Review of: "Russian Military Renaissance: An Unnecessary War"

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Below is my review of “Russian Military Renaissance: An Unnecessary War.” This was a difficult piece to read because it lacked a clear thesis, a systematic argument, and consistent focus. It jumped around from topic to topic without referring back to a central contention, other than Vladimir Putin’s Russia is bad and ‘irrational’. It is certainly the former, but the latter categorization is problematic, as explained below. It purports to put forth a new notion for foreign policy analysis – military renaissance – which lacks distinctiveness and is not adequately expanded upon or applied within the text. It is unclear how this term gives us any additional theoretical or analytical clarity into Russia’s actions or how it adds to the literature on foreign policy analysis. (At best, it should be ‘national’ or ‘civilizational’ renaissance, not military.) In addition, it labels a series of assertions as obvious, factual, or objective, but in doing so reads more like a confrontational opinion piece than a scholarly treatment of a case study, almost daring the reader challenge these assertions.

It is unclear what the author actually means to discuss: the decision to invade Ukraine, decisions made after the invasion, the prospects for Russia’s future, Russia’s general post-Cold War foreign policy, nuclear saber-rattling, Western (mis)perceptions of Russia, neo-Eurasianism, hybrid warfare, China-Russian relations, or the prospects for Russian support in the international system – all of these show up in this paper. It almost seems like the author sought to discuss the decision to invade Ukraine and/or Russian nuclear posturing, but then gets distracted by so much else. A clear, concise argument is needed.

A central contention is that Russian foreign policy is ‘irrational’. The sentences “We should then come to the conclusion that contemporary Russia differs from the USSR not only in terms of military capabilities. Its rationality has decreased over the last three decades” is case in point. In terms of specifics, one could ask: How has its rationality declined over the past three decades? How does one define rationality? What benchmarks of rationality are we using? But the problem of using ‘rationality’ as the basis of an argument is problematic for several, broader reasons. First, the usage in the paper equates ‘rational’ with ‘good’. This is a misapplication of terms which conflates calculations between means and ends with the normative content of actions. Since the author does not find Russian foreign policy ‘good’ it is, ergo, ‘irrational’. This is, unfortunately, an all-to-common way that scholars, policymakers, and pundits seek to criticize something they do not like. The expansive field of rational choice theory would approach these concepts with far more rigor than is applied here. Second, much of Russia’s failed invasion of Ukraine was certainly a miscalculation of means and ends, misperceptions, confirmation bias, and wishful thinking, but that does not make it ‘irrational’ – it was just based upon faulty information and processes. Wrong does not mean irrational. If it did, then any student who got a question incorrect on an

exam could be declared irrational. Third, this conflation of concepts does not demonstrate an appreciation or understanding of how the Kremlin saw the world or its options and the interactive relationship between these and the actions of others. It seeks to view Russia's actions through *our* (really, the author's) lens, rather than seeking to understand it through theirs. The discussion of neo-Eurasianism in the paper gets us closer to such an appreciation/understanding, but it gets lost within everything else. Fourth, in the title and the text, it refers to an 'unnecessary war', but does not explain what the term unnecessary means in this context. It seems like this is connected to the 'irrationality' argument, but that is unclear. Was the war unnecessary because NATO did not actually intend to attack Russia? Even if that is true, it would fail to analyze Russia from its own perspective in which Russia took actions in order to increase its own security in a manner which was based upon its idiosyncratic preference structure which held that 'war' had more value than 'non-war'. Even if we disagree with that choice, it does not make this preference structure irrational. Finally, in its discussion of Russia's nuclear threats, the paper fails to demonstrate an appreciation of the equally expansive literature on the logic of nuclear deterrence and signaling which is based upon rational actors which may choices which possibly lead to suboptimal outcomes. Within the context of game theory, Russia's nuclear posturing is anything but irrational, but rather a supremely rational (and, thus far, successful) action based upon a lack of means to otherwise deter the West from directly intervening. The 'game' of chicken is particularly apt in this case.

Some suggestions for how to improve the paper – much of which is already present in the paper in some form -- could include the following. First, one could focus specifically on how the decision to invade Ukraine was a natural consequence of neo-Eurasianist thinking which sees the world through the lens of inherent conflict between Sea and Land – a variant of which has been adopted as de facto official policy by the Kremlin. This was actually where the paper was the strongest and one could show how this shaped the Kremlin's preference structure in such a way elevated war over no-war. However, it would be important not to conflate good with rational or to make judgments about the relative correctness of neo-Eurasianism. Instead, such an approach would be a far more focused treatment which seeks to explain Russian foreign policy through this/its lens, rather than delving into a series of other topics. This would require, however, a deeper explanation of how these concepts entrenched themselves in official Kremlin thinking by analyzing texts, such as speeches by Russian officials, national security documents, etc.

Second, one could focus on Western misperceptions of Russian intentions and built its own preference structure in such a way that it, too, was playing a variant of its own game of chicken with Ukraine as a proxy. Putin directly and specifically told us in his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech – and multiple times afterward - exactly what he thought of the West, NATO expansion, and American unipolarity. An examination of American and European dismissals of his clear language would actually make for a fascinating topic about Western wishful thinking, confirmation bias, and ideological ego-centrism.

Third, one could also look specifically at Putin's post-invasion nuclear posturing from the basis of Russian strategic doctrine, signaling behavior, etc. – possibly comparing it to Cold War cases or Russian rhetoric pre-2022. This would require an examination of the literature on nuclear deterrence and game theory, and then carefully craft an analysis of Russian rhetoric, both spoken and doctrinal. One could even evaluate the relative success of this rhetoric by matching it with both content analysis of Western counter-rhetoric and Western policies in response.

Lastly, an examination of why Russia shifted from its hybrid warfare policy of 2014-2021 to conventional warfare from 2022-present would also be fascinating – some of which is hinted at in this paper. This would require a close reading and analysis of Russian foreign policy rhetoric, specific policies by Russia and other actors (namely NATO members), and changing doctrines in which hybrid warfare somehow became discredited – hence, leading to the choice of large-scale conventional war. The ironic, and ultimately tragic fact, was that Russia was sort of getting what it wanted with a policy of hybrid warfare by supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine: Ukraine was unlikely to join NATO for the foreseeable future because of the war in the Donbass, Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy establishments appeared paralyzed, Ukraine's president was deeply unpopular, and Ukraine's economy was only slowly recovering from the pandemic. What changed in Russian strategic thinking, when did it change, and why did it change?

In short, the subject would be better served by a more systematic and coherent argument, with a clear thesis, which excludes extraneous topics and discussions.