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The Societal Basis for National Competitiveness

Chinese and Russian Perspectives



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About This Report

This report is part of a larger project that considers the societal sources of national dynamism and competitive advantage. In this report, we survey Chinese and Russian thinking about the qualities of nations that tend to produce competitive advantage. We draw several broad lessons from those analyses.

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Summary

This report is part of a larger RAND Corporation study on the societal foundations of national competitiveness. In the first phase of the study, RAND analysts mined historical cases, multiple literatures assessing national rise and fall, and recent issue-specific research to nominate seven societal characteristics associated with competitive advantage.¹ That work produced an analytical view of the qualities that contribute to national dynamism and success in international rivalries—but very much from a U.S. or more broadly Western perspective. The research raised an important question: Might U.S. rivals think about the question of societal advantage in radically different ways? Our goal was not to discover any formal Chinese or Russian national strategies for societal advantage but to discover whether we could find any parallel set of factors or variables that analysts or officials in China and Russia believe to be associated with competitive advantage.

China's Conceptions of National Competitive Advantage

In seeking to identify current concepts of societal advantage in China, we reviewed Western academic and Chinese official and scholarly writings about the country's history both prior to and after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Analysis of Chinese sources posed a major challenge because of thorough politicization: Scholars and analysts generally are prohibited from publishing analysis that criticizes Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule or promotes ideas at odds with the party's official ideology and are incentivized to praise or exaggerate the strengths and advantages of CCP rule. This reality unavoidably introduces a strong bias in the Chinese literature, although such writings can offer a clear sense of the CCP's formal conceptions of national strategic advantage. To offset

¹ Michael J. Mazarr, *The Societal Foundations of National Competitiveness*, RAND Corporation, RR-A499-1, 2022.

the CCP's political bias, we also considered Western academic writings about the strengths of Chinese society, especially regarding the imperial era.

Regarding China's societal strengths in the period prior to the PRC's establishment, Western and Chinese scholars have highlighted the importance of national identity, the role of local elites, and China's long-standing emphasis on learning and education. Scholars debate how much the country's traditional values and culture contribute to the nation's successes today. Western scholars agree that China's culture is best described as a blend of traditional and modern culture and values. Despite these complexities, Chinese authorities routinely regard the nation's traditional culture and values as a source of national unity, cohesion, and strength. At a CCP Politburo study session in 2022, General Secretary Xi Jinping called traditional Chinese culture the "root and soul of the Chinese nation" and hailed it as the "foundation on which we can stand firm and keep pace amid the turmoil of world cultures."²

Since the PRC's founding, Chinese scholars have tended to emphasize the importance of the country's political institutions as a source of strength. The notion that China possesses an *institutional advantage* over its rivals is commonly encountered in official documents and scholarly writings. These judgments serve an obvious political purpose in promoting the CCP's authority, and it may be tempting to dismiss them as mere propaganda. However, these views may reflect a sincere belief in the party's advantages for two reasons: First, the PRC's achievements are indeed impressive, compared with those of imperial dynasties. China has achieved a level of wealth, military power, and diplomatic reach that far exceed what any Chinese emperor could have hoped to have achieved. The CCP can justifiably take credit for some of these gains. Second, officials and scholars have a vested interest in highlighting the strengths of a political party from which they personally derive benefit as members. The sources we reviewed define this advantage in terms of the CCP's political institutions and in part their ability to coordinate national power in a more centralized and decisive way than Western countries. Above all, officials under Xi have emphasized CCP lead-

² "During 39th Collective Study Session of CPC Central Committee Political Bureau, Xi Jinping Stresses: Deepen Study of Chinese Civilization, History" [把中国文明历史研究引向深入增强历史自觉坚定文化自信], Xinhua, May 28, 2022.

ership as the most critical ingredient of national power, in part because of the CCP's ability to coordinate all elements of national power and ensure a unity of effort. Chinese leaders have also emphasized the CCP's pragmatism, ideological discipline, and willingness to learn as features of another strategic advantage. Some of these features evoke those from the imperial era, in particular the importance of national unity, the role of elites, and an emphasis on learning and education.

Russian Conceptions of Societal Advantage

Russia's national narrative propagated by leadership and supported by a large majority of the population begins with the fact that Russia must always be a great power. As with China, public, official, and much scholarly opinion in Russia identifies a distinctly Russian path to greatness and competitive advantage. From 2000 to 2020, only a small minority of Russians agreed that Russia should develop along the lines of "European civilization." Large pluralities or majorities believed that Russia must "take its own, special path."³ Russian leaders and scholars have long associated the adoption of Western principles as a path to subservience.

This view is reflected in three dominant themes in official Russian statements and Russian writings on national competitiveness: autocracy, Orthodoxy, and military power.

The Russian people themselves tend to hold similar views that Russia above all must have a strong state. This view provides the base of support for the idea that centralized authority is a preferred form of governance in Russia. Although some Russians respond to polls by professing to support democracy, they do not necessarily have in mind competitive elections and checks and balances, nor are they necessarily prepared to bring about democracy through active participation in the political process.

The Russian Orthodox Church and its conservative values, according to President Vladimir Putin, protect Russian society (and religious conservatives outside Russia) from falling into the decadence and moral decay that Russia has long attributed to the West and that Russia considers a source of

³ Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie-2020*, 2020, p. 28.

national and spiritual weakness and thus competitive disadvantage. Religion is not the only factor in this complex Russian psychology, and over the centuries religion has not created an insurmountable barrier to Russia finding common interests with Catholic and Protestant European powers. But in the context of persistent competition with the Catholic and Protestant West, Russian Orthodoxy does serve the purpose of informing the Russian narrative about why the country is different from, and perhaps in some ways better than, the West.

The Russian formula for competitive success came to be tightly associated with military power as a foundational aspect of Russian greatness that often takes precedence over other factors commonly associated with societal success. Russian officials believe that were Russia not militarily powerful, the country would be carved up and exploited by Western powers.

Implications for U.S. Strategy

As inflexible and dogmatic as Chinese and Russian visions of competitive advantage may be, they do manage to capture a version of at least three of the seven characteristics identified by our first-phase study.⁴ Indeed, Chinese and Russian conceptions of societal advantage carry at least an implicit message that an effective combination of these three characteristics (national ambition and will, unified national identity, and an active state), when layered on top of the cultural values of their respective societies, can provide a winning formula in a long-term rivalry regardless of China's or Russia's achievement of other factors associated with dynamism and competitive advantage. The contest between the United States and these two rivals may pivot around this essential standoff: a narrower recipe for national success based on nationalism, centralized authority, and willpower versus a more expansive formula built on networked power, grassroots dynamism, and the values of openness and freedom.

Beyond that broad conclusion, our findings on Chinese and Russian visions of societal dynamism and advantage highlight several potentially actionable lessons:

⁴ Mazarr, 2022.

- *A reliance on central guidance.* China's and Russia's conceptions of advantage rely on powerfully centralized national efforts that reflect, to them, decisive degrees of national unity, coordination, and will. The United States could respond by doing more to publicize failures in central planning in both countries, as well as U.S. and allied examples of effective governance achieved through more bottom-up methods.
- *The critical role of nationalism.* Chinese and Russian official statements and independent analysis consistently use language suggesting that strong doses of nationalism offer important competitive advantage. Reliance on such self-aggrandizing nationalism is a competitive disadvantage for both China and Russia in the constraints it puts on access to networks of talent and collaboration.
- *The role of cultural values.* Both China and Russia believe that they are operating from a base of cultural values superior to the West and view their societies as having a potent spiritual advantage that will underwrite long-term success against a decadent and morally weak West. In this sense, steps to renew the national fiber of the United States and its democratic allies are every bit as important to the long-term competition as the size of the respective defense budgets. The United States may also benefit, in direct competitive terms, from renewed investments in cultural expression.
- *The blind spots in Chinese and Russian thinking about national competitive advantage.* First, both countries appear to be relatively insensitive to reactions to their use of coercive power. Second, China's and Russia's focus on central control and national willpower as the well-springs of competitiveness tends to create a blind spot for appreciating the value of open, grassroots innovation in an environment of free experimentation. Third, China and Russia seem to have a blind spot on one of the most crucial general institutions supporting national competitiveness—the rule of law. Fourth, China and Russia resort to cultural and national sources of strategic advantage risks, reducing the talent on which each regime can call in the pursuit of strategic advantage. In China's case, an almost exclusive reliance on ethnic Han leadership could lead to diminishing flexibility in dealing with ethnic minorities. Fifth, aspects of both Chinese and Russian cultural values may tend to emphasize narrowly transactional and expedient policies

over long-term, more open-ended avenues to competitive advantage, whether domestic or international. Sixth and finally, because of their mutual faith in core national values of solidarity and willpower, there is a risk that both China and Russia may become very difficult to deter, especially in crises, because they will exaggerate their ability to outlast the United States in a conflict.

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Introduction

This report is part of a larger RAND Corporation study on the societal foundations of national competitiveness. In the first phase of the study, RAND analysts mined historical cases, multiple literatures assessing national rise and fall, and recent issue-specific research to nominate societal characteristics associated with competitive advantage.¹ That work produced an analytical view of the qualities that contribute to national dynamism and success in international rivalries—but very much from a U.S. or more broadly Western perspective. The work was grounded in mostly Western cases and U.S. and European literatures. It tended, perhaps as a result, to emphasize qualities traditionally associated with liberal Western views of competitive societies—such as shared opportunity, intellectual freedom and creativity, diversity, pluralism, and effective institutions.

That work therefore raises an important question: Might U.S. rivals think about the question of societal advantage in radically different ways? We do not mean the question in official terms—our goal here was not to discover any formal Chinese or Russian national strategies for societal advantage. Instead, we sought to conduct a more abbreviated look than our first phase at official publications and wider scholarly and analytical writings in China and Russia to discover whether we could find any parallel set of basic factors or variables that analysts or officials in both countries believe to be associated with competitive advantage. In our research, we aimed to find general themes and patterns of thinking, not actual plans.

The answer to this question may hold major importance for U.S. strategy. If U.S. rivals have a clear conception of what allows societies to pre-

¹ Michael J. Mazarr, *The Societal Foundations of National Competitiveness*, RAND Corporation, RR-A499-1, 2022.

vail in rivalries, U.S. strategists need to know that. They can then use that information to bolster U.S. and allied resilience against rival qualities—for example, identifying specific social qualities that would provide the highest value in signaling about relative dynamism. Such knowledge could also allow the United States to identify social qualities in its rivals that might be targeted for disruption. The latter possibility must be highly qualified; actively impeding the social health of rivals comes with many potential risks, especially at a time when Chinese and Russian officials and analysts strongly believe that the United States is seeking to contain and undermine their power.

This report does not speak to individual U.S. policies designed to react to Chinese or Russian conceptions of advantage. Our focus here is diagnosis—understanding what ideas may be driving Chinese and Russian thinking on the competitive advantage of societies. We sought to understand what Chinese and Russian sources themselves think of this topic, rather than outside, “objective” interpretations of their competitive standing. We reviewed Chinese- and Russian-language sources, official and unofficial, as well as external, especially U.S., analyses that offer insight on that same question: How do China and Russia view the societal sources of competitive advantage?²

An obvious challenge is distinguishing real beliefs from propaganda—determining whether Chinese or Russian statements about competitive advantage reflect the true thinking of officials, scholars, or analysts or whether these statements are part of a messaging campaign to gain perceptual advantage. Scholars and analysts might not be free to express doubts about the characteristics presented in these statements if the ruling regimes broadcast them as national advantages. Both regimes today are clearly trying to mobilize cultural narratives to serve regime purposes.

Because we cannot know China’s and Russia’s real thinking, it is impossible to answer this question definitively. However, our research provides three strong reasons to think that many Chinese and Russian officials, scholars, and analysts genuinely believe the arguments reviewed below—

² We reviewed and quote from published translations where available but otherwise provided the translations.

that each of these two nations benefits from social qualities that generate competitive advantage in international rivalries. First, many of the themes and behaviors reflected in these arguments predate the current regimes and represent long-standing theoretical arguments and patterns of political and economic organization in both countries. Second, these arguments have been made by independent scholars and analysts during periods of greater openness in both countries and by Chinese and Russian nationals living abroad, where they are not under threat of censorship in the same way. Third, even if some officials or independent thinkers may doubt some of these claims, many of them have become integral to the ideological and nationalist narrative in both countries and closely associated with the current regimes. To this extent, the arguments reflect quasi-official theories of competitive advantage.

It is important to reemphasize the focus of the overall study. Its purpose is to examine the *societal characteristics* that produce competitive advantage—the qualities of societies that lead to greater dynamism, innovation, adaptiveness, solidarity, and other intervening outcomes that help nations succeed in enduring rivalries. The study is not focused on either strategy or policy choices or exogenous factors (such as environmental events or instability in nearby territories) that are also associated with national success or failure. In this report, therefore, we focus on China's and Russia's conceptions of societal advantage—not, for example, on views in those two countries on the best strategies to generate global power and influence.

The following two chapters make an initial contribution to such understanding through our review of available literature in China and Russia that speaks to these issues. We cannot claim that the sources we have reviewed in either case represent a comprehensive portrait of thinking on these issues. But we are confident that we conducted a wide-enough survey, placed into the context of existing expertise on the strategic perspectives of both countries, and found consistent-enough patterns to conclude that we evaluated a representative range of analysis.

In the process, we had to account for a significant variety of views in both countries. In particular, some Chinese and Russian leaders and scholars, especially in the modern era, have advocated some elements of Western socioeconomic approaches as the route to national advantage. Like mod-

ernizers elsewhere, these leaders and scholars sought to make their countries powerful in part by importing European and U.S. social and political patterns and, to an inevitable degree, values. We do not seek to essentialize either country, imagining a unitary and unchanging set of views about national culture or advantage. But some clear patterns do emerge—some themes that remain consistent across time and recur in official and scholarly assessments.

Chinese Perspectives

China's rich history, cultural achievements, and impressive longevity as one of the few civilizations with direct continuity from antiquity suggest a persistent, deep reservoir of societal strengths. Premodern China was for many centuries among the world's most prosperous and successful empires. Although the country endured considerable hardships in the early 20th century, it rose from one of the world's poorest and weakest countries in the 1970s to one of the wealthiest and most powerful within four decades, adding yet one more illustrious chapter in the country's history.

Here, we will explore Chinese views of the political, social, and cultural characteristics that may have contributed to contemporary China's successes from both the preindustrial and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-led eras. We reviewed both Western academic and Chinese sources. Examples of the latter include speeches by top officials, including CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping; Chinese academic writings; and commentary in *People's Daily* [人民日报] (the CCP's newspaper) and such journals as *Seeking Truth* [求是], *Outlook* [瞭望], and *Study Times* [学习时报]. From these sources, we discerned a common set of Chinese conceptions of the features of Chinese society that might have contributed to the country's successes, using analogous concepts to those highlighted in a companion RAND report, *The Societal Foundations of National Competitiveness*.¹

There are several challenges to the study of this topic that should be acknowledged up front. First and foremost is the issue of historical discontinuity. During the late Qing and early modern periods (1800s–1940s), China experienced considerable disarray, chaos, and violence. The late imperial

¹ Mazarr, 2022.

and early republican governments were often corrupt and incompetent. The militaries of the same governments often proved inadequate in the face of insurrections and invasions by numerically inferior foreign militaries.² CCP officials frequently invoke the country's weakness in the early modern era as a rhetorical means of contrasting the country's relative success under CCP rule. In a typical formulation, for example, the CCP Central Committee's resolution on the anniversary of its founding stated,

After the Opium War of 1840, China was gradually reduced to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society due to the aggression of Western powers and the corruption of feudal rulers. The country endured intense humiliation, the people were subjected to untold misery, and the Chinese civilization was plunged into darkness.³

However, even under CCP rule, China remained poor and often politically unstable for decades. Only in the early 1980s did China begin to experience rapid economic growth and greater political stability.

This historical period of national weakness introduces a sharp divide in Chinese history. This divide complicates any attempt to directly link contemporary societal strengths to premodern influences. Preindustrial factors might have contributed to China's success during periods of prosperity, but it is possible that these factors' influence proved insufficient to overcome structural changes, such as economic collapse and the devastation wrought by war. Although we will explore evidence regarding traditional values and cultural traits, the discontinuity between more-distant historical periods and evidence and the present day will render conclusions regarding these features as tentative at best.

A second challenge in analyzing this topic lies in the thorough politicization of Chinese academic research. The CCP's authoritarian system of censorship constrains the free expression of ideas. Controls are especially strict on topics related to China's society and politics. Scholars generally are prohibited from publishing analysis that criticizes CCP rule or promotes ideas

² Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.

³ "China: 'Full Text' of CPC Resolution on Major Achievements, Historical Experiences over Past Century," Xinhua, November 16, 2021.

at odds with the party's official ideology. Moreover, the political controls also incentivize scholars and analysts to praise or exaggerate the strengths and advantages of CCP rule. Chinese scholarly journals are rife with articles that hail the "institutional strengths" and "strategic advantages" of CCP rule, for example. This reality unavoidably introduces a strong bias in the Chinese literature and limits the range of potential theories and variables that political scientists and analysts can consider in their study of Chinese society and politics. We attempt to correct the bias to a limited extent by consulting Western academic sources on relevant topics, but since our study aims to replicate China's perspective, we do not attempt to negate the bias entirely. Rather, we caveat our findings by emphasizing that the variety of views presented in Chinese scholarly writings reflect, in part, political views meant as much to persuade as to inform.

A third challenge, which also applies to the Russian case, is the variety of views within China, especially over the past several decades, about the societal sources of advantage. Some modernizers and technocrats looked to Western economic and social models to achieve success. For a time, CCP leaders partly rejected Confucian and other traditional Chinese values in favor of Western-style technocratic modernization and party rule. (Marxism-Leninism, after all, is a Western import.) The question of "[w]hat remained of China's traditional political culture" amid the massive dislocations of modernization, "in which foreign ideologies appeared incomparably more attractive than the native ones," is the source of intense debate and no clear consensus.⁴

Chinese strategic perspectives do not uniquely privilege any theory of societal advantage. Successive modern Chinese regimes have sought to preserve their security and guarantee regime continuation, goals that require "political cohesion, economic growth, a favorable balance of power, and strong armed forces."⁵ There is nothing particularly Chinese about those

⁴ Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy*, Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 164.

⁵ Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos: China's Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping*, Harvard University Press, 2018, p. 232.

approaches. The routes to them involve the same broad societal qualities stressed in the first phase of this study.⁶

There is therefore no single Chinese view of the societal qualities needed for national power. Even modernizers and Communists tended to place outside ideas in the context of Chinese cultural norms, to absorb outside ideas into the Chinese conceptual bloodstream. These patterns make for complex rather than simple narratives on the best societal characteristics. As Yuri Pines argues,

Chinese political culture cannot be understood in simplistic, monochromatic, or unilinear terms. Rather, it was full of paradoxes and tensions, reflecting what Liu Zehua aptly names its “yin-yang structure.” Adoration of monarchism coexisted with extremely critical views of individual monarchs; intellectuals were perceived as both the ruler’s servitors and his moral guides; a hierarchical mind-set coexisted with strong egalitarian tendencies; while the commoners, who were declared the “root” of the polity and the kingmakers, were also firmly excluded from participation in political processes.⁷

The rest of the chapter is organized in the following manner. In the next section, we present background information about Chinese scholarship on national power. Then, we consider some of the societal features of imperial China that might have contributed to its continuity, durability, and civilizational achievements through the rise and fall of dynasties. We highlight in particular the sense of national identity, the role of local elites, and China’s traditional emphasis on learning and education. In the section, we also note the Western and Chinese academic debate over what *traditional values* entail and how much these values might actually persist in modern China. In the subsequent section, we examine societal features in the era of CCP rule. We focus on the attributes identified by officials and scholars, who tend to emphasize political institutions and elements of CCP rule, including the party’s ability to coordinate state efforts, marshal resources and oversee major projects, and uphold ideological discipline. Drawing from

⁶ Mazarr, 2022.

⁷ Pines, 2012, p. 5.

the analysis of the two eras, we conclude that three long-standing features of Chinese society have served as sources of societal advantage: a unified national identity, a public-spirited elite, and a learning and adapting society.

Background

Chinese scholars since the 1990s have studied the roles that society and culture play in a country's comprehensive national power—that is, the sum of all types of national power. Experts have regarded *soft* forms, such as culture, society, and government administrative ability, as important components of comprehensive national power, in addition to traditional *hard* forms, such as military and economic might.⁸ For example, Huang Shuofeng, a researcher in the People's Liberation Army's Academy of Military Science, wrote that comprehensive national power included “spiritual” factors, which he defined as a country's culture, levels of education, and diplomatic skill.⁹ Jia Haitao, a professor at Jinan University, similarly argued that comprehensive national power included “cultural” power.¹⁰

In the 2000s, interest in the soft dimensions of national power grew with the popularity of Joseph Nye's theory of soft power.¹¹ Chinese scholars disagreed on the definition of *soft power*, with some emphasizing culture and values, while others regarded political activities and institutions as more essential. Scholars associated with the former include Pang Zhongying and Zhang Xiaoming, both from Beijing University. These scholars focused on the “attractiveness” of a nation's traditional and popular culture, as well as moral values. Experts associated with the latter include Yan Xuetong and

⁸ Qi Haixia, “From Comprehensive National Power to Soft Power: A Study of the Chinese Scholars' Perception of Power,” working paper, Griffith Asia Institute, 2017, p. 3.

⁹ Huang Shuofeng [黄硕丰], *New Study on Comprehensive National Power* [综合国力新论], China Social Sciences Publishing House, 1999.

¹⁰ Jia Haitao [贾海涛], “The Assessment and Ranking of China's Comprehensive National Power: Theory, Reality, and Assessment Formula” [中国综合国力评估及世界排名:理论现实及测评共识], *Journal of Nanjing University of Science and Technology* [南京理工大学社会科学版], Vol. 5, 2012, p. 25.

¹¹ See, e.g., Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, 2004.

Chu Shulong, both professors at Tsinghua University. These experts emphasized the way that institutions and political arrangements enabled a state to translate resources into results. For example, Yan and his colleague identified “internal mobilization” as one of the key elements of soft power, which they identified as the ability of elites and the populace to be organized for national purposes. They regarded China’s ability in this regard as far inferior to that of the United States.¹² According to a Griffith Asia Institute study published in 2017, the “culture” school of thought predominated in the early 2000s, but the emphasis on the “political” dimensions of soft power prevailed in the latter part of the 2000s.¹³

The literature on comprehensive national power, soft power, China’s national identity, and education shows that Chinese scholars have long regarded a society’s structure and culture to be important parts of national power and potential contributors to a nation’s competitive advantage. Although much of the scholarly community has focused on traditional culture and values, others focused on the political aspects of Chinese national power.

Sources of Societal Advantage from the Era Prior to the People’s Republic of China

Amid a history stretching back thousands of years, China has experienced considerable disruption and change but also remarkable continuity. In this section, we examine the historical period prior to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). China prior to 1949 included a brief existence as a republic in the 1920s and periods of fragmentation and dissolution in the more distant past; for the sake of brevity, we refer to this period as *imperial*, owing to the predominance of the imperial form of government over the span of several thousands of years. For our analysis, we reviewed

¹² Yan Xuetong [阎学通] and Xu Jin [恤金], “The Comparison of the Soft Power of China and the United States” [中美软实力比较], *Modern International Relations* [现代国际关系], No. 1, 2008.

¹³ Qi, 2017.

primarily Western academic sources, although we also consulted Chinese scholarship.

What was it about imperial China's society and culture that might have contributed to its longevity, durability, and successes? In the late Qing dynasty, scholars such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao emphasized timeless qualities of the country's "spirit" and cultural identity, which they regarded as a source of national strength, despite the country's obvious political, military, and economic weaknesses. They urged a selective adoption of Western technologies and ideas to strengthen the nation in a manner that did not compromise its identity and spirit.¹⁴ Several factors have been identified by scholars as particularly important, but here we will focus on the following: a sense of national identity, a public-spirited local elite, a long-standing emphasis on education and learning, and traditional values and culture. Although experts debate the degree to which the country's values remain cohesive or "traditional" amid modernizing trends, Chinese officials regard the country's values as an important source of national strength.¹⁵

National Identity

Scholars have also noted that China's rich culture and history as one of the most ancient civilizations has provided the basis for a strong identity. To be sure, a national identity in the sense of a cohesive nation-based identity tied to a state form did not exist in imperial China.¹⁶ However, Chinese people had a distinct and clear sense of identity, which reflected a mix of

¹⁴ Yount-Tsu Wong, "Revisionism Reconsidered: Kang Youwei and the Reform Movement of 1898," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3, August 1992.

¹⁵ The subject of Chinese cultural values and traditions is obviously immensely complex. To take just one example, there is a rich literature on the contest between two major value traditions—legalism and Confucianism—in Chinese history. See, for example, Bernd Eberstein, "China's History in Chinese Dress: The Struggle Between Confucianism and Legalism: Recent Developments in Chinese Historiography," *Oriens Extremus*, Vol. 24, Nos. 1/2, 1977. The CCP then partly built on and partly rejected elements of both traditions. There is not space in this report to do justice to the complex mosaic of social values represented in these different schools; we merely highlight some of the most-prominent themes in recent discussions of national competitive advantage.

¹⁶ Omar Dahbour, "National Identity: An Argument for the Strict Definition," *Public Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2002.

local and a broader culture centered on a unique written language, certain rituals promoted by the emperor, and values associated with Confucius and other philosophers and religions.¹⁷ Indeed, the CCP's relationship with the country's cultural history and ethnic identity has been ambivalent and often conflictual. Mao Zedong regarded much of China's culture and traditions as backward and inferior. Since the reform and opening period, however, Beijing has frequently drawn from its distinctive cultural identity to forge its own nationalism.¹⁸

Various forms of nationalism and national solidarity recur as themes in Chinese narratives about the country's inherent strengths. "In China," Daniel Bell argues, "political thinkers have almost always agreed on the need for a large and unified political community."¹⁹ Once achieved by early Chinese dynasties, this objective and fact—the idea of solidarity under a strong central leadership—became a broadly accepted national goal and claim of cultural advantage and indeed a core source of legitimacy for the regime.²⁰

Public-Spirited Elite

Another distinctive feature of imperial China was its relatively public-spirited elite. The central government relied heavily on subnational-level, local elites, often called *gentry*, to provide leadership and oversee important public works projects, such as the construction of roads and bridges. Local elites were often linked through kinship.²¹ Local officials raised taxes to pay for the works, which they regarded as an important responsibility.

¹⁷ Prasenjit Duara, "Historical Consciousness and National Identity," in Kam Louie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

¹⁸ Perry Link, "What It Means to Be Chinese: Nationalism and Identity in Xi's China," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 3, June 2015.

¹⁹ Daniel A. Bell, "Reforming the Administrative State: A View from China," *American Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring 2021, p. 172.

²⁰ Pines, 2012.

²¹ Yuhua Wang, "Blood Is Thicker Than Water: Elite Kinship Networks and State Building in Imperial China," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 116, No. 3, August 2022.

They also maintained social order.²² Although the types of public responsibilities undertaken by local elites were fairly limited compared with those undertaken by modern bureaucracies, the tradition of a local elite responsible for maintaining local stability and encouraging economic activity persisted into the communist era. Although Mao concentrated power in the hands of the central government, his successors gradually reverted to a more decentralized arrangement in which subnational governments took primary responsibility for ensuring stability and economic development.²³ A 2018 International Monetary Fund study noted that subnational governments were responsible for about 85 percent of state spending and revenue and much of the daily maintenance of domestic policy.²⁴ The public-spirited elites, especially at the subnational level, helped facilitate the country's rapid economic growth and maintain stability.

Education and Learning

Chinese culture has long emphasized education, in part because of the difficulties of mastering the written language. Imperial Chinese society had many tutors and educators available for hire to train and educate promising students, usually from elite families. China in imperial times also highly esteemed moral and cultural cultivation through learning. The imperial government recruited officials in part through written exams that tested a person's knowledge and understanding of classical texts.²⁵ It is worth underscoring that, in premodern China, only a tiny fraction of the population learned to read. Nonetheless, imperial China's esteem for literacy and education stood as a distinctive feature. Under the CCP, education experienced considerable disruption, in part because of the violent disruptions

²² Mary Backus Rankin, "The Origins of a Chinese Public Sphere: Local Elites and Community Affairs in the Late Imperial Period," *Chinese Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1990.

²³ Jing Ye, "The Political Logic of Changes in Local Fiscal Capacity in China," *China Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2013.

²⁴ Philippe Wingender, "Intergovernmental Fiscal Reform in China," working paper, International Monetary Fund, 2018.

²⁵ Benjamin A. Elman, "Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 1991.

of Maoist politics. However, in more-recent years the government subsequently expanded education opportunities and literacy for the nation, although access and quality vary widely.²⁶ Since the early 2000s, the CCP also embraced the idea of a learning-oriented political party as it cultivated professional and technical expertise as a governing party.²⁷

Traditional Culture and Values

Chinese scholars understandably take great pride in the sophistication and richness of their country's culture and history. But how much of a strategic advantage traditional values and culture provide remains an issue of debate. Aside from the challenge of defining precisely what those values and that culture may be, experts have debated the impact of modernization on traditional culture and values and the mechanism by which culture and values can affect national power.

In the 1990s, Singapore leader Lee Kuan Yew championed the region's "Asian values" as an ingredient of national success. Subsequently, scholars studied the impact of education, family ties, and social order on economic performance.²⁸ Experts noted that, despite modernization, cultures associated with Confucianism do appear to share certain characteristics. Japan, South Korea, and China, for example, continue to value group identity and a family cohesion despite modern change.²⁹ However, the variation in performance in the same countries and the diversity of cultures and economic outcomes in Asia have over time led many scholars to doubt the argument that adherence to "Asian values" can alone bring economic prosperity.³⁰

²⁶ W. James Jacob, "Social Justice in Chinese Higher Education: Regional Issues of Equity and Access," *International Review of Education*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2006.

²⁷ Joseph Fewsmith, "CCP Launches Campaign to Maintain the Advanced Nature of Party Members," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 13, January 30, 2005.

²⁸ Ming-Yih Liang, "Confucianism and the East Asian Miracle," *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics*, Vol. 2, No. 3, July 2010.

²⁹ Hu Xiaomeng, Sylvia Chen, Li Zhang, Feng Yu, Peng Kaiping, and Li Liu, "Do Chinese Traditional and Moral Cultures Affect Young Adults' Moral Priorities?" *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 9, No. 1799, November 2018.

³⁰ Fareed Zakaria, "The Dustbin of History: Asian Values," *Foreign Policy*, November 9, 2009.

Regarding China in particular, one analytic challenge has been to define traditional culture and values. Most experts cite Confucianism as a defining feature of Chinese culture, noting in particular values of harmony, benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, honesty, loyalty, and filial piety.³¹ Yet there have been many iterations of the classical thinker's philosophy, many of which have been considerably modified and often politicized to serve the needs of the country's rulers. For example, scholars have pointed out how the humanist and democratic spirit of some Confucian teachings have often been discarded in official teachings in favor of an emphasis on obedience and submission to authority.³² Moreover, scholars have pointed out that Chinese popular culture is a huge and varied value system, encompassing primitive beliefs in spirits from antiquity, as well as ideas from Taoism and imported Buddhism. The complexity and diversity of influences have led some scholars to challenge the notion that Chinese culture can be reduced to a single Confucian legacy.³³

The country's adherence to traditional values and culture has also been disputed. China is experiencing many of the same modernizing changes that other societies have undergone. For example, as China has moved from an agricultural to an industrial society, it has experienced increasing wealth and divorce rates, both indicators of modernity.³⁴ Western scholars also agree that China's culture is best described as a blend of traditional and modern culture and values. Nor is the mix of influences uniform across the population. Studies have found considerable variation between individuals who favor modern and those who favor traditional values. One Western academic study noted that individuals who endorsed Chinese traditional culture emphasized familism, relationships, authority, and male dominance, whereas those who endorsed modern Chinese culture put more weight on achievements, autonomy, egalitarianism, utilitarianism, quality of life, and

³¹ Zhang Lihua, "China's Traditional Culture Values and National Identity," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 21, 2013.

³² Lee Cheuk Lin, "Do Traditional Values Still Exist in Modern Chinese Societies?" *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 1, 2003.

³³ Lee, 2003.

³⁴ Hu et al., 2018.

gender equality.³⁵ Moreover, scholars debate whether these values are more strongly held in the PRC or other countries featuring significant ethnic Chinese populations. Some scholars have argued, for example, that Singapore reflects a stronger Confucian culture than China in some regards.³⁶

Despite these complexities, a few core themes of the narrative on cultural traditions do stand out. Some themes derive from the work of well-known Chinese anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists, who drew from detailed research and field work to adduce a set of social values that provided the resilience and productive capacity of Chinese society.³⁷ When seeking to make claims about cultural values that empower national strength, Chinese scholars and analysts typically refer to such qualities as solidarity within villages, larger communities, and the nation; the importance of the group over the individual; national toughness and resilience; a moral sensibility on the part of citizens and officials alike; and a strong work ethic. These qualities may or may not have a basis in Chinese history or empirical proof as sources of advantage, but they reflect classical views of elements of cultural advantage.

Chinese authorities routinely regard such purported elements of the nation's traditional culture and values as a source of competitive strength. This stance reverses the government's attitude in the Mao era, when authorities attempted to destroy traditional Chinese culture as a symptom of "backwardness." At a Politburo study session in 2022, Xi called traditional Chinese culture the "root and soul of the Chinese nation," and hailed it as the "foundation on which we can stand firm and keep pace amid the

³⁵ Hu et al., 2018.

³⁶ Steve J. Kulich and Rui Zhang, "The Multiple Frames of 'Chinese' Values: From Tradition to Modernity and Beyond," in *Oxford Handbook of Chinese Psychology*, ed. by M. H. Bond, Oxford University Press, 2012.

³⁷ A famous example is the anthropologist Fei Xiaotong, whose classic work spoke to such cultural patterns as "the rule of ritual," familial relations and kinship, village solidarity, and hard work; see Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society, A Translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo*, University of California Press, 1992. Even with such deeply revered works, however, there are debates about the degree to which they capture the essence of Chinese cultural patterns or values. See, for example, Jack Barbalet, "The Analysis of Chinese Rural Society: Fei Xiaotong Revisited," *Modern China*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2021.

turmoil of world cultures.”³⁸ The Central Committee has similarly called China’s traditional culture a “prominent strength of our nation that enables us to gain a firm footing amidst global cultural interaction.”³⁹ At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi called on officials to “do more to foster a Chinese spirit, Chinese values, and Chinese strength to provide a source of cultural and moral guidance for our people.”⁴⁰

Chinese officials regard a strong and vibrant culture as essential to building national power. As Xi explained, “Cultural confidence represents a fundamental and profound force that sustains the development of a country and a nation.” He stated, “Our country will thrive only if our culture thrives, and our nation will be strong only if our culture is strong.” He added that, “without a rich and prosperous culture, the Chinese nation will not be able to rejuvenate itself.”⁴¹

Culture and Values: A Critique of the West

The scholar Shadi Bartsch explains, “Over the past three decades, the Chinese government has become quicker to assert the superiority of their own civilization over the west, particularly the superiority of the Confucian tradition to the western (‘rationalist’) tradition.” That superiority is specifically found in such areas as virtue and civic responsibility—values that some Chinese scholars have drawn from classic Greek philosophers.⁴² Recent years have seen a renewed interest in Chinese traditions, values, and culture among scholars anxious to reconnect with the sources of national greatness and anchor the current political system in deep roots.⁴³

³⁸ “During 39th Collective Study Session of CPC Central Committee Political Bureau, Xi Jinping Stresses: Deepen Study of Chinese Civilization, History” [把中国文明历史研究引向深入增强历史自觉坚定文化自信], Xinhua, May 28, 2022.

³⁹ “China,” 2021.

⁴⁰ “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report to the 19th CPC National Congress,” Xinhua, November 3, 2017.

⁴¹ “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report to the 19th CPC National Congress,” 2017.

⁴² Shadi Bartsch, *Plato Goes to China: The Greek Classics and Chinese Nationalism*, Princeton University Press, 2023, pp. 9, 106, 183.

⁴³ Pines, 2012, p. 2.

Specifically, Bartsch notes, some Chinese scholars critique an “overemphasis on rationality” as the “source of the mess the west finds itself in now.” Such generalizations are “nonsensical,” Bartsch admits: Modern China is built on arguably an even more rational-bureaucratic foundation than the United States, and there is no evidence that Americans are more “soulless” than Chinese people. “And yet these generalizations have staying power,” she notes. She continues, “From the Chinese perspective, western rationality is geared to economics, efficiency, and profit, whereas eastern rationality has the ethical life as its goal.” Chinese scholars “are eager to compare their long-lived civilization to that of the west and to argue for the superiority of the former.”⁴⁴

The literature on the idea of a “civilizational state,” some of whose proponents are Chinese scholars, also makes a case for the inherent cultural advantages of China in the global context. Probably the best-known Chinese example is Zhang Weiwei’s *The China Wave*, which highlights several elements of a civilizational state and points in particular to some elements unique to Chinese civilization. In the process, the book emphasizes the same cultural values common to such Chinese discussions—such as putting the group over the individual and work ethic.⁴⁵ But the discussion is generic, referring most often to tradition and culture in broad terms without even precisely defining their elements and without offering any empirical basis for the claims of Chinese superiority. The book is more of a jeremiad than a true piece of analysis, but it reflects a strain of thinking among Chinese officials and scholars: the idea that Chinese civilization and its associated values have a rightful place at the head of a global hierarchy.

Yet authorities do not regard traditional Chinese culture alone as the basis of such strength. Instead, they advocate for a syncretic approach that blends traditional Chinese culture with modern ideologies, most notably Marxism, but also such ideas as nationalism from Western countries. Wang Huning, a Politburo member, is an influential intellectual who has advised

⁴⁴ Bartsch, 2023, pp. 106, 183.

⁴⁵ Zhang Weiwei, *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State*, World Century Publishing Corporation, 2012. Martin Jacques made a similar argument about a Chinese civilizational state in *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World*, Penguin, 2012.

China's top leaders since Jiang Zemin. In his writings, he argues that China had to become a culturally unified and self-confident nation governed by a strong, centralized party-state to succeed. He proposed a blending of Marxism, traditional Chinese Confucian values, legalist political thought, and Western ideas of state sovereignty, power, and nationalism to establish the basis for a stable China that would prove immune to Western liberalism.⁴⁶

Wang wrote an extensive chronicle of a long visit to the United States in which he compared the two cultures. His focus, he noted, was on answering the question, "What are the forces that dominate the struggle of people in this society for generations?" Many factors contributed to successful outcomes—"innovation, struggle, thrift, and so on." But the key advantage was "whether these things become a cultural gene, a tradition."⁴⁷ Part of his concern was why China—"this ancient civilization with a long history of more than 2,000 years"—had "declined in the modern era. Why is it lagging behind the modern nations of the world?"⁴⁸ His assessment of the United States was complex and nuanced; he stressed paradoxes and contradictions more than simple conclusions.

In Wang's ultimate assessment of U.S. society and China's ability to surmount the United States in competitive terms, he ends up strongly emphasizing the role of cultural habits and values. In his summing up, he stresses the crisis of social values in the United States: the decline of the family, ebbing national solidarity and willpower, "stray teenagers," racial tensions, and rising inequality. "The American spirit is facing serious challenges," he argues, and "the younger generation is ignorant of traditional Western values. . . . If the value system collapses, how can the social system be sustained?" Wang contends that a "society without a core value system encounters the greatest political coordination and management difficulties," and he suggests that creating a new value system through social progress is a dangerous endeavor that can go off the rails and produce "chaos and moral crisis." Although he is not explicit about it, he clearly implies in the work that

⁴⁶ N. S. Lyons, "The Triumph and Terror of Wang Huning," *Palladium*, October 11, 2021.

⁴⁷ Wang Huning, *America Against America*, independently published, 1991, Chapter 1.

⁴⁸ Wang, 1991, preface.

values in the United States are fraying rapidly and that—though he never touches on China in the book—rivals with a strong “core value system” will prevail over a dissolute America.⁴⁹

Wang’s influence can be seen in the directives by top Chinese leaders. In one speech, for example, Xi stated, “We must uphold Marxism, firm up and further build the ideal of Communism and a shared ideal of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and nurture and practice core socialist values.” At the same time, he stated, “We should cherish our cultural roots, draw on other cultures, and be forward-thinking.”⁵⁰

Similarly, when explaining how traditional Chinese culture can be blended with Marxism, officials have selectively chosen and politically defined “traditional culture” in ways consistent with CCP ideology. For example, Xi praised in particular the “rich ideas concerning the state system and the state governance,” the “tradition of the large-scale unification,” and the “rule that regards morality as the dominant factor.” He explained that when Marxism spread to China, it was “welcomed by the Chinese people” because its thinking resonated with the “excellent historical culture and the values which have been passed on for several thousand years.”⁵¹

Some commentators in China esteem in particular the country’s combination of traditional values of endurance and modernist values of collective purpose. A commentator article in *People’s Daily* claimed that the country’s success in reducing poverty was owed to the “Chinese nation’s spiritual quality of self-reliance and arduous struggle,” as well as the “unity and struggle of the entire party and the people of all ethnic groups of the entire country.”⁵² Similarly, the Central Committee’s resolution on the anniver-

⁴⁹ Wang, 1991, Chapter 11.

⁵⁰ “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report to the 19th CPC National Congress,” 2017.

⁵¹ “Adhere to and Improve Socialist System with Chinese Characteristics, Push Forward Modernization of State Governance System and Governance Capability” [坚持和完善中国特色社会主义制度推进国家治理体系和治理能力现代化], *Seeking Truth* [求是], January 1, 2020.

⁵² “Let the Spirit of Zunyi Conference Shine Forever—on the Spiritual Genealogy of Chinese Communists No. 25” [让遵义会议精神永放光芒—论中国共产党人的精神谱系之二十五], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], October 18, 2021.

sary of the CCP's founding attributed the country's achievements to its "spirit of self-reliance" and "self-confidence."⁵³

The view that the country's syncretic ideology provides China a source of national strength pervades official documents and media commentary. Authorities have, for example, defined the "culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics" as a "powerful source of strength that inspires all members of the Party and the people of all ethnic groups in China."⁵⁴ Media commentators have argued that the country must build up a strong national culture capable of infusing the nation with the will to outcompete the United States. One widely distributed commentary called for a "profound transformation" to make China strong enough to contend with the United States. The commentary warned that submission to U.S. commercial culture would cause the nation's young people to "lose their strong and masculine vibes," which could lead China to "collapse like the Soviet Union."⁵⁵

The CCP's commitment to the notion of cultural superiority is so strong that Chinese officials and commentators have often downplayed or repressed information that discredits the narrative rather than admit obvious evidence of national weakness. For example, officials have concealed data on crime, unrest, unemployment, and other facts that undercut the narrative of national greatness. In 2023, for example, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson dismissed reports of the economy's slowdown: "All sorts of comments predicting the collapse of China's economy keep resurfacing every now and then. But China's economy has outlived them all. What has collapsed is such rhetoric, not China's economy."⁵⁶

In sum, premodern China showed considerable resilience and strength despite frequent disasters and upheaval. Dynasties rose and fell, but the Chinese state showed remarkable continuity over thousands of years. Several factors that might have contributed to the Chinese state's longevity include

⁵³ "China," 2021.

⁵⁴ "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report to the 19th CPC National Congress," 2017.

⁵⁵ Jeff Pao, "China on the Cusp of a 'Profound Transformation,'" *Asia Times*, August 31, 2021.

⁵⁶ "China's Economy Remains Strongly Resilient; What Has Collapsed Is 'Chinese Collapse' Theory: Foreign Ministry," *Global Times*, September 12, 2023.

a sense of national identity, which provided a social basis for continuity and political unity; a public-spirited local elite, which facilitated economic development and helped ensure social stability; and an emphasis on education, which reinforced the sense of ethnic identity and also reflected a strong esteem for learning. Traditional values and culture have also been cited by experts as a source of national strength. However, these aspects have experienced considerable variation and change over time. Nonetheless, Chinese officials and scholars uphold a syncretic set of values that incorporates ideas from traditional, Marxist, and foreign influences to bolster national unity, morality, and purpose.

Societal Sources of Competitive Advantage in the People's Republic of China

In addition to factors from the preindustrial era, several society-related factors are regarded as sources of competitive advantage by CCP scholars and thinkers. These factors tend to center on political institutions, and relevant writings tend to reflect politically approved views that in many ways reflect propaganda. Nonetheless, Chinese officials may well believe these factors to be sources of national strength for several reasons. First, the CCP's achievements are quite impressive, compared with what imperial Chinese dynasties achieved. In particular, the CCP has overseen a rise in economic, military, and diplomatic power that far exceeds what any imperial government could hope to achieve. Second, scholars and officials who are members of the CCP have a strong incentive to identify features that buttress the legitimacy of the party, since this helps justify their own elite status.

In terms of society, modern writers emphasize the importance of institutions. As a commentary in the *People's Daily* explained, "Institutional competition is an important aspect of the competition of comprehensive national strength, and institutional advantage is an important advantage for a country to win the strategic initiative."⁵⁷ The notion that China possesses an institutional advantage over its rivals is commonly encountered in offi-

⁵⁷ Zhang Yiqi [张一琪], "Great Creation in History of Human Political System" [人类政治制度史上的伟大创造], *People's Daily* [人民日报], October 18, 2021.

cial documents and scholarly writings. For example, Xi asserted at the 19th Party Congress that the “system of socialism with Chinese characteristics” provides the “fundamental institutional guarantee for progress and development” for China.⁵⁸

These sources define this advantage in terms of the CCP’s political institutions. Chinese officials have, for example, described the system of people’s congresses as an “institutional guarantee for the creation of the miracles of rapid economic development and long-term social stability with the party leading the people.”⁵⁹ In explaining the importance of people’s congresses, Xi stated, “Institutional competition is an important aspect of the competition of comprehensive national strength, and institutional advantage is vital for a country to seize the strategic initiative.” He added that “a country will be stable if it has a stable system, and a country will be strong if it has a sound system.”⁶⁰ Xi explained, “Institutional competition is an important aspect of the competition in comprehensive national power.” Highlighting the importance of the people’s congresses, he noted that “institutional advantages are important advantages for a country to gain strategic initiative.” He added, “A stable system will make a country stable, and . . . a strong system will make a country strong.”⁶¹ Chinese media also emphasize the importance of a single strong leader to maintain unity and discipline. These sources uphold Xi’s authority in particular as a national advantage. When reelecting Xi as the country’s president, for example, an official news source, Xinhua, cited a National People’s Congress delegate as saying that under Xi’s leadership, China had “overcome one obstacle after another, and created miracle upon miracle.”⁶²

Above all, officials under Xi have emphasized CCP leadership as the most critical ingredient of national power. At the 19th Party Congress, Xi

⁵⁸ “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report to the 19th CPC National Congress,” 2017.

⁵⁹ Zhang, 2021.

⁶⁰ “Consolidate and Develop a Lively, Stable and United Political Situation” [巩固和发展生动活泼、安定团结的政治局面], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], October 15, 2021.

⁶¹ Xi Jinping [习近平], “Speech at the Work Conference of the Central People’s Congress” [在中央人大工作会议上的讲话], *Seeking Truth* [求是], February 28, 2022.

⁶² “Xinhua Headlines: Xi Jinping Unanimously Elected Chinese President, PRC CMC Chairman,” Xinhua, March 11, 2023.

hailed the leadership of the CCP as the “greatest strength of the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics.”⁶³ In a 2020 speech, Xi stated that “the greatest national condition of China is the CCP’s leadership.”⁶⁴ Similarly, the Central Committee stated in the 2021 resolution that the CCP’s “strong leadership” is the “fundamental reason why the Chinese people and Chinese nation have been able to transform their fate in modern times and achieved the great success we see today.”⁶⁵ Officials and scholars highlight several practical advantages of CCP rule, including the ability to coordinate and lead state efforts, marshal resources and carry out major projects, follow a mission of serving the people, learn and adapt, provide vision and strategic leadership, and practice ideological discipline.

Coordinate and Lead State Efforts

Chinese officials explain that the CCP’s ability to coordinate all elements of national power and ensure a unity of effort lies at the heart of its importance. Xi explained that the party’s leadership is the “fundamental guarantee for doing well the various work of the party and country, and the fundamental point for our country’s political stability, economic development, national unity, and social stability, and must absolutely not waver in the slightest.” He described as an “outstanding characteristic of the superiority of our country’s socialist political system” the CCP’s role in “commanding the overall situation and coordinating the efforts of all quarters.”⁶⁶

Marshal Resources and Carry Out Major Projects

Another characteristic identified by authorities as a source of competitive advantage is the ability to marshal resources and carry out major projects.

⁶³ “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report to the 19th CPC National Congress,” 2017.

⁶⁴ Xi Jinping [习近平], “The Leadership of the Chinese Communist Party Is the Most Essential Feature of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” [中国共产党领导是中国特色社会主义最本质的特征], *Seeking Truth* [求是], July 15, 2020.

⁶⁵ “China,” 2021.

⁶⁶ Xi, 2020.

In a speech, a senior economic official stated that China would draw on the “institutional advantage of pooling national resources to advance major projects” to carry out technological development during the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021–2025).⁶⁷ Another commentary in *People’s Daily* observed that China’s “excellent economic performance” and “strong capacity for development” reflected the CCP’s “institutional advantage” of “concentrating our efforts on doing big things.”⁶⁸

Serve the People

In evaluating its own strength, party writers place emphasis on the ostensible mission of serving the people. Xi explained that the CCP “always represented the fundamental interests of the broad masses of the people.” He added that “safeguarding the people’s legitimate rights and interests” are the “fundamental reasons why the state system and the state governance system of our country can effectively operate and are full of vitality.”⁶⁹ Similarly, the 2021 CCP resolution stated, “The Party’s greatest political strength is its close ties with the people, while the biggest potential danger it faces as a governing party is becoming distanced from them.” It continued,

The Party represents the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people. It has no special interests of its own, nor has it ever represented the interests of any individual interest group, any power group, or any privileged stratum. This is the fundamental reason why the Party has maintained its inviolable strength.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Mu Xuequan, “China to Advance Major Projects with ‘Whole Nation’ Efforts: Official,” *Xinhua*, March 6, 2021.

⁶⁸ “Highlight the ‘Institutional Advantage’ of China’s Development” [彰显中国发展的“制度优势”], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], October 23, 2019.

⁶⁹ “Adhere to and Improve Socialist System with Chinese Characteristics, Push Forward Modernization of State Governance System and Governance Capability,” 2020.

⁷⁰ “China,” 2021.

Willingness to Learn

Chinese leaders have also emphasized the CCP's pragmatism and willingness to learn as another strategic advantage. Xi stated, "We have never excluded the governance experience of any country that is conducive to China's development and progress." He noted as examples how, in the "period of socialist construction," China established a state governance system that reflected "much useful experience from the Soviet Union." However, since the advent of reform and opening policies in the 1970s, the CCP has "organically integrated the socialist system with the market economy."⁷¹

This openness to borrowing foreign ideas and approaches is sometimes offered as an inherent aspect of Chinese culture. If so, it is surely an inconsistent trait: Important periods of Chinese history have involved harsh suppression of foreign influences. In the post-1970s period, at least, the "China model" has emerged in part through experimentation, flexibility, and trial and error, with a willingness to borrow others' strategies and techniques. Even a broader openness to learning in the design and application of social initiatives, however, is difficult to identify as an inherently Chinese characteristic that has been persistent over time. But the CCP has made adaptiveness and pragmatism a strength and at least publicly advertises these values as rooted in Chinese culture.

Strategic Vision and Leadership

Authorities also emphasize the CCP's strategic vision and leadership as a key advantage. In a typical formulation, the Central Committee hailed the party's role in "commanding the overall situation," and the party's leadership in the government, military, and economy have resulted in "institutional advantages in governing the country in an orderly manner, developing various causes in a highly efficient manner, and ensuring a harmonious and stable society."⁷²

⁷¹ "Adhere to and Improve Socialist System with Chinese Characteristics, Push Forward Modernization of State Governance System and Governance Capability," 2020.

⁷² "The Most Essential Characteristic of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics Is the Leadership of the Communist Party of China" [中国特色社会主义最本质的特征是中国共产党的领导], *People's Daily* [人民日报], February 28, 2018.

One potential advantage of this quality is to allow investments in longer-term projects. Although there are limits to central authority in China, and a truly powerful coordinating entity is a relatively new phenomenon, a centralized, CCP-led political institution at least in theory can discipline all actors to endure short-term pain for long-term policy success and resist distractions. This is reflected by some CCP political writings, one of which states that “marshal[ing] resources to carry out major tasks” can avoid the long decision cycle, low morale, and low efficiency of capitalist societies without being subject to the influence of interest groups.⁷³ Another *People’s Daily* article argues that the Chinese governance system is “advantaged to persist on treating the entire country as one game of chess, [and to] mobilize the eagerness/initiative [to achieve] from all aspects.”⁷⁴ The idea of mobilizing eagerness to achieve shows the belief that the institution can effectively manage and create incentives for all actors for a holistic goal.

Ideological Discipline

Some sources regard the CCP’s Marxist ideology as a source of strength. They argue that the ideology provides a basis for political discipline and unity. The ideology also provides an intellectual tool for analysis. One commentary explained that the CCP’s effectiveness stemmed from the “scientific theory, common ideals and beliefs, tight organizational system, and iron discipline” arising from adherence to its Marxist ideology.⁷⁵ Some commentaries argue that the CCP’s ideological discipline and influence on China’s society provide another source of strategic advantage. One arti-

⁷³ Xiaonan Hong [洪晓楠], “The Significant Advantages of Concentrating Strengths for Major Tasks” [集中力量办大事的显著优势], CPC News [中国共产党新闻网], May 15, 2020.

⁷⁴ Central Party School, Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era Research Center [中央党校(国家行政学院)习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想研究中心], “The Significant Advantage of Concentrating Strengths to Carry Out Major Tasks Makes the Great Governance of China” [集中力量办大事的显著优势成就‘中国之治’], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], March 13, 2020.

⁷⁵ Liu Yushan [刘云山], “Some Norms Regarding Intra-Party Political Life Under the New Situation” [严肃党内政治生活净化党内政治生态], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], November 7, 2016.

cle stated that, “compared with Western civil societies, a people’s society is superior.” The article explained that a “people’s society” is “essentially a socialist society.” A “people’s society” is constructed with the goal to “benefit the entire body of the people” and is based on “principles such as public ownership, public interests, public fairness, and public justice.” The article added that the “leader of people’s society is the CCP,” and its “fundamental feature” is that of a “harmonious society.” At the same time, it stated that the people’s society “has its roots in Chinese traditional culture” and “yet is a contemporary innovation.”⁷⁶

In sum, officials and scholars identify a variety of institutions and political features as critical to China’s success. Some of these add to and reinforce societal features from the preindustrial era. For example, the CCP’s emphasis on ideological discipline and creation of a syncretic values system builds on a strong sense of national identity. The CCP’s ability to marshal and oversee major projects and its emphasis on “serving the people” through governance evokes the idea of a public-spirited local elite. Of course, in both cases, elites often proved self-serving, corrupt, and cynical. But in other cases, they did contribute to the public good through the provision of public works, maintenance of social stability, and facilitation of economic activity. Similarly, the CCP’s emphasis on learning and adaptation evokes traditional China’s esteem of education and learning. This pragmatism and willingness to learn arguably played a key role in enabling the CCP to avoid the fate of its Soviet brethren, who remained far more attached to rigid ideological dogmas even when such adherence proved counterproductive.

Conclusion: Chinese Society Is a Blend of Old and New

China’s stunning rise as a world power owes to many factors. In addition to natural endowments, such as a large population and natural resources, the country has benefited from cultural and political institutions and influences. Although determining the precise role that societal characteristics

⁷⁶ Hu Angang [胡鞍钢], “People’s Society Is China’s Major Innovation in Theory and Practice” [人民社会为何优于公民社会], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], July 19, 2013.

played in the country's success remains challenging, Chinese authorities and scholars clearly regard these features as of high importance. Imperial China experienced considerable continuity despite the rise and fall of dynasties for many reasons, but a strong sense of national identity, a public-spirited elite, and a long-standing emphasis on education and learning likely contributed to some degree. Traditional values and culture also helped reinforce a sense of national cohesion, pride, and moral bearing through such tumultuous change.

CCP officials and scholars have articulated a variety of institutional advantages that reflect, in part, the peculiar political arrangements of the ruling party. Chinese sources highly esteem the CCP's ability to provide vision and leadership, ideological discipline, and governance; marshal resources; and coordinate policy. Some features of CCP rule reinforce and build on features from the historical period prior to the PRC, in particular those related to national identity, public-service oriented elites, and a willingness to learn and adapt.

Russian Perspectives

Russia traces its origins to the tenth century, when Vladimir the Great converted to Orthodox Christianity. Since that time, Russia and the Russians have had a restless history, searching for a living space among their equally restless neighbors.¹ Like every country of modern Europe, Russia's borders have been in flux for centuries. Mongols invaded in the 13th century and did not fully retreat until the 15th. Poles followed in the early 17th century and briefly occupied Moscow, and Napoleon arrived at the Russian capital in 1812. For its part, Russia over the past several hundred years expanded its borders and sphere of influence under the flags of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union and defeated the Nazi war machine on the Eastern Front. Over that same period, Russians made their mark in the arts and sciences, counting among them some of the greatest authors, conductors, and scientists in the world.

Russia's history is beset with impressive achievements and notable setbacks. The swings have at times been drastic, with Russia at one point in history occupying a top geopolitical position, while the next relegated to a marginal player in world affairs. One consistent theme, however, is that Russia is not content to be a bystander to events but is determined to play the role of a great power toward the top of global hierarchies. As one analyst put it, post-Soviet Russia could not be "another Poland."² It is this insistence on relevance, respect, and greatness that has been Russia's most important guiding light as an empire or nation. In this chapter, we combine observa-

¹ Dmitri Trenin, *The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002, pp. 29–76.

² Fyodor Lukyanov, "The Lost Twenty-Five Years," *Russia in Global Affairs*, February 28, 2016.

tions of Russian behavior and outcomes with a range of Russian and Western sources—including official statements, public opinion polling, and academic literature—to examine the characteristics that Russians themselves associate with their country’s enduring quest to be a great power.

Caveats on Essentialism and Dissenting Views in Russia

In the discussion that follows, there might be some concern that we are making essentialist arguments about the Russian people, that there is some hardwiring irrespective of external factors among the general population that would preclude changes to the political status quo. This is not our view. Our aim in this chapter is to reflect the contemporary views of the Russian elite, population, and informed observers about Russian perceptions on the ingredients to national success. What has been true or is true today might not always be so. There are many examples of countries charting a new course that deviates from long-standing historical patterns. If and when that change occurs in Russia, perhaps with the rise of a population whose majority did not come of age during the Soviet Union, it will be grounds for new analysis on the societal and external conditions that might have produced the outcome.

As in the Chinese case, various groups of modernizers have argued that Russia needed to pursue competitive advantage through Western-style modernity, with some of the accompanying norms and societal qualities. As in China, a modernizing Communist regime made vast investments in competition through massive industrialization and industrial-era social institutions. Anne Clunan describes this argument in the post–Cold War period: “Some members of the elite viewed this Russian uniqueness as the basis for Russia’s future development. Others saw it as the reason for Russia’s past failure to achieve the desired level of political and economic development and a reason to embrace a Western path.” More than half of elites polled in 1993 believed that Russia “should adopt Western values and institutions, not just its technologies,” because these represented the only fea-

sible way of competing globally.³ Thus, we are cognizant of a spectrum of views among the Russian people on what does or could make the country great, and the prominence of one strain or another in Russian society could change alongside circumstances.

At the same time, observing outcomes in Russia today that have been the norm in the country's long history leads to a justifiable argument that a critical mass of the Russian people and elite support or accept the approach to societal organization we describe in this chapter as optimal for achieving national success. As Clunan further points out, "Nationalists, communists, and great power 'patriots' also emphasized Russia's historical past as a culturally unique civilization destined to be distinct from the West" and "believed that Russia had a mission to lead the rest of the world in confronting it."⁴ As we will show below, this view can be supported empirically by observing what Russians have or have not done in the 21st century, as well as by reading official statements and public opinion polling throughout the 2000s. It is important to put public responses into a modern context—poor living conditions for many Russians in the 1990s are an important factor, for example—while recognizing that Russian views about the path to national greatness have persisted across generations in varying conditions.

It is also important to address the idea that there are and always have been dissenting views within Russian society on the ideal path to national success. The fact that divergent views exist—and those views tend to prioritize a dilution of highly centralized authority—reinforces the point that Russia in the future could take an alternative path from the one it is currently on under President Vladimir Putin and his supporters. And in the marketplace of competing ideas, which is increasingly repressed in Russia, an opposition with a different understanding of the characteristics of national success could eventually come to power. But this would be the exception in Russian history, not the rule. That it is the exception leads us to focus our discussion on the prevailing and persistent view on the characteristics of Russian national success.

³ Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, pp. 57, 59.

⁴ Clunan, 2009, p. 59.

Russia's Fixation on Greatness

Greatness is a relative idea. It results from a comparison with something else. It is also a product of external acknowledgment that one is great. For Russia, the quest for greatness is closely connected to its relations with its European neighbors, who in various forms have been Russia's competitors (and, at times, allies) for centuries. Russians can believe that they are part of a great country, but if they do not measure up to the competition or receive the desired respect from others, a certain dissonance is created. In this sense, as much as other major powers, Russia has a deeply ingrained tendency to obsess about its standing relative to others. In theory, Russia ought to be deeply interested in the qualities of societies that determine such positioning.

History informs the Russian belief in national greatness. Russia began as a smattering of loosely connected principalities around the Moscow region. The Grand Duchy of Moscow's victory of the Novgorod Republic in July 1471 at the Battle of Shelon helped to consolidate power in the hands of the Muscovite prince and later the tsar of Russia. Since that time, Russia expanded significantly. By the late 19th century, the tsar claimed territory from modern Ukraine to Central Asia to Alaska. Like many countries at that time, territorial expansion was the primary indicator of greatness, and Russia was and remains a country occupying more land than any other (in its current borders, Russian territory accounts for roughly 11 percent of the world's landmass, twice as much as the next largest country, Canada). In 1550, Russia's population of 8.6 million was roughly equivalent to that of the Poland-Lithuania Commonwealth. By 1900, Russia was the largest country in Europe by population, consisting of nearly 150 million people, followed by Germany at 62 million.

Russia has never been a rich country by European standards, however. Despite having a fraction of the population of the Russian Empire in 1890, the economies of Germany, the United Kingdom, and Japan were respectively larger in absolute terms.⁵ Russia's size also did not always translate to military victory, with Russia losing wars to the British, French, and Otto-

⁵ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Vintage Books, 1987, p. 171.

mans in 1856; to Japan in 1905; and to Germany and the Central Powers in 1917–1918. Of course, the Soviets defeated the Nazis on the Eastern Front in 1945, a moment that remains very important in the historical memory of many Russians today, although this victory was not a product of economic or technological sophistication so much as immense amounts of national mobilization, brute industrial output, operational creativity, and willpower.⁶

When Russian leaders and Russian citizens look back on their thousand-year history, they conclude that Russia was, is, and will always be a great power. They understand that Russia by some metrics does not measure up to other powers, such as the United States, China, Germany, France, or the United Kingdom. But it was the Russians who industrialized at a rapid pace and ultimately defeated the Nazis on the Eastern Front; it was the Russians who expanded their territory; it was the Russians who produced literature, compositions, art, scientific breakthroughs, and space exploration that have drawn the admiration of the world; and it was the Russians who commanded the grudging acknowledgment of the West that the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact could not be defeated militarily without unacceptable risk. Crucially, Russia accomplished this not by copying the West but by drawing on its own experience to forge a unique path.⁷

From 1992 to 2020, popular Russian support for the idea that “Russia must preserve the role of a great power” has never dropped below 72 percent of those surveyed; since 2017, support has hovered around 85 percent.⁸ In his vision for Russia prior to taking over as president in 2000, Putin wrote, “Russia was and will remain a great power. It is preconditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic, and cultural existence.”⁹ In Clunan’s analysis of popular and elite opinion in the post–Cold War period, the *only* major theme that unified Russians across many views of national identity was “a shared aspiration to restore Russia’s status as a great

⁶ Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie-2020*, 2020, p. 29.

⁷ The idea of *otherness* from the West and most other countries is a continuing theme in Russian thought. See Isaiah Berlin, *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture Under Communism*, Brookings Institution Press, 2016, p. 123.

⁸ Levada Center, 2020, p. 28.

⁹ Vladimir Putin, “Rossiia na rubezhe tysyacheletii,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, December 30, 1999.

power on par with the leading countries in the West and an aversion to an ideologically driven foreign policy but little else.” Russia’s “quest for great power status has a long historical pedigree. Shared memories of Russia’s past status as a great power—whether global, European, or Eurasian—created a core aspiration among most political elites to retain or regain that status.”¹⁰

The scholar Tim McDaniel connects these notions to arguably the most significant and consistent theme in Russian identity: the so-called Russian idea. The idea, he explains, is that “Russia has its own, independent, self-sufficient, and eminently worthy cultural and historical tradition that both sets it apart from the West and guarantees its future flourishing.” This national-cultural basis of strength represents “a separate and potentially higher form of modernity.”¹¹ This notion, that Russia has a distinct identity that provides the best long-term sources of national advantage, is the foundation for many of the specific components discussed in the following sections.

The Instruments of Russian Greatness

Russians aspire to be a part of a country that is a great power. But what qualities or factors produce greatness for Russia? Although emulation has been a persistent approach in intergroup competition over millennia, Russians have never looked at how the richer countries of the West achieved greatness and concluded, “That is the way for us.”¹² In the post-Soviet era, Russia could have taken Austria—a former seat of empire surrounded by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that remains outside the alliance—as a model, for instance, and determined that Russia should follow a similar path of political and economic organization and Western integration. In

¹⁰ Clunan, 2009, pp. 59, 55.

¹¹ Tim McDaniel, *The Agony of the Russian Idea*, Princeton University Press, 1998, pp. 10–11.

¹² Although it is true that Russian tsars, such as Peter the Great, sought to incorporate some elements of Western European culture and norms, these changes did not fundamentally influence the underlying Russian system based on highly centralized authority and a collective mentality among the population.

2021, Austria had a higher gross domestic product (GDP) per capita than Germany, and few would argue that Austria is at risk of imminent invasion even though it is a small country surrounded by NATO and has suffered calamitous military invasions over the past several hundred years.¹³

In other words, Russia could have adopted a model based on democratization, free markets, and the rule of law in the belief that these ideas produced prosperity and security. Rather, when asked about the proper direction for their country in 2001, 71 percent of Russian citizens surveyed agreed that Russia “belonged to a special—‘Eurasian’ or Orthodox—civilization and as a result a western course of development was not appropriate [for Russia].”¹⁴ Other survey data covering a longer period show that there is a widespread belief among the Russian elite and population that Russia must develop according to its own distinctive history and national character.¹⁵ From 2000 to 2020, only a small minority agreed that Russia should develop along the lines of “European civilization.” Large pluralities or majorities wanted to achieve Western standards of living, but they believed that Russia must “take its own, special path” to do so.¹⁶ These ends and means in Russian popular opinion are shown in Table 3.1, which shows data from the annual public opinion survey by the Moscow-based Levada Center.

These survey data, Russian historical patterns that have continued through the Putin era, and some Western research on the Russian state together suggest that Russians see the means to success differently from many of their European neighbors, including former Soviet republics and parts of the former Russian Empire. In Poland, which went through a form of “shock therapy” and endured economic hardships in the 1990s and early 2000s, there were different views from Russia on the road to societal success. In 2002, when more than 90 percent of Poles described their national economic situation as “bad,” 51 percent had favorable views on U.S. democracy, compared with 28 percent of Russians. In Ukraine, where the economic

¹³ World Bank, “GDP per Capita, PPP (Current International \$),” World Development Indicators database, undated-a (selecting Austria, Russian Federation, and Germany).

¹⁴ Levada Center, “Press-vypusk No. 32: 13 noiabria 2001 goda,” November 13, 2001.

¹⁵ Levada Center, 2020, p. 28.

¹⁶ Levada Center, 2020, p. 28.

TABLE 3.1

Sample of Russian Views on Developmental Ends and Means, 1998–2014

Ends: What would you ideally like to see for Russia in the future?	1998 (%)	2006 (%)	2007 (%)	2013 (%)	2014 (%)
Just the way it is now	2	9	10	8	15
Like it is in developed Western countries	43	43	50	39	40
Like it was during the USSR	36	32	25	25	27
Like it was in 1917	5	5	4	7	3
Something different	6	5	4	8	6
Difficult to answer	9	6	6	14	14
Means: Which of the opinions do you agree with?	1999 (%)		2014 (%)		
Russia will become a prosperous country only based on its own ingenuity, following its own special, unique path, distinct from that of the West	72		77		
Russia will become a prosperous country only if it follows the same path as the West	16		12		
Difficult to answer	13		10		

SOURCE: Survey questions and data translated from Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie-2014*, 2014, p. 28.

situation was also quite poor at the time, 53 percent liked U.S. ideas about democracy.¹⁷

Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, other data showed that a majority in Russia did not share the same views about the building blocks of societal success as people in such countries as Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Ukraine. In 2007, Russians polled expressed considerably lower support for “core democratic values” compared with people in these other countries.¹⁸ Given the lackluster results of Russia’s political and eco-

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, *What the World Thinks in 2002*, 2002, p. 64.

¹⁸ Pew Research Center, *World Publics Welcome Global Trade—but Not Immigration*, October 4, 2007, p. 57.

nomic reforms in the 1990s, such views are perhaps understandable. But it is important to note that Russia for centuries, in a variety of socioeconomic contexts, has rejected the adoption of Western alternatives. And Russia's neighbors, such as Poland and Ukraine, similarly endured harsh economic times in the 1990s and early 2000s and yet had different ideas about their countries' paths to success.

Putin and other Russian thought leaders (past and present) similarly have associated the adoption of Western principles as a path to subservience. Citing a tsarist-era Russian theorist, Putin wrote in 2012,

People often think proclaiming various freedoms and universal suffrage will in and of itself have some miraculous strength to direct life onto a new course. In actual fact, in such instances in life, what happens usually turns out not to be democracy, but depending on the turn events take, either oligarchy or anarchy.¹⁹

To be sure, Putin as an unchallenged autocrat has every reason to adopt such rhetoric to perpetuate the idea that Russians should accept his continued, unchallenged rule. But public opinion polling suggests that there is a relatively large and receptive audience for these ideas in Russian society.

Although the current Western model is built on democracy, the rule of law, and protection of human rights, Russia in general hews to a more conservative ideology that prioritizes consolidated authority and so-called traditional religious values, which in turn are supposed to produce order and societal stability.²⁰ More than anything, Russian society's behavior, which

¹⁹ Quoted in Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Brookings Institution Press, 2013, p. 55.

²⁰ Henry Hale, a scholar on Russia, casts doubt on popular Russian "support" for autocracy. Hale relies on data from a survey series that dates from the mid-1990s to 2008. See Henry Hale, "The Myth of Mass Russian Support for Autocracy: The Public Opinion Foundations of a Hybrid Regime," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 8, October 2011. For similar views, see Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev*, Free Press, 2011, pp. 377–389. Data are available showing that Russians support democracy in word. But, in practice, a critical mass—a large enough number to overthrow autocratic authorities and sustain a true democratic political order—has yet to make an appearance in Russia's long history. Hale's and other research suggest that this change is possible, but until empirical evidence shows otherwise, we have to con-

accepts an autocratic leader who promotes Russia as a conservative bulwark against the amoral West, points to this conclusion. Thus, a 19th-century maxim credited to Sergei Uvarov, the Russian minister of education from 1833 to 1849, remains useful to understand how Russians understand instruments of greatness. Amid growing internal antagonism to Russian authority in the 1820s, Uvarov asserted that Russia's continued greatness stood on three pillars: autocracy, Orthodoxy, and nationality.²¹ More-contemporary Russian thought leaders argued much the same while searching for a "Russian idea" in the 1990s.²²

This formula came to be tightly associated with military power as a foundational aspect of Russian greatness that often takes precedence over other economic and political building blocks commonly associated with societal success in the West. Russian elites in particular tend to prioritize military strength above economic considerations or high standards of living. As one historian observed, "Insecurity led Russia to the development of a military establishment far in excess of what the country's inhabitants and economic resources could prudently bear."²³ And Russia traditionally has not been willing to connect alliance building to a reduction in military expenditures.

Thus, we might rephrase Uvarov's slogan this way: In the Russian view, autocracy and the Orthodox religion serve as the foundation of order and stability in Russian society, a foundation that gives the leader the political space to ensure Russia's security, economic growth, and international status (see Figure 3.1). It is indeed a top-down way of thinking about how to produce desired outcomes. In the sections below we will therefore focus on how autocracy, Orthodoxy, economic and technological development, toughness and willingness to sacrifice, and military strength continue to underpin Russians' views about their country's distinctive greatness.

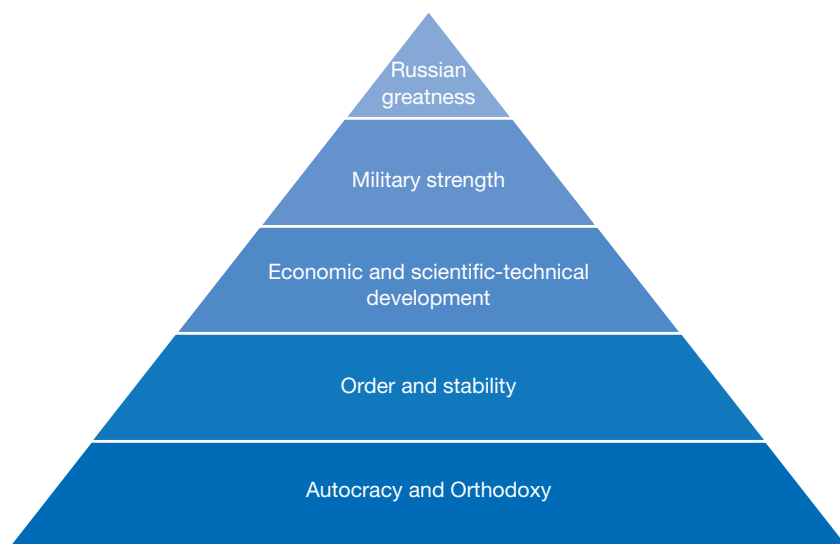
clude that most Russians either support the status quo or are indifferent to the form of their political system.

²¹ The Russia scholar Brian Taylor identified similar characteristics of the Russian national project under Putin. See Brian Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

²² Hill and Gaddy, 2013, pp. 63–75.

²³ Richard Pipes, *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture*, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 10.

FIGURE 3.1
Foundations of Russian Greatness



SOURCES: Analysis based on Putin, 1999; Hill and Gaddy, 2013; Vladimir Putin, “‘Byt’ sil’nyimi: garantii natsional’noi bezopasnosti dlia Rossii,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, February 19, 2012.

To be sure, this is not to suggest that these avenues to greatness, via economic development, military power, regional predominance, or other means, have objective empirical support or actually produce the outcomes Russian leaders desire. There is an extensive literature on the barriers to economic modernization, development, and technological progress imposed by aspects of the Soviet and Russian systems—the negative implications, for example, of centralized control. Many Russian reformers of the 1990s and well into the 2000s were motivated by precisely such evidence of the need to adopt more Western-centric approaches to national dynamism.²⁴ In par-

²⁴ See, for example, Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, Sergei Guriev, and Andrei Markevich, “New Russian Economic History,” Center for Economic Policy Research, April 23, 2022; Sergei Guriev and Andrei Rachinsky, “The Role of Oligarchs in Russian Capitalism,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Winter 2005; Sergei Guriev and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, “Why Russia Is Not South Korea,” *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 2, 2010.

ticular, this literature stresses a classic institutionalist barrier to competitive advantage: Russian political and economic institutions are less coherent, effective, and transparent than those of many highly developed nations, and this fact undercuts the benefits of these other purported sources of advantage. This is arguably a critical blind spot that creates what could be an insurmountable contradiction for Russia between the goal of greatness and the ways to achieve it.

Autocracy

As noted above, highly centralized, unchallenged authority has been a mainstay of Russia's political order for centuries. Russian tsars, Soviet general secretaries (Joseph Stalin, in particular), and the current Russian president have all exercised nearly unlimited power to steer the empire (country) in whatever direction they saw fit. Clearly, there were incentives to provide the Russian people with certain standards of living to avoid societal disruptions and revolution, but Russian leaders have for the most part never had to compete with political rivals in elections or seek the approval of the people to justify their continued presence in the Kremlin. And, again, this form of political organization has historically been seen by a sufficient number of Russians as a strength for their country and instrumental to preserving its independence and greatness.²⁵

Since the 17th century, movements against autocratic rule have made appearances in Russian history. The opposition has sought to dilute the power of a single ruler based on existing Western norms of the day. The Orthodox Church and an influential elite have often come to the defense of the status quo, explaining that Russia copying the West would ultimately lead to the country's poverty and dependence on richer neighbors. As Nikolai Karamzin, a Russian historian, put it in around 1810: "Autocracy has founded and resuscitated Russia. Any change in her political constitution has led in the past and must lead in the future to her perdition."²⁶ There seems to be a persistent belief among a critical mass of the elite and society

²⁵ See the discussion of statism as a major component of Russian identity in Clunan, 2009, pp. 64–67.

²⁶ Quoted in Pipes, 2005, p. 1.

at large in Russia that competition for power leads to disorder in Russian society, which leads to weakness, which leads to exploitation by outsiders.²⁷ Conversely, an unchallenged leader can bring prosperity by creating order and stability. According to Catherine the Great, “The purpose of ‘autocracy’ is not to deprive people of natural liberty, but to steer their actions toward the greatest good.”²⁸

Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy detail the continuity in this line of thinking in modern Russian political thought.²⁹ They note how Putin associated order with stability and autocracy with order, whereas he believed that democracy would pave the way to anarchy in Russia. In practice, that meant that for Russia to be successful, it needed a powerful state, and the state can only be powerful in Russia if it is unchallenged. Thus, around 2002 the Kremlin began to consolidate state control over the country.³⁰ One key action was to subordinate television broadcasting companies to state control or to individuals loyal to the Kremlin. Another was to whittle away the independence of the Russian judicial system. And a final act was to make clear to the “captains of industry” that they should not use their wealth to engage in opposition politics. The arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and seizure of the oil company Yukos’s assets in 2003 was an unmistakable signal of the willingness of Putin to match words with deed. From that time, autocratic rule in Russia has become increasingly entrenched.³¹ As of early 2023, Freedom House described Russia as a “consolidated authoritarian regime”³²—but while the term was meant as a condemnation, for Putin and many Russian officials, the trend was a source of reassurance and a guarantee of Russia’s competitive standing.

²⁷ Hill and Gaddy, 2013, pp. 38–62.

²⁸ As cited in Andrei P. Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia: Development and Crisis*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 11.

²⁹ Hill and Gaddy, 2013, pp. 38–62.

³⁰ Karen Dawisha, *Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* Simon & Schuster, 2015, pp. 266–312.

³¹ Michael McFaul, “Russia’s Road to Autocracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 32, No. 4, October 2021.

³² Freedom House, “Countries and Territories,” dataset, undated.

The Russian people themselves tend to hold similar views that Russia above all must have a strong state. This view provides the base of support for the idea that centralized authority is a preferred form of governance in Russia.³³ Although Russians in polls profess to support democracy, they do not necessarily have in mind competitive elections and checks and balances, nor does Russians' support mean that they are prepared to bring democracy about through active participation in the political process.³⁴ Andrei Tsygankov, a scholar of Russian governance, pointed to polls from 2005 to 2011 in which respondents stated that Russia should have its own form of democracy that corresponded to its unique national traditions.³⁵ In practice, that has meant a general acceptance (or support) of a controlled information space, with preference for single narratives and presidential elections in which the winner is predetermined and no real challenger is allowed.

In Russia, liberal opposition movements have periodically appeared throughout Russian history but have yet to make a lasting and comprehensive effect on Russian politics. Instead, we observe a pattern of autocracy generating liberal protests and demands for reform, leading to a reconsolidation of autocracy—most recently in the 1990s, early 2000s, and 2012. As Tsygankov points out, “Although there is a pro-Western group within Russian liberalism, such thinking rarely commands strong popular support.”³⁶

In the years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there again was a cadre of politicians and elements of Russian society that supported a new path for Russian political organization. And there was a possibility Russia could have chosen a different course. The reformer politician Boris Nemtsov, who was later assassinated in 2015, was seemingly on a path to power in Russia in the late 1990s. But the vision of Nemtsov and the new *westernizers* and moderates was never realized, and Russia opted for the more traditional path of autocracy. When a new movement sprang up under the prominent leadership of the politician Alexei Navalny, he was

³³ Richard Pipes, “Flight from Freedom: What Russians Think and Want,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 2004.

³⁴ See Hale, 2011.

³⁵ Tsygankov, 2014, pp. 131–132.

³⁶ Tsygankov, 2014, p. 133.

poisoned by Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officers and is now in prison.

The longevity, repetitiveness, and extreme form of Russia's autocratic form of government raises the possibility that it is not just the result of arbitrary historical events and personalities but something deeper in a Russian culture that is the product of hundreds of years of evolution in a particular environment.³⁷ Geography and religious history appear to be leading factors underpinning this culture. In Russia, over time they produced a comparatively extreme version of concentrated authority, along with a conservatism among Russian thought leaders and large numbers of the Russian population who emphasize the positive value of Russia's autocratic model and assume that things would only be worse were it to change.³⁸ This is why up to today Russia's leaders and much of its population believe or accept that unchallenged political authority is the most effective form of governance to achieve security and realize national aspirations. To be sure, as Russian authority has become increasingly repressive against divergent views, it is more difficult to determine what people believe versus what they feel compelled to accept against their preferences.

Orthodoxy

The role of Eastern Orthodoxy in Russian society and its associations with greatness are complex. Russians over centuries have emphasized the importance of the Eastern Orthodox religion to their personal and national identity.³⁹ As we noted in the discussion of survey data on Russia's preferred

³⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011; Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*, Picador, 2020; Julia Ioffe, "Putin's Post-Prigozhin Clean Up," *Puck Newsletter*, July 5, 2023.

³⁸ Marshall T. Poe, "A People Born to Slavery": *Russia in Modern European Ethnography, 1476–1748*, Cornell University Press, 2000; Stephen Watts, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Benjamin N. Harris, and Clint Reach, *Alternative Worldviews: Understanding Potential Trajectories of Great-Power Ideological Competition*, RAND Corporation, RR-2982-NIC, 2020, online appendixes, p. 24.

³⁹ Pipes, 2005, p. 182.

path of national development, Russians use Orthodoxy as a characteristic of Russianness that distinguishes them and their chosen development model from the West. Orthodoxy informs Russian foreign policy, which has long sought to preserve the closeness of the Orthodox Eastern Slavs in Ukraine and Belarus. The Orthodox religion and its conservative values, according to Putin, serve to protect Russian society (and religious conservatives outside Russia) from falling into the decadence and moral decay that Russia has long attributed to the West and that is held to be a source of national and spiritual weakness and thus competitive disadvantage.⁴⁰

Putin for years has inveighed against the alleged moral decay of the West, citing various examples and then asserting that Russia would be a conservative bulwark against such trends. In remarks in the fall of 2021, he stated:

Zealots of these new approaches even go so far as to want to abolish these concepts altogether. Anyone who dares mention that men and women actually exist, which is a biological fact, risk being ostracized. “Parent number one” and “parent number two,” “birthing parent” instead of “mother,” and “human milk” replacing “breast-milk” because it might upset the people who are unsure about their own gender. I repeat, this is nothing new; in the 1920s, the so-called Soviet Kulturtraegers also invented some newspeak believing they were creating a new consciousness and changing values that way. And, as I have already said, they made such a mess it still makes one shudder at times. . . .

Well, if someone likes this, let them do it. I have already mentioned that, in shaping our approaches, we will be guided by a healthy conservatism. That was a few years ago, when passions on the international arena were not yet running as high as they are now, although, of course, we can say that clouds were gathering even then. Now, when the world is going through a structural disruption, the importance of reasonable conservatism as the foundation for a political course has skyrocketed—precisely because of the multiplying risks and dangers, and the fragility of the reality around us.

⁴⁰ Elena A. Stepanova, “‘Everything Good Against Everything Bad’: Traditional Values in the Search for a New Russian National Idea,” *Zeitschrift für religion, gesellschaft und politik*, Vol. 7, 2023.

This conservative approach is not about an ignorant traditionalism, a fear of change or a restraining game, much less about withdrawing into our own shell. It is primarily about reliance on a time-tested tradition, the preservation and growth of the population, a realistic assessment of oneself and others, a precise alignment of priorities, a correlation of necessity and possibility, a prudent formulation of goals, and a fundamental rejection of extremism as a method.⁴¹

The correspondence between Russian Orthodoxy and the greatness of Russia goes back centuries. The Great Schism between the Orthodox and Catholic churches in the 11th century was important because it set up differentiation along a key form of identity—at that time and today. Tsygankov recounts how Russia in the 15th century

found itself standing alone between Islam and Catholic Europe. To signal to the Holy Roman Empire its cultural autonomy, the grand prince of Moscow Ivan III rejected the idea of accepting the Catholic empire's superiority and famously signed his written answer to the emperor with the title, "Great Ruler of all of Rus" by God's grace.⁴²

One of the most famous (if somewhat vague and inconsistent) theories of the essential values of the Russian people—Nikolai Berdyaev's *The Russian Idea*—argues for a "spiritual and historic universalism," which contends that the "Russian idea is the idea of the Kingdom of God."⁴³

Religion is not the only factor in this complex Russian psychology, and over the centuries doctrine has not created an insurmountable barrier to Russia finding common interests with Catholic and Protestant European powers. But our discussion here is specifically about sources of relative advantage, which implies some sort of differentiation from others. And in the context of persistent competition with the Catholic and Protestant West, Russian Orthodoxy does serve the purpose of informing Russians' narrative

⁴¹ Vladimir Putin, speech, Valdai Discussion Club meeting, October 21, 2021.

⁴² Tsygankov, 2014, p. 34.

⁴³ Nikolai P. Poltoratzsky, "The Russian Idea of Berdyaev," *Russian Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2, April 1962, pp. 129–130.

about why their country is different from, and perhaps in some ways better than, the West.

In more recent years, Orthodoxy continues to inform Russians' perceptions of the sources of their country's greatness. In both the Yeltsin and Putin eras, there have been calls by Russian leaders to define the *Russian idea*. The Russian idea is an attempt to give the new Russian Federation a purpose reflective of its great power status.⁴⁴ In both periods, Russian philosophers have emphasized that Russia must rebuild itself based on its Orthodox heritage.⁴⁵ What does that mean in practice? In his study of Russia's "breakout from the post-Cold War system," Dmitri Trenin describes how Putin spent some of his time as prime minister (2008–2012) consulting with Russian religious figures about the contours of the Russian idea. Over this time, as Trenin described,

Russia needed a sense of spiritual sovereignty. Putin became preoccupied with helping Russia achieve self-determination, aided by answering questions such as "What are we?" and "What do we want to be?" Putin's answer to the first question was that Russia is a distinct civilization, the core of a special "Russian world," a supranational community of people who associate themselves with traditional Russian values, mainly Eastern Slavs like Belarusians and Ukrainians.⁴⁶

The question of Russian values loomed large for Putin. Observing what he viewed as the moral decay and rejection of traditional values in the West, he expressed that it was part of Russia's role as an Orthodox great power to be the "keeper of conservative values," which included "the sanctity of the family as a union between a man and a woman, the indispensable role of religious faith, the function of traditional religions as spiritual compasses, the centrality of the state among all political and social institutions, and,

⁴⁴ Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*, Twelve, 2019, pp. 24–43.

⁴⁵ Hill and Gaddy, 2013, pp. 47–48. Hill and Gaddy point out that, on these matters of Russia and religion, Putin was initially "circumspect," but by 2012 he had certainly embraced them to a much greater degree.

⁴⁶ Dmitri Trenin, *Russia's Breakout from the Post-Cold War System: The Drivers of Putin's Course*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 2014, p. 9.

of course, patriotism.⁴⁷ Putin and other senior Russian leaders since 2012 have often returned to this theme of the moral decline of the West and the importance of Russia in serving as a bulwark against the spread of universal values.⁴⁸ The implication is that, were Russia to embrace the liberal Western value system, Russia would be weaker, not stronger. According to Nikolai Patrushev, Russia's Security Council secretary,

The values of our multinational, multi-confessional society must be protected from the aggressive promotion of neo-liberal values, which in many respects contradict the very essence of our worldview and are actively propagated by our geopolitical opponents in the struggle for influence on the development of civilization and their dominance in the world.⁴⁹

Russia, by not pushing back against such trends, would risk losing a part of its identity and becoming something historically it has not been. Putin and his supporters in government have an incentive to lump all things Western together, including the West's political model, as an affront to Russian heritage and a threat to Russia as a distinct and great civilization.

To be sure, the Russian people are not overly religious according to the metric of church attendance. Very few Russians attend church regularly.⁵⁰ Russia also has high rates of divorce and abortion, which reflect a rather loose adherence to the tenets of Orthodoxy.⁵¹ But more than 70 percent of Russians identify as Orthodox; in 2017, 69 percent reported believing that the Russian culture, of which religion is an important element, was supe-

⁴⁷ Trenin, 2014, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Vladimir Putin, speech, Valdai Discussion Club meeting, October 27, 2022.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Simon Saradzhyan and Angelina Flood, "The World According to Patrushev," *Russia Matters*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, October 7, 2022.

⁵⁰ Pew Research Center, "Russians Return to Religion, but Not to Church," February 10, 2014.

⁵¹ Amie Ferris-Rotman, "Putin's Next Target Is Russia's Abortion Culture," *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2017.

rior to others.⁵² And Putin maintains close relations with Russian Orthodox leaders and uses the rhetoric of conservatism and traditional religious values perhaps because he truly believes in what he says or because he believes that it resonates with the Russian people. It also appears to resonate with the Orthodox population in Europe, where strong majorities agree that “a strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West,” although this sentiment does not preclude a simultaneous willingness to cooperate with the West.⁵³

One final important aspect of religion as it relates to our discussion is that it is a key building block of personal and political culture. Scholars have emphasized, for example, how important the Catholic Church was in laying the psychological and social building blocks for market capitalism and democracy.⁵⁴ By breaking down close-knit kin networks in favor of faith-based communities, the Catholic Church may have unwittingly influenced the political and economic development of Europe. Evidence remains scant on the degree to which the Orthodox Church may or may not have influenced Russian society in similar ways, although there is some suggestion that it did have such effects.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, some historians of Russia have argued that the Orthodox Church, as a descendant of Byzantium, imparted somewhat different norms on the Russian people, which affected political outcomes in Russia. In particular, although there is, to date, insufficient evidence to say this definitively, it is possible that the Orthodox Church over centuries reinforced an extreme form of autocratic rule in Russia that has

⁵² Pew Research Center, *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe*, May 10, 2017.

⁵³ Pew Research Center, 2017; Sigal Samuel, “Where Russia Is Seen as a Buffer Against the U.S.,” *The Atlantic*, May 17, 2017.

⁵⁴ Fukuyama, 2011, pp. 229–244.

⁵⁵ J. Hajnal, “European Marriage Patterns in Perspective,” in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley, eds., *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography*, Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd, 1965; Michael Mitterauer and Alexander Kagan, “Russian and Central European Family Structures: A Comparative View,” *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 1982, p. 127.

led to autocracy's stickiness in Russian political culture that has differed from previous forms in Western Europe.⁵⁶

Economic and Technological Development

In the early 1900s, the implications of industrialization in Central and Western Europe, as well as in Asia, were clear to see. Russia in 1905 lost a war to Japan, which had begun to modernize its industrial capacity in the mid-19th century. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia bowed out of World War I in 1918 with a disadvantageous treaty that left previously held territory in the hands of the Germans for a time. The Russian Civil War (1917–1922) further ravaged an already lagging economy. When Stalin took control in the 1920s, he recognized that Russia must catch up to its European competitors, lest it become a vassal to foreign powers. In a 1931 speech, he explained,

To slacken the tempo [of industrialization] would mean falling behind. And those who fall behind get beaten. But we do not want to be beaten. No, we refuse to be beaten! One feature of the history of old Russia was the continual beatings she suffered because of her backwardness. She was beaten by the Mongol khans. She was beaten by the Turkish beys. She was beaten by the Swedish feudal lords. She was beaten by the Polish and Lithuanian gentry. She was beaten by the British and French capitalists. She was beaten by the Japanese barons. All beat her because of her backwardness, military backwardness, cultural backwardness, political backwardness, industrial backwardness, agricultural backwardness.⁵⁷

This frustration led to a brutal and highly coerced industrial overhaul that, albeit at great humanitarian cost, later helped the Soviets overcome the Nazi onslaught and defeat the Germans on the Eastern Front. Notably, at that time, the perceived foundations of industrial success were centralized,

⁵⁶ Pipes, 2005, pp. 12–14.

⁵⁷ Joseph Stalin, “Stalin on Rapid Industrialization,” speech to industrial managers, February 1931, in *Problems of Leninism*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953.

unchallenged authority and socialism.⁵⁸ This meant that Soviet modernization would occur from the top down, through nationalization of all of the important industrial enterprises, as well as agricultural production.

Putin found Russia in a similarly weak economic condition relative to its competitors in the late 1990s. Russia had just suffered a sovereign debt default in 1998, and overall the country was in a vulnerable position. At the turn of the millennium, Putin noted, “It will take us approximately fifteen years and an annual growth of our Gross Domestic Product by 8 percent a year to reach the per capita GDP level of present-day Portugal or Spain, which are not among the world’s industrialized leaders.”⁵⁹ The geopolitical situation was more favorable to Russia than the economic one in that the prospects of large-scale war were low, although Russian strategists recognized the close connection between technological and economic development and national security.⁶⁰

Putin rejected the idea that Russia should adopt some version of Soviet ideology to modernize in the 21st century. Instead, he turned to respected Russian technocrats to help chart Russia’s technological and economic development. In 2000, the Center for Strategic Research (Tsentr strategicheskikh razrabotok) published an ambitious ten-year plan known as Strategy-2010 to inform public policy across a number of key sectors, such as education, health and health care, and housing.⁶¹ (Putin referenced the center’s work in his millennial address.⁶²) The authors, led by German Gref, the current CEO of Sberbank, also tackled the challenges of modernizing the Russian economy. They noted that Russia at that time “risked joining coun-

⁵⁸ Robert C. Allen, *Farm to Factory: A Reinterpretation of the Soviet Industrial Revolution*, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 49.

⁵⁹ Putin, 1999.

⁶⁰ Clint Reach, Alyssa Demus, Eugeniu Han, Bilyana Lilly, Krystyna Marcinek, and Yuliya Shokh, *Russian Military Forecasting and Analysis: The Military-Political Situation and Military Potential in Strategic Planning*, RAND Corporation, RR-A198-4, 2022; Clint Reach, *Russian Military Forecasting Translation Volume: 1999–2018*, RAND Corporation, RR-A198-5, 2022, pp. 41–61.

⁶¹ Center for Strategic Research [Tsentr strategicheskikh razrabotok], “Strategy of Development of the Russian Federation to 2010,” 2000.

⁶² Putin, 1999.

tries whose influence on the growth of the global economy is negligible.⁶³ The primary obstacles to modernization, according to the authors, included a poor business climate, an inefficient financial system, and an imbalanced economic structure that was too reliant on fossil fuel exports. The solutions to these problems were, among others, to deregulate the economy, protect property rights, and create conditions for fairer competition in the marketplace. In contrast to Stalin's, this approach was more bottom up, with the state shepherding economic growth by creating conditions for markets to work more effectively in Russia, for more capital to flow into Russia from abroad, and for greater access to Western technology across the Russian economy, all of which would put the onus on private industry to innovate and grow the Russian economy.

In practice, the execution generally did not follow the theory. In 2010, the authors of the above strategy reconvened to assess the results of the implementation of Russian reforms over the past decade. According to one analysis, they noted partial execution of the plan, which, in their view, contributed to higher standards of living for average Russians, improved credit worthiness of the country, and improved economic productivity overall.⁶⁴ At the same time, the experts noted that Russia's economic success was by and large due to high oil prices throughout the 2000s. In fact, according to Sergei Sinelnikov-Murylev, the rector of the Russian Foreign Trade Academy and scientific head of the Institute for the Economy in Transition, the confluence of high oil prices and the reduction of political competition served as a brake against the vision of the economic reformers.⁶⁵ This implicitly corresponds to the idea that centralized authority and the order it apparently conveys precedes other priorities in the hierarchy of the foundational elements of Russian national success.

⁶³ German Gref et al., *The Primary Areas of Long-Term Socio-Economic Policy of the Government of the Russian Federation* [Osnovnye napravleniia sotsioekonomicheskoi politiki pravitel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii na dolgosrochnuiu perspektivu], draft report, Center for Strategic Research [Tsentr strategicheskikh razrabotok], 2000, p. 73.

⁶⁴ Anton Petrov, "Analysis of the Causes of Strategy-2010's Partial Successes and Overwhelming Failures After a Decade of Implementation," *Russia Corporate World*, Vol. 5, No. 6, July 2010.

⁶⁵ Petrov, 2010.

In 2011–2012, as Putin was planning a return to the presidency, he released a platform that was a continuation of his 1999 millennium message. On the economy, he promoted many of the same ideas as those found in Strategy-2010. The message again was to improve Russia's business climate; diversify the economy away from a reliance on hydrocarbons; increase Russian competitiveness in such areas as nanotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and information technology; and improve higher education.⁶⁶ (In 2008, then-President Dmitry Medvedev promoted much the same in these areas.⁶⁷) The dual objectives of Russia's economic modernization strategy were to improve the Russian standard of living and the capabilities of the Russian military.

As before, however, the model would start from the regime retaining a strong grip on power across the country, with the hope that this arrangement would still provide sufficient space for Russian industry—private and state owned—to innovate and produce. Recall that Putin in 2002–2003 seized control of the country in a number of aspects, and Russia has become increasingly authoritarian over time.⁶⁸ And from the perspective of Putin and a critical mass of Russia's elite and population, this is a strength not a weakness. What the aforementioned Russian experts were arguing in 2010 was that centralized authority in Russia weakened its prospects for sustained technological innovation and economic growth. And this was prior to the sanctions the West would impose in 2014 and 2022, limiting easy Russian access to the most-advanced technology in the world. In the view of some of the architects of the vision for an advanced Russian economy, there was a contradiction between Russian insistence on autocratic governance and technological and economic advancement.

To be sure, Russia's GDP based on purchasing power parity (PPP) in 2022 remained the sixth largest in the world, providing sufficient resources to devote to maintaining a large military by international standards.⁶⁹ On a

⁶⁶ Matthew Rojansky and Harrison King, "Putin's Platform," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 28, 2012.

⁶⁷ Reach et al., 2022, pp. 63–64.

⁶⁸ Freedom House describes Russia as a "consolidated authoritarian regime," alongside Turkmenistan, Belarus, and Tajikistan. See Freedom House, undated.

⁶⁹ International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, October 2022.

per capita basis, however, Russia's GDP (PPP) remained behind that of Portugal.⁷⁰ Further, as of 2018, Russia ranked far behind leading Western economies and below Portugal, Spain, and Poland in the World Bank's analysis of data from the World Intellectual Property Organization's Global Innovation Index.⁷¹ According to the Global Innovation Index, Russia was 47th among all countries in 2022, behind Thailand and Mauritius.⁷² And we have seen in the Russian war on Ukraine the degree to which technological lag forced Russia to rely on the technology of its professed adversaries.⁷³

Thus, it remains an open question whether Russia's current political-economic model, which throughout the 2020s will have less access to leading technology outside Russia, will be able to generate the outcomes that Russian leaders correlate with Russia's position as a great power. Some economic and technological inferiority in exchange for unchallenged control of the Russian state and society historically has been an acceptable trade, with military might picking up the balance.

The record to date under Putin, and in centuries past in Russia, suggests that Russian economic development and technological innovation are likely to be hamstrung by a political system that is unable to provide the accountability and incentives that Russian society needs to realize its aspirations for greatness in the 21st century. Russia looks to the West as the benchmark of standard of living in the modern era but rejects fully embracing the means with which that standard has been achieved. Given that emulation has been a tried-and-true method of competition for millennia of human history, it is a lingering curiosity why Russia is so resistant to do so. Regardless, under the current leadership the prospects for change in this area seem as remote as ever.

⁷⁰ World Bank, undated-a.

⁷¹ World Bank "Global Innovation Index," TCdata360, webpage, undated-b.

⁷² Soumitra Dutta, Bruno Lanvin, Lorena Rivera León, and Sacha Wunsch-Vincent, eds., *Global Innovation Index 2022: What Is the Future of Innovation-Driven Growth*, 15th ed., World Intellectual Property Organization, 2022, p. 45.

⁷³ James Byrne, Gary Somerville, Joe Byrne, Jack Watling, Nick Reynolds, and Jane Baker, *Silicon Lifeline: Western Electronics at the Heart of Russia's War Machine*, Royal United Services Institute, August 8, 2022.

Toughness and Willingness to Sacrifice

A theme that recurs in many discussions of the Russian societal characteristics that convey competitive advantage is resilience and toughness (or some variant). The narrative holds that Russia has weathered brutal difficulties that would have broken less durable and courageous peoples and that this hardiness has allowed Russia to triumph over many enemies.⁷⁴ The notion of sacrifice is an important parallel value: Russians believe themselves to be capable of immense sacrifice in service of the nation, a form of solidarity more intense than Western nations and thus conveying important competitive advantage.

The modern apotheosis of this societal quality was of course World War II. The story of the Great Patriotic War is at its core a story of glorious self-sacrifice on the part of millions of Russians, both those involved in the fighting and those laboring to support the war efforts, in defense of the Russian state and people. The suffering tolerated by the people to attain victory is seemingly celebrated as much as the victory itself.

The flip side of willingness to suffer, of course, can be a form of apathy, which is often ascribed to the Russian people by outsiders but not of course suggested by Russian sources as a source of competitive advantage.⁷⁵ The scholar Tim McDaniel has referred to “a deadening sense of fatality” in the Russian people, in which “hope and optimism about the future are rare.” Post–Cold War problems in Russia did not so much produce a sense of “lost historical opportunities for positive social change,” McDaniel writes, as

⁷⁴ Stepanova, 2023, pp. 102–103. For a somewhat propagandistic but nonetheless instructive characterization of this argument, see Marilyn Murray, “How Self-Sacrifice Has Shaped the Russian Soul,” *Moscow Times*, November 19, 2012. “It is more accurate to comprehend the country’s durability by a greater appreciation of the country’s people,” Murray argues. She continues, “Russians are intense and inscrutable, tough and courageous. They are capable of exceptional devotion. They are willing to sacrifice anything and everything to save their loved ones and their motherland.”

⁷⁵ Masha Lipman, for example, writing in 2005, described both sides of the coin of this national trait: “Endurance, slavish devotion are words commonly used to describe the Russian national character, and the evidence is overabundant. Today, 15 years after the collapse of the communist dictatorship, the image of contemporary Russians appears to be largely unchanged: passive, apathetic and submissive.” See Masha Lipman, “Apathy into Anarchy Does Go,” *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2005, p. 52.

much as “a crushing sense of the absence of possibilities.”⁷⁶ Recent analyses of Russian passivity around the Russia-Ukraine war highlight this capacity for endurance—and willingness to go along with state policy—as helping to explain the popular reaction in Russia.

Military Power as a Sine Qua Non of Russian Greatness

Russia’s fixation on greatness and its insistence that it is a distinct, Orthodox civilization mean that Russia continues to maintain a large and powerful military. A history of invasion from the Mongolian Empire, Poland, France, and Germany logically embedded in the Russian psyche an obsession with security. But Russia has also been an expansionary power, fueled by a mentality of an entitled influencer of international affairs, which has faced repeated resistance from its western neighbors. These factors combine to form in the mind of Russia’s senior leadership an inseparable link between military power and Russian greatness. The Russian people are more ambivalent about the allocation of large sums of national treasure to military might, although in practice there is acceptance of relatively high defense spending, and there is pride among a significant subset of the population in image of the Russian military as a powerful entity by global standards.⁷⁷

Russian officials believe that were Russia not to be militarily powerful, the country would be carved up and exploited by Western powers. In early 2023, Patrushev asserted that if Russia did not maintain credible military power, the West would to “turn Russia into Muscovy,” meaning that the country could disintegrate into something resembling the disconnected principalities of centuries past.⁷⁸ Promoting a decision to drastically increase military spending from the previous decade, Putin expressed the same sentiment, that Russia “should never lead anyone into temptation with

⁷⁶ McDaniel, 1998, p. 5.

⁷⁷ In 2021, a large majority of Russians in a survey reported preferring that the primary efforts of the Russian government be committed toward achieving a high standard of living versus military might. See Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie-2021*, 2021, p. 33. An average of 30 to 35 percent of respondents expressed pride in the “glory of Russian weaponry” in periodic polling from 1999 to 2020; see Levada Center, 2020, p. 30.

⁷⁸ Vitalii Tsepliaev, “‘Rossiui khotiat prevratit’ v Moskoviiu.’ Nikolai Patrushev o Zapade i Ukrainе,” *Argumenty i fakty*, January 11, 2023.

our weakness.”⁷⁹ From 2015 to 2020, Russia by one estimate (that took into account GDP [PPP]) spent the equivalent of \$165 billion per year on military spending, which is substantial for a developing country like Russia’s, whose GDP (PPP) per capita ranked well behind Poland, Lithuania, and Romania.⁸⁰ To be sure, Russia’s defense expenditures were manageable relative to the size of its economy and were nowhere near the stratospheric levels of the Soviets, who might have bankrupted the system as a result of defense outlays. But this level of defense spending by Russia while the average standard of living lagged behind Eastern European countries demonstrates the position of military power in Russia’s hierarchy of needs. Russia and the United States possess the largest nuclear arsenals in the world.

Russia’s military strength is also a means to overcome a relative lack of soft power vis-à-vis its neighbors to achieve outcomes consistent with its self-perception as a great power. In previous eras, Russia could partner with other European countries to buttress its security and reinforce its status as an integral part of European affairs. In 21st-century Europe, under the umbrella of U.S. military protection, the diplomatic linkages between countries include democratic governance, economic and technological development, and high standards of living, as opposed to alliances created to mitigate growing threats to continental security. Russia’s view on what makes it a great country puts it at odds with most every other European country and narrows its diplomatic space to create influence and security. Lacking an attractive alternative socioeconomic model, military power is the primary tool for Russia to achieve the status and respect it desires.⁸¹ This most recently became apparent when Russia, after exhausting nonmilitary measures, resorted to force to reverse Ukraine’s growing Western political, economic, and military orientation.

⁷⁹ Putin, 2012.

⁸⁰ Michael Kofman and Richard Connolly, “Why Russian Military Expenditure Is Much Higher Than Commonly Understood (as Is China’s),” *War on the Rocks*, December 16, 2019.

⁸¹ Evidence of Russia’s dearth of soft power in Europe is the robust membership of a majority of the continent in either the European Union or NATO—or both, in many cases.

Looking ahead, one implication of this belief in the need to maintain a large military could be that Russia falls into the historical pattern of committing larger portions of national revenues to defense spending at the expense of economic and technological development and higher standards of living of the Russian people. Under Putin, defense spending has tended to hover around 3 to 4 percent of GDP, and Russia has maintained sovereign wealth funds from oil revenues as a hedge against future economic crises. Russia is currently drawing down these funds to some extent to pay for the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the costs to rebuild Russia's military after the war will be high because Russia will need to build more weapons and equipment from scratch as opposed to modernizing existing stocks. Nevertheless, Russia's defense minister in late 2022 announced that Russia would be increasing its top-line number of active service members from 1 million to 1.5 million and raising the number of air and ground units well beyond what it had before the war started.⁸²

Conclusion

Russia's national narrative propagated by leadership and supported by a majority of the population begins with the fact that Russia must always be a great power. This mentality is built on objective successes over the past several hundred years. Russia is the largest country by territory in the world, a result of pioneer expansion and military conquest. Russia has long had the largest population in Europe, and the Russian people have overcome numerous invasions, which provided the security for unique accomplishments in the arts and sciences.

From a Russian standpoint, the perpetuation of this greatness is built on several pillars that have stood the test of time. The two most important, particularly for the current Russian elite, are autocracy and Orthodoxy. These foundational elements are essential for maintaining order, stability, and identity in a country as large and ethnically diverse as Russia. Autocracy maintains order, and Orthodoxy provides the ostensible moral and spiri-

⁸² "Vystuplenie Ministra oborony Rossii na rasshirennom zasedanii Kollegii Ministerstva oborony Rossii," bmpd.livejournal.com blog, December 21, 2022.

tual underpinning to the Russian mission at home and abroad. In contrast to the modern, collective West, Russians reject the idea that a single model of development based on democracy, the rule of law, and universal human rights is most appropriate. As Putin has argued,

A spontaneously constructed state and society does not work, and neither does mechanically copying other countries' experiences. Such primitive borrowing and attempts to civilize Russia from abroad were not accepted by an absolute majority of our people. This is because the desire for independence and sovereignty in spiritual, ideological and foreign policy spheres is an integral part of our national character.⁸³

In other words, Russia is what it is today because it does not merely follow prevailing trends, which could pose a threat to its unique historical heritage.

Russia's insistence on political and moral independence from Europe, along with a history of invasion and a lack of soft power in the 21st century, creates an inseparable link in the Russian mind between security and greatness. If Russians insist that they must be great in the 21st century, and if Russia does not measure up to the modern criteria of greatness according to standard of living, then the way to mitigate the dissonance that might otherwise arise from this contradiction is to devote considerable resources to military strength, even if these investments come at the expense of the standard of living across the country.

Russian leaders do not necessarily believe that the attributes described in this chapter will lead to decisive victory over the West. Rather, these attributes will allow Russia to persevere as an independent great power in a climate of perceived increasing pressure from the outside to disintegrate their country. Having experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians seem to believe that such an outcome could happen within Russia itself or, perhaps even worse, Russia could become a vassal to the West. Putin recently noted that the West had "skillfully raised the wick to the collapse of Russia" through unspecified meddling in the country and in Ukraine.⁸⁴ Patrushev

⁸³ Vladimir Putin, speech, Valdai Discussion Club meeting, September 20, 2013.

⁸⁴ "Putin zaiavil, chto Zapad ochen' umelo podnosil fitil' k raspadu Rossii," RIA Novosti, November 4, 2022.

continually returns to the idea of how to best “remain Russia,” which often is through a preservation of Russia’s “spiritual and moral values.”⁸⁵ In sum, autocracy, Orthodoxy, and military strength will hold the country together and preserve its rightful place in the pantheon of great powers.

Winston Churchill famously described Russia as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” The mystery arose and continues to arise because Russia is different from the West and takes pride in being so. Russia’s geography is different, its religious roots are different, and its political culture is different, but it retains a great power mentality. To achieve greatness, Russia rejects the prevailing model—its leaders are in fact allergic to it—and has a different formula that many Russians believe best corresponds to the country’s history and national character. Putin alluded to this when he allegedly told then-Vice President Joe Biden, “You look at us and you see our skin and then assume we think like you. But we don’t.”⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Quoted in Saradzhyan and Flood, 2022.

⁸⁶ Michael McFaul, “Vladimir Putin Does Not Think Like We Do,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 2022.

Findings and Lessons: Competing Visions of National Competitive Advantage

The previous two chapters highlight an important and perhaps underappreciated fact: Both China and Russia hold starkly different views from most U.S. and Western officials and analysts about the societal sources of competitive advantage. Unsurprisingly, the countries' concepts emphasize the claimed advantages of their distinct models, grounded most fundamentally in the unity and coordinated policy allowed by nationalistic autocratic regimes. Those same themes now provide the basic grist for Chinese and Russian narratives about the weakness of the West and the superiority of their systems—narratives they are broadcasting more and more vigorously to the developing world. In the global ideological context of systems, then, the United States is also inevitably engaged in a debate between contending visions of the societal sources of competitive advantage.

One conclusion that stresses the degree of competitive challenge, at least from China, is that as inflexible and dogmatic as both countries' visions of competitive advantage may be, they do manage to capture a version of at least three of the seven characteristics identified by our first-phase study: national ambition and will, unified national identity, and an active state.¹ For two of these characteristics—national ambition and will and unified national identity—Chinese and Russian accounts of national power stress these qualities even more than current U.S. concepts. In terms of actual, measurable expression of such qualities, China and Russia might be display-

¹ Mazarr, 2022.

ing more willpower and unity than the United States today. Their concepts of advantage also touch on the role of an active state (though very likely taking it too far), a learning and adapting mindset (at least in nonpolitical ways), and forms of pluralism.

Chinese and Russian conceptions of societal advantage therefore carry an implicit message that an effective combination of three of those characteristics (national ambition and will, unified national identity, and an active state), when layered on top of the cultural values of China's and Russia's respective societies, can provide a winning formula in a long-term rivalry regardless of achieving other factors associated with dynamism and competitive advantage. The contest between the United States and these two rivals may pivot around this essential standoff: a narrower recipe for national success based on nationalism, centralized authority, and willpower, versus a more expansive formula built on networked power, grassroots dynamism, and the values of openness and freedom.

A problem for both aggressive, revisionist states will be respecting one of the leading findings of the first phase of this study: the importance of keeping these societal characteristics in balance. In both their external and internal behavior, China and Russia are displaying a clear, and perhaps growing, tendency toward overshooting. This may be because of a lack of checks and balances in their systems or because their political and cultural traits lead them to an even more ambitious expression of power than the United States. But this tendency to excessive expression of these qualities—in actions ranging from aggressive wars and coercion of others to a highly overactive state at home—may turn out to be China's and Russia's most important Achilles' heel. Historical cases and evidence reviewed for the first phase of the study offered a stark lesson: Great powers that pursue a significant number of these qualities in extreme ways court strategic disaster. Such an outcome is already emerging for Russia and may be happening for China in a more slow-motion way.

The United States is already benefiting from this emerging reality in various ways, from the many actions that other countries are taking in response to bullying from the Chinese and Russian governments to the internal strains being created within the rivals, in forms ranging from a brain drain in Russia to deepening debt in China. But the United States could make more pointed, coordinated, and strategic efforts, especially in

its messaging, but also in policies, to use China's and Russia's overstretch against them. To take just one example, the United States could develop a model package of diplomatic, economic, and security sector assistance for countries that become victims of Russian or Chinese economic warfare—a comprehensive strategy to use the reaction to this coercion to end up with much deeper ties with the threatened partner.

Beyond that broad conclusion, our findings on Chinese and Russian visions of societal dynamism and advantage highlight several potentially actionable lessons.

A Reliance on Central Guidance

The most essential—and perhaps most obvious—element of China's and Russia's conceptions of advantage is that they rely on powerfully centralized national efforts that reflect, to them, decisive degrees of national unity, coordination, and will. Official statements and other sources in both countries repeatedly emphasize the value of a regime that takes control of the competitive process and drives it. This vision suggests that a dominant state role, one able to override any interest group or institution in the society, is characteristic of successful nations—they can better coordinate the elements of national power and support needed major projects. The legitimacy of both regimes is intimately bound up in this view because it establishes the essential competitive purpose—and accountability—of their governments. Yuri Pines argues, for example, that among the “aspects of Chinese traditional political culture” most applicable to the current contest, the most important is

the legacy of the political center maintaining its hegemonic position vis-à-vis a variety of social groups and local interests, and reining in centrifugal socioeconomic and political forces. In this context, the ability of the Party leadership to act as “a collective emperor” and maintain a single legitimate locus of power on Chinese soil is the most essential precondition for China's political stability and governability.²

² Pines, 2012, pp. 181–182.

This choice reflects, explicitly or implicitly, very clear trade-offs and the problem of what autocracies that rely on central guidance surrender in order to gain the control and (they hope) stability offered by such rigid systems. Chinese and Russian leaders of the current systems have been willing to surrender greater degrees of flexibility and creativity, significant amounts of foreign investment and partnership potential, and some degree of representative legitimacy in exchange for the presumed advantages of central control. This choice is not grounded in an analytically based judgment of what approach is likely to be more effective or efficient but rather reflects a defensive and somewhat paranoid idea that they have to be willing to give up the potential for greater openness because of the urgent need to protect the regime—which, in the ideology of both countries, is the embodiment of national values and ambitions.

This insight could hold several implications for U.S. strategy. For example, the United States should specifically target failures in Chinese and Russian central management in its narrative campaigns. Stories about local debt in China, failed white elephant investments, meddling with technology companies, and other policies and events cast direct doubt on the advantages conveyed by central planning. These issues are well-known, but U.S. messaging sometimes focuses more on direct abuses by these governments. Competing for the narrative over national advantage—both within these countries and in the developing world and beyond—demands a focus on this central component of China and Russia's vision of systemic superiority.

The flip side of that insight is that the United States could do more to publicize U.S. (and friend or ally) governmental actions at multiple levels to solve problems. For example, a significant subset of U.S. governors, state legislatures, and city governments have been pursuing hundreds of different public policies with important positive outcomes. The same is true at the subnational, and in many cases national, level throughout Europe and in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, as well as other democratic partners. A more concerted effort to trumpet these success could help counteract Chinese and Russian narratives about autocratic advantages.

These messaging strategies are likely to be especially important during crises. Several of the trends outlined above suggest that the United States, China, and Russia are each likely to be tested by a range of emergencies and persistent challenges, ranging from climate change-induced environmen-

tal issues, to new pandemics to domestic political instability, to regional or global geopolitical crises. The countries will be tested—and their ability to respond, in institutional and political terms, will send powerful messages about the capacity of the relative systems. Investments in crisis preparation (including developing a skilled cadre of emergency managers) may therefore be an important source of competitive advantage for the United States, allowing it to gain rather than lose reputation in the face of these tests.

A second major insight draws from the current experience in responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Sanctions levied on Russia have had the effect of undermining the practical workings of its autocratic system, in terms of industrial production, financial position, management of the economy, and technological innovation. The resulting message is simple: Major aggression from revisionist states will be met with measures that specifically seek to undercut the domestic effectiveness and global appeal of their centralized regimes. The United States and others can use this message for deterrence, arguing that major aggression will be met with harsh penalties designed precisely to strike at the strength and productive operation of the central mechanism for relative competitive advantage that these autocratic states possess.

The Critical Role of Nationalism

Although they do not embrace the abstract political science concept itself, China's and Russia's official statements and independent analysis consistently use language suggesting that strong doses of nationalism offer important competitive advantage. This source of advantage may be strengthening, insofar as nationalism in both China and Russia, partly in reaction to perceived outside pressure, appears to be becoming more intense and belligerent.

An important implication is that the current recipes for national competitive success of both China and Russia contain an unavoidable element of anti-Western messianism.³ Current thinking in both China and Russia

³ Several of the forms of Russian identity cataloged by Anne Clunan have an important element of this trait. See Clunan, 2009, pp. 66–72.

assumes an increasingly hostile zero-sum contest of ideas and influence with the United States and the West. In this context, both countries seek to elevate their culturally distinct models of governance and social values as wellsprings of competitive advantage and connect them to visions of a world more strongly influenced by those models, in the process undermining the appeal and influence of the West. This is not an essential or permanent feature of Chinese or Russian conceptions of competitive advantage; various officials and scholars in both countries have charted routes to national greatness that did not stand in formal opposition to the West or that indeed embraced the idea that their country could best advance its interests by becoming more Western. But that is not the approach in either country today, and it stands little chance of becoming so any time soon. Moreover, each of those national-cultural visions contains elements of a messianic desire to bring their approach to others. Even as the United States seeks stabilizing elements of cooperation with both China and (after the war in Ukraine) Russia, perceptions of the sources of societal advantage in both countries are likely to powerfully circumscribe the potential for better relations.

Yet nationalism also has distinct downsides. The emphasis on nationality makes China and Russia less attractive as an employer for talented people from other nations, whereas the inherent openness, individualistic ethic, and increasingly shared opportunity of the United States have made it a magnet for talent from around the world. China has intense programs in place for recruitment of Chinese nationals into key fields, but its autocratic system and self-referential nationalism create a severe competitive advantage in the global war for talent. One way of thinking about the issue is that China is recruiting from its own population; the United States is recruiting, in some sense, from the world.

This component of China's and Russia's concepts of advantage suggests, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, that an extreme message of competition from the United States could be counterproductive. Any steps the United States takes to strengthen nationalistic sentiment in either country plays directly into a leading source of competitive advantage. There is no straightforward way to deal with this tension; the United States cannot stop competing or criticizing malign actions by China or Russia. But this component does suggest the value of a shift in the public presentation of U.S. strategy,

as well as the importance of being far more deliberate in the effort to signal that the United States wants good relations with the Chinese and Russian people. Many options are available to achieve a more balanced and publicly restrained message of competition; they are simply not a high priority for the United States.

This theme also might suggest the value of official or unofficial efforts to sponsor research and commentary designed to provoke a debate about the true meaning of nationalism for both China and Russia. Left to its own momentum, the trend of rising nationalism in intensifying rivalries will play to the competitive strategies of China and Russia. The governments in those two countries do their best to control and use nationalistic tendencies for their own ends. Although the effect would be modest and long term, it could be helpful for the United States to sponsor books, essays, and opinion pieces, including from Chinese and Russian nationals (probably living abroad), offering a range of perspectives on the character and policy implications of nationalistic pride. Over time this approach could provide alternatives to official views of these issues and help dilute the value of nationalism as a source of competitive power for China and Russia.

The Cultural Foundations of National Power

Both China and Russia believe that they are operating from a base of cultural values superior to the West and able to convey important competitive advantage. They view their societies as having a potent spiritual advantage that will underwrite long-term success against a decadent and morally weak West. To take just the Chinese example, “Pride in the superiority of Confucian civilization is central to nationalism in China today.”⁴

One implication of this fact is that China and Russia may continue to believe that they have the upper hand in the long-term competition if the United States and many Western countries continue to experience what could be described as crises of the spirit, reflected in widespread mistrust in social institutions, growing polarization, and declining levels of patriotism

⁴ Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*, University of California Press, 2005, p. 8.

and national ambitions. The self-confidence of rivals steeped in cultural and spiritual models of competitive advantage may remain dangerously strong if they view the roadblock to their ambitions as spiritually and culturally weak. Expanded investments in defense might not have much effect on these perceptions: The United States was racing to start a military buildup before December 1941 and shore up its position in Asia. But, ultimately, the conviction of Japan's leaders that they had precisely such cultural and spiritual advantages fed their wishful thinking and contributed significantly to war. The lesson is that steps to renew the national fiber of the United States and its democratic allies are every bit as important to the long-term competition as the size of their respective defense budgets.

A concept of societal advantage grounded in the superiority of a *particular* national culture—the “Russian idea” or the “Chinese dream”—may have difficulty when a nation interacts with others over time. Societal advantage is inherently different from a concept of advantage built on universalizable patterns and values—a theme that our first-phase study reinforced. As we argued, traits such as national identity, shared opportunity, strong institutions, and a learning culture are available to any country.⁵ The United States and the broader West do not claim these traits as unique to their own cultures. The elements of cultural superiority and indeed xenophobia (sometimes manifested as outright racism and ethnic bias) inherent to Chinese and Russian conceptions of advantage are likely to grate on others.

Another possible implication of this finding is that the United States may benefit, in direct competitive terms, from renewed investments in cultural expression. Efforts to create an atmosphere of cultural energy and creativity could help generate momentum against Chinese and Russian claims of cultural superiority. Such efforts could quite explicitly include support for Chinese Americans and Russian Americans—artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and others—whose products could then be pushed back into China and Russia as evidence of the creative energy in the United States.

Finally, the United States could do more to use its ongoing engagement programs to advertise the cultural and spiritual energy of the country more explicitly. Foreign aid programs, for example, could be designed to produce

⁵ Mazarr, 2022.

more-intentional exposure to the values and motives of the aid officers and humanitarian workers involved. The same could be done with security cooperation programs in selected countries. Such efforts would be tricky; if they descended into propaganda sessions about the superiority of U.S. culture, they would become counterproductive. But there could be ways to use the tens of thousands of regular engagements with other countries to advertise U.S. cultural values and commitments in ways that would provide another useful answer to Chinese and Russian accusations.

Chinese and Russian Blind Spots

Finally, our analysis highlights several blind spots in Chinese and Russian thinking about national competitive advantage. Each of these two rivals has a fairly rigid conception of national power grounded to some extent in essentialist visions of cultural superiority and the inherent value of autocratic control. These visions reflect tendencies seen in previous highly centralized, autocratic regimes, such as those led by Kim Il Sung or Mao Zedong. Both China and Russia tend toward a degree of strategic egocentrism, viewing the world through lenses deeply biased by their ideologies and in many cases resistant to feedback and correction. As a result, each country may miss important potential threats to or sources of competitive advantage.⁶

First, *both China and Russia appear to be relatively insensitive to reactions to their use of coercive power.* Their mindset of cultural and spiritual superiority creates in both cases a form of neoimperial sensibility that expects and demands that other states, especially neighboring ones, to bow to their wishes. China and Russia may disregard verbal or policy reactions to these

⁶ The discussion below will also suggest ways in which the United States could make strategic use of these factors to gain advantage. To be clear, at least in the Chinese case, we do not mean to suggest options in service of any generalized effort to constrain Chinese economic growth or political stability. We do not believe that such an effort would be a wise strategic direction for the United States, running as it does against any hope of creating a mutual expectation of peaceful coexistence. The Russian case is now of course different, post-Ukraine invasion; eventually, though, with a different Russia taking a different approach to its neighbors, we would hope that the United States would not need to undermine Russian economic and technological prospects across the board.

moves as illegitimate and unjustified. Each country is a strategic narcissist of the first order, often reluctant to fully process others' reactions to their ideology and use of power. The result has been apparent since about 2010: As they have become increasingly belligerent in pressing their various claims, China and Russia have generated significant and, in many cases, profound reactions in their regions and around the world. This pattern offers a potentially critical U.S. competitive advantage that Washington has arguably only begun to tap into.

Second, China and Russia's focus on central control and national will-power as the wellsprings of competitiveness tends to create *a blind spot for appreciating the value of open, grassroots innovation in an environment of free experimentation*. Closed systems have more difficulty creating effective feedback loops: gathering the full scope of information on successes and failures, ensuring that the right data get to the right decisionmakers, taking problems seriously, and admitting flaws. This is a classic and well-understood competitive challenge for autocratic systems, but it may have especially important implications in the current rivalries. In the technology competition, for example, the United States could develop assessments of Chinese technology ecosystems that clearly lay out the sources of innovations and new technologies, identify the specific role played by any reservoirs of grassroots dynamism behind those trends, and then seek to weaken them in carefully selected, militarily relevant areas. For example, it may be that researchers who spend significant time in the West, with access to outside early-stage capital for new firms or cooperative ventures with Western universities, tend to provide disproportionate elements of bottom-up entrepreneurial energy to Chinese technology development.

This does not mean that the Chinese and Russian systems do not adapt or learn from experience. Both do, and, as important, their senior officials and scholars tend to *believe* that they learn and change. A good example is the strong tradition of self-criticism in China's People's Liberation Army, which energizes a constant discussion of its flaws and ways to do better. Yet a blind spot for both systems and their concepts of national competitiveness may have to do with the character and source of adaptation: The systems are centrally derived rather than emergent, they are deliberate and planned rather than rapid, and they tend as a result to deliver powerful, relatively rigid and generalized answers to recognized problems. In some cases (espe-

cially in the Russian example), a powerful tradition of telling higher levels what they want to hear, to claim that organizational goals are being met, obstructs the process of identifying problems in the first place. This same dynamic is known to exist in China, though to what precise degree is less clear.

The United States could seek to make use of this blind spot in various ways, although the approach would have to be indirect, and its effects may be limited. The United States could seek, for example, to introduce intentionally misleading ideas about the true problems in its system in narrow areas tied to military capabilities. The United States could try to anticipate the enemy's adaptations to current U.S. problems and get ahead of them, a strategic way of being inside the enemy's decision loop.

Third, China and Russia seem clearly to have *a blind spot on one of the most crucial general institutions supporting national competitiveness—the rule of law*. Especially in Russia but even in China (and despite recent anti-corruption campaigns), both systems tend to create ideological, personalistic, and nepotistic incentives that chip away at the efficient and reliable functioning of the rule of law. China's strong emphasis on group solidarity and community spirit exacerbates these risks, making the nation more prone to corruption and patronage and clientelism that could prove debilitating over the long term. There is less interest in holding individuals to abstract standards in China than in the United States. Xi Jinping has launched multiple anticorruption campaigns, seemingly out of a recognition of this problem, but it may be that the nature of Chinese society combined with the incentives of an autocratic, centralized system will be difficult to overcome.⁷

That tendency to weaken the rule of law can have very direct consequences for measurable national power outcomes—for example, Russia's military-sector corruption and its effects on combat effectiveness in Ukraine. It can also have damaging long-term effects on growth and innovation by raising questions about entrepreneurs' ability to control their firms. It impairs economic performance by scaring off foreign investors unwilling to operate in systems without reliable legal standards. It introduces general inefficiencies into their systems, more so in Russia than in China. It can impair

⁷ For a recent discussion of this challenge, see "Rule by Law, with Chinese Characteristics," *The Economist*, July 13, 2023.

the quality of governance by substituting highly ritualized and formalistic procedures for true decisionmaking, thus making these centrally controlled systems less decisive than they sometimes appear.

Fourth, China and Russia resorting to cultural and national sources of strategic advantage *risks reducing the talent on which each regime can call in the pursuit of strategic advantage*. In China, for example, actively promoting a belligerent nationalism can discourage exchanges with foreign academic institutions and damage innovation in the long run. A near-exclusive reliance on ethnic Han Chinese for leadership can also lead to rigid and inflexible policies toward ethnic minorities and an underutilization of talents in those communities. Extreme antiforeign sentiment and the belief that China has already built a world-class education system with a surplus of assiduous students may suppress the academic exchange necessary for long-term scientific innovation. Antiforeign sentiment could also deter foreign-educated Chinese students from returning to China for work—or at least render them disillusioned after returning to China and make them caution those who are aboard from returning. This effect was entrenched before the COVID-19 pandemic and recent U.S.-China tensions, when something like 90 percent of Chinese students who came to the United States stayed after their studies were completed.⁸ Russia's invasion of Ukraine and related repression, meanwhile, has caused a substantial brain drain. Estimates suggest that well over a million young Russians fled the country after February 2022.⁹

Fifth, *aspects of both Chinese and Russian cultural values may tend to emphasize narrowly transactional and expedient policies over long-term, more open-ended avenues to competitive advantage, whether domestic or international*. Domestically, this can take the form of overemphasizing results-oriented activities as opposed to open-ended exploration, curiosity, and discovery, which may be primarily encouraged and valued when they yield tangible benefits, such as money and power. China's and Russia's socio-political systems can focus intensely on the result of an issue rather than the process or general learning that comes from it. A well-known implication of

⁸ National Science Foundation, "International Students Who Intend to Stay in the United States: What Are the Overall Trends?" 2017.

⁹ Stacey Vanek Smith, "She Had a Dream Job. Now, She's Part of a Massive Brain Drain Hammering Russia," National Public Radio, May 31, 2023.

this mindset is the long-term underfunding of basic science in China relative to other advanced scientific powers.¹⁰ The same fixation on outcomes and results may help to explain the emphasis on quantifiable results, such as numbers of research papers published or housing units constructed, as opposed to more quality-oriented measures.

This blind spot also complicates the relationship between short- and long-term thinking in these societies. Especially in the Chinese case, even though the regime prides itself on extremely long-term perspectives and action, the emphasis on immediate results can bias decisions toward short-term imperatives. In China, this is sometimes institutionalized in the infamous five-year plans but also more broadly affects decisionmaking designed to promote the interests of a specific official, office, or local government rather than truly look toward the long term. One well-known result of this implicit bias toward the short term is the willingness of Chinese firms and government offices to ignore environmental concerns in development projects.

Internationally, this approach may encourage both Russia and China to view many relationships in primarily transactional terms, perhaps reducing their ability to build lasting communities of common values with strategic effect. This pattern seems very evident in recent behavior by Russia and China: Although they may invest in deep diplomatic expertise on specific partner nations and speak the language of long-term, value-based associations, their approaches are often governed by more-immediate outcome orientations that imply an essentially transactional model. When expediency is the primary value of foreign policy, the opportunities to attract deeper relationships grounded in mutual values decline.

A sixth and final blind spot could be very dangerous for U.S. national security strategy. Because of mutual faith in core national values of solidarity and willpower, there is a risk that *both China and Russia may become very difficult to deter, especially in crises, because they will exaggerate their*

¹⁰ Aruhan Bai, Cong Wu, and Kejia Yang, "Evolution and Features of China's Central Government Funding System for Basic Research," *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*, Vol. 6, December 2021. See also Mia Nulimaimaiti, "China Must 'Tolerate Failure' in Science and Tech to Close Gap with U.S., by Reforming Risk-Averse Research Environment," *South China Morning Post*, March 20, 2023. More recently, the PRC has increased investments in basic research to close this gap, but it is not clear that the underlying situation has fundamentally changed.

ability to outlast the United States in a conflict. Russia's and China's faith in culturally based sources of advantage may begin to parallel that of earlier U.S. rivals and adversaries, including Hitler's Germany, imperial Japan, and North Vietnam, and lead Beijing and Moscow to risk-taking behavior on the assumption that the United States will back down. It may be that such perceptions (of the United States, as well as of Western Europe) already played a role in encouraging Vladimir Putin to believe that the West could not sustain a long campaign against him in Ukraine. The nature of Chinese and Russian conceptions of societal advantage therefore poses arguably greater risks to U.S. deterrent policies than any differences in local military balances: History suggests that fundamental calculations of national willpower are more important in undermining deterrence than potential windows of opportunity for *faits accomplis*.

The Sustainability of Chinese and Russian Models

Taken together, these blind spots—as well as the risks inherent in the other characteristic outlined above—highlight another risk for China and Russia and their conceptions of competitive advantage: Their approaches to national advantage may not be sustainable. This was ultimately the downfall of the Soviet Union. It was able to force-feed its system for a time, achieving dramatic industrial and even technological outputs and achieving a degree of domestic and international legitimacy as an effective social, political, and economic system. But ultimately its isolation, bureaucratic inefficiencies, repression, and corruption caught up with it. Given the nature of the system, as we know in retrospect and as was seen by some—including the diplomat George Kennan—at the time, the character of the system meant that such a reckoning was inevitable.

It is important not to exaggerate the relevance of this analogy for today's U.S. rivals, especially for China. As noted above, it has a vibrant private sector and is deeply engaged with the world in trade, cultural exchange, investment, and scientific and technological collaboration. Its system is not free but may be more responsive and ultimately effective than the Soviet bureaucracy. Even Russia, leaning on the pillars of national strength and legitimacy described earlier, likely has a more sustainable model than its

Soviet forebear—more grounded in a unifying nationalism, more inter-linked with a wider variety of outside trade and technology partners, more open to often corrupt but still wealth-creating entrepreneurial activity.

And yet there are still reasons to doubt the sustainability of both national models as engines of competitive advantage. China and Russia cannot avoid their essential character as autocracies; they must impose control on flows of people, information, ideas, and investment in ways that open societies do not, and this imposes a competitive penalty. They make increasingly centralized choices in ways that have historically led to bad decisions on major issues ranging from national investments to making war. Their intense nationalism walls them off from the allegiance and immigrant talent of most of the world. Their resentful ambitions, designed in part to claw back world roles they believe were stolen from them, are at least for now producing highly aggressive foreign policies that are creating significant (though not universal) concern and pushback.

Indeed, both countries' national-cultural conception of advantage might have built powerful contradictions into their approaches to governance and international relations, contradictions with deep historical roots. Tim McDaniel has argued that Russia's modern history involves the "yoking together of three elements that could never be assimilated to each other: the Russian idea, the despotic state, and the commitment to rapid modernization." These elements of competitive identity contradicted one another in many ways—the demands of modernity, for example stood in severe tension with elements of the tradition-bound, largely anti-Western Russian idea. These tensions produced a system in which "a whole set of distortions revealed themselves: word did not correspond to deed, professed belief to actual practice." The result was that "elites and institutions, despite their inherent power, gave off an eerie scent of decay and had much less legitimacy than their august facades sought to convey."¹¹

There is an argument that even China's economically and technologically dynamic system is beginning to labor under a less catastrophic but still crippling set of distortions, resulting from a similar forced marriage of Confucian ideals, communist authoritarian orthodoxy, and Wild West cap-

¹¹ McDaniel, 1998, p. 14.

italist progress. The two countries' systems may be joined in particular by the fact that they each came to reflect comprehensive forms of dishonesty. "The social world was constructed on a foundation of mendacity," McDaniel wrote of Russia¹²—an outcome that may be emerging in China as well. Neither system allows for a well-established principle of accountability. As in many autocratic regimes, ducking or shifting responsibility is one hallmark of successful routes to power. The most-important leadership values are as much about avoiding responsibility as pursuing true problem-solving governance.

Perhaps the essential problem for both may be an irresolvable dilemma around major political-economic reform, which, if significant enough, "would always threaten the system with collapse." Before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, McDaniel notes, "Russian rulers always balked at the sight of this abyss,"¹³ and it may be that, on issues from debt to financial reform to state ownership of firms, Chinese rulers have begun to balk before needed reforms as well.

Most broadly, in both cases, these factors may be curdling into a bitter, self-righteous, and belligerent mindset that could prove a significant source of drag on efforts to realize national greatness. Internally, this mindset could lead to social and political crackdowns, the imposition of new orthodoxies, and attacks on minorities and dissenters in ways that violate many classic principles of national competitive dynamism. Externally, such a mindset could set China and Russia against significant parts of the Western world in ways that isolate them from at least some key networks of ideas, research, technology development, investment capital, and private-sector activity. And both countries face a raft of challenges separate from the character of their model: demographic, financial, and environmental hurdles to continued success.

Of the two, China has especially powerful advantages to counteract these risks. But for both countries, the autocratic, belligerent, and egocentric approaches could prove self-limiting.

¹² McDaniel, 1998, p. 15.

¹³ McDaniel, 1998, p. 16.

Chinese and Russian conceptions of national competitive advantage thus provide an important perspective on the current U.S. rivalries with both countries. These conceptions suggest that the rivalries involve a clash of two very distinct approaches to national competitive advantage, two theories of the social and political factors that produce success. There is some research basis for believing that the U.S. approach—open, adaptive, experimental, free—has long-term advantages, but that assumption might not hold for the emerging era of strategic competition. At a minimum, awareness of the views of competitive advantage in China and Russia should inform U.S. strategy for these rivalries.

Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
GDP	gross domestic product
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PPP	purchasing power parity
PRC	People's Republic of China

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Unless otherwise indicated, the authors of this report provided the translations of bibliographic details for the non-English sources included in this report. To support conventions for alphabetizing, sources in Chinese are introduced with and organized according to their English translations. The original rendering in Chinese appears in brackets after the English translation.

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This report is part of a larger RAND Corporation study on the societal foundations of national competitiveness. Building off that study's identification of the qualities that contribute to national dynamism and success in international rivalries from a Western perspective, the authors surveyed Chinese and Russian thinking about the qualities that tend to produce competitive advantage. The authors aimed to find general themes and patterns of thinking, not actual plans.

Both China and Russia hold starkly different views from most U.S. and Western officials and analysts about the societal sources of competitive advantage. Unsurprisingly, the countries' concepts emphasize the claimed advantages of their distinct models, grounded in the unity and coordinated policy allowed by nationalistic autocratic regimes.

Chinese and Russian conceptions of societal advantage carry at least an implicit message that an effective combination of three societal characteristics (national ambition and will, unified national identity, and an active state), when layered on top of the cultural values of their respective societies, can provide a winning formula in a long-term rivalry regardless of other factors associated with dynamism and competitive advantage. The contest between the United States and these two rivals may pivot around this essential standoff: a narrower recipe for national success based on nationalism, centralized authority, and willpower versus a more expansive formula built on networked power, grassroots dynamism, and the values of openness and freedom.

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