



Russian Grand Strategy in the 21st Century

ROBERT T. PERSON, PHD

UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY

EMAIL: ROBERT.PERSON@WESTPOINT.EDU

WEBSITE: WWW.ROBERT-PERSON.COM/

TWITTER: [@RTPERSON3](https://twitter.com/RTPERSON3)

What is “grand strategy?”

- [Feaver \(2009\)](#): “[Grand strategy is] the **collection** of plans and policies that comprise the states **deliberate effort** to harness political military, diplomatic, and economic tools together to advance that state’s national interest. Grand strategy is the **art of reconciling ends and means**. It involves purposive action.”
- [Brands \(2014\)](#): “At its best...a grand strategy represents an **integrated scheme** of interests, threats, resources, and policies.”

Ends, ways, and means of grand strategy

- Ends: a state's core strategic objectives and national interests
- Ways: the military, diplomatic, political, economic, and social measures and policies that a state uses to achieve its strategic ends
- Means: the material and nonmaterial resources available to a state to pursue its strategic ends
- **Grand Strategy**: the coordinated and comprehensive integration of **ways** and **means** to achieve national strategic **ends**.

Origins of Russia's strategic worldview

Insecurity:

“Defending the Russian state on the largely featureless great European plain requires strategic depth. From the middle of the sixteenth century onward, Russia has relentlessly pushed its frontiers outward, annexing disorganized territory or seizing land from states in decline...

Over the centuries, this dialectic of expansion and resistance created Russia's geopolitical space, roughly the territory of the former Soviet Union or Russian Empire. This is the sphere of influence Russian rulers consider essential to their security...

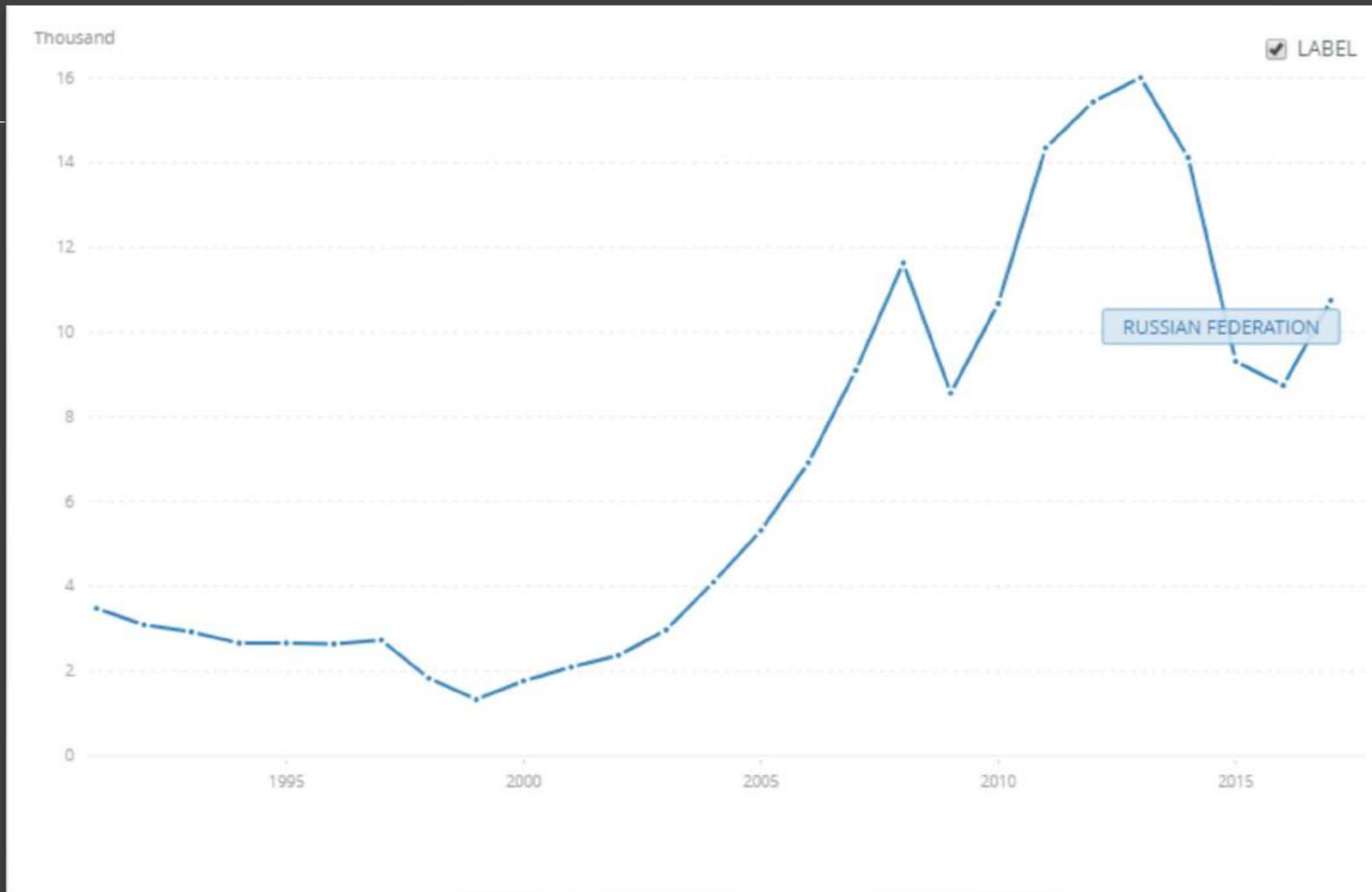
[Security] imperatives have combined to feed a persistent sense of vulnerability that never lies far beneath the surface in the consciousness of Russia's rulers. External expansion draws in ever more people of dubious loyalty, raising the costs of maintaining internal order.”

(Graham 2016)

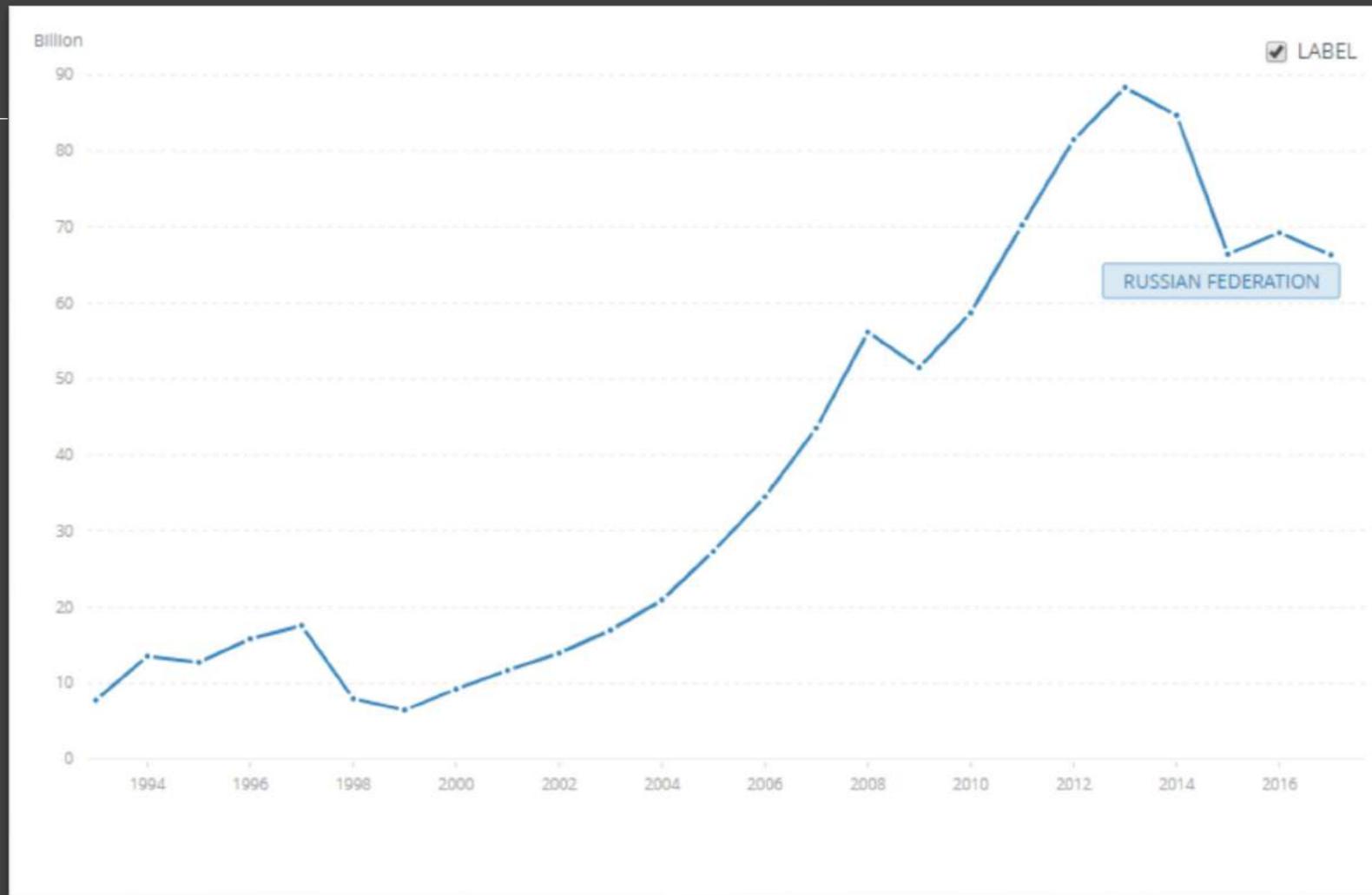
Russia's strategic ends: "Yalta 2.0"

1. Establish an uncontested privileged sphere of influence across the territory of the former USSR.
 - a) Exercise Russian influence and interests in domestic and foreign policies of quasi-satellite states
 - b) Deny other great powers from pursuing influence & interests in Russian sphere
2. Secure for Russia a decisive seat at the table of great powers in ambiguous regions
 - a) Regional great powers are absent: Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa
 - b) Multiple great powers present: Arctic
3. Containment: constrain United States' unilateral pursuit of its interests globally

Means: GDP per capita (current US\$)



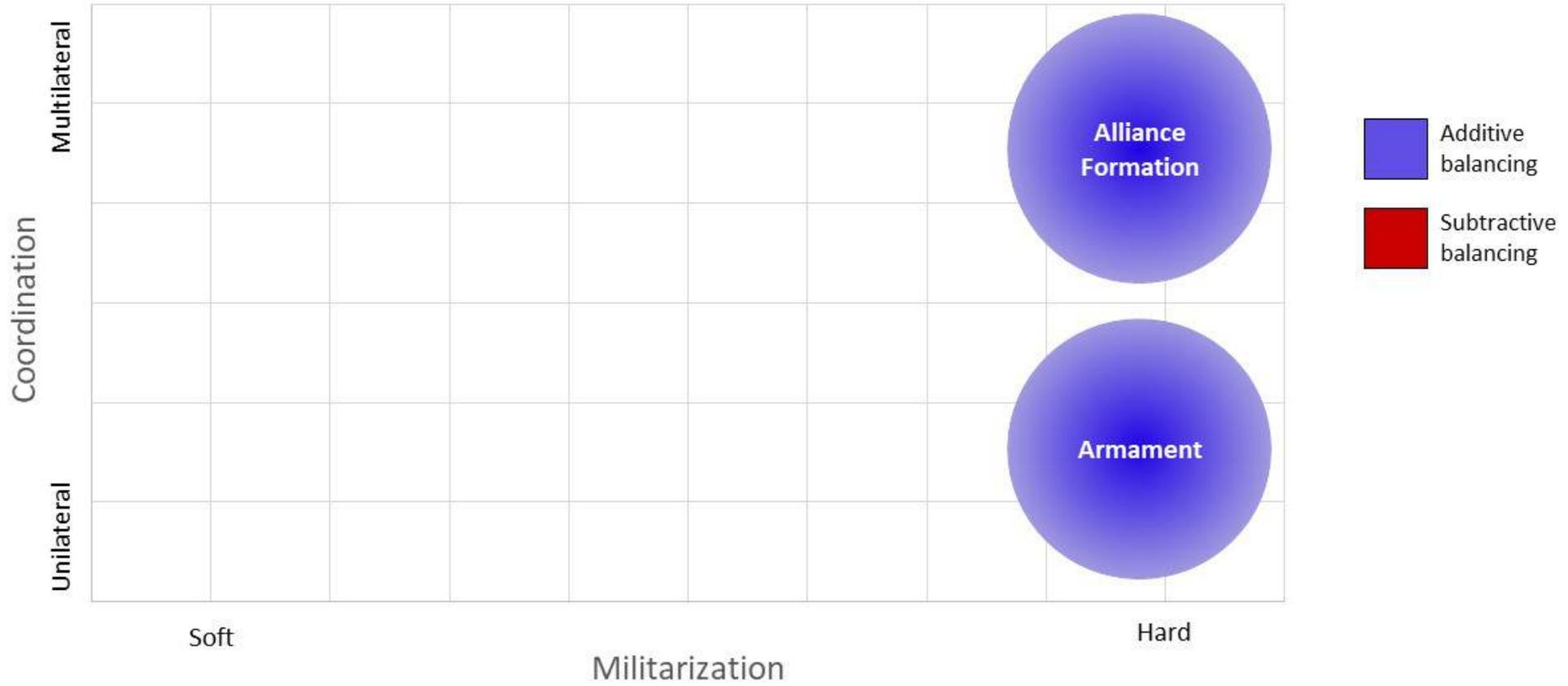
Means: Military expenditure (current US\$)



The “ways” of grand strategy: hard balancing

- Counterbalancing an adversary by increasing your “hard power”
 - Preferred method: internal balancing (armament)
 - Secondary method: external balancing (alliance formation)
- “Additive balancing”
 - Adding more weight to your side of the scale
- Hard balancing is costly
 - Especially for second-tier powers balancing against the unipole

Balancing Strategies



The challenge: reconciling ends, ways and means

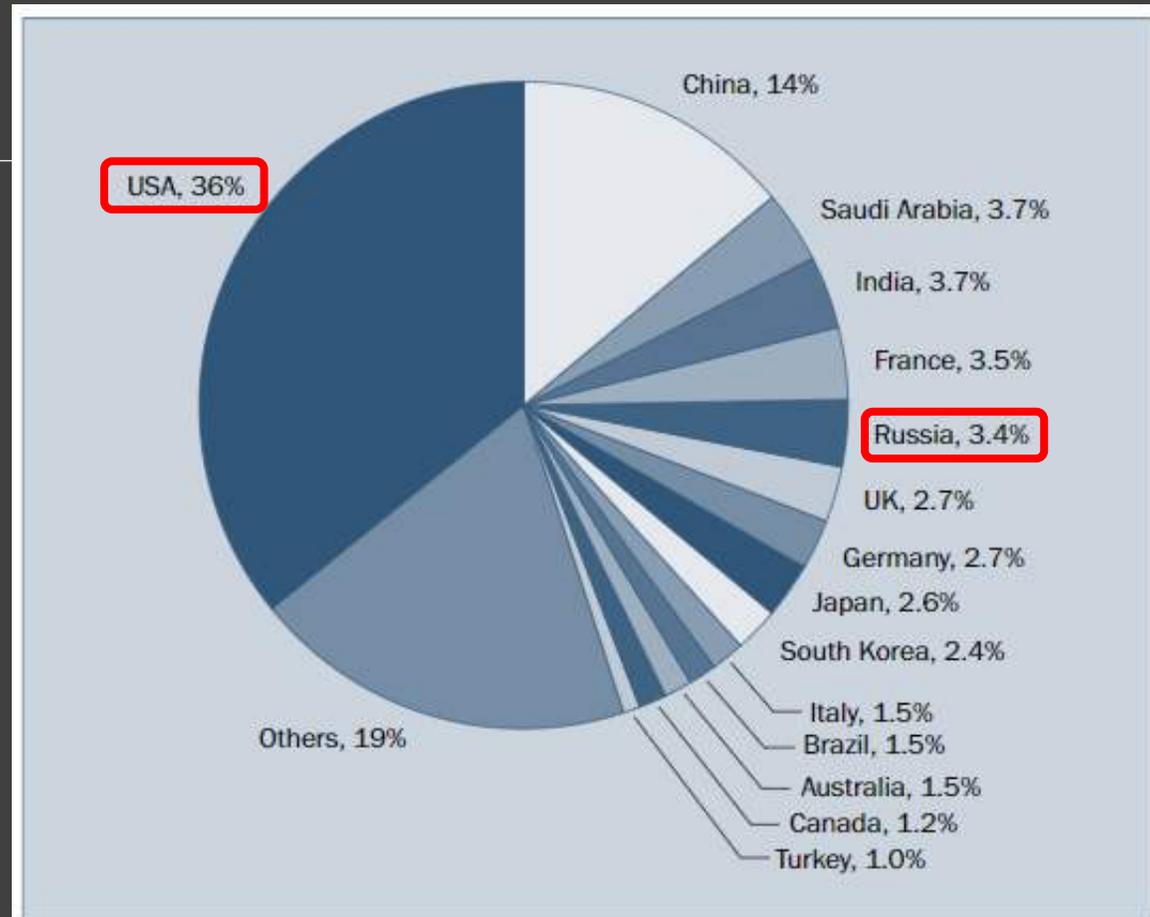


Figure 2. The share of world military expenditure of the 15 countries with the highest spending in 2018

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Apr. 2019.

Evolving “ways” of Russian grand strategy

- I. “Pragmatic Accommodation”: 2000 – 2003
- II. “Soft Balancing”: 2003 – 2007
- III. “Asymmetric Balancing”: 2007 – present
 - a. Covert development & refinement: 2007 – 2014
 - o Concurrent with Obama-Medvedev “reset,” 2008-2012
 - b. Overt asymmetric balancing: 2014 - present



1. Pragmatic accommodation, 2000-2003

- Russia playing a weak hand vis-à-vis U.S.
- Offer support and concessions to U.S. in order to secure Russian interests
 - Post-9/11 support
 - “Blessing” Central Asian nations’ support of U.S. in Afghanistan war
 - Treaty of Moscow, 2002
- One-sided bargaining – failed to secure concessions from U.S. on:
 - Preserving ABM treaty (U.S. withdrawal November 2001)
 - NATO expansion (November 2002: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania invited to begin accession talks)
 - Halting invasion of Iraq, 2003



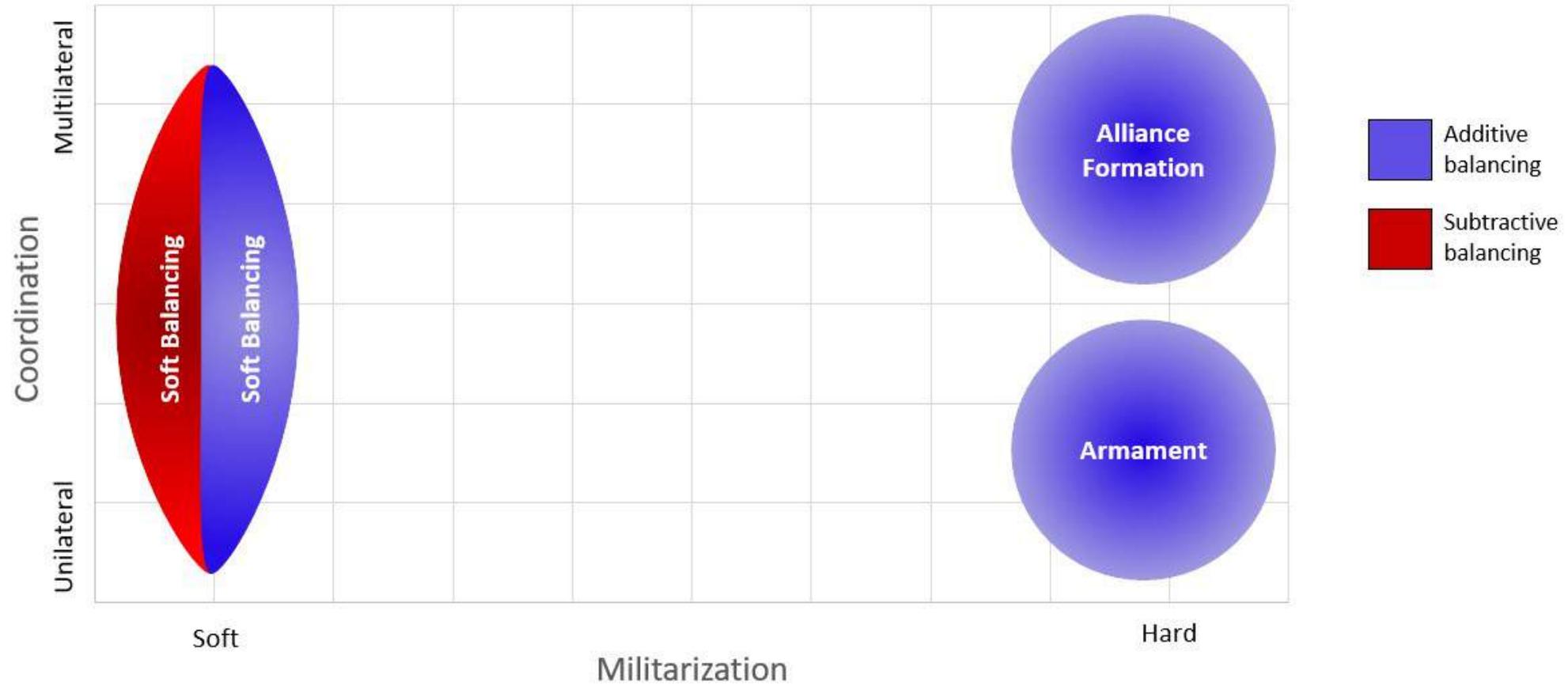
2. Soft Balancing, 2003-2007

- Soft Balancing:

“Soft-balancing measures do not directly challenge a unipolar leader's military preponderance, but they can delay, complicate, or increase the costs of using that extraordinary power. Nonmilitary tools, such as international institutions, economic statecraft, and strict interpretations of neutrality, can have a real, if indirect, effect on the military prospects of a unipolar leader” ([Pape 2005](#))



Balancing Strategies



Soft balancing begins to harden...

“[W]hat is a unipolar world? However one might embellish this term, at the end of the day it refers to one type of situation, namely one center of authority, one center of force, one center of decision-making. It is world in which there is one master, one sovereign. And at the end of the day this is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within...One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way”

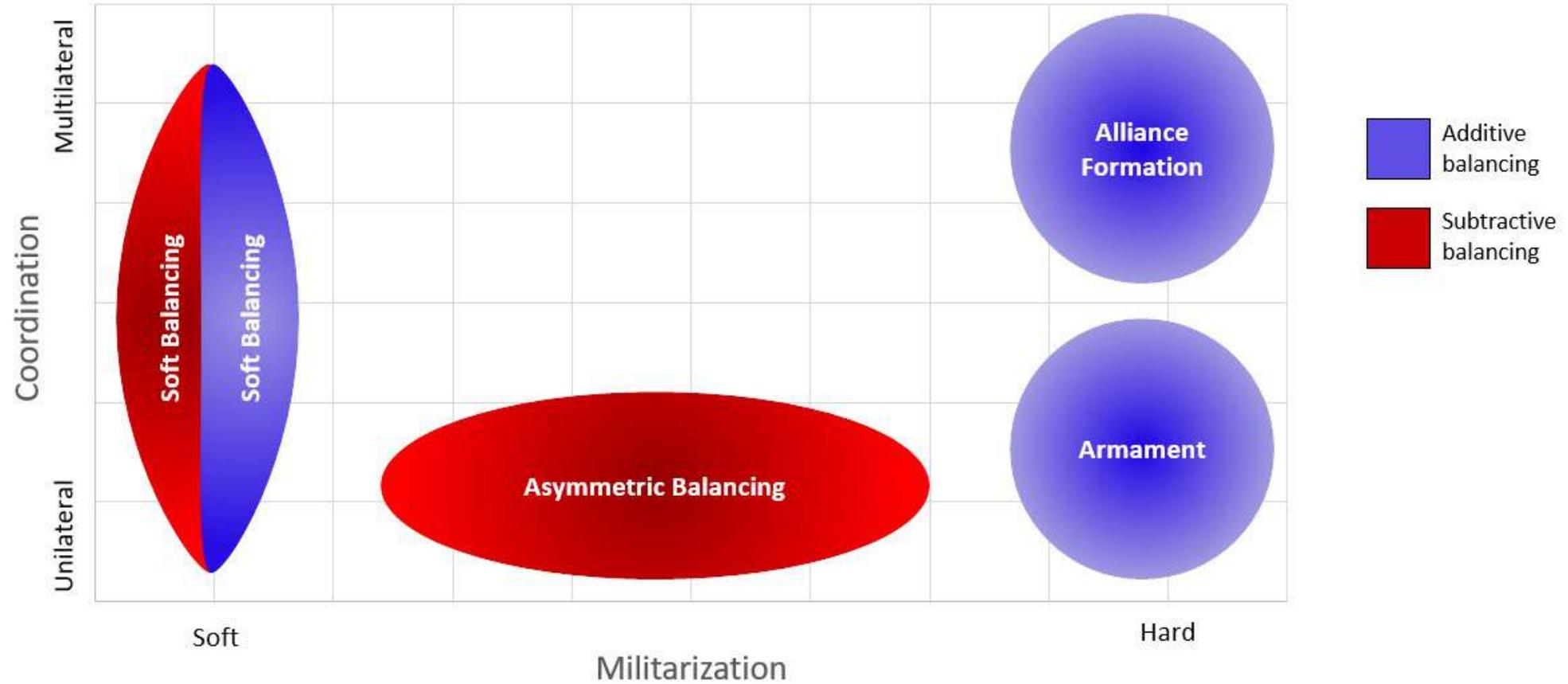
Vladimir Putin
[Munich Security Conference](#)
February 10, 2007



3. Asymmetric Balancing, 2007 - present

- “Efforts by nation states to balance and contain indirect threats posed by subnational actors such as terrorist groups that do not have the ability to challenge key states using conventional military capabilities or strategies. Asymmetric balancing also refers to the other side of the coin, that is, to efforts by subnational actors and their state sponsors to challenge and weaken established states using asymmetric means such as terrorism.” ([Paul 2004](#))
- “Both rising great powers and regional powers likely will be attracted to asymmetric strategies as a means of offsetting superior U.S. military capabilities.” ([Layne 2004](#))

Balancing Strategies



Gray Zone tactics: the “ways” of subtractive asymmetric balancing

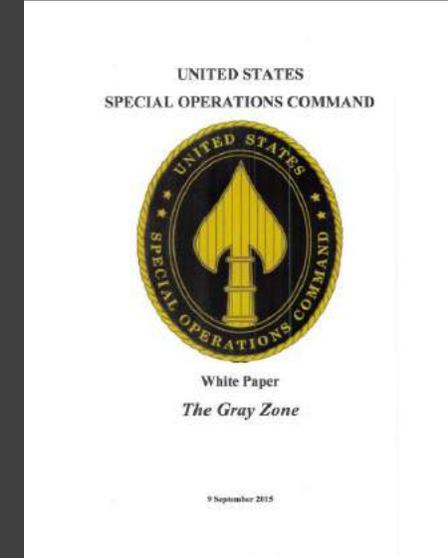
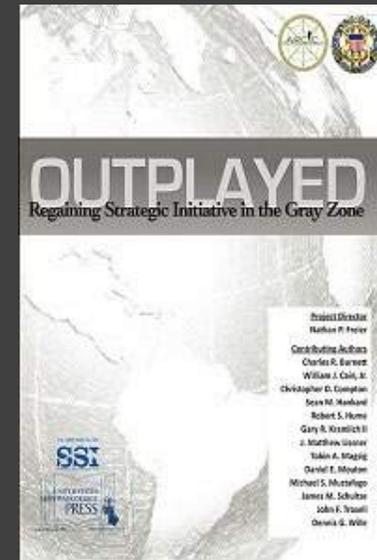
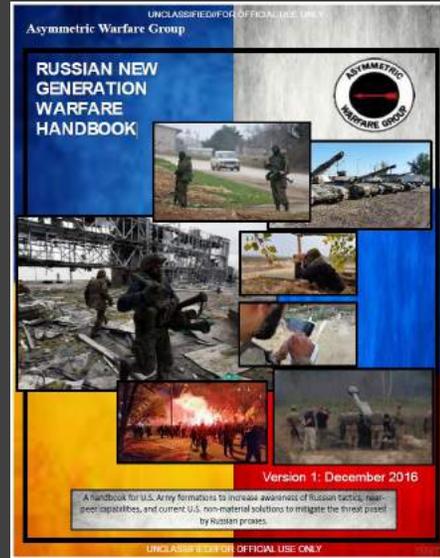
- Cyber and information operations, including efforts to undermine public resistance and support.
- Information and propaganda operations in support of other hybrid instruments.
- Covert operations under state control, espionage, infiltration, and subversion.
- Use of special operations forces, other state-controlled armed units, and unacknowledged military personnel.
- Logistical, political, and financial support for insurgent and terrorist movements.
- Enlistment of non-governmental actors, including organized criminal groups, terrorists, and extremist political, religious, and ethnic or sectarian organizations.
- Assistance to irregular military and paramilitary forces.
- Economic pressures that go beyond normal economic competition.
- Manipulation and discrediting of democratic institutions, including the electoral system and the judiciary.
- Calculated ambiguity, use of covert and unacknowledged operations, and deception and denial.

Russian asymmetric balancing in action

- Estonia 2007: Information warfare against “bronze soldier” relocation
- Russo – Georgian War, 2008
 - Lessons learned: losing the information war
- Crimea invasion & annexation, 2014
- Donbas conflict, 2014 - present
- U.S. Election interference, 2016 - present
- Political warfare in Baltics, 2007 – present (esp. since 2014)

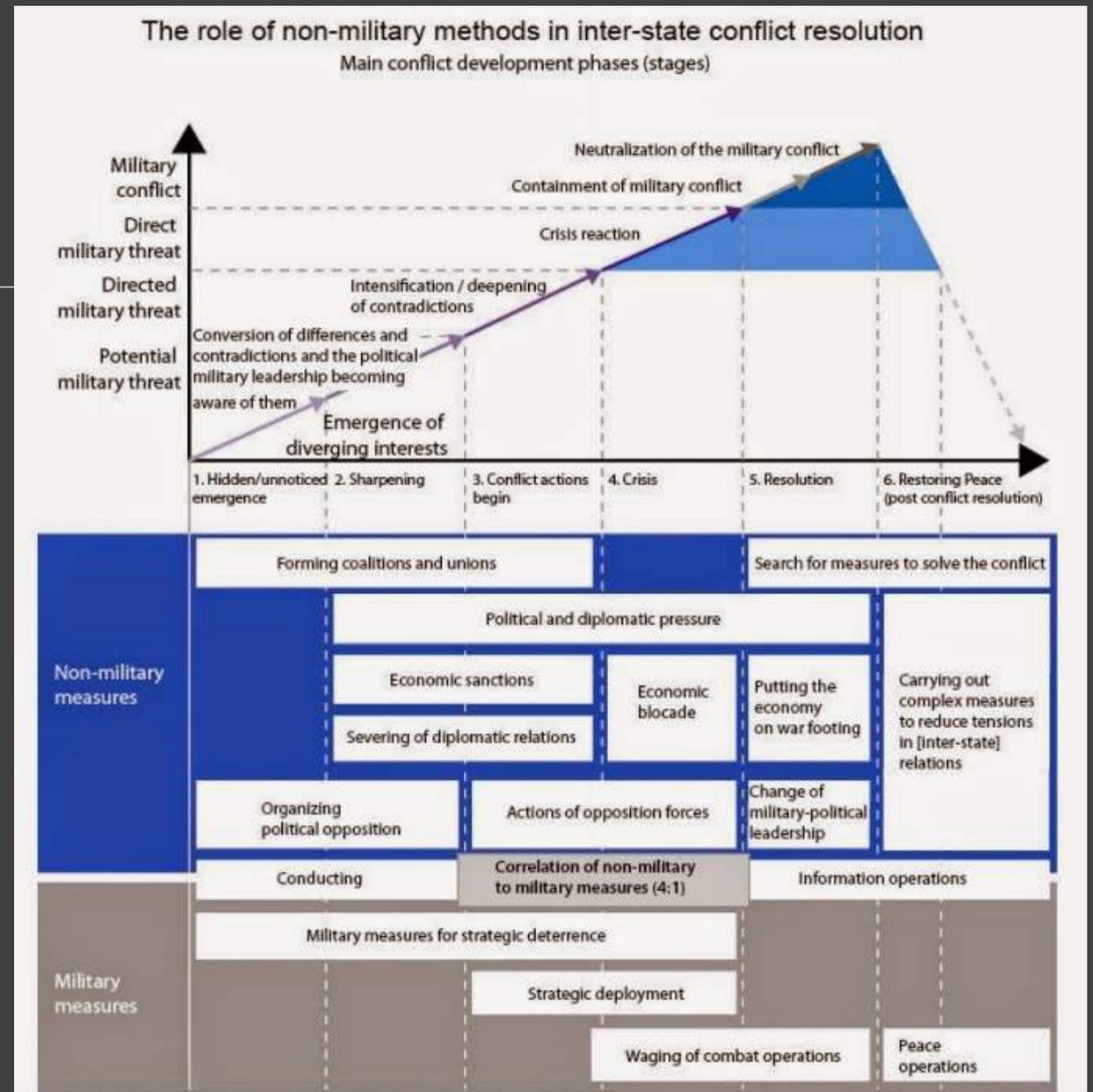


The Problem of Hybrid Warfare



Mistaken models

The “Gerasimov Doctrine” - the model that wasn’t



Implications and Conclusions

- Russia's grand strategic ends are enduring – they will outlast Putin
- The ways of Russian grand strategy are evolving
 - Trial and error – finding what works
 - Increasing means = increasing assertiveness & disruption
- Asymmetric subtractive balancing is low cost, high impact
 - Su-57 stealth fighter: ~\$50 million each
 - Internet Research Agency: \$90 million in annual salaries for 1,200 employees
- Asymmetric balancing not synonymous with “hybrid war.”
 - Little green men may not be on the way
- Defense, deterrence, and assurance should be calibrated toward asymmetric threats
 - Greatest threat is political/information/cyber warfare - prepare for it at home and abroad
 - Threat of kinetic military action against NATO allies is very low

Questions, comments, and discussion

- Follow on Twitter: [@RTPerson3](https://twitter.com/RTPerson3)
- Email: Robert.person@westpoint.edu
- Website: www.robert-person.com/

