

Review essay

Observing War, Interpreting Strategy:

Russian Strategic Culture and the Politics of Learning Meaningful Lessons

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Abstract

This essay reviews Dimitri Minic's *Pensée et culture stratégiques russe. Du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine* and situates it within debates on strategic culture, expertise, and lesson-drawing. Minic's analysis of over 1,200 Russian-language sources reconstructs the revisionist-traditionalist divide that has reshaped Russian conceptions of war and highlights how non-material factors—worldviews, myths, and doctrinal reinterpretations—contribute to strategic thinking. The book's strengths lie in its systematic engagement with domestic debates and the empirical breadth of its evidence, though its dialogue with wider political science literature and treatment of civil-military relations remain limited. Extending the discussion, the essay links Minic's findings to current debates on battlefield transparency, analogical reasoning, and the extraction of lessons from conflict. It argues that in-depth contextual expertise on ideational factors is indispensable for avoiding misinterpretation, making strategic culture analysis a critical resource for both scholars and policymakers.

Keywords: Strategic Culture; Lesson Learned; Change; Russia

Introduction

"Don't do Russia policy without consulting people who know far more about Russia than you do. Don't rely on people who have been trained as diplomats but have no real understanding of patterns of Russian behavior."

Toomas Hendrik Ilves, former Estonian president, reported by Politico 9 March 2022.

Ilves's warning points to a broader dispute over Western interpretations of Russian conduct. For many of Russia's European neighbours, the problem was not simply that Washington, Berlin, or Brussels underestimated Moscow's coercive intentions, but that they repeatedly interpreted Russian behaviour through assumptions of eventual convergence, accommodation, or mutual interest (Lau 2022; Kuzio 2024). Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 formally ended the language of "reset" in relations with Moscow (Rachwald 2011); yet it did not fully displace the expectation that selective engagement with the Russian leadership remained possible. By 2021, Chatham House could still list the notions that Russia and the West ultimately wanted the same things, that they were not in conflict, and that a new European security architecture must include Russia as widely held myths (Allan et al., 2021). Even after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, although from a minority position, some analysts continue to argue that Russia poses only a limited threat and is merely reacting defensively to Western policies (Chau & Wang, 2023; Evans, 2025).

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This debate concerns not only the scale of the Russian threat but, more fundamentally, the frameworks through which the West interprets it. Much Western threat assessment (Hackett et al., 2022; Shultz & Brimelow, 2022) has privileged observable indicators of power — force size, spending levels, equipment, and readiness — while giving less systematic attention to the interpretive frameworks through which Russian elites define threats, opportunities, and acceptable instruments of coercion (Renz, 2024). Yet, as scholars from Fuller (2008) to Gray (2014) have argued, such factors are central to understanding why leaders make the choices they do. This is the terrain of what political science calls strategic culture: “a system of symbols [that] embodies assumptions about what the security *problematique* is, and therefore about how to best deal with it” (Johnston, 1998, p. 39).

Studies of strategic culture have long been criticised for being overly vague and all-encompassing, thereby failing to meet the methodological standards of political science (Anand, 2020; Lantis & Howlett, 2016; Uz Zaman, 2009). Yet a growing body of literature has begun to adopt this concept in heuristically fruitful ways to strengthen and complement explanations about change within the armed forces (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2025; Dian et al., 2023; Schmitt, 2024), differences in force postures (Angstrom & Honig, 2012; Harig et al., 2022; Ruffa, 2017), failures in critical decision-making (Göransson, 2024; Renz, 2024), use and development of technology (Farrell, 2010; Schwarz, 2025) and alliance making (Becker & Malesky, 2017; Borozna, 2022; Gasparyan & Duarte, 2024). In these works, strategic culture is essentially treated as a set of historically sedimented assumptions, institutionalised habits, threat narratives, and professional repertoires that contribute to shaping how actors interpret the security *problématique* and select plausible instruments of action.

Along these lines, scholarship on Russian strategic culture has linked Moscow’s threat perception to narratives of vulnerability, strategic depth, and Western hostility (Götz & Staun, 2022; Rumer & Sokolosky, 2020); examined how fears of “colour revolutions” shaped Russian understandings of non-military destabilisation and regime security (German, 2020); traced the development of cross-domain coercion and deterrence (Adamsky, 2018, 2023; Fasola & Averre, 2026); analysed cyber and information threats through ideas of besiegement, technological inferiority, and vulnerability to foreign interference (Kari & Kuusisto, 2017; Kari & Pynnöniemi, 2023); and studied the relationship between Russian military thought, indirect action, and the changing character of war in Ukraine (Fasola, 2024; Göransson, 2024; Kukkola, 2023). Other works have stressed the imperial, civilisational, and status-based dimensions of Russian strategic culture, including the role of great-power entitlement, conservative ideology, and Putin’s operational code (Dagi, 2026; Engström, 2014; Kanet, 2019; Østbø, 2026). Read in conjunction, this literature suggests that Russian strategic culture should be understood as a contested and evolving interpretive environment through which Russian elites define threats, justify coercion, and learn from war. This interpretive environment is what gives operational meaning to material power. In short, without the non-material grammar of Russian strategy, the visible “heavy metal” (Adamsky, 2025, p. 5) of military power tells us what Russia possesses, but not how, why, or to what ends it is likely to fight.

Unlike “heavy metal”, analysis of immaterial elements requires specialised subject knowledge. This is precisely where the policy problem begins. Western governments and expert communities have repeatedly been criticised for lacking the area knowledge, linguistic competence, and conceptual familiarity needed to interpret Russian strategic behaviour on its own terms (ECA, 2024; GAO, 2025; IfG, 2024; Vagle & Brooks, 2025). Recent work on expertise and public administration supports these concerns, suggesting that specialist knowledge often has limited influence on policy outcomes (Haunschild et al., 2025). In the Russian case, the issue lies chiefly in the difficulty of interpreting military

language, threat narratives, and coercive signalling without filtering them through Western strategic categories. As Adamsky argues (2023, p. 5), Western scholarship has often lagged behind the evolution of Russian deterrence theory and has insufficiently engaged Russian-language primary sources, especially when those sources illuminate the intangible dimensions of strategy.

The marginalisation of specialised expertise leaves greater room for impressionistic geopolitical commentary to fill the interpretive gap. “Popular geopolitics” (Tuathail, 1999, p. 110) circulating through media and public debate often accounts for non-material factors but recasts them as civilisational constants, innate instincts, or national mentalities. In doing so, these commentaries offer apparently clear answers about “how the world is” and “what must be done.” They impose narrative closure by turning contingent developments into seemingly timeless geopolitical patterns (Sharp, 1993), rationalise strategy retrospectively in ways that resemble analytical pareidolia (Recordati-Koen, 2024), and derive much of their persuasive force from emotionally compelling political myths (Laketa, 2019; Schmitt, 2018). In more recent work, Welker (2025) shows how this geopolitical mythmaking has structured far-right interpretations of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The problem, then, is not that public geopolitical commentaries do not take immaterial factors seriously, but that they often do so without the evidentiary discipline needed to distinguish strategic culture from deterministic storytelling.

Accordingly, the recent publication of Dimitri Minic’s *Pensée et culture stratégiques russe. Du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine* offers the opportunity to discuss more in depth the policy benefits of expertise, shedding light on how the process of planning for possible, probable, and preferable futures requires intensive learning. By providing a detailed analysis of Russian strategic thought, Minic’s book constructs a rich ideational context that enables a more grounded interpretation of Russia’s behaviour. At the same time, the book raises a broader analytical problem: how far can Russian military-scientific discourse explain the actual conduct of war, and where must it be confronted with the empirical record of Russia’s warfighting in Ukraine? Drawing on these insights, this review essay examines Minic’s contribution along two connected axes: first, what it reveals about Russian strategic thought and culture; and second, how the relationship between strategic discourse and wartime practice should inform the extraction of lessons from contemporary war. The essay proceeds in three stages. The first section summarises the book’s key findings. The second assesses its strengths and limitations by examining Minic’s evidentiary strategy, situating the book within wider debates on Russian strategic culture and military thought, and evaluating how far military-scientific discourse can illuminate decision-making and wartime practice. The third broadens the discussion to consider the importance of expert judgement in formulating lessons to guide policymaking, especially when the object of analysis is an adversary whose doctrinal language, threat perceptions, and practices of coercion do not map neatly onto Western analytical categories.

Book summary

Minic’s *Pensée et culture stratégiques russe. Du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine* reconstructs the intellectual evolution through which Russian military thinkers came to expand the meaning of war beyond armed confrontation alone. The book situates contemporary Russian strategy within the broader cognitive and doctrinal evolution since the post-Soviet period, highlighting a shift from the Soviet emphasis on armed struggle toward a conception of warfare that encompasses information operations, asymmetry, and indirect approaches.

The organising concept is the “bypassing of armed struggle”: the idea that strategic objectives may be pursued by circumventing direct armed confrontation through political,

informational, technological, and other indirect instruments. Minic traces how this idea evolved amid a long-standing divide between traditionalist and revisionist military thinkers: traditionalists defended the primacy of armed struggle, while revisionists argued for the integration of indirect methods and information-centric strategies. Over time, revisionist approaches increasingly contributed to shaping official discourse, ultimately becoming the dominant interpretive lens within Russian military doctrine. These developments were also informed by partisan or outright misinterpretations of Western strategic thought and doctrines. Russian theorists frequently reframed selected ideas (from operational concepts to the writings of Western strategists and geopolitical thinkers) as either evidence of hostile intent or as templates to be adapted, often with little regard for their original meaning.

The book further reconstructs the worldview underpinning Russian strategic culture: a persistent sense of encirclement, a perception of malevolent Western intent, and the belief in Russia's unique civilisational role. These ideas contribute to shaping both the theoretical embrace of indirect methods and operational approaches, including hybrid tactics, information warfare, and the use of irregular or proxy actors. Lastly, Minic illustrates how these cultural and ideational factors contribute to shaping Russian behaviour in Ukraine, including the partial success of Crimea and Donbass operations as well as the miscalculations that led to a protracted war of attrition.

Overall, Minic combines doctrinal analysis with a cognitive and cultural lens, demonstrating that Russian military behaviour cannot be understood solely through conventional or material indicators. Its main contribution is therefore to show how inherited assumptions, ideological narratives, and selective appropriations of foreign strategic thought structure the ways Russian military elites imagine war, identify threats, and connect political goals to instruments of action.

Analysis

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its solid empirical foundation. Minic demonstrates that strategic culture can be reconstructed through rigorous research without resorting to either reductionism or determinism. Drawing on the work of more than 260 authors published in major Russian military-scientific outlets (such as *Voennaia Mysl*¹, *Voенно-promyshlennyi kur'er*² and *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn*³), on doctrine documents, public addresses by the senior leadership and military dictionaries, he examines a corpus of over 1,200 articles from 1999 to 2021. This extensive survey allows him to trace the evolution of Russia's post-Soviet strategic thought and culture in unusual breadth and detail. Minic's specificity does not lie in being the only scholar to engage Russian-language sources, but in focusing so systematically on Russian military-scientific discourse itself. Whereas much of the literature spans doctrinal documents, official statements, elite speeches, operational behaviour, and broader political narratives (Adamsky, 2023; Fasola & Averre, 2026; Götz & Staun, 2022), Minic works with a more restricted but finer-grained evidentiary base. This choice gives the book particular analytical leverage: it enables him to reconstruct the internal structure of professional military debate, identify competing schools of thought, and trace how certain concepts gradually gained prominence within Russia's strategic vocabulary. Equally convincing is the (implicit) logic of validation underpinning his approach, whereby professional military debate is read alongside official military dictionaries, doctrinal documents, and public statements. If strategic culture is understood as a negotiated reality among elites (Berger, 1998), then juxtaposing the debates in

¹ *Military Thought*.

² *Military-Industrial Courier*.

³ *International Affairs*.

professional literature with official sources is a valuable way to trace the dynamic interplay between ideas and official codification—at least insofar as such sources codify state objectives and identify the means to achieve them (Choi, 1996). As a corollary, the book's extensive appendices not only attest to the thoroughness of Minic's research but also provide essential background on the military theorists themselves, including their ranks, experience, and ages. This enables readers to identify the basic profiles of the authors contributing to Russia's military-strategic literature.

While the book constitutes a valuable source for scholars and analysts, its structure as well as its core claims could benefit from additional clarity. The density of references and empirical detail can overwhelm readers, making it difficult to discern the book's central analytical thread. Although each chapter is empirically rich, the book does not always make explicit the causal mechanisms linking Soviet intellectual legacies or entrenched perceptions of Russia's strategic environment to the redefinition of war. As a result, the central research question occasionally recedes from view, leaving readers to reconstruct the causal linkages themselves rather than being guided by a clear analytical framework.

A related limitation concerns the treatment of civil-military relations. Because strategic culture emerges from the interaction of political authorities, military institutions, broader elite networks, and society, a fuller discussion of this dimension would have clarified how military-scientific debates relate to decision-making structures and resonate beyond specialist circles (Brooks, 2019; Feaver, 2003, 2017; Kohn, 1997; Pion-Berlin & Dudley, 2020). The book convincingly reconstructs the evolution of professional military discourse, yet it remains less clear how these debates are received, filtered, or instrumentalised by political leaders. This matters because analyses of Russian strategic behaviour have often stressed the role of Putin's inner circle, elite perceptions, and personalist decision-making in shaping policy (Herd, 2022; Zygar, 2016). Nor is it fully clear whether military elites derive legitimacy from wider public narratives, impose their own interpretive frames upon them, or operate within a more insulated professional sphere. This issue is especially relevant in a system where official narratives about Ukraine, the West, and Russia's great-power status circulate across political, military, and public registers rather than remaining confined to one institutional arena (Dagi, 2026; Götz & Staun, 2022). In this respect, the relationship between the military-scientific community, the Kremlin's inner decision-making circles, and broader mechanisms of legitimation remains under-specified. Addressing this issue would have linked the study more directly to comparative research on how strategic cultures are formed, transmitted, and transformed (Snyder, 2023).

This limitation becomes especially consequential when the analysis moves from strategic discourse to wartime practice. Minic's reconstruction of Russian strategic thought offers a detailed account of how Russian elites conceptualise indirect action, information confrontation, and the evolving character of war. Yet the extent to which these conceptual frameworks are borne out in Russia's conduct of war in Ukraine is not fully addressed. This matters because Russia's conduct of the war cannot be reduced to indirect or hybrid methods alone. Its campaign has also involved grinding attrition and exhaustion (Jones & McCabe, 2026), the persistence of inherited operational habits and firepower-centred approaches (Noorman, 2023), and the destructive targeting of urban space as a method of domination (Coward, 2025). At the same time, the war has generated important debates in the West on adaptation, multidomain operations and nuclear signalling (Chadwick et al., 2024; Henke et al., 2026; Michel et al., 2024). The empirical record of warfighting, therefore, presents a more ambiguous empirical record than a discourse-centred reading alone might suggest: Russian practice combines elements of indirect confrontation and information warfare with older, often brutal, patterns of destruction, exhaustion, and coercive escalation. This is not to suggest that Minic ignores the war in Ukraine. His interpretation of

the full-scale invasion as revealing the limits, and ultimately the failure, of Russia's indirect approach is persuasive. The point is rather that this argument would have been strengthened by a deeper engagement, especially in the final chapter, with the operational conduct of the war itself. Doctrines, narratives, and professional debates do not translate mechanically into battlefield behaviour. Assessing how far they illuminate Russian practice therefore requires closer attention to military operations, including instances of adaptation, inconsistency, escalation, and failure. Without such confrontation, there is a risk of treating strategic culture as a self-contained system of meaning rather than as a set of interpretive resources whose relevance ultimately depends on how they are enacted, modified, or disregarded in practice.

Discussion

While modern sensors and information technologies may have rendered the battlefield more “transparent” than ever, the fog of war has hardly lifted. Greater visibility does not necessarily translate into cognitive clarity—that is, the ability to interpret intentions, anticipate deception, and grasp the adversary's strategic logic (Kunertova & Herzog, 2024). Two factors explain this gap. First, an abundance of data can foster overconfidence and a misplaced sense of omniscience (Néron-Bancel & Garnier, 2024). Second, military adaptation within the hider–finder dynamic (Calcara et al., 2022, 2023) is likely to produce instruments that deny transparency to the adversary (Oelrich et al., 2024), or prompt the adjustment of strategies precisely to exploit or mitigate the effects of transparency (Fox, 2024). Against this backdrop, I argue that in-depth knowledge of ideational factors is as relevant as the capacity to observe material ones, especially if the ultimate aim of observation is to derive actionable lessons.

As Fuller (2008) aptly notes, what is referred to as a “lesson learned” contains two elements: reflection and action. To put it simply, the endeavour of extracting lessons requires analysis of relevant events that have already occurred (the reflection) and the selection (action) of one course out of a larger pool of possible policy options. This second element is tied to a ‘prophecy’ about how the future (in terms of military engagements, responses to threats, etc.) might unfold (Ibid., p. 45). Both aspects pose significant challenges from a theoretical and practical standpoint. The fragmented and sometimes incoherent character of Russian strategic culture, as documented by Minic, shows that reflection is itself contested and that the lessons drawn are shaped as much by entrenched narratives as by empirical events. In general terms, the risks of planning for an inherently uncertain and unknowable future are manifold. Planning thus requires policymakers to exercise the utmost prudence and ground their decision in as much context as possible, since forethought cannot ‘navigate itself’ (Gray, 2014)

This raises the question of how decision-makers actually inform their choices. Zelikow's (2015) dissects decision-making into value judgments (what do I care about), reality judgments (what is going on), and action judgments (what can I do), which constantly interact. To inform their reality judgments (answering “what is going on?”), decision-makers extensively use analogies, comparing present or possible future situations to historical precedents (Khong, 2022). Such analogical reasoning is not far from counterfactuals, which Lebow (Lebow, 2000, p. 551) defines as “what if” statements about the past that vary contextual attributes or variables to assess how outcomes might have differed. Analogies, by contrast, can be seen as “what if” statements about the present or future: what if today's or tomorrow's policy choices resembled those taken in the past? Minic's reconstruction of Russian debates reveals how analogies to the Cold War are repeatedly mobilised, providing both a justificatory framework and a predictive model that channels current policy choices into familiar but misleading patterns.

In both counterfactuals and analogies, as Fearon (1991) notes, the exercise is essentially one of causal reasoning. Thus, if policymakers seek to identify causal mechanisms that are portable across contexts, attention should be given not only to the mechanisms themselves, but also to the (ideational, institutional etc.) context and its attributes (Carlsnaes, 2008; Falletti & Lynch, 2009). Returning to Zelikow's framework, this means that reality and action judgments are closely linked: extracting lessons from the past amounts to identifying causal mechanisms expected to recur in the future. In the Russian case, Minic demonstrates how reality judgements are conditioned by deep-seated narratives of encirclement and Western hostility, which in turn narrow the menu of action judgements available to decision-makers. Crucially, expertise is required to ensure that such judgements are not superficial. Only in-depth contextual knowledge enables observers to grasp the interaction between mechanisms presumed to operate and the specific environment in which they unfold.

The process of drawing lessons is, of course, unavoidably subjective and riddled with causal ambiguity, as it is shaped by competing perspectives, partial understandings and interpretations (Laugen Haaland, 2016). Yet, it is indispensable, precisely because it enables adaptation and transformation: without attempts to extract lessons, even imperfectly, states would lack the "chain of transmissions" of change (Dyson, 2019; Farrell, 2010; Van der Vorm, 2021). This makes clear that lesson-drawing cannot be divorced from the ideational environment in which it occurs: as Minic shows, even contradictory or conspiratorial beliefs can exert causal force by structuring how elites perceive options and risks. While there is no guarantee that lessons will generate positive transformation, careful attention to contextual and ideational factors offers the best safeguard against distortion and, crucially, the most reliable basis for meaningful change. For scholars, this underscores the need to study not only the workings of causal mechanisms but also the interpretive frameworks through which policymakers perceive and act upon them. For practitioners, it highlights that contextual expertise is not a luxury but a prerequisite for sound political decision-making. While there is no guarantee that the lessons of experience will lead to positive transformation, in-depth knowledge of contextual factors is one of the few safeguards against gross misinterpretation.

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