

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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Without making Russians the hapless and helpless victims of their history, it is possible to see security as being central to their historical evolution. Russia, after all, is a country formed by the incursions and invasions first of the Norse ‘Varangians’ and later the Mongol Golden Horde. At the crossroads of Eurasia, it has faced enemies and opportunities to the west, east and south (and as climate change opens up both the hydrocarbon reserves and maritime routes of the Arctic, in the future the north may even become a new arena for great power competition). Questions of governance, modernisation, reform and reaction have been driven time and again by Russia’s real and perceived security needs. Victory over Napoleon in 1812 bred a complacency which helped stave off any serious reform, until defeat in the Crimea in 1856 demonstrated to the newly crowned Tsar Alexander II the extent to which social conservatism meant economic stagnation and this, in turn, was a threat to Russian security in an age of aggressive international rivalry. Security concerns were thus at the heart of his emancipation of the serfs, an ambitious piece of social reform. However, managing change is always one of the most difficult tasks for any essentially authoritarian regime and it weakened existing means of social control and generated pressures for deeper reform. When Alexander was murdered by terrorists in 1881, the most serious threat to Russia seemed to his successor, Alexander III, to be not foreign soldiers armed with modern weapons but revolutionaries, terrorists and the mob at home. Security issues therefore drove the subsequent conservative reaction, and so the pendulum swung in a pattern which repeated itself through the twentieth century, not least as Stalin built a war-fighting state on the bones of millions of starved and executed victims and the backs of millions more labouring in the Gulag prison camps. Conversely, it was concerns about the security of the state – facing both potential dissent at home and technological obsolescence abroad – that led a timorous, conservative elite grudgingly to open the door to reform, a door through which would step Gorbachev, the man who brought down the Soviet system with his attempts to reform and preserve it.

The 1990s saw Russia launch on a programme of largely inchoate marketisation in parallel with a well-meant but only partial democratisation. Beyond the maintenance of his personal authority, President Boris Yeltsin (1991–99) seems to have had little real notion of the kind of Russia he wanted and a rapid turn-over of elites, advisers and courtiers also militated against the emergence of any such

sustained vision. Nonetheless, it is striking that the Yeltsin administration was at its most focused, even its most brutal, when it regarded security interests at stake, whether from Chechen separatists (invaded in 1994), an unruly parliament (shelled into submission in 1993) or NATO operations in Serbia (sending paratroopers to seize Pristina ahead of Western forces in 1999).

This was an essentially reactive process, though. As a result, Russian security interests in the main suffered through the Yeltsin years, whether through a hot-and-cold relationship with NATO or the absence of any sustained military reform process. It is this, as much as any behind-the-scenes power-brokering, which helps explain the virtual consensus which greeted the choice of Vladimir Putin as his successor. Under President Putin (1999–2008), it is not so much that security moved back into the heart of Russian politics – it was always there – as that the Kremlin adopted a far more comprehensive and consistent approach to building policy around its needs. Furthermore, under Putin the Russian economy enjoyed a sustained period of not just stabilisation but growth, opening up new opportunities for security-related expenditure. In general, the Putin era saw a striking ‘securitisation’ of politics, from the extent to which his tough line on Chechnya helped secure his election to the presidency through to the penetration of the political and business elite by the so-called *siloviki* (‘men of force’, veterans of the military and security apparatus). Putin relinquished the presidency to his chosen successor Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, but moved sideways to a strengthened prime ministerial position with a particular responsibility for security affairs. As a result, security policy does not look as if it is changing dramatically in substance, even if President Medvedev is adding some different themes and tones to the public discourse, and the financial crisis gripping Russia from late 2008 is forcing the Kremlin to economise. Besides, the colonisation of the elite by the *siloviki* ensures not just their continued strength within the country but also that their take on security will be a difficult one to ignore.

Nonetheless, the Medvedev presidency does offer a genuine opportunity for Russia to articulate a new approach to security policy, one which steps away from the expectations and prejudices of its imperial and superpower past and sees security as something best attained through genuine collaboration, transparency and democratic accountability. Whether he can grow into his office and articulate more than ‘Putinism with a human face’ is one of the great unknowns of his presidency. However, security – broadly formulated – will be one of the crucial arenas not only for any future struggles between president and prime minister but a host of other actors, as interest groups vie for resources, and others, from nationalists to globalists, liberals to conservatives, seek to shape their country’s future. The purpose of this collection is to explore not only the nuts and bolts of security policy and capability but also set it in wider social, economic and political contexts. One possibly controversial issue has been the decision to exclude foreign policy as an issue in its own right. There is, of course, a huge overlap between foreign and security policy, but they are distinct. In Russia, security considerations tend to trump foreign relations. Likewise, it would have been possible to write a

whole book exploring the global context of Russian security politics, from the rise of China and the importance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to the election of US President Barack Obama and his desire to ‘press the reset button’ on relations between Moscow and Washington.

Instead, though, this collection does not seek to look to Russian security affairs from the outside in, but rather from the inside out, as Moscow itself sees them. Thus, Graeme Herd opens the discussion by addressing the question of security strategy at the broadest level, looking both at the various doctrines and other documents which formally frame Russian thinking, and also the debates and core themes which emerge from them. Central to how Russia is dealing with the varied threats it sees facing it – from military to demographic challenges – is the notion of ‘sovereign democracy’ articulated by Putin. Genuine sovereignty, in this model, is achieved not only by the forms of statehood but also ensuring the greatest freedom to act in the support of national interests in a multi-polar world; in other words, one not dominated by the United States. To this end, Russian foreign policy becomes dominated by the need to create such freedom of manoeuvre, just as the country needs security assets – and again, everything from gas supplies to military forces can be seen as such – that can be deployed effectively.

Such assets must be marshalled, sustained, expanded and deployed by a political system able to deliver. The third chapter, by Mark Smith, picks up where Herd left off, addressing in much more specific terms how issues relating to security affect Russian politics, in terms of public opinion and the politics of legislature, institutional interest and elite manoeuvres. Above all, it highlights clearly the extent to which, while limited pluralism is still permitted, in practice the Russian system has become ‘hyperpresidential’, especially in matters relating to security. Thus, security policy is decided by the president (and, for now at least, the prime minister), with the legislature, the ministries and other bodies being confined to an essentially advisory and administrative role.

However, it is those other bodies, especially the Ministries of Defence (MO) and Internal Affairs (MVD) and the security agencies, which have to execute those policies. Furthermore, no chief executives operate in a social vacuum and even if Putin and Medvedev have phenomenal freedom of manoeuvre to determine security policy, they listen to those around them. This helps explain the significance of the *siloviki*, whom Bettina Renz examines in the next chapter, on civil–military relations. Questions of whether the military and security agency *siloviki* are in charge, or are instead the agents of the state, miss the point. One of the key developments which Putin’s appointment did not just accelerate but also reflected, was the rise of the security elites and the extent to which they colonised other structures and in the process affected policy.

The *siloviki* can hardly be considered a homogeneous bloc, though. They share common understandings about the place in the world they believe Russia deserves, but are often divided along philosophical, practical, personal, factional and institutional lines as to just how the country is to get there. That is one of the reasons behind the failure of military reform, despite growing budgets and a steady

stream of encouraging rhetoric. In the fifth chapter, Pavel Baev comprehensively explores not just the capabilities of the Russian military today and tomorrow but the divisions and rivalries which have blocked past progress. His conclusions, that the projected reform programme is unsustainable and bound to fail – at least with the current level of political will and strategic intent – is hardly an encouraging or surprising one. It also demonstrates the extent to which Russia's military ambitions were too much even for the healthy defence budgets of the Putin era, and were in any case not matched by any sustained notion of reform.

That the Russian military went through a period of demoralisation, drift and decay was evident by its lacklustre performance in Chechnya. However, it is not just that equipment was outdated and training ill-suited to a gritty counter-insurgency war; it is also that the Kremlin lacked any clear idea of how to resolve secessionist feelings that were generations old. C.W. Blandy uses an historical assessment of the Chechen conflict to then look at the wider prospects for security in the North Caucasus. His conclusions are that while the Russians were able to pacify Chechnya for the moment by military means and the installation of a forceful local proconsul, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, they have still not grasped the need to address genuine practical and historical concerns in the region.

That said, by mid-2009 President Medvedev was at least paying lip service to the way that security could be best achieved not through zero-sum confrontation but addressing root causes. Not only did he accept the role that deprivation and lawlessness played in fuelling North Caucasian insurgency, he was also talking more warmly of serious nuclear reductions. If Baev's chapter addresses the practical trajectory of Russian strategic rearmament, Stephen J. Cimbala's outlines the scope for dramatic disarmament in a way that would not diminish its objective security.

The trouble is, of course, that security discourse rarely is truly objective. This is an emotive subject, in which historical memory, future aspirations and current traditions all conspire to drive and delineate any such debates. As I discuss in my chapter, this is certainly evident in domestic security policy and the evolution of the security and intelligence community. It is perhaps unsurprising that Putin, a proud veteran of the KGB, oversaw a dramatic revival in the fortune of its successor agencies, which now operate both nationally and internationally. On the other hand Putin and Medvedev – like so many previous Russian leaders – have tended both to rely excessively on coercion to control crime, public dissent and terrorism alike, while funding the agencies concerned inadequately. The result has been in many ways to worsen Moscow's security position. The intelligence agencies are only patchily successful in predicting future external challenges, and if anything their activities worsen Russia's relations with the outside world. More to the point, organised crime has become embedded within the fabric of Russian politics and economics, and while no longer as overtly uncontrolled as during the 1990s, it will take generations to uproot.

In the final analysis, though, Russia's emerging security policies will be shaped by two fundamental drivers. The first is the economic resources available to the

state, whether to upgrade its weapons, hire professional soldiers, police its streets or subsidise foreign allies and clients. As Julian Cooper's characteristically detailed and incisive analysis demonstrates, coming years will see sustained economic troubles and thus fiscal constraints. Putin appeared to enjoy the opportunity to be able to spend on both guns and butter, but Medvedev will face tough challenges. The temptation to continue to spend on military and security priorities at the cost of long-term economic modernisation and public welfare will be great.

But this is hardly new. If the economic driver is essentially an objective constraint, the second driver is essentially subjective: the psychological and cultural instincts of Russia's rulers and ruled alike, their gut sense of what threats they face, how best these can be defused or repelled and what role they ought to play in the world. Stephen Blank's impassioned closing chapter unapologetically warns of the danger of Russia continuing to regard itself as a besieged fortress, like Soviet and Tsarist regimes alike. How far, though, is the present Russian political class willing to abandon its present securitisation of discourse and legitimacy and adopt a new course? Putin's perceived toughness was central to his political appeal and allowed him to ride out a number of specific security-related crises, from the sinking of the submarine *Kursk* to the long-running war in Chechnya. Medvedev appears eager to try and emulate his mentor, even while he appears to have a more nuanced notion of Russia's credible place in the world and the security challenges it faces.

However, just as history opened this chapter, so too must it close it. Putin has described the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century, but in many ways the wonder was not that the USSR collapsed but that this ramshackle, increasingly bankrupted, bombastic empire lasted as long as it did. Likewise, Tsarist Russia had by the turn of the century arguably exhausted its every creative and evolutionary resource, and attempts at modernisation, such as those of its Prime Minister Peter Stolypin after the 1905 Revolution, foundered as much as anything else on an elite unable or unwilling to see that Russia's true security opportunity was in making radical choices. The First World War, the Abdication Crisis and the Bolshevik Revolution were, as much as anything else, the axe blows which simply toppled a mighty tree long since dead inside. After 1991, Moscow was granted another precious opportunity to take a new path. Yeltsin squandered it; Putin turned his back on it; Medvedev has not quite lost sight of it. Nonetheless, as the world changes, old habits and answers will become increasingly inadequate to the task, and the irony is that while security is and always has been at the very heart of Russian policy-making, it also seems to be something that successive regimes and rulers have failed to understand. Will the Medvedev generation have learned from the lessons not just of the Soviet era but the Yeltsin and Putin presidencies?