Bears and Byzantium: How America Misreads Russian Grand Strategy

Common complaints within Intelligence Studies about the examination of foreign intelligence communities, especially those not residing in the west, run the gamut from being too historically driven to being completely ahistorical and thus nothing more than a simple organizational review of facts and details to being too often inevitably compared against a standard framework that uses either the United States or the United Kingdom as the backdrop. While these analyses are all important, they have failed to look at how the competing conceptualizations of culture within the discipline engender entirely different approaches and therefore radically different conclusions about how we view and evaluate said communities. Below is a ‘case glance’ of the phenomenon utilizing the Russian Federation. Perhaps most interesting and fairly unexpected is how in terms of security affairs American understanding about Russia seems to be hurt more analytically by grand strategic culture and is often never analyzed from a perspective that emphasizes contemporary reality, purpose-based objectives and actual organizational functionality.

Russian Federation

Despite every effort by officials within the Russian Federation since the end of the Cold War to decry a new foreign policy strategy and to instigate new relations based on ideas of multipolarity and balanced global power, most American analyses of Russia cannot seem to get past characterizing every Russian maneuver and interest in a grand strategic cultural way. When this is done Russia is inevitably seen as aspiring to new ‘great power’ status or attempting to reconstitute Soviet glory or is subconsciously beholden to an autocratic instinct that dates even further back, either to the czars or even back to Byzantium.

This type of cognitive closure is detrimental to American intelligence and diplomacy because it is purposefully limiting the potential frames of engagement between the two sides. In many ways the United States, both in terms of its scholarship and diplomatic efforts, has blindly created self-fulfilling prophecies when it comes to the Russian Federation because of a repeated inability to see past its own reliance on grand strategic culture as the chief defining point for understanding Russians. This is what led outstanding scholars like Samuel Huntington as early as 1993 to make statements like, ‘if, as the Russians stop behaving like Marxists, they reject liberal democracy and begin behaving like Russians but not like Westerners, the relations between Russia and the West could again become distant and conflictual.’ It is in the same vein that scholars seem to think the modern-day has no real relevance on understanding Russian foreign policy and intelligence/national security prioritization. This incredulous overreliance on ancient culture, where scholars and practitioners alike believe the roots of all Russian decisions in 2014 require an understanding of the Russian soul from 500, even 1000, years before, leads American analysts down a rabbit hole of quasi-mysticism and vague truisms. This is why so many Russian intelligence officials scoff at American analysis, whether it is from the ivory tower or Foggy Bottom.

“Of the organization of the Soviet and subsequent Russian state we can draw no specific indication of Byzantine bureaucratic organization, but in spirit the way the Soviets organized their government for security purposes is still quite Russian...What is being argued here is that the way the Byzantines managed their security and intelligence was a function of the political culture of the state, the same political culture that was inherited later by the Kievan and then Russian state, and which has served the Soviet and subsequent post-Soviet Russian state.”
The above is not being singled out for it is truly an exemplar of the kind of analysis that passes for grand strategic culture when examining Russia. Not only are the arguments non-scientific, they are ultimately spurious: these analyses are not trying to ascertain the true motivations of contemporary Russian intelligence decisions. Rather they are trying to make sure Russia stays within the frame that already exists. This is cognitive closure at its worst: where the question ‘why do they do what they do?’ transforms instead into ‘what kind of Russia do we want and how do we make sure it becomes that and that alone?’ Grand strategic cultural thinking on Russian intelligence reveals relatively little about modern Russian thinking for American analysts, but it reveals a wealth of information on American thinking for Russian analysts.

An emphasis on grand strategic culture will actually make for better reading, as you will inevitably be taken down a road of the most interesting and intense historical and cultural impacts, possibly going back thousands of years. Organizational cultural conditions will instead leave you diving into budget concerns, internal turf wars over specific issue-areas, and the changing dynamics of micro-subjects that might not even make the paper, let alone a history text. But those conditions are the things that reveal the most about the contemporary prioritizing of intelligence communities, much more so than fascinating turns down history lane. More importantly, there seems to be a disconnect in our discipline where the more important security/intelligence countries are dominated by grand strategic cultural analyses. Perhaps that is a reason we seem to make so little headway in better understanding those impactful intelligence communities like Russia.

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