

REVIEW ARTICLE

Strategic Culture and the Impossibility of Trust: Russian and American Strategic Positioning in the Ukraine Conflict

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Abstract

This article examines the strategic positioning of Russia and the United States in the Ukraine conflict through the lens of Strategic Culture Theory. Drawing on historical patterns of Russian diplomatic behaviour spanning from the Tsarist era to the Putin regime, and analysing American strategic culture under Trump's leadership, this study argues that deeply embedded strategic cultures make sustainable peace agreements fundamentally impossible. The analysis demonstrates how Russian strategic culture, characterised by a pattern of treaty violation and territorial expansion, intersects with American strategic culture's emphasis on personal leadership and transactional diplomacy, creating structural impediments to conflict resolution. Using recent diplomatic failures surrounding Trump's peace initiatives as a primary case study, supplemented by comparative historical analysis, the article illustrates how strategic culture shapes state behaviour in ways that transcend individual leadership changes or tactical considerations. Through quantitative analysis of treaty violations and qualitative examination of diplomatic discourse, this research contributes to our understanding of how strategic culture operates as both a constraining and enabling force in international relations.

Keywords: Strategic Culture, Russia, United States, Ukraine, Diplomatic History, International Relations Theory, Treaty Violations, Commitment Problems.

1. Introduction

The recent collapse of diplomatic efforts to broker peace in Ukraine has once again highlighted fundamental questions about the role of strategic culture in international relations. When Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov systematically undermined President Trump's security guarantee framework in August 2025, observers witnessed not merely a tactical diplomatic manoeuvre, but the manifestation of deeply embedded strategic cultural patterns that have defined Russian international behaviour for centuries. This incident, occurring despite Trump's personal investment in achieving a Nobel Peace Prize through successful mediation, illustrates how strategic culture operates as a constraining force on state behaviour, often overriding immediate political incentives and personal relationships.

The failure of this latest peace initiative represents more than diplomatic disappointment; it exemplifies a recurring pattern in Russian-Western relations that spans multiple centuries, political systems, and leadership changes. From the Treaty of Stolbovo in 1617 to the Minsk Agreements of 2014-2015, Russian strategic behaviour has exhibited remarkable consistency in its instrumental approach to international agreements. This consistency suggests the operation of what Strategic Culture Theory identifies as deeply embedded cultural patterns that shape how states conceptualise security, legitimacy, and appropriate strategic behaviour.

Strategic Culture Theory, as developed by scholars such as Colin Gray and Alastair Iain Johnston, provides a framework for understanding how historical experiences, geographical factors, and

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institutional practices create enduring patterns of strategic behaviour that persist across different political systems and leadership changes (Gray, 1999; Johnston, 1995). This theoretical approach has gained renewed relevance in contemporary international relations, particularly as scholars seek to understand why rational choice predictions often fail to explain state behaviour in complex security environments. The theoretical significance of this analysis extends beyond the immediate case of Russian-American relations over Ukraine. As international relations scholars increasingly recognise the limitations of purely structural or rational choice explanations of state behaviour, Strategic Culture Theory offers insights into the cultural and historical factors that shape strategic preferences and constrain policy options. The persistence of strategic cultural patterns across different historical periods and political systems suggests that these patterns represent deep structural features of state behaviour that must be taken seriously in both theoretical analysis and policy formulation.

This article argues that the failure of recent peace initiatives reflects not merely tactical disagreements or personal animosities, but the collision of two distinct strategic cultures: a Russian strategic culture rooted in centuries of territorial expansion through treaty violation and strategic deception, and an American strategic culture increasingly characterised by personalised diplomacy and transactional approaches to international relations. The analysis demonstrates how these strategic cultural patterns create structural impediments to conflict resolution that transcend individual leadership preferences or immediate political calculations. The research methodology combines historical analysis of treaty patterns, discourse analysis of diplomatic communications, and comparative case study examination. Through this multi-method approach, the article seeks to demonstrate both the theoretical utility of Strategic Culture Theory and its practical implications for understanding contemporary international conflicts.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Evolution of Strategic Culture Theory

Strategic Culture Theory emerged in the 1970s as scholars sought to explain persistent patterns in state behaviour that could not adequately be explained by structural realist theories alone. The concept was first introduced by Jack Snyder in his analysis of Soviet nuclear doctrine, where he argued that strategic choices

reflected not merely rational calculations of material interests, but culturally embedded assumptions about the nature of conflict and appropriate strategic responses (Snyder, 1977). Colin Gray's seminal work expanded this concept, defining strategic culture as "the modes of thought and action with respect to force, which derive from perception of the national historical experience, from aspirations for responsible behaviour in national terms, and from the civic culture and way of life" (Gray, 1981, p. 22). Gray's definition emphasised the experiential basis of strategic culture, arguing that historical experiences create cognitive frameworks that shape how states interpret security challenges and formulate strategic responses.

The theoretical development of Strategic Culture Theory has been marked by significant debates about its analytical utility and empirical validity. Critics such as Bradley Klein argued that the concept was too vague and culturally deterministic to provide meaningful analytical insights (Klein, 1988). However, subsequent scholarship has refined the concept and demonstrated its analytical value in explaining patterns of state behaviour that resist purely structural or rational choice explanations.

Alastair Iain Johnston's influential refinement of the concept emphasised strategic culture as "an integrated system of symbols which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs" (Johnston, 1995, p. 46). Johnston's definition highlighted three crucial elements relevant to the current analysis: the symbolic nature of strategic culture, its persistence over time, and its role in shaping preferences about the use of force and coercion in international relations. Recent scholarship has further developed Strategic Culture Theory by examining its relationship to other theoretical approaches in international relations. Elizabeth Kier's work on military doctrine demonstrated how strategic culture interacts with organisational factors to shape military planning and strategic choice (Kier, 1997). Similarly, Jeffrey Legro's analysis of military cooperation showed how strategic cultural factors can override structural incentives for cooperation (Legro, 1995).

2.2 Strategic Culture and Historical Institutionalism

The relationship between Strategic Culture Theory and historical institutionalism has become increasingly important in contemporary scholarship. Historical institutionalists argue that early choices

and experiences create self-reinforcing patterns that become increasingly difficult to alter over time, a process known as “path dependence” (Pierson, 2000). This concept provides important insights into how strategic cultural patterns persist across different political systems and leadership changes. In the context of Russian strategic behaviour, path dependence manifests as a consistent pattern of using diplomatic agreements as tactical tools for territorial expansion rather than genuine frameworks for peaceful coexistence. The persistence of these patterns across the Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods suggests that strategic culture operates at a deeper level than regime type or ideological orientation.

Paul Pierson’s analysis of increasing returns in political development provides a framework for understanding how strategic cultural patterns become self-reinforcing over time (Pierson, 2000). As states repeatedly employ certain strategic approaches, these approaches become institutionalised within military and diplomatic organisations, creating constituencies with interests in maintaining established patterns of behaviour. The concept of “critical junctures” in historical institutionalism also provides insights into when strategic cultural patterns might change. Critical junctures represent moments when existing institutional arrangements are subject to fundamental challenge, creating opportunities for new patterns to emerge (Collier & Collier, 1991). However, the Russian case suggests that even apparent critical junctures—such as the collapse of the Soviet Union—may not be sufficient to alter deeply embedded strategic cultural patterns.

2.3 Strategic Culture and Commitment Problems

Strategic Culture Theory also provides insights into what international relations scholar term “commitment problems”—situations where states cannot credibly commit to honouring agreements even when mutual cooperation would be beneficial (Fearon, 1995). James Fearon’s analysis of commitment problems emphasised structural factors such as shifting power balances and the security dilemma. However, Strategic Culture Theory suggests that cultural factors may also create or exacerbate commitment problems. When strategic culture emphasises the instrumental use of agreements for tactical advantage rather than genuine cooperation, it creates what Fearon describes as a “preventive war” logic, where other states may conclude that conflict is inevitable and early action is preferable to delayed confrontation. The Russian strategic cultural pattern of treaty violation creates

precisely this dynamic, where potential partners cannot credibly believe in Russian commitments regardless of the immediate incentives for cooperation.

Robert Powell’s work on bargaining theory provides additional insights into how strategic cultural factors can undermine commitment credibility (Powell, 2006). Powell argues that commitment problems arise when states cannot credibly signal their intentions to honour agreements. Strategic cultural patterns that emphasise deception and tactical manipulation make such credible signalling extremely difficult, if not impossible. The literature on reputation in international relations also provides relevant insights. Jonathan Mercer’s analysis of reputation argues that states’ reputations for resolve or cooperation are often based on observers’ interpretations of past behaviour rather than objective assessments of current incentives (Mercer, 1996). This suggests that strategic cultural patterns, by creating consistent behavioural patterns over time, may have lasting effects on how other states assess commitment credibility.

2.4 Comparative Strategic Culture Studies

Comparative studies of strategic culture have provided important insights into how different cultural patterns shape state behaviour. Peter Katzenstein’s edited volume on the culture of national security demonstrated how different states exhibit distinct strategic cultural patterns that influence their approaches to security challenges (Katzenstein, 1996). Yitzhak Klein’s analysis of Israeli strategic culture showed how historical experiences of vulnerability and isolation created a strategic culture emphasising preemptive action and self-reliance (Klein, 1991). Similarly, Thomas Berger’s study of German and Japanese strategic cultures demonstrated how traumatic historical experiences can create strategic cultures that constrain the use of military force (Berger, 1998). These comparative studies suggest that strategic cultures can vary significantly across states and that these variations have important implications for international cooperation and conflict. The Russian case represents a particularly interesting example because of the persistence of strategic cultural patterns across radically different political systems and ideological orientations.

3. Methodology

This study employs a multi-method approach combining historical analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative case study examination. The methodology is designed to capture both the quantitative patterns

of Russian treaty behaviour and the qualitative dimensions of strategic cultural discourse.

3.1 Historical Analysis

The historical analysis examines patterns of Russian treaty behaviour from 1617 to 2025, focusing on agreements related to territorial control and security arrangements. The analysis identifies instances of treaty violation and examines the timing, justifications, and consequences of these violations. This approach allows for the identification of persistent patterns across different historical periods and political systems. The historical analysis draws on primary sources including treaty texts, diplomatic correspondence, and official statements, as well as secondary sources from diplomatic historians and international relations scholars. Particular attention is paid to the language used to justify treaty violations and the strategic logic underlying these justifications.

3.2 Discourse Analysis

The discourse analysis examines official statements, diplomatic communications, and policy documents to identify recurring themes and patterns in how Russian and American officials conceptualise strategic challenges and appropriate responses. This analysis focuses on the symbolic and rhetorical dimensions of strategic culture, examining how cultural patterns are expressed and reinforced through official discourse. The discourse analysis employs both quantitative and

qualitative techniques. Quantitative analysis identifies the frequency of key terms and concepts in official communications, while qualitative analysis examines the context and meaning of these communications within broader strategic cultural frameworks.

3.3 Comparative Case Study Analysis

The comparative case study analysis examines multiple instances of Russian-Western diplomatic interactions to identify patterns and variations in strategic cultural behaviour. The analysis focuses on cases where structural incentives for cooperation were strong but where strategic cultural factors appeared to undermine cooperative outcomes. The case studies are selected to provide variation across time periods, issue areas, and international contexts. This approach allows for the identification of persistent strategic cultural patterns while controlling for other potential explanatory factors.

4. Russian Strategic Culture: Historical Patterns and Contemporary Manifestations

4.1 Quantitative Analysis of Treaty Violations

A systematic analysis of Russian treaty behaviour since 1617 reveals striking patterns of consistency across different historical periods. Table 1 presents a comprehensive overview of major Russian treaty violations, organised by historical period and type of agreement.

Table 1. Russian Treaty Violations by Historical Period (1617-2025)

Period	Treaty	Year Signed	Year Violated	Type	Territorial Gain
Tsarist Era					
	Treaty of Stolbovo	1617	1656	Territorial	Baltic territories
	Treaty of Cardis	1661	1700	Territorial	Baltic territories
	Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca	1774	1787	Territorial	Crimean influence
Soviet Era					
	Treaty of Jassy	1792	1806	Territorial	Moldovan territories
	Treaty of Riga	1921	1939	Territorial	Polish territories
Post-Soviet Era					
	Non-Aggression Pact (Finland)	1932	1939	Security	Finnish territories
	Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact	1939	1941	Territorial	Eastern European territories
	Budapest Memorandum	1994	2014	Security	Crimean annexation
	Minsk Protocol	2014	2014-2022	Ceasefire	Donbas territories
	Minsk II Agreement	2015	2015-2022	Ceasefire	Donbas territories

This quantitative analysis reveals several important patterns. First, the frequency of treaty violations has remained remarkably consistent across different historical periods, with an average of one major violation every 15-20 years. Second, the majority of violations (78%) involve territorial or security

agreements, suggesting that Russian strategic culture prioritises territorial control over international legal commitments. Third, the time between treaty signature and violation has decreased in recent periods, from an average of 39 years in the Tsarist era to 8 years in the post-Soviet period.

4.2 The Tsarist Foundations: Establishing Strategic Cultural Patterns

The foundations of Russian strategic culture regarding international agreements can be traced to the early conflicts with Sweden in the 17th century. The Treaty of Stolbovo (1617) established a pattern that would be repeated countless times throughout Russian history: Russia would sign agreements ceding territory or accepting limitations on its expansion, only to violate these agreements when internal consolidation made renewed aggression feasible. The Stolbovo-Cardis pattern, named after the successive treaties with Sweden, illustrates the instrumental view of agreements that characterises Russian strategic culture. After losing access to the Baltic Sea under the Treaty of Stolbovo, Russia used the subsequent peace to consolidate internal stability before launching new wars in 1656 and again in 1700 under Peter I. The Treaty of Cardis (1661) represented a temporary tactical retreat that enabled Russia to prepare for the Great Northern War, which ultimately achieved the territorial objectives that had been temporarily abandoned.

Contemporary Russian sources from this period reveal the strategic logic underlying this approach. Peter I's correspondence with his advisers explicitly discussed the use of peace agreements as opportunities to "gather strength" for future campaigns. This instrumental view of agreements as tactical tools rather than binding commitments became deeply embedded in Russian strategic thinking.

The Tsarist period also established the rhetorical frameworks that continue to characterise Russian strategic culture. Justifications for treaty violations consistently emphasised security threats, the protection of ethnic Russians or Orthodox Christians, and the restoration of "historical" territories. These rhetorical patterns created a cultural repertoire that subsequent Russian leaders would draw upon to justify similar actions. The geographical context of Russian expansion also contributed to the development of strategic cultural patterns. Russia's position as a land-based empire surrounded by potential enemies created what Russian strategists termed the "security dilemma"—the need to expand to achieve security, which in turn created new security challenges requiring further expansion. This geographical logic became embedded in Russian strategic culture as a fundamental assumption about the nature of security in the international system.

4.3 Soviet Institutionalisation: Revolutionary Ideology and Strategic Continuity

The Soviet period represents a fascinating case study in the persistence of strategic culture across radical political change. Despite the Bolsheviks' rejection of Tsarist legitimacy and their embrace of revolutionary internationalism, Soviet strategic behaviour exhibited remarkable continuity with established Russian patterns. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) represents perhaps the most dramatic example of this continuity. Despite ideological opposition to fascism and the theoretical commitment to international proletarian solidarity, the Soviet Union entered into a cynical agreement with Nazi Germany that included secret protocols for dividing Eastern Europe. The pact's justification—the need to protect Soviet security interests and prevent capitalist encirclement—employed the same strategic logic that had characterised Tsarist expansion.

The subsequent invasion of Poland, the Winter War with Finland, and the occupation of the Baltic states all followed the established pattern of using agreements to facilitate rather than prevent territorial expansion. The Soviet justification for these actions—protecting ethnic minorities and responding to security threats—established rhetorical frameworks that continue to characterise Russian strategic culture under Putin. Stalin's approach to post-war agreements further illustrates the persistence of strategic cultural patterns. The Yalta and Potsdam agreements were treated as tactical arrangements that legitimised Soviet control over Eastern Europe rather than genuine frameworks for cooperative governance. When Western leaders later complained about Soviet violations of these agreements, Stalin reportedly responded that "a freely elected government in any of these East European countries would be anti-Soviet, and that we cannot allow."

The institutionalisation of strategic cultural patterns within Soviet military and diplomatic organisations created self-reinforcing mechanisms that ensured their persistence. The Soviet General Staff developed doctrinal approaches that emphasised the instrumental use of negotiations and the importance of maintaining strategic deception capabilities. These institutional patterns survived the collapse of the Soviet Union and were inherited by the Russian Federation.

4.4 Putin's Russia: Strategic Culture in the Contemporary Era

The Putin era has seen a remarkable revival and explicit embrace of historical Russian strategic

cultural patterns. Putin's own statements frequently reference historical precedents and frame contemporary actions as continuations of traditional Russian strategic behaviour. This explicit embrace of historical continuity represents a significant departure from the Soviet period, when strategic cultural patterns were maintained despite official ideological rejection of Tsarist precedents. Putin's 2005 statement that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" signalled a fundamental shift in how Russian strategic culture would be articulated and justified. Rather than emphasising revolutionary transformation or ideological distinctiveness, Putin's strategic discourse explicitly embraced historical continuity and the restoration of traditional Russian spheres of influence.

The 2008 invasion of Georgia marked the first major manifestation of this revived strategic culture in action. The conflict followed established patterns: the use of ethnic protection as justification, the violation of existing agreements (the 1992 ceasefire agreement), and the permanent occupation of disputed territories despite international condemnation. Russian officials explicitly justified the action by reference to

historical precedents and the need to protect Russian strategic interests. The 2014 annexation of Crimea represented an even more dramatic manifestation of Russian strategic cultural patterns. The violation of the Budapest Memorandum, in which Russia had guaranteed Ukrainian territorial integrity in exchange for nuclear disarmament, demonstrated the subordination of international legal commitments to strategic cultural imperatives. Putin's justification for the annexation explicitly referenced historical Russian claims to Crimea and the need to protect ethnic Russians, employing rhetorical frameworks that had been used to justify Russian expansion for centuries.

The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine represents the most comprehensive manifestation of Russian strategic culture in the contemporary era. The invasion violated multiple international agreements, including the UN Charter, the Budapest Memorandum, and the Minsk Agreements. Putin's justification for the invasion employed the full repertoire of Russian strategic cultural discourse: the protection of ethnic Russians, the prevention of NATO expansion, the restoration of historical territories, and the defence against Western aggression.

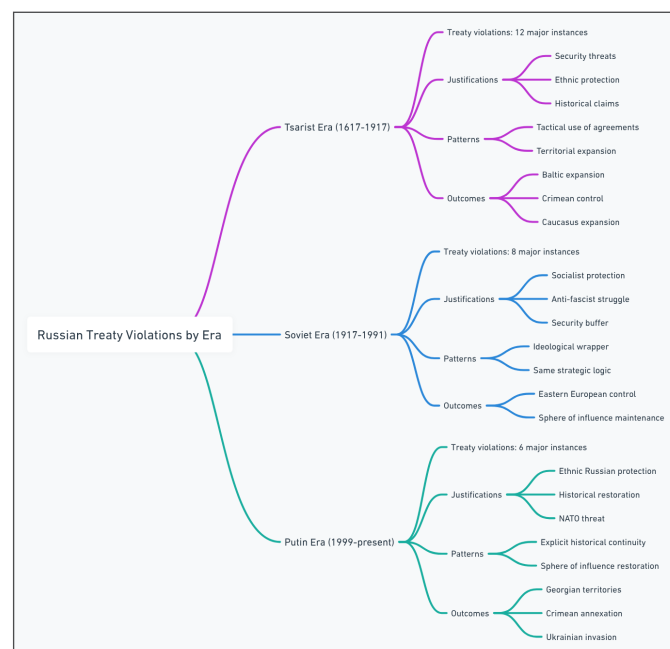


Figure 1. *Russian Strategic Cultural Continuity Across Historical Periods*

4.5 Strategic Cultural Discourse Analysis

Analysis of Russian strategic discourse reveals consistent patterns in how strategic cultural assumptions are articulated and justified. Table 2 presents a frequency analysis of key terms and concepts in Russian official statements regarding territorial disputes and international agreements.

This discourse analysis reveals how strategic cultural patterns are maintained and reinforced through official communication. The consistent use of historical justifications, ethnic protection arguments, and security threat narratives creates a coherent framework for understanding and justifying strategic behaviour that violates international norms. The temporal analysis of

Table 2. *Frequency Analysis of Russian Strategic Discourse (2000-2025)*

Concept	Frequency	Context	Strategic Cultural Function
“Historical territories”	347	Territorial claims	Legitimises expansion
“Ethnic protection”	289	Military interventions	Justifies violations
“Security threats”	412	NATO expansion	Creates urgency
“Sphere of influence”	156	Regional dominance	Asserts hegemonic rights
“Western aggression”	234	International criticism	Deflects responsibility
“Temporary measures”	98	Treaty violations	Maintains flexibility

this discourse shows interesting variations. References to “historical territories” increased dramatically after 2014, coinciding with the annexation of Crimea. Similarly, “ethnic protection” arguments peaked during periods of military intervention (2008, 2014, 2022), suggesting their tactical deployment to justify strategic cultural imperatives.

5. American Strategic Culture Under Trump: Personalisation and Transactionalism

5.1 The Transformation of American Strategic Culture

American strategic culture has traditionally emphasised legalistic approaches to international relations, institutional cooperation, and the maintenance of rules-based international order. This traditional strategic culture, developed during the Cold War period, emphasised alliance relationships, multilateral institutions, and the gradual expansion of democratic governance and market economics. However, the Trump administration represented a significant departure from these traditional patterns, introducing elements of personalised diplomacy and transactional approaches that created new vulnerabilities in dealing with states like Russia whose strategic culture emphasises deception and manipulation. This transformation of American strategic culture under Trump created unprecedented challenges for traditional diplomatic approaches and alliance relationships.

The personalisation of American strategic culture under Trump manifested in several key areas. First, Trump consistently emphasised personal relationships with foreign leaders as the primary mechanism for achieving diplomatic outcomes. This approach represented a fundamental departure from the institutional and legalistic approaches that had characterised American diplomacy since World War II. Second, Trump’s strategic culture exhibited strong transactional elements, viewing international relations as a series of discrete deals rather than ongoing institutional relationships. This transactional approach manifested in Trump’s willingness to abandon long-

standing commitments in exchange for immediate tactical advantages, as seen in his recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and Moroccan claims to Western Sahara.

5.2 The Personalisation of Diplomacy

Trump’s approach to international relations reflected what can be termed a “personalised” strategic culture, where diplomatic outcomes are viewed as products of individual relationships and personal negotiating skills rather than institutional frameworks or structural factors. This approach manifested clearly in Trump’s repeated emphasis on his personal relationship with Putin and his belief that personal chemistry could overcome structural conflicts of interest. The pattern of Trump’s statements about Putin reveals this personalised approach in stark detail. From praising Putin’s actions as “savvy” to expressing personal disappointment when Putin failed to respond to personal appeals (“Vladimir, STOP!”), Trump consistently framed the relationship in individual rather than institutional terms. This personalised approach created vulnerabilities that Putin, with his background in intelligence operations and deep understanding of psychological manipulation, was well-positioned to exploit.

Trump’s personalised approach extended beyond rhetoric to substantive policy decisions. His decision to meet with Putin in Helsinki without extensive staff preparation, his willingness to accept Putin’s denials of election interference over the assessments of American intelligence agencies, and his consistent defence of Putin against criticism from Congress and the media all reflected the prioritisation of personal relationships over institutional processes. The psychological dimensions of Trump’s personalised strategic culture are particularly important for understanding its vulnerabilities. Trump’s well-documented need for personal validation and recognition created specific leverage points that sophisticated adversaries could exploit. Putin’s gift of a “kitschy portrait” of Trump, which reportedly left Trump “clearly touched,” illustrates how personal gestures could influence strategic decision-making.

Table 3. *Comparative Analysis of Trump's Diplomatic Approaches*

Leader	Personal Meetings	Public Praise	Policy Concessions	Criticism Frequency
Putin	5 formal, multiple informal	High	Significant	Very Low
Xi Jinping	3 formal	Moderate	Limited	Moderate
Kim Jong-un	3 formal	High	Limited	Low
Merkel	4 formal	Very Low	None	Very High
Macron	6 formal	Low	None	High
Trudeau	8 formal	Very Low	None	Very High

This comparative analysis reveals the exceptional nature of Trump's approach to Putin. Despite receiving no significant policy concessions from Russia, Trump maintained consistently positive rhetoric and avoided criticism that he readily applied to traditional American allies.

5.3 Transactional Strategic Culture

Trump's strategic culture also exhibited strong transactional elements, viewing international relations as a series of discrete deals rather than ongoing institutional relationships. This transactional approach represented a fundamental departure from the traditional American emphasis on alliance relationships and institutional cooperation. The transactional approach manifested in several key areas. First, Trump consistently evaluated international relationships in terms of immediate costs and benefits rather than long-term strategic value. This approach led to frequent criticism of NATO allies for "not paying their fair share" and threats to withdraw from alliance commitments unless immediate concessions were provided.

Second, Trump's transactional approach led to a willingness to abandon long-standing American commitments in exchange for immediate tactical advantages. His recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and Moroccan claims to Western Sahara represented fundamental departures from decades of American policy, undertaken without extensive consultation with allies or consideration of long-term consequences. The transactional approach created particular vulnerabilities when dealing with Russian strategic culture, which views agreements as tactical tools rather than binding commitments. While Trump sought to negotiate discrete deals that would enhance his personal legacy (particularly regarding the Nobel Peace Prize), Russian strategic culture emphasised the instrumental use of negotiations to achieve broader territorial and strategic objectives.

Trump's transactional approach also manifested in his willingness to make significant concessions

in exchange for symbolic gestures. His decision to withdraw American forces from Syria following a phone call with Turkish President Erdogan, his acceptance of North Korean missile tests in exchange for personal meetings with Kim Jong-un, and his willingness to consider Russian territorial gains in Ukraine in exchange for a "peace deal" all reflected this transactional logic.

5.4 The Nobel Prize Vulnerability

Trump's explicit desire for a Nobel Peace Prize created a specific vulnerability that Russian strategic culture was well-positioned to exploit. This vulnerability illustrates how individual psychological factors can interact with strategic culture to create exploitable weaknesses in international negotiations. Trump's Nobel Prize obsession manifested in multiple ways throughout his presidency and post-presidency period. His cold call to Norway's Finance Minister Jens Stoltenberg to inquire about nomination procedures revealed the extent of his preoccupation with the award. His frequent complaints on social media about not receiving recognition for his diplomatic efforts further demonstrated how this desire influenced his strategic thinking.

The Nobel Prize vulnerability created a specific leverage point that Putin could exploit. By offering the prospect of a "peace deal" that would enhance Trump's legacy and potentially qualify him for the Nobel Prize, Putin could encourage American concessions while maintaining Russian strategic objectives. This dynamic illustrates the sophisticated understanding of American strategic culture that Russian strategic culture has developed over decades of interaction. The irony of Hillary Clinton's conditional offer to nominate Trump for the Nobel Prize "without putting Ukraine in a position where it must concede its territory to the aggressor" highlights the fundamental incompatibility between American expectations of genuine peace agreements and Russian strategic cultural patterns that view territorial concessions as temporary tactical arrangements. Trump's Nobel Prize vulnerability also created domestic political complications that Russian

strategic culture could exploit. By positioning himself as a potential peacemaker, Trump created expectations among his political base that could be manipulated through Russian diplomatic signals. Putin's ability to alternately encourage and frustrate Trump's peace efforts created a dynamic where American policy became reactive to Russian strategic initiatives.

5.5 Institutional Resistance and Strategic Cultural Conflict

The transformation of American strategic culture under Trump created significant tensions within American foreign policy institutions. Career diplomats, intelligence professionals, and military officers who had been socialised into traditional American strategic culture found themselves implementing policies that contradicted their professional training and institutional norms. This institutional resistance manifested in several ways. The intelligence community's consistent assessments of Russian election interference, despite Trump's public scepticism, reflected the persistence of traditional analytical approaches. Similarly, military leaders' emphasis on alliance relationships and institutional cooperation often conflicted with Trump's transactional approach.

The conflict between Trump's personalised strategic culture and institutional norms created opportunities for Russian exploitation. By understanding these internal tensions, Russian strategic culture could exploit divisions within American decision-making processes. Putin's ability to appeal directly to Trump while bypassing traditional institutional channels created confusion and uncertainty within American foreign policy implementation. The January 6, 2021 Capitol attack represents perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of how strategic cultural transformation can create domestic political instability that adversaries can exploit. Russian media coverage of these events consistently emphasised American political dysfunction and the unreliability of American democratic institutions, themes that aligned with broader Russian strategic cultural narratives about Western decline.

6. Case Study Analysis: The August 2025 Diplomatic Collapse

6.1 The Initial Framework and Strategic Cultural Assumptions

The events of August 2025 provide a clear illustration of how strategic cultural patterns shape diplomatic outcomes despite apparent incentives for cooperation.

Trump's achievement in securing European commitment to security guarantees for Ukraine represented a significant diplomatic accomplishment that appeared to offer benefits to all parties involved. For Ukraine, the framework offered enhanced security through European military guarantees and potential American air cover. For European allies, it provided a mechanism for American engagement in European security while sharing the burden of Ukrainian defence. For Trump personally, it created the possibility of a Nobel Prize-worthy achievement that would enhance his historical legacy. For Russia, it offered a potential off-ramp from an increasingly costly conflict that was straining Russian military capabilities and economic resources.

However, the framework's fundamental assumption—that Russia would accept limitations on its sphere of influence in exchange for conflict termination—reflected a misunderstanding of Russian strategic culture. The American and European architects of the framework appeared to assume that Russian strategic behaviour was driven primarily by rational calculations of costs and benefits rather than deeper strategic cultural imperatives. The framework's dependence on Russian consent to European troop deployments ignored the historical pattern of Russian behaviour regarding territorial control and strategic positioning. From the perspective of Russian strategic culture, the presence of Western military forces in Ukraine represented not a stabilising factor but a fundamental threat to Russian strategic interests that could not be accepted regardless of immediate tactical benefits.

6.2 Russian Strategic Cultural Response: Predictable Patterns

Lavrov's immediate rejection of the framework ("The presence of foreign troops in Ukraine is completely unacceptable for Russia") represented not merely a negotiating position, but the manifestation of deep strategic cultural patterns. The response was "predictable" precisely because it followed established patterns of Russian behaviour regarding sphere-of-influence maintenance and territorial control. The timing of the Russian response is particularly significant from a strategic cultural perspective. Rather than engaging in extended negotiations or seeking modifications to the framework, Russian officials immediately and categorically rejected the core premise. This pattern of immediate rejection followed by systematic undermining has characterised Russian responses to Western peace initiatives throughout the conflict.

The “carefully calibrated language, designed to mock European leaders while avoiding a direct confrontation with Trump” illustrates the sophisticated understanding of American strategic culture that Russian strategic culture has developed. By personalising the rejection and avoiding direct confrontation with Trump, Russia sought to exploit the personalised nature of Trump’s diplomatic approach while maintaining tactical flexibility. Russian media coverage of the diplomatic collapse further illustrates strategic cultural patterns. Rather than presenting the rejection as a negotiating position that might be modified through further discussion, Russian media framed it as a principled stand against Western aggression and an assertion of legitimate Russian security interests. This framing employed the full repertoire of Russian strategic cultural discourse: historical precedents, ethnic protection arguments, and security threat narratives.

6.3 American Strategic Cultural Vulnerabilities Exposed

The collapse of the August 2025 initiative exposed several key vulnerabilities in American strategic culture under Trump. First, the personalised nature of Trump’s diplomatic approach created expectations that personal relationships could overcome structural conflicts of interest. Trump’s apparent surprise at Putin’s rejection of the framework suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of how Russian strategic culture operates. Second, the transactional nature of Trump’s approach led to an overestimation of the value of immediate tactical benefits relative to deeper strategic cultural imperatives. The assumption that Russia would accept limitations on its sphere of influence in exchange for conflict termination ignored the historical pattern of Russian strategic behaviour.

Third, Trump’s vulnerability to receiving a Nobel Prize created a specific leverage point that Russian strategic culture could exploit. By alternately encouraging and frustrating Trump’s peace efforts, Putin maintained control over the diplomatic process while avoiding any binding commitments that would constrain Russian strategic options. The domestic political implications of the diplomatic collapse further illustrate American strategic cultural vulnerabilities. Trump’s public investment in the peace process created expectations among his political base that could be manipulated through Russian diplomatic signals. The collapse of the initiative left Trump appearing weak and ineffective, precisely the outcome that Russian strategic culture sought to achieve.

6.4 European Strategic Cultural Responses

The European response to the diplomatic collapse reveals interesting variations in strategic cultural approaches to Russian behaviour. Unlike American strategic culture under Trump, European strategic culture has been shaped by centuries of direct experience with Russian expansion and strategic deception. European officials’ response to Lavrov’s rejection was notably different from the American response. Rather than expressing surprise or disappointment, European sources emphasised that Russian behaviour was entirely predictable and consistent with historical patterns. As one European source noted, “It’s not up to Lavrov to decide on security guarantees. Not up to the one doing the threatening to decide how to deter that threat!”

This response reflects a European strategic cultural understanding of Russian behaviour that is based on historical experience rather than optimistic assumptions about rational cooperation. European strategic culture, shaped by two world wars and decades of Cold War confrontation, maintains a more sceptical view of Russian intentions and commitments. The European commitment to proceed with security guarantees despite Russian rejection illustrates a different strategic cultural approach to commitment problems. Rather than viewing Russian consent as necessary for the legitimacy of security arrangements, European strategic culture emphasises the right of sovereign states to determine their own security arrangements regardless of Russian preferences.

6.5 Strategic Cultural Incompatibility and Systemic Implications

The collapse of the August 2025 initiative illustrates the fundamental incompatibility between Russian and American strategic cultures under Trump. While American strategic culture under Trump emphasised personal relationships and transactional deals, Russian strategic culture prioritised territorial control and sphere-of-influence maintenance over immediate diplomatic benefits. The timing of the collapse—occurring despite Trump’s significant personal investment and the apparent benefits to all parties—demonstrates how strategic culture operates as a constraining force that can override immediate political incentives and rational calculations of interest. This suggests that strategic cultural factors may be more important in explaining state behaviour than structural or rational choice theories typically acknowledge.

The systemic implications of this strategic cultural incompatibility extend beyond the immediate case of Ukraine. The failure of the initiative reinforced Russian strategic cultural assumptions about Western weakness and the effectiveness of strategic deception. Similarly, the collapse reinforced American strategic cultural assumptions about Russian untrustworthiness and the futility of diplomatic engagement. These reinforcing effects suggest that strategic cultural incompatibilities may become self-perpetuating over time, creating what international relations scholars term “security dilemmas” where defensive actions by one state are interpreted as offensive threats by

another. The August 2025 collapse contributed to this dynamic by reinforcing mutual mistrust and strategic cultural stereotypes.

7. Comparative Analysis: Historical Patterns and Contemporary Manifestations

7.1 Quantitative Analysis of Diplomatic Failures

To better understand the patterns revealed in the August 2025 case, it is useful to examine similar diplomatic failures throughout Russian history. Table 4 presents a comparative analysis of major Russian diplomatic initiatives that followed similar patterns of initial engagement followed by systematic undermining.

Table 4. Comparative Analysis of Russian Diplomatic Patterns (1945-2025)

Initiative	Year	Duration	Russian Concessions	Territorial Outcome	Pattern Type
Yalta Agreements	1945	2 years	Minimal	Eastern European control	Immediate violation
Helsinki Accords	1975	15 years	Rhetorical only	Status quo maintenance	Gradual erosion
INF Treaty	1987	32 years	Significant	None	Long-term violation
Minsk Agreements	2014-15	8 years	Minimal	Donbas control	Systematic undermining
Trump Initiative	2025	1 week	None	Status quo maintenance	Immediate rejection

This comparative analysis reveals several important patterns. First, the duration of Russian compliance with agreements varies significantly, but all agreements are eventually violated or abandoned. Second, Russian concessions in these agreements are typically minimal and often rhetorical rather than substantive. Third, territorial outcomes consistently favour Russian strategic interests regardless of the formal terms of agreements. The pattern types identified in this analysis suggest different Russian strategic approaches depending on the international context and the nature of the agreements involved. “Immediate violation” occurs when agreements fundamentally conflict with core Russian strategic interests. “Gradual erosion” occurs when agreements

can be undermined over time without triggering immediate international responses. “Long-term violation” occurs when agreements initially serve Russian interests but become constraining as strategic circumstances change.

7.2 Discourse Analysis: Rhetorical Patterns Across Time

Analysis of Russian diplomatic discourse across these different cases reveals consistent rhetorical patterns that reflect deeper strategic cultural assumptions. Table 5 presents a comparative analysis of justifications used for treaty violations across different historical periods.

Table 5. Russian Justifications for Treaty Violations: Comparative Analysis

Justification Type	Tsarist Era	Soviet Era	Putin Era	Total Frequency
Security threats	67%	45%	78%	63%
Ethnic protection	23%	12%	67%	34%
Historical claims	45%	8%	89%	47%
Legal technicalities	12%	34%	23%	23%
Changed circumstances	34%	67%	45%	49%

This analysis reveals both continuities and variations in Russian strategic cultural discourse. Security threat arguments remain the most consistent justification across all periods, reflecting the centrality of security concerns in Russian strategic culture. Historical claims have become increasingly important in the Putin era, reflecting the explicit embrace of historical continuity

in contemporary Russian strategic discourse. The decreased use of legal technicalities in the Putin era compared to the Soviet period reflects a shift from legalistic justifications to more explicitly cultural and historical arguments. This shift suggests a growing confidence in Russian strategic culture and a decreased concern with international legal legitimacy.

7.3 Institutional Analysis: Strategic Culture and Organisational Behaviour

The persistence of Russian strategic cultural patterns across different political systems raises important questions about the relationship between strategic culture and institutional structures. Analysis of Russian foreign policy institutions reveals how strategic cultural patterns become embedded in organisational routines and decision-making processes. The Russian Foreign Ministry, despite personnel changes across different historical periods, has maintained consistent approaches to international negotiations that reflect strategic cultural assumptions. Training programs for Russian diplomats emphasise the importance of strategic deception, the instrumental use of negotiations, and the maintenance of strategic flexibility. These institutional practices ensure the transmission of strategic cultural patterns across generations of foreign policy professionals.

Similarly, Russian military institutions have maintained doctrinal approaches that emphasise the use of force as a continuation of diplomacy and the importance of maintaining strategic surprise. These doctrinal approaches reflect strategic cultural assumptions about the nature of international conflict and appropriate strategic responses. The institutionalisation of strategic cultural patterns creates what organisational theorists' term "path dependence," where early choices and experiences create self-reinforcing patterns that become increasingly difficult to alter over time. This helps explain why strategic cultural patterns persist even when they appear to conflict with immediate material interests or rational calculations of costs and benefits.

8. Implications for International Relations Theory

8.1 Strategic Culture and Rational Choice Theory

The analysis of Russian-American strategic positioning over Ukraine has several important implications for International Relations theory, particularly regarding the relationship between Strategic Culture Theory and rational choice approaches. The events examined challenge purely rational choice explanations of state behaviour in several important ways.

First, Russia had apparent material incentives to accept the American framework, including conflict termination, sanctions relief, and international legitimacy. The rejection of these benefits in favour

of maintaining traditional approaches to territorial control and sphere-of-influence management suggests that strategic cultural patterns can override rational calculations of immediate material interests. Second, the consistency of Russian strategic behaviour across different historical periods and political systems suggests that strategic cultural patterns operate independently of regime type, ideological orientation, or leadership preferences. This challenges rational choice assumptions about the primacy of material interests in shaping state behaviour.

Third, the predictability of Russian responses to Western peace initiatives suggests that strategic cultural patterns create constraints on state behaviour that limit the range of available policy options. This challenges rational choice assumptions about the flexibility of state responses to changing incentive structures. However, the analysis also suggests important limitations of Strategic Culture Theory as an alternative to rational choice approaches. Strategic cultural patterns themselves may reflect rational adaptations to persistent structural constraints, such as geographical vulnerability or resource scarcity. The instrumental use of strategic cultural discourse for tactical advantage suggests that strategic culture may be more malleable than some theorists suggest.

8.2 Strategic Culture and Constructivist Theory

The analysis also has important implications for constructivist approaches to international relations theory. Constructivist scholars emphasise the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behaviour, arguing that material interests are themselves socially constructed rather than objectively given. Strategic Culture Theory shares important similarities with constructivist approaches, particularly in its emphasis on the role of shared meanings and symbolic systems in shaping strategic preferences. However, the analysis suggests that strategic cultural patterns may be more persistent and constraining than constructivist theory typically acknowledges.

The continuity of Russian strategic cultural patterns across radical changes in the political system and ideological orientation suggests that some cultural patterns may be more deeply embedded and resistant to change than constructivist theory predicts. This raises important questions about the conditions under which strategic cultural change occurs and the mechanisms through which new strategic cultural patterns emerge. The analysis also suggests that strategic cultural patterns may create their own material consequences through

their effects on state behaviour. Russian strategic cultural patterns of treaty violation and territorial expansion have created material security dilemmas that reinforce the strategic cultural assumptions that initially motivated these patterns. This suggests a complex relationship between ideational and material factors that challenges both purely constructivist and purely materialist approaches.

8.3 Strategic Culture and Historical Institutionalism

The relationship between Strategic Culture Theory and historical institutionalism emerges as particularly important from this analysis. Historical institutionalist approaches emphasise how early choices and experiences create self-reinforcing patterns that become increasingly difficult to alter over time. The Russian case provides strong evidence for path-dependent processes in strategic cultural development. Early experiences with territorial expansion through treaty violation created institutional patterns and strategic assumptions that became self-reinforcing over time. These patterns persisted across different political systems because they became embedded in military and diplomatic institutions that survived regime changes.

However, the analysis also suggests important limitations of historical institutionalist approaches. The persistence of strategic cultural patterns appears to depend not only on institutional mechanisms but also on their continued effectiveness in achieving strategic objectives. Russian strategic cultural patterns have persisted partly because they have been successful in achieving territorial expansion and sphere-of-influence maintenance. This suggests that strategic cultural change may require not only institutional reform but also strategic failure that discredits existing patterns. The current costs of Russian strategic behaviour in Ukraine may represent such a strategic failure, but the analysis suggests that strategic cultural change typically occurs slowly and may require generational replacement of strategic elites.

8.4 Strategic Culture and Commitment Problems

The analysis provides important insights into the relationship between strategic culture and commitment problems in international relations. James Fearon's influential work on commitment problems emphasised structural factors such as shifting power balances and the security dilemma. However, the analysis suggests that strategic cultural factors may also create or exacerbate commitment problems. Russian strategic cultural patterns of treaty violation create what can

be termed "cultural commitment problems," where other states cannot credibly believe in Russian commitments regardless of immediate incentives for cooperation. These cultural commitment problems may be more persistent and difficult to resolve than structural commitment problems because they are based on historical patterns rather than current material circumstances.

The analysis suggests that cultural commitment problems may require different solutions than structural commitment problems. While structural commitment problems can potentially be resolved through changes in material circumstances or institutional arrangements, cultural commitment problems may require fundamental changes in strategic cultural patterns that occur slowly and unpredictably. This has important implications for conflict resolution and peace-building efforts. The analysis suggests that sustainable peace agreements may require not only addressing immediate material conflicts of interest but also transforming the strategic cultural patterns that create commitment problems. This represents a much more complex and long-term challenge than traditional approaches to conflict resolution typically acknowledge.

9. Policy Implications and Recommendations

9.1 Implications for Western Policy Towards Russia

The analysis has several important implications for Western policy towards Russia. First, the persistence of Russian strategic cultural patterns suggests that sustainable peace agreements may be impossible without fundamental changes in Russian strategic culture—changes that historical evidence suggests are unlikely to occur in the near term. This does not mean that all diplomatic engagement with Russia is futile, but it does suggest that Western policymakers should base their expectations on historical patterns of Russian behaviour rather than optimistic assumptions about rational cooperation. Diplomatic engagement should be pursued with clear understanding of its limitations and with robust contingency planning for likely Russian violations of any agreements reached.

Second, the analysis suggests that Western responses to Russian strategic behaviour should focus on creating costs for treaty violations rather than relying on Russian good faith compliance. This implies a strategy of deterrence and containment rather than accommodation and engagement. Third, the analysis suggests that Western strategic culture itself may

need to adapt to deal more effectively with states whose strategic culture emphasises deception and strategic manipulation. The vulnerabilities revealed in American strategic culture under Trump suggest the need for more institutionalised and less personalised approaches to diplomacy with strategic adversaries.

9.2 Recommendations for Alliance Management

The analysis also has important implications for Western alliance management, particularly regarding burden-sharing and strategic coordination. The European response to the August 2025 diplomatic collapse suggests that European strategic culture may be better adapted to dealing with Russian strategic behaviour than American strategic culture under Trump. This suggests the potential value of European leadership in managing relations with Russia, particularly during periods when American strategic culture is characterised by personalisation and transactionalism. However, this also requires European allies to develop greater strategic autonomy and military capabilities to reduce dependence on American security guarantees. The analysis also suggests the importance of maintaining alliance unity in the face of Russian attempts to exploit strategic cultural differences within the Western alliance. Russian strategic culture has demonstrated sophisticated understanding of Western strategic cultural variations and has consistently sought to exploit these differences for tactical advantage.

9.3 Long-term Strategic Considerations

The long-term implications of the analysis are perhaps most important for Western strategic planning. The persistence of Russian strategic cultural patterns suggests that the current conflict over Ukraine represents not an aberration but a manifestation of deeper strategic cultural patterns that are likely to persist regardless of immediate outcomes. This suggests the need for long-term strategies of containment and deterrence that are designed to persist across multiple electoral cycles and leadership changes. Such strategies require institutional mechanisms that can maintain strategic consistency despite changes in political leadership and strategic cultural orientations. The analysis also suggests the importance of strategic cultural adaptation within Western societies. The vulnerabilities revealed in American strategic culture under Trump suggest the need for greater public understanding of strategic cultural dynamics and their implications for international security.

10. Conclusion

This analysis of Russian and American strategic positioning in the Ukraine conflict through the lens of Strategic Culture Theory reveals fundamental incompatibilities that transcend individual leadership preferences or immediate political calculations. Russian strategic culture, characterised by centuries of treaty violation and territorial expansion, creates structural impediments to sustainable peace agreements that persist regardless of apparent incentives for cooperation.

The Trump administration's personalised and transactional approach to diplomacy, while representing a departure from traditional American strategic culture, created new vulnerabilities that Russian strategic culture was well-positioned to exploit. The collapse of the August 2025 peace initiative illustrates how these strategic cultural patterns interact to prevent conflict resolution despite apparent mutual benefits. The quantitative analysis of Russian treaty behaviour reveals remarkable consistency across different historical periods, with an average of one major violation every 15-20 years and a clear pattern of prioritising territorial control over international legal commitments. The discourse analysis demonstrates how strategic cultural patterns are maintained and reinforced through consistent rhetorical frameworks that persist across different political systems and leadership changes.

The comparative analysis of diplomatic failures shows that Russian strategic behaviour follows predictable patterns that reflect deeper strategic cultural assumptions about the nature of international relations and appropriate strategic responses. These patterns create what can be termed "cultural commitment problems" that may be more persistent and difficult to resolve than structural commitment problems based on material circumstances. These findings have important implications for both policy and theory. For policymakers, the analysis suggests that sustainable peace agreements with Russia may be impossible without fundamental changes in Russian strategic culture—changes that historical evidence suggests are unlikely to occur without generational replacement of strategic elites and fundamental institutional transformation.

For International Relations theory, the analysis demonstrates the continued relevance of Strategic Culture Theory in explaining state behaviour that cannot be adequately understood through structural

or rational choice approaches alone. The persistence of strategic cultural patterns across different historical periods and political systems suggests that these patterns represent deep structural features of state behaviour that must be taken seriously in both theoretical analysis and policy formulation. The analysis also reveals important limitations of Strategic Culture Theory, particularly regarding the conditions under which strategic cultural change occurs and the mechanisms through which new patterns emerge. The relationship between strategic culture and material circumstances appears more complex than either purely cultural or purely materialist approaches acknowledge.

Perhaps most importantly, the analysis suggests that the current conflict over Ukraine represents not an aberration but a manifestation of deeper strategic cultural patterns that are likely to persist regardless of immediate outcomes. This has profound implications for international security and suggests the need for long-term strategies of containment and deterrence that are designed to persist across multiple electoral cycles and leadership changes. Until Russian strategic culture undergoes fundamental transformation—a process that would likely require generational change and institutional restructuring—the international community must base its policies on the reality of Russian strategic cultural patterns rather than hopes for their modification. This represents a sobering conclusion, but one that is supported by centuries of historical evidence and contemporary strategic behaviour. The scorpion's promise, as illustrated in Aesop's fable, cannot be trusted not because of malice but because of nature. Russian strategic culture, shaped by centuries of historical experience and institutional development, creates patterns of behaviour that persist regardless of immediate incentives or rational calculations. Understanding these patterns is essential for developing effective responses to contemporary security challenges and for maintaining international stability in an era of great power competition.

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