, where Chinese commercial entities typically resolve disputes via their own internal channels. What is more, the unauthorized protest was not put down by the Russian law enforcement agencies, and none of the participants, barring one, faced prosecution, fines, arrest, or deportation.¹⁷⁶ This fundamentally distinguishes this case from any other protest—even those posing exclusively socioeconomic demands—directed against state institutions in Russia since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Ordinary Russians—regardless of whether they hold opposition or pro-government views—as well as citizens of the United States, the EU, and even states allied with the Kremlin, such as Belarus and the Central Asian republics—do not generally enjoy the same immunity as the Chinese workers did.

Such manifestations of asymmetrical relations must be consistently and extensively covered not only in Western media, think tanks, and intelligence reports—which the general public is largely indifferent to—but also in official public statements by heads of state and government, press secretaries, and other government representatives. The cumulative media impact of recommended coverage is more likely to lower the political cost of publicly acknowledging Russia’s asymmetry with China among Russian citizens, opinion leaders, elites, and officials, while simultaneously raising the cost of denying it.

Component 2: Russia in China’s “Century of Humiliation”

A reassessment of Russia’s position vis-à-vis China necessarily requires contextualization. Beijing’s official historiography attributes China’s humiliation in the 19th and early 20th centuries to Western and Japanese imperialism, downplaying Russia’s role. Meanwhile, under the Treaties of Aigun (1858), Peking (1860), Tarbagatai (1864), and Ili (1881), the Russian Empire carried out the largest annexation of Chinese territory in the entire “Century of Humiliation”—around 1.5 million square kilometers (**Figure 15**).¹⁷⁷ The capture of Port Arthur in 1898 is recorded in Chinese historiography as a telling example of Russian colonial behavior. Furthermore, Russia was a full-fledged member of the Western coalition formed to suppress the Boxer Rebellion. One of the most brutal episodes of those years was the Blagoveshchensk massacre in 1900, in which up to 7,000 Chinese civilians were killed in pogroms and by drowning in the Amur River.¹⁷⁸

Gabuev’s observation that some Chinese museums restrict Russian citizens’ access to exhibits documenting Russia’s imperial atrocities demonstrates that Beijing has chosen to temporarily set its historical grievances against Moscow aside, but not to forget them completely. In China, the “Century of Humiliation” has long functioned not as a neutral historiographical term, but as an emotionally and politically charged narrative through which the CCP links the past of external subjugation to the present, justifying its narrative of “national rejuvenation.”¹⁷⁹

In this sense, the Chinese memory of humiliation functions as a direct analogue of Russia’s anti-Western *Ressentiment*: it transforms historical trauma into a constant tool of legitimation for the domestic political system and the restoration of dignity into the CCP’s central political project. Under Xi Jinping, this mechanism has become even more personalized: through the centralization of power and the strengthening of ideological control, Xi has transformed the mobilization against external humiliation into a resource for his own political stability, linking “national rejuvenation” to the approaching 100th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China in 2049.¹⁸⁰

The case of Taiwan is relevant here. China’s revival will remain incomplete even after the seizure of the island as long as the historical memory of territories seized by Russia remains alive. If Beijing consistently thinks in terms of historical compensation, it cannot simultaneously declare Taiwan the culmination of its national revival and ignore Russia’s massive annexations of Chinese lands in the 19th century. Moreover, revisiting the historical dispute with Russia—which is economically dependent on China—over Haishenwai (Vladivostok) and other territories carries incomparably lower risks than a confrontation with the U.S. and the EU over Taiwan, given China’s deep integration into Western markets and supply chains.

Thus, the Russian factor highlights the inconsistency of China’s narrative about a fair end to the “Century of Humiliation” and calls into question the credibility of the CCP and Xi personally, since they avoid making claims against Moscow similar to those regarding Taiwan.

The core idea is to contribute to the articulation of Beijing’s official historiography, where Russia constitutes a part of the so-called “collective West,”—which, ironically, is Russia’s current main enemy. At the same time, any possible counterargument from the Kremlin that the West is deliberately “trying to drive a wedge between Russia and China” will be unconvincing, as Russia itself humiliated China and created a historical precedent that justifies Chinese *Ressentiment*.

Figure 15. Russian Seizures of Chinese Territories (19th century)



Source: The Academy of Chinese Studies. Available from: <https://chiculture.org.hk/en/photo-story/1220>

Western governments and universities do not need to create new infrastructure to drive this strategic component—it already exists. Only one thing should be noted: the more papers documenting Russia’s imperial expansion in China (especially those written in Chinese) are published, the higher the likelihood that they will be incorporated into the training data of large language models and AI-generated search-engine summaries, which are increasingly shaping the public perception of the topic.¹⁸¹

Political cover for implementing this component is already provided by official Chinese historiography: China officially recognizes Russia as a participant in the imperialist expansion in the country. In this case, Western institutions would merely draw greater attention to a topic that Beijing does not formally deny. This prevents the Kremlin from portraying this strategy as Western propaganda.

Ultimately, Chinese anti-Western *Ressentiment* has already become institutionalized in the official narrative, the rhetoric of national rejuvenation, and in Xi’s personalized rule. In this sense, Russia is not an external “third-party actor” that the West is allegedly trying to artificially pit against China, but rather one of the Western powers participating in the humiliating order against which China’s political self-identification is being constructed. The more insistently Beijing promotes the idea of Taiwan’s imminent return as a symbol of justice, the more vulnerable its own narrative will become if it fails to consistently articulate the Russian dimension of China’s historical humiliation.

Component 3: Negotiating Russia via China

Over the four years since the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has insisted that the conflict over Ukraine be resolved bilaterally (between itself and Washington) with Kyiv and the EU excluded from any negotiations. The proposed mechanism reverses this logic. As noted by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russian officials grow nervous whenever China interacts with the U.S., since every bilateral interaction between the two powers that excludes Russia reinforces a balance that Moscow cannot come to terms with.¹⁸²

The diplomatic practice of Western governments could apply a similar logic by addressing Moscow’s strategic intentions in talks with their Chinese counterparts—publicly and in multilateral fora—directly referring to Beijing as the dominant partner.

When Russia invokes its “red lines,” the appropriate response should be to indicate that the issue will be raised with Beijing specifically. The goal is not to bar Russia from diplomatic fora, but to consistently reaffirm a concrete position among Western governments: Beijing is the counterpart for the U.S. and the EU on issues where Russia’s dependence renders Moscow’s decision-making autonomy merely nominal.

Target Audiences

This strategy targets five different audiences with various channels of influence and evaluation metrics.

- **Western authorities and press.** The development of a common conceptual framework that describes Russia in terms of its asymmetry relative to China is a prerequisite for the strategy to achieve the desired effect. The key priority here is systematic consistency in direction. This is not about a one-time coordinated campaign, but rather the sustained reinforcement of a unified narrative reproduced by numerous institutions until it becomes ingrained in the standard analytical language.
- **Russian elites and politicians.** Primarily the secret services and official economic departments, which are already referring to China as a threat in their internal communications. The West's reassessment will not reach this audience directly, but rather through public discourse, which they closely monitor: declassified intelligence assessments, reports at parliamentary and congressional hearings, and think tank publications. Once the Western institutional narrative becomes aligned with what Russian officials attest to in classified documents, the political cost of openly expressing this position within the system will decrease.
- **Russian ultranationalists.** Supporters of the Wagner Group, Igor Girkin, the "Russian Community," the "Rusich" paramilitary group, non-state TV Russian military correspondents, and pro-war experts on Telegram with a combined audience of millions. Xenophobic, anti-Asian sentiments are already evident in those circles, but a politically articulated discourse regarding Russia's secondary role in relation to China remains missing. The strategy merely needs to ensure the availability of verifiable empirical material in formats suitable for consumption by this audience.
- **Russian urban middle class.** This segment combines an intolerant view of Asian migration with a cautiously positive geopolitical view of China. According to Levada Center data from February 2025, about 38% of Russian citizens viewed China "very favorably," while 50% viewed it "mostly favorably." However, new survey results from January 2026 indicate that this optimism has cooled. The share of unequivocally positive assessments has fallen by 11 percentage points. Now, only 27% of Russians view China "very favorably," while 56% said they viewed it "mostly favorably."¹⁸³ This trend indicates that attitudes are becoming more reserved. The aim of the strategy is not to make economically active Russians think less favorably of China, but to point toward the gap between the official Kremlin narrative and the documented facts.
- **Chinese elites and politicians.** They are not a homogeneous group; a distinction should be made between the party-state apparatus, which is focused on maintaining the narrative of a "no-limits" partnership with Russia, and the economic-technocratic faction within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the People's Bank of China. For the latter, the cost of supporting Russia is a perfectly quantifiable factor, reflected in the vulnerability of Chinese banks to secondary sanctions, restrictions on access to American technology, and the costs of developing alternative payment systems. The academic community at mainland universities and think tanks also plays a significant role, as they are capable of legitimizing or, on the contrary, questioning the public nature of China–Russia relations at the level of specialized discourse.

Viability: Russia's and China's Media Environments

One could object to this strategy by pointing to the increasing isolation of the Russian media environment, which implies that a strategy based on narrative pressure cannot reach its target audience. This assumption is not, however, borne out by empirical data from the spring of 2026. The Kremlin's most ambitious attempt to close off the information space—the systematic blocking of Telegram and the push to migrate users to the state-run messaging app Max, modeled after China's WeChat—has yielded significantly more limited results than its Chinese counterpart.

At first glance, it might appear that by April 2026—when access to Telegram had been blocked almost completely and additional restrictions were placed on VPN providers—the impact was quite significant. By the end of that spring, the total weekly reach of Russian Telegram had fallen by approximately 47% compared to the pre-blocking average. View numbers for the 100 largest news channels were 58% lower than those from the same period last year.¹⁸⁴

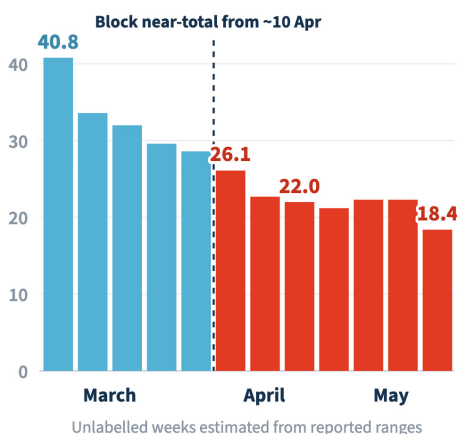
Levada Center data for late April 2026 showed that the share of Russians for whom Telegram channels are the primary source of information had dropped to 18%, down from a peak of 30% in May 2025, while the state-run Max messaging app appeared on the list of significant sources for the first time, accounting for about 10%.¹⁸⁵ Crucially, the broad audience barred from using Telegram did not switch to state television; on the contrary, quite a few users began seeking ways to circumvent the restrictions. From April 2025 to March 2026, Russia-based users downloaded VPN apps via Google Play 35.7 million times, a fourteen-fold increase over the prior year. Activity peaked in the first quarter of 2026, when this figure reached 21.27 million. In March of that year, three of the top five services in the rankings exceeded 2.5 million downloads (Figure 16).¹⁸⁶

The trend described above does not undermine but rather confirms the value of the recommended strategy. The scale of the Kremlin's efforts to suppress Telegram shows that the Russian authorities view this platform as a threat and are unable to fully control the narratives circulating on it. At the same time, it implies a narrowing scope of opportunity: any measures to engage with Russian society through Telegram must be implemented quickly, while the platform still retains its reach among the Russian population.

Figure 16. Russia's Blocking Telegram and User Bypassing Strategies

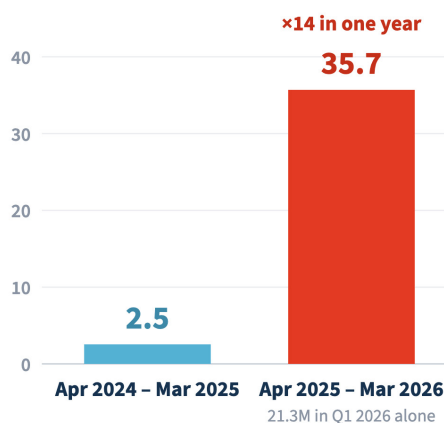
Weekly views in Russian Telegram channels

Billions of post views per week, 2 Mar – 24 May 2026



VPN app downloads from Russia

Google Play, millions per 12-month period



Source: Telemetr data via Agentstvo (weekly Telegram views); Google Play download data (VPN apps). Note: Telegram access in Russia was blocked almost completely by April 10, 2026

China's information environment, though rightly considered one of the most closed in the world, is not without its vulnerabilities either. In 2025, the human rights organization Freedom House rated China and Myanmar at 9 out of 100 on its Internet Freedom Index.¹⁸⁷ This is the worst score among the countries assessed; North Korea and Turkmenistan are not covered by the index. At the same time, independent observers estimate VPN usage in mainland China at 15–35% of 1.1 billion internet users, or roughly 170–390 million. With these figures, the country falls between developed democracies and the authoritarian regimes of the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, official Chinese statistics on downloads systematically underestimate the actual scale, keeping the country in last place globally in terms of formal VPN penetration.¹⁸⁸

In China, there is still room for public debate that highlights the gap between the official state narrative and the actual views of experts and citizens. According to MERICS, this discrepancy is particularly pronounced in economic discussions. Youth unemployment, pension reform, deflationary pressures, and other socioeconomic issues are actively discussed in online forums and expert publications, fueling public discontent and social tension. It is precisely these topics that the comprehensive Chinese censorship apparatus targets most intensely.¹⁸⁹

Official statements frequently issued by Chinese authorities serve as further confirmation of the state's sensitivity to uncontrolled information exchange. In November 2025, China's Ministry of State Security launched a highly publicized national campaign against software designed to bypass blocks, warning the public that circumventing the "Great Firewall" threatens both personal and national security and will be severely punished.¹⁹⁰

Against this backdrop, two additional channels operate continuously and are accessible without any restrictions. Hong Kong, which is exempt from the "Great Firewall," welcomed 37.8 million visitors from mainland China in 2025. This represented an 11% increase compared to the previous year.¹⁹¹ Chinese students abroad—numbering 570,600 in 2025 alone, alongside 6.44 million of those who have returned from abroad since 1978—constitute a segment of the population whose access to the open internet remains unrestricted throughout their entire period of study.¹⁹²

The Chinese information environment is more censored than Russia's. However, it is not sufficiently isolated to completely shield the Chinese audience from accurate historical materials disseminated through academic, diaspora, and educational channels.

Expected Reactions and Risks

This recommendation is based on an empirically provable pattern: Beijing is not always able to conceal its irritation with Moscow behind the pragmatic facade of partnership. Moments when this facade cracks usually follow actions by Russia that disregard Chinese preferences. Four specific incidents in recent years confirm this pattern.

- The first occurred at the SCO summit in Samarkand on September 15, 2022, at the height of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region, where Putin for the first time publicly acknowledged China's "questions and concerns" regarding the war. For his part, Xi pointedly made his first overseas trip since the pandemic—to Kazakhstan—where he assured President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of China's full support against any hegemony in the region.¹⁹³
- The second incident followed Putin's September 21, 2022, speech on mobilization and his threat to use "all available means." Beijing privately warned the Kremlin against any tactical nuclear strike.¹⁹⁴ Later, on November 4, 2022, during a meeting with then-German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, President Xi Jinping publicly called on the international community to oppose the use of nuclear weapons or threats to use them.¹⁹⁵
- The third was in March 2025, when the Chinese state-run television channel Phoenix TV—which had been covering the war exclusively from the Russian perspective—sent journalists to the Ukrainian side of the front line for the first time to provide neutral reporting.¹⁹⁶ This shift occurred in the weeks following the talks between Russia and the U.S. in Riyadh, to which neither Ukraine, nor EU countries, nor China had been invited.
- The fourth took place at the 2026 Munich Security Conference: Beijing announced an additional package of humanitarian and energy aid to Kyiv after Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha briefed his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, on the damage caused by Russian strikes to local infrastructure and enterprises linked to Chinese commercial interests.¹⁹⁷

These four incidents demonstrate that Beijing protects the symbolic framework of partnership but resorts to public counter-signals when Russia crosses the escalation thresholds set by China, damages its commercial assets, or plays its own game behind Beijing's back.



Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin during an official visit to Beijing, May 20, 2026. Photo: Russian Presidential Executive Office

Recommendation I carries three risks that require an honest assessment:

- The first is that the Kremlin is exploiting this narrative in its bargaining with the West, portraying itself as capable of distancing itself from Beijing in exchange for Western concessions, which is already happening behind closed doors in negotiations between Russia and the United States. It should be noted that Russia's dependence on China is real and deeply entrenched, resulting from decisions made by Moscow before and after 2022. The Kremlin, in its attempt at bargaining, is forced to acknowledge precisely what it is meant to deny—namely, its dependence on China.
- The second risk is the intensification of repression against Russian voices that point out this dependence, such as Girkin-Strelkov. This risk stems not from the proposed strategy, but from the very contradiction within the Russian system regarding its perception of China.
- The third risk is the deepening, rather than a reassessment, of Chinese support. This risk is limited both by the well-documented caution of the Kremlin and Russian intelligence agencies toward China and by the logic of secondary sanctions, as demonstrated by Chinese banks' refusal to underwrite Russian bonds, as well as the 9.1% decline in Chinese imports of Russian oil following OFAC's designations in January 2025.¹⁹⁸

Of course, Russian *Ressentiment* is resistant to inconvenient facts and will reinterpret any narrative about asymmetry with China as further proof of Western hostility. The objection is real, but narrower than it appears. The mechanism that reads external signals as Western hostility works on signals that originate in the West—while the described asymmetry originates in Beijing: the renaming of Vladivostok, the failed “panda bond” issue, the stalled Power of Siberia 2 contract, and the immunity of Chinese workers at Komsomolsk-on-Amur. The Kremlin's rejoinder that Washington is “driving a wedge” therefore rings hollow, and denial cuts the wrong way—dependence on China can be denied only by acknowledging it. Nor does the strategy need to convert Russia's impervious security core; it works around it, through the audiences for whom *Ressentiment* is a passive coping mechanism, not an operating system. It does not pierce Russian *Ressentiment*—it exploits its logic and routes past the single audience it cannot move.

Another possible objection is that the “Russia as China's junior partner” narrative may already exist in the Kremlin's propaganda. However, the Kremlin's narrative casts Beijing as strength or leverage, with Russia acting as an equal partner in a shared mission against the West. The recommended strategy makes the opposite visible (structural subordination), which the Kremlin cannot concede without breaking the great-power myth that the “Nevsky doctrine” protects.

Success Metrics

The strategy is designed from a long-term perspective. Performance assessment is based on three observable indicators.

1. A downward trend in China's share of Russian imports, driven by significant diversification of Russia's trading partners—where structural dependence on China ceases to determine Moscow's strategic behavior—serving as a prerequisite for exiting the proposed strategy.
2. The emergence of a consistent, articulated criticism—rather than merely disorganized, veiled discontent—over the conditions of dependence on China in Russian public discourse, primarily among ultranationalists and economic elites.
3. The frequency and visibility of Beijing's official public counter-signals in response to Moscow disregarding its interests. The Kremlin's ongoing tacit denial of its dependence on China works in favor of the recommended strategy, thereby allowing a new label to take root in the international political glossary, just as the “aggressor state” designation has become attached to Russia since 2022.

RECOMMENDATION II

Continuing the war is not a sustainable scenario for the Kremlin. Every year of the conflict deepens its dependence on Beijing, drains the civilian economy, and intensifies the criticism leveled against it by radicals operating outside Moscow's narrative monopoly.

The combination of the Kremlin's inability to achieve peace under current conditions and the instability caused by the continuation of the war creates pressure to seek avenues for escalation that would shift the conflict's center of gravity to less-equipped sections of the front line or even to Ukraine's allies that are more vulnerable to armed escalation. The reality of such pressure is supported by public assessments from European intelligence agencies and NATO member governments from the 2024–2026 period.¹⁹⁹

The most dangerous scenario is a coordinated attempt by China to seize the island of Taiwan, synchronized with a Russian military escalation against Europe. Russia does not necessarily need to secure a tactical truce in Ukraine in order to launch new hybrid or military aggression—this is one of the points highlighted by this memo (**Figure 11, pp. 33–34**). In any scenario, Moscow's main goal is to halt or significantly weaken Western (primarily European) military support for Ukraine, as well as to trigger a collapse within the EU and NATO by undermining Article 5 of the alliance. The Kremlin is counting on U.S. transactionalism and Eurosceptic factions to reduce the likelihood and capabilities of a potential Western counterattack.

The valuable strategic experience gained during the preparation for countering the Russian invasion of Ukraine must be fully taken into account. Beginning in October 2021, U.S. and British intelligence agencies accurately documented Russian military movements and warned allies and Ukraine. Until the end of February 2022, many of these warnings had not been taken seriously enough, especially by French, German, and Ukrainian leadership.²⁰⁰ Today, the story repeats itself once again: warnings about potential Russian preparations for an operation against Europe have already been issued publicly at the highest levels. Thus, the time available to implement countermeasures—identifying and curtailing the sources from which Russia is drawing material, financial, and military resources to sustain the war in Ukraine and prepare for its expansion—is significantly limited.

The Kremlin, despite wartime setbacks and the apparent irrationality of its *Ressentiment*, is nonetheless capable of learning from its mistakes and is unlikely to give European countries enough time to prepare for a new invasion. This is compounded by factors favorable to the Kremlin, such as the reduction of the U.S. military presence in Europe, public disagreements between Washington and Brussels over a range of issues—from migration and green policies to EU market regulations and defense spending—as well as the White House's reluctance to allow prolonged instability in international energy markets and rising fuel prices.

The latter was most clearly demonstrated by the June 2026 memorandum between the U.S. and Iran—a country that does not possess nuclear weapons and has less economic and military potential than Russia.²⁰¹ This agreement lasted less than a month.

Recommendation II does not seek to prevent a potential military escalation by Russia toward NATO, but merely proposes measures that could make Russia less prepared by the time X-day arrives. Most of these measures are already under way.

The Logic Behind Russia's Choice to Escalate Against the Baltic States

Understanding the logic behind the Kremlin's decision-making regarding the Baltic NATO members requires considering not only the aforementioned "gambling for resurrection" mechanism, but also a clear historical precedent. In early December 1944, Nazi Germany found itself in a situation formally comparable to Russia's current plight: a shrinking resource base, an enemy building up its forces on the Eastern front, and the Allied Western Front (composed of American and British forces) stabilizing and continuing to amass troops. In these challenging circumstances, the decision was made to launch an offensive in the Ardennes.

Heinz Guderian, Chief of the General Staff of the German Army, in his memoirs described the operation as a gamble with no real chance of success, noting that high-ranking officers directly involved in preparations urged Adolf Hitler to reconsider his decision to launch the operation, but he remained relentless.²⁰² The military theorist and Major General of the Wehrmacht's Panzer Forces Friedrich W. von Mellenthin noted that Hitler's planned adventure, despite its apparent irrationality (a view shared by the majority in the General Staff), was justified from the standpoint of the survival of the state, since "desperate situations demand desperate remedies, and that pure defense never won a war."²⁰³

Should it have been successful, the Ardennes offensive would have delivered Germany an opportunity to secure a separate ceasefire with the West, which would have allowed Germany to redeploy all its available forces to fight the USSR, and possibly to negotiate a restriction on Western Lend-Lease supplies to the USSR as one of the terms of the ceasefire.

In the current context, neither a decisive victory nor a realistic opportunity to end the war on terms acceptable to Russia can be achieved on the Ukrainian front. Each month of such a war exacerbates Russia's weaknesses, while Ukraine's key remaining ally, Europe, is actively investing in its own rearmament and manufacturing, increasingly reducing Moscow's chances of success. However, full preparation will take Europe several years, until the early 2030s, which makes this period the Kremlin's most strategically attractive window of opportunity to turn the balance of power in its favor.

In July 2026, a serving Russian general, speaking anonymously to Dmitry Kolezev, a Russian journalist in exile, judged the escalation against Europe and any use of nuclear weapons to be beyond Russia's military-economic capacity—"only imitation" was possible, in his account.²⁰⁴ The claim cannot be independently verified, and the framework of this memo treats such insider disclosures with caution, since they may equally serve Russian deception. Its relevance is not as a forecast of success but as evidence of the same fracture Guderian described: a general staff reading the limits soberly, and a political leadership that may act against that reading. The danger lies precisely there—an operation launched not because it is feasible, but because, for a regime facing the closing window this section describes, inaction is judged the greater threat.

There are four potential targets for an escalation strike available to the Kremlin: the Baltic states, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and northern Ukraine via Belarus. The latter three do not meet the necessary conditions for potentially reducing the burden on the Kremlin.

- A strike against Armenia does not provide the Kremlin with a victory of a grand enough scale: a military advance into Armenia would not make it easier for Moscow to carry out its war against Ukraine, nor would it cut off European military and financial support for Ukraine. Armenia remains a member of the CSTO, despite the suspension announced in 2024, and a strike by Moscow against its own defense bloc would inflict reputational damage on the Kremlin disproportionate to the practical benefit.²⁰⁵
- Russian pressure or an invasion of Kazakhstan would very likely trigger a direct confrontation with China, which sees Kazakhstan as a key partner within the “Belt and Road” initiative.²⁰⁶ Such a confrontation with Beijing runs counter to the current configuration of Sino-Russian relations, in which Moscow occupies a subordinate position.
- A second strike against northern Ukraine via Belarus—a course of action that potential critics of this recommendation might propose as an alternative to the Baltic scenario—also fails to meet these criteria. Since 2022, Ukraine has established a layered defense system: border zones near Belarus have been mined and remain largely impassable due to the wooded and marshy terrain, while Ukraine has acquired extensive experience in deploying drones as well as the ability to deliver effective long-range strikes against enemy territory while suppressing Russian air defense systems.²⁰⁷ The element of surprise, which enabled Russian troops to advance toward Kyiv through Belarus at the start of the war, has completely disappeared.

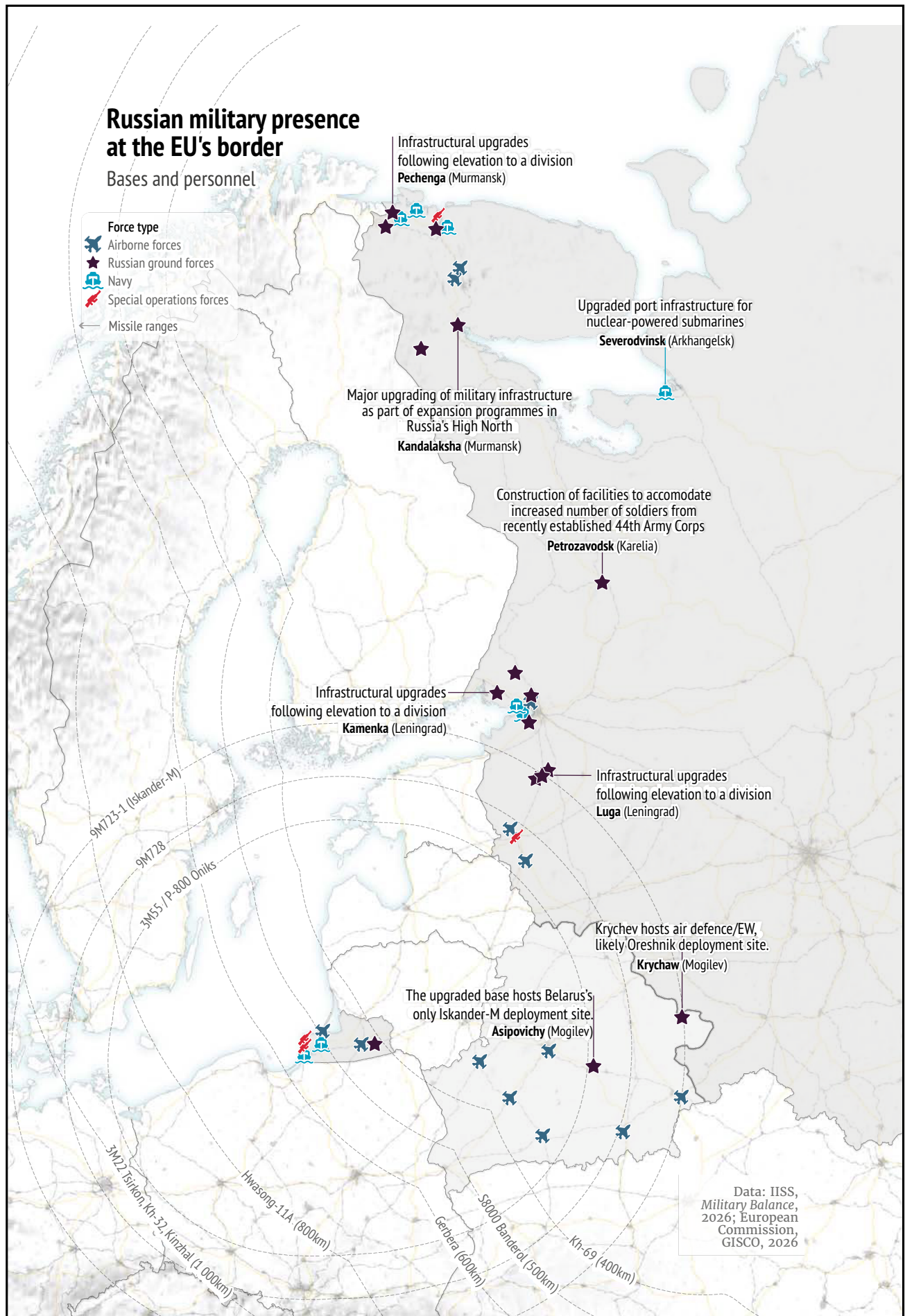
Putting pressure on Ukraine’s rear through Belarus is not entirely out of the question. However, this scenario amounts to an attack on the very same adversary that Moscow has been unable to defeat in four years of full-scale war; it does not cut off the source of Western support for Ukraine but potentially strengthens it. At the same time, in order to justify its failure on the front line, the Kremlin consistently asserts that the war is no longer just against Ukraine, but also against NATO. An attack on the Baltic states fits this narrative perfectly.

The Baltic direction allows the Kremlin to tip the military, political, and narrative scales in its favor by forcing European NATO members—which are less prepared for the new war reality²⁰⁸—to divert some of their resources from the Ukrainian front to self-defense. Given their small populations, a lack of strategic depth, and high risk of complete land isolation through Russian bridgeheads in Kaliningrad and Belarus, the Baltic states are the most vulnerable spot of NATO’s eastern flank.

The military and intelligence agencies of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have documented active Russian military preparations near the borders of Northern Europe and the Baltic states, including the construction of new military infrastructure capable of accommodating up to 115,000 Russian troops.²⁰⁹ According to high-ranking sources, the next one to three years could become the “most dangerous” period for European security, as Russia may attempt to take advantage of the fact that European NATO countries have yet to build up the military capability to repel a strike. Another assessment by European military officials, cited in *The Times*, indicates that a Russian invasion of the Baltic states is most likely to occur before the 2028 U.S. presidential election.²¹⁰

In its June report, the EUISS presented a detailed map of Russian military preparations on NATO’s eastern flank (**Figure 17**).

Figure 17. Russian Military Presence at the EU's Border



Source: Chaillot Paper No. 190, "Defending Europe, deterring Russia: Resources, readiness and resolve." By Steven Everts, Luigi Scazzieri, with contributions from Clotilde Bômont, Ondrej Ditrych, Caspar Hobhouse, Nad'a Kovalčíková, Giuseppe Spatafora, Joris Teer. EUISS, June 22, 2026. Available from: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/chaillot-papers/defending-europe-deterring-russia-resources-readiness-and-resolve>

Recommended Countermeasures (for the Next 6 to 24 Months)

To successfully develop preventive and response measures for a scenario of a Russian invasion of the Baltic states, the following points are important to consider.

These recommendations are addressed to the foreign ministries and intelligence services of NATO, the EU, and Indo-Pacific partner states. Implementation and oversight involve the U.S. National Security Council (NSC), the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Treasury (OFAC), the U.S. Department of Commerce (BIS), the European Commission, the Council of the EU, and the European External Action Service (EEAS). Further analytical support is directed to DG DEFIS, EDA, OFSI, CRS, NED, EED, and EUISS.

Belarus as Russia's Bridgehead

De jure, Belarus under self-proclaimed ruler Alexander Lukashenko remains an independent state and belongs to Russia's strategic periphery (Venezuela, Mali, or Cuba) rather than to its internal territory. De facto, Belarusian dependence on Moscow far exceeds that of typical Russia-allied countries, and its role more closely resembles that of a military-logistical vassal.

Lukashenko's ability to balance between Moscow and Washington is severely limited.²¹¹ Tactical moves like the release of political prisoners, bold diplomatic contacts with the U.S., and joining the "Board of Peace" do not negate the fact that, should Russia decide to escalate the conflict against NATO's eastern flank, Belarus will be used as a bridgehead even without Lukashenko's sincere consent. Without Belarusian territory, any Russian military operation against the Baltic states, including cutting off the Suwałki Gap in Poland, would not be possible. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Belarus will voluntarily "withdraw" from the Kremlin's sphere of influence.

Six **SECURE** measures recommended:

1. **Strengthen the systematic monitoring of the redeployment of Russian troops and military equipment to Belarusian territory using satellite data, OSINT, and AI.** Particular consideration should be given to the risk that Russia may use civilian rail and other transport services to covertly deploy Russian soldiers and specialists in civilian clothing to Belarus.
2. **Expand sanctions lists against the Belarusian MIC based on verified documentation from Belarusian democratic forces in exile, in particular former employees of the Belarusian enforcement agencies (BelPol),²¹² and similar sources.**
3. **Cultivate coordination with Belarusian democratic forces in exile, including independent media and think tanks, to conduct public outreach to Belarusian society and elites, bypassing Belarusian official state communication channels.**
4. **Upgrade investment in the production of low-cost Ukrainian drones and expand this production network across the EU to strengthen NATO's eastern flank, while continuing and enhancing support for Ukraine's military and civilian sectors.**
5. **Reconsider the approach that transactionalism or generous concessions can extract Belarus from Russia's sphere of influence.**
6. **Empower European private enterprises and territorial communities to establish localized air defense groups, leveraging decentralized funding and asymmetric technologies (specifically interceptor drones and remote turrets) to secure critical infrastructure and augment the national defense grid.²¹³**

North Korea's Military-Industrial Channel and Eastern Transit Routes

Since September 2023, the DPRK has become one of the key suppliers of ammunition for Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. This scale is documented by South Korea's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), which estimated the total volume of shipments at approximately 33,000 containers as of February 2026—the equivalent of more than 15 million 152-mm shells.²¹⁴ Meanwhile, a joint investigation by IStories and the Open Source Center, based on satellite imagery and shipping data, provided a lower-end figure of 29,500 containers and 8–11 million shells and missiles.²¹⁵ The cumulative impact of North Korea's support for Russia is substantial, with North Korean ammunition accounting for up to half of all shells expended by the Russian military by 2025.²¹⁶ At the same time, Pyongyang has dispatched over 15,000 military personnel, construction workers, and military engineers (primarily to Kursk Oblast), as well as KN-23 ballistic missiles and "Koksan" self-propelled artillery pieces.

However, this supply channel is vulnerable. By the end of 2025, the volume of these shipments had dropped significantly, forcing a shift toward smaller-scale rail transport as the cargo fleet maintaining the maritime route was halved. According to Estonian intelligence estimates, this noticeable decline was driven partly by the depletion of North Korea's own ammunition stockpiles and partly by the rapid growth of Russia's domestic military production, which surged from one million shells in 2022 to seven million in 2025.²¹⁷

The eastern export corridor—the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), the Trans-Siberian Railway, and the Power of Siberia gas pipeline—fulfills a second critical function. These transit routes facilitate the import of dual-use goods and electronics containing Western components, while enabling the export of Russian hydrocarbons and raw materials to China and other Asian markets via Far Eastern ports, effectively bypassing Western sanctions. Since 2022, Ukrainian intelligence services have been conducting operations to disable elements of this network, including railway sabotage in Buryatia, Zabaykalsky Krai, and other territories along the BAM and Trans-Siberian routes.²¹⁸

Western assistance could therefore include expanding intelligence support for Ukrainian operations against critical logistics infrastructure in Russia's Far East that underpins North Korea's military-industrial supply chain, as well as the distribution corridor for Russian hydrocarbons and dual-use goods. Such a measure does not require direct military involvement by Western countries and relies on Ukraine's asset-based military capabilities.

Simultaneously, the EU is set to adopt its 21st sanctions package (that could have already happened by the time this memo is published) to further expand the list of vessels and operators in the Russian shadow fleet, while the U.S. BIS Affiliates Rule²¹⁹ is scheduled to be reactivated in November 2026 to automatically extend export restrictions to any company in which sanctioned individuals or entities on the Entity List and the Military End-User List own a 50% or greater stake.

The African Theater

Networks affiliated with the Wagner Group and the Africa Corps earn approximately \$114 million per month across the Sahel from illegal gold mining and smuggling.²²⁰ The associated gold smuggling routes were verified by The Sentry's April 2026 investigation "Doubling Down," which demonstrated that these illicit flows transit directly through the UAE, Sudan, and Libya.²²¹

Sudan is a special case, as Russia had already established a foothold in the gold sector there even before the full-scale war against Ukraine through Meroe Gold, a company linked to Wagner Group. Subsequently, in April 2024, Moscow secured a major gold exploration concession in exchange for an interbank agreement on settlements in rubles and the supply of Russian weapons. Sudanese gold mines remain one of the key channels for the financial stability of war economies: with production of about 70 tonnes in 2025, only about 20 tonnes were officially exported, while the rest (50–80% as estimates vary) was smuggled, primarily to the UAE.²²² This opacity of the civil war—where gold has become the currency for arms procurement and accounts for over 70% of all revenue for the warring parties²²³—allows Russia to exploit access to gold mines to circumvent sanctions, financing the war in Ukraine with resources from African conflicts.

Russia's presence in the region faces serious challenges. A CRS report from April 2026 highlights the chronic personnel shortage that has plagued the Africa Corps since its establishment in late 2023.²²⁴ On April 25, 2026, the Azawad Liberation Front shot down an Africa Corps helicopter, prompting Russian forces to withdraw from Kidal—the 2023 recapture of which had been presented as proof of Russian superiority over the French presence and the UN peacekeeping mission. At the same time, plans to build a Russian naval base in Port Sudan remain on hold.²²⁵

Western countermeasures may prioritize the following actions.

1. Intensify outreach to representatives of political factions in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Sudan who are seeking alternatives to Russia's presence (Figure 18).
2. Strengthen the systematic designation of companies and individuals in the Sahel–UAE–Sudan–Libya axis, based on verified financial and logistical documentation.

Figure 18. Russia's Military Presence in Africa (2026)



Source: "Russia's Security Operations in Africa." CRS, from U.S. government statements and news reports, April 8, 2026. Available from: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12389>

Shifting the Global Balance of Power Away from Russia

Russia's global sphere of influence has faced significant challenges in recent years. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 curtailed Russia's main influence channel in the Mediterranean. The capture of Venezuelan ruler Nicolás Maduro by U.S. special forces on January 3, 2026, reoriented the regime in Caracas toward the United States, thereby depriving Russia, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, and China of a key partner in South America and unimpeded access to Caracas's oil infrastructure.²²⁶

The Armenian–Azerbaijani declaration, signed in Washington on August 8, 2025, was negotiated without Russian involvement and led to a significant loss of the Kremlin's control over the region. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan, which had previously been friendly toward Russia, have distanced themselves from Moscow while strengthening their ties with the West.²²⁷

Russia also suffered political setbacks in Europe. In Moldova, pro-Russian parties lost the parliamentary elections of September 2025 despite the resources the Kremlin had invested in them. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán—Moscow's most useful outlier inside the EU—lost power in April 2026 after sixteen years.²²⁸

The joint U.S.–Israeli war on Iran failed to achieve regime change, and the disruption of Gulf shipping pushed up the price of Russian oil. But the same episode showed how quickly a strait can be closed—and on that measure Russia is the more exposed party. Its own war in Ukraine brought Finland and Sweden into NATO and turned the Baltic into an alliance lake—together with the Black Sea it handles some 61% of all cargo passing through Russian seaports; the exits of both run through straits held by NATO members.²²⁹ Should Russia launch an attack on the Baltic states, it could not be 100% certain that the Hormuz scenario would not turn against it.

From all of the above, several important conclusions and suggestions can be drawn.

- Ensuring that Iran and its proxies cannot block the Strait of Hormuz or the Red Sea—before Russia and China escalate along their borders—may deny Moscow and Beijing the distracted West they are counting on.
- Conducting joint NATO demonstration exercises to test the feasibility of blocking the Danish or Turkish straits may send a sobering message to Moscow and inject some uncertainty into its military planning.
- Deepening ties with the new Syrian authorities may cut off the main hub for the deployment of Russian forces to Africa (as Russia's military bases in Hmeimim and Tartus are still operational).²³⁰
- Strengthening relations with Armenia and guarding its peace with Azerbaijan may open the Zangezur Corridor and deprive Moscow of its remaining physical leverage over the TITR, through which goods from China reach Europe without crossing Russia. Currently, Georgia is the TITR's only onward passage from Azerbaijan, with Russian positions within a kilometer of Georgia's main east-west highway. The Armenian segment is the only one where U.S. control is already a legal reality, and Yerevan's reorientation is its independent policy, codified in law.²³¹
- Engaging the new authorities in Venezuela may help mitigate price shocks in the oil markets and obtain more data on the black-market energy trade networks between Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China.

Expected Reactions and Risks

Hybrid warfare—taking the shape of disinformation campaigns and targeted acts of sabotage—against Western countries will intensify regardless, even if the current policy of pressuring the Kremlin continues without the implementation of the measures described above.

The most significant risk arises from Russia realizing that its window of opportunity is narrowing. The Kremlin, observing the West’s intensifying preparations, may choose to accelerate rather than postpone action against the European theater. However, leaving Russian resource flows untouched will not extend this window of opportunity, but will provide the Kremlin with a larger material-technical base for escalation.

Another serious risk is instability in global markets, particularly in energy sectors (as evidenced by the recent attacks on Iran), along with subsequent humanitarian crises in third countries, such as a total energy collapse in Cuba caused by systematic disruptions in supplies due to the U.S. embargo.

Success Metrics

The metric for this strategy’s effectiveness is the tempo and scale of the contraction of Russia’s resource base. The following indicators signal success.

- A decrease in the volume of gold exported by Russia via the Sahel–UAE–Sudan–Libya corridors.
- Increased retreats from cities and military bases by the Russian-controlled Africa Corps and affiliated mercenaries in the Sahel region.
- A prohibition on Russia leveraging Syrian territory to deploy forces to the Africa theater.
- A reduction in Russia’s ammunition and missile supplies from North Korea.
- Expanded sanctions and interdictions targeting vessels of the Russian “shadow fleet” subject to sanctions by the EU, the U.S., the UK, and Canada.
- A reduction in the volume of Russia’s shadow imports of critical components (especially those manufactured in the West) for the MIC needs.
- The intensification of Ukrainian operations targeting Russia’s deep-rear critical infrastructure.
- The introduction and harmonization of U.S., EU, UK, and Canadian sanctions against the entire Belarusian MIC and related civilian firms secretly executing Russian defense contracts.
- Production cost reductions and a significant increase in the production volume of FPV and other drone types, along with complete standardization of the production of all types of ammunition, missiles, and drones across all European NATO member states.
- The conduct of at least one joint NATO exercise in early fall 2026 to test blocking the Danish or Turkish straits, which would serve as a warning signal to Russia.
- A reduction in Iran’s capabilities to interfere with international shipping.

SURVEYED EXPERTS



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ABBREVIATIONS

ABM — Anti-Ballistic Missile (Treaty)

AI — Artificial Intelligence

AIS — Automatic Identification System

BAM — Baikal–Amur Mainline

BIS — Bureau of Industry and Security

BNAC — Boris Nemtsov Academic Center for the Study of Russia

BND — Bundesnachrichtendienst (Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service)

BOFIT — Bank of Finland Institute for Emerging Economies

BRICS — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa

BRICS+ — Original core, plus Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the UAE, Indonesia, and official partner states

C+C5 — China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan

CCP — Chinese Communist Party

DDRL — Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law

CEO — Chief Executive Officer

CIA — Central Intelligence Agency

CMASF — Russian Center for Macroeconomic Analysis and Short-Term Forecasting

CNI — Center for New Ideas

CRS — Congressional Research Service

CSIS — Center for Strategic and International Studies

CSTO — Collective Security Treaty Organization

DG DEFIS — Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space

DIA — Defense Intelligence Agency

DOJ — U.S. Department of Justice

DPRK — Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

EDA — European Defence Agency

EEAS — European External Action Service

EED — European Endowment for Democracy

EU — European Union

EUISS — European Union Institute for Security Studies

FDD — Foundation for Defense of Democracies

FDI — Foreign Direct Investment

FPV — First-Person View

FSB — Federal Security Service (Russia)

FSI — Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies

GACC — General Administration of Customs of the People’s Republic of China

GDP — Gross Domestic Product

GDR — German Democratic Republic

G8 (Now G7) — U.S., UK, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, and Japan (before 2014 included Russia)

ICC — International Criminal Court

KGB — Committee for State Security

MAGA — “Make America Great Again”

MERICS — Mercator Institute for China Studies

MIC — Military-Industrial Complex

NATO — North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NED — National Endowment for Democracy

NSC — National Security Council

ODNI — Office of the Director of National Intelligence

OFAC — Office of Foreign Assets Control

OFSI — Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation

OSCE — Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

OSINT — Open-Source Intelligence

OSW — Centre for Eastern Studies

PIIE — Peterson Institute for International Economics

PPE — Politics, Philosophy, and Economics

RDIF — Russian Direct Investment Fund

RSPP — Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs

SAB — Constitution Protection Bureau of Latvia

SCO — Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

SIPRI — Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

START — Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty

SURF — Stanford U.S.–Russia Forum

SVR — Foreign Intelligence Service (Russia)

TITR — Trans-Caspian International Transport Route

UAE — United Arab Emirates

UK — United Kingdom

UN — United Nations

U.S. — United States

USSR — Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

VPN — Virtual Private Network

WTO — World Trade Organization

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