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Shifting power, preventive logic, and the response of the target: Germany, Russia, and the First World War

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ABSTRACT

If a declining state has incentives for preventive war, the rising state should have incentives to delay a confrontation until it is stronger. We develop the theoretical paradox and examine the July 1914 crisis. Why did Russia, rising relative to Germany, not adopt a buying-time strategy? We argue that although most Russian leaders hoped to avoid a confrontation, they feared that the failure to support Serbia would lead to a loss of Russian credibility and a significant setback to Russia's position in the Balkans, one that could not easily be reversed, even with Russia's expected increase in relative military power.

KEYWORDS Power transition; preventive war; rising states; buying time; status; July Crisis; First World War

Political and military leaders faced with the rising power of a hostile adversary often perceive incentives to adopt a strategy of preventive war in the hope and expectation of defeating the adversary and degrading its military capabilities. They fear that inaction would lead to a decline in their bargaining power, the risk of war under less favourable circumstances later and the need to make unacceptable concessions in the future to avoid such a war. Michael Howard exaggerates when he claims that the causes of most wars can be found in 'perceptions by statesmen of the growth of hostile power and the fears for the restriction, if not the extinction, of their own', but the preventive use of military force is a common historical phenomenon.¹ This has led international relations scholars to clarify the concept of preventive war, identify the conditions under which adverse power shifts lead to preventive war strategies and test their propositions in historical cases.²

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¹Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1983), 18. A.J.P. Taylor makes a similar claim about all great power wars between 1854 and 1914, in *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1954), 166.

²Jack S. Levy, 'Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War', *World Politics* 40/1 (October 1987), 82–107; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell

Despite these important advances, there is a curious omission in the traditional theoretical literature on preventive war. That literature focuses almost exclusively on the perceptions, fears, motivations, and strategies of the preventer, but ignores those of the target. Does the target realise that the adversary's anticipation of future shifts in power might give it incentives to attack now? If so, how does the target respond? Strategic logic suggests that shifts in relative power that give the declining state incentives for a preventive war should give the rising state incentives to buy time and delay a confrontation until it is stronger. As Deng Xiaoping stated, the rising state should 'Hide your strength, bide your time'.³ Does this prescription provide a historically accurate description of the behaviour of rising states? Do rising states adopt a strategy of buying time and attempt to delay a military confrontation? Or do they adopt other strategies? By neglecting these questions, and by focusing almost exclusively on the declining state, the non-formal literature on the strategy of preventive war is remarkably non-strategic.

The opposing incentives of declining and rising states, of initiator and target, were recognised by Clausewitz, who argued that 'If one commander wants to postpone the decision, the other must want to hasten it.... If it is in A's interest not to attack B now but to attack him in four weeks, then it is in B's interest not to be attacked in four weeks' time, but now'.⁴ This logic is emphasised in the formal theoretical literature on the 'commitment problem', which traces the paths through which shifting power can lead to a bargaining breakdown and a costly war among adversaries who would each benefit from a negotiated settlement.⁵ The commitment problem helps to explain why a rising state's

UP 1999), Ch.4; Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 2000); John A. Vasquez, 'Was the First World War a Preventive War? Concepts, Criteria, and Evidence', in Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez (eds.), *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP 2014), 167–198. Although most of these applications focus on wars that have occurred, there have been a few efforts to examine cases where the conditions for preventive war strategies were satisfied but where war did not occur. See Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, 'The Preventive War that Never Happened: Britain, France, and the Rise of Germany in the 1930s', *Security Studies* 16/1 (January–March 2007), 32–67; William Mulligan, 'Restraints on Preventive War before 1914', in Levy and Vasquez (eds.), *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2014), 115–38.

³Quoted in 'Less Biding and Hiding,' *Economist*, 2 December 2010.

⁴Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press [1832]1976), Book I, Ch. I, 16 (84).

⁵James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War,' *International Organization*, 49/3 (Summer 1995) 379–414; Robert Powell, 'War as a Commitment Problem,' *International Organization* 60/1 (Winter 2006), 169–204. The rising state (assumed to be the weaker of the two) recognises that it is likely to lose any war fought now and consequently has incentives to avoid war and to reach an agreement. The stronger but declining state has incentives to reach an agreement that freezes the current status quo and the current distribution of power. It understands, however, that there is nothing to stop its rising adversary, once it is stronger, from reneging on the agreement, initiating a new set of demands, and threatening military force if its demands are not met. The rising power, eager to avoid war now, might promise to abide by a settlement, but its incentives for strategic deception undermine the credibility of its promises. Moreover, even if its leaders fully intend to honour the agreement, they could change their minds, or they could be replaced by a more hostile regime. Thus, under conditions of shifting power the rising state cannot make a credible commitment to abide by any negotiated settlement.

buying time strategy might not work to delay a confrontation until it is stronger. It does not address the empirical questions of whether rising states have historically recognised that they might be targets of a preventive attack, and, if so, what strategies they have adopted in response.⁶

Although strategic logic suggests that shifts in power that create preventive incentives for the declining state should simultaneously create buying-time incentives for the rising state, some rising states pursue surprisingly confrontational policies. The First World War provides a good example. Most historians and political scientists agree that in 1914, German leaders perceived underlying trends in power as favouring Russia over Germany (and the Triple Entente over the Triple Alliance), and that preventive logic played an influential role in German decision-making in the July Crisis.⁷ Scholars debate exactly how confrontational Russian behaviour was during the crisis and what perceptions and motivations drove that behaviour, but they generally agree that Russia was more confrontational than conciliatory. Russia provided strong support to Serbia, adopting an unyielding deterrent strategy against Austria–Hungary and Germany, and was the first power to mobilise after Austria–Hungary’s declaration of war on Serbia.⁸ This is a puzzle. If German leaders were driven by better-now-than-later, preventive logic, why were Russian leaders not driven by a better-later-than-now, buying-time logic?

In the next section, we consider whether rising states recognise that their adversary might have preventive incentives for war, and, if so, what strategies they adopt in response. We then turn to the First World War. We explore whether Russian leaders believed that time was on their side and whether Russia was ready for war in 1914. We then explain why Russian leaders pursued a fairly aggressive strategy of deterrence and ultimately accepted the risks of war, rather than delay until they were in a stronger position. Our evidence draws from extensive Russian documentation translated into German and French, as well as German, French and British primary sources.

⁶The contemporary relevance of the opposing strategic logics of rise and decline is suggested by a recent analysis of escalating Saudi–Iranian tensions in the Middle East. Interpreting Saudi Arabia as a declining power and Iran as a rising power, the author argues that ‘History teaches us that it is not rising states that tend to be reckless, but declining powers. Rising states have time on their side. They can afford to be patient: They know that they will be stronger tomorrow and, as a result, will be better off postponing any potential confrontation with rivals.’ Trita Parsi, ‘The logic behind escalating tensions in the Middle East.’ <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2016/1/the-power-logic-behind-riyadhs-moves.html>. Accessed 7 January 2016.

⁷For recent reviews see Hew Strachan, ‘The origins of the First World War’, *International Affairs* 90/2 (2014), 429–39; Keith Neilson, ‘1914: the German War?’ *European History Quarterly*, 44/3 (2014), 395–418; John A. Vasquez, ‘The First World War and International Relations Theory: A Review of Books on the 100th Anniversary’, *International Studies Review* 16/4 (December 2014), 624–627.

⁸The conventional wisdom on Russia is reflected in D.C.B. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin’s 1983); Ronald P. Bobroff, ‘War Accepted but Unsought: Russia’s Growing Militancy and the July Crisis, 1914’, in Levy and Vasquez (eds.), *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2014), 227–51. Even more aggressive Russian policies, and in fact primary Russian responsibility for the war, are emphasised by Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 2011).

Perceptions and strategies of the rising state

A glance at history suggests that under conditions of shifting power, in which declining states perceive incentives to adopt a strategy of preventive war, there is considerable variance in the behaviour of the rising state. Some rising states are oblivious to the preventive thinking of its adversary. Others recognise the threat and respond in various ways.⁹

Do they see it coming?

Some rising states fail to recognise that the declining power feels sufficiently threatened to seriously consider initiating a preventive war. One example is Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. Once Japan's relative military power levelled off after a military build-up, Russia became the rising power in the region. Japan feared a significant increase in Russia's power in the Far East following the completion of the trans-Siberian railway, the integration of Russia's northern and southern fleets, and the ongoing fortress reinforcements at Port Arthur. After failing to reach a settlement over Korea, Japanese leaders resorted to a strategy of preventive war while the opportunity was still available.¹⁰ Russian political leaders – driven by cultural stereotypes of Asians, confident of their own military superiority, and convinced that it would be irrational for the Japanese to resort to war – never saw it coming.¹¹

Another example – if we define preventive logic to include a state's initiation of war against a stronger state before the latter grows stronger still – is the Pacific War. Japanese leaders recognised that the growing economic strength of the United States meant that Japan would never be able to match future US military power. They feared future American attempts to exploit Japanese economic vulnerabilities and concluded, after the breakdown of negotiations, that this was the last opportunity for a war that could lead to a diplomatically acceptable outcome.¹² The United States never saw it coming.¹³

More recently, it appears that Israel's preventive strike against Iraq's Osiraq reactor in June 1981 took Saddam Hussein completely by

⁹The rising state may also exaggerate the threat of a preventive strike by the adversary. In the decade before 1914, Germany worried that Britain, fearing Germany's rising naval strength, might launch a preventive strike to destroy the German fleet, modelled on the 'Copenhagening' of the Danish fleet in 1807. Jonathan Steinberg, 'The Copenhagen Complex', *Journal of Contemporary History* 1/3 (1966), 23–24.

¹⁰Ian Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War* (New York: Longman 1985) 157; Philip Streich and Jack S. Levy, 'Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905', *Foreign Policy Analysis*. 'Early View', 12 May 2014, doi 10.1111/fpa.12058.

¹¹Bruce Menning, 'Miscalculating One's Enemies: Russian Military Intelligence before the Russo-Japanese War', *War in History* 13/2 (2006), 141–170.

¹²Dale C. Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War* (Princeton: Princeton UP 2015) Ch.4.

¹³Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford: Stanford UP 1962).

surprise, despite the fact that Iran had twice attacked the reactor (with minimal damage) during the early phases of the Iran–Iraq War.¹⁴ After the Israeli raid, however, states developing nuclear programmes (Iran, for example) have been more likely to anticipate that their programme might provoke a preventive strike and to respond with precautionary measures.

Strategies of the potential target

If the rising state recognises the threat it poses to the declining state and anticipates the possibility of a preventive strike, it has several strategic options. One is secrecy (Deng's strategy of hiding) during the period of its military build-up. The effectiveness of this strategy depends on the underlying components of military power, the quality of intelligence and the nature of the regime. The requirement for parliamentary approval for military funding by the late nineteenth century undercuts the viability of a hiding strategy for many states. Secrecy is most likely to be effective in the case of new military technologies, which are more easily concealed, at least in the development stage. Iran has pursued this strategy with its nuclear programme for many years.¹⁵ Secrecy is less feasible if the sources of rising power are economic or demographic.

A rising state can adopt a strategy of accommodation (biding), aimed to convince its adversary that it does not have hostile intentions¹⁶ and possibly to undercut the perceived legitimacy of preventive military action in the eyes of the declining state's population and of relevant third parties.¹⁷ Alternatively, the rising state might accelerate its arms build-up or search for allies¹⁸ at the risk of increasing the threat perceived by the declining state and consequently the risk of a preventive attack.¹⁹ Accelerating an arms build-up might also undercut the goal of secrecy. As Amos Yadlin, former chief of Israeli military intelligence, argues, 'The Iranian strategy to

¹⁴The Iraqi intelligence failure was all the more puzzling given acts of sabotage and assassination against the Iraqi nuclear programme and key individuals associated with it, which Saddam presumably assumed was the work of Israel's Mossad. Jed C. Snyder, 'The Road to Osiraq – Baghdad's Quest for the Bomb,' *The Middle East Journal* 37/4 (1983) 565–593.

¹⁵Devin Hagerty, 'Iran: The Nuclear Quandary', in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21st Century Asia* (Stanford: Stanford UP 2008), 296–322.

¹⁶China's strategy of 'peaceful rise' might be an example. On the difficulty of assessing rising state intentions see David M. Edelstein, 'Managing Uncertainty: Beliefs about Intentions and the Rise of Great Powers', *Security Studies* 12/1 (2002), 1–40.

¹⁷Stacie E. Goddard, 'The Rhetoric of Appeasement: Hitler's Legitimation and British Foreign Policy, 1938–39', *Security Studies* 24/1 (2015), 95–130.

¹⁸Securing allies is problematic if potential allies perceive a greater future threat from the rising power than from the declining power.

¹⁹An example is Frederick the Great's invasion of Saxony in 1756, after he learned of an impending offensive alliance against Prussia. M.S. Anderson, *18th-Century Europe, 1713–1789* (New York: Oxford UP 1966), 34.

reach a nuclear bomb is to do it not as fast as possible ... [but] as safely as possible ... – in a way that would not provoke a military response'.²⁰

If the rising power or its coalition is already sufficiently strong, it might adopt a policy of deterrence, perhaps combined with some military preparations and other means of signalling resolve. This strategy also risks increasing its adversary's sense of threat and reinforce its long-term preventive logic with short-term pre-emptive logic. As we will see, in 1914, Russia adopted a strategy of deterrence against Austria–Hungary and Germany.

If the rising state concludes that none of its strategies will work, and that its adversary is likely to initiate a preventive war, it can initiate a pre-emptive attack to secure first mover advantages in a war in which it will be at a disadvantage because of its inferior power. The potential military effectiveness of such a strategy is countered, however, by the fact that it undercuts claims by the rising power that it is fighting a defensive war. Regardless of the theoretical logic underlying pre-emption, pre-emptive wars, unlike preventive wars, are relatively rare in international politics.²¹

Having briefly examined the perceptions and possible responses of rising states, we turn to the July Crisis. After summarising the conventional wisdom among historians about the influence of preventive logic among German decision-making elites, we focus on Russia. Did Russian leaders understand the preventive logic in German thinking? How did Russian leaders assess relative military power, future trends in power, and their own readiness for war? How did they define their options? Why did Russian leaders take decisions that significantly increased the likelihood of war?

The July Crisis

German preventive logic

Preventive war thinking in German foreign policy dates from the 1870s but became more prominent on the eve of World War I.²² Friedrich von Bernhardi argued in *Germany and the Next War* (1912) that Germany's position was deteriorating due to the encirclement of the Entente, Russia's growing strength and Finance Minister Vladimir Kokovtsov's efforts to stabilise Russia's fiscal position and its domestic politics. Although Bernhardi believed that Russia did not currently want war, he doubted this quiescent

²⁰In, David E. Sanger, 'Building Nuclear Weapon Would Take Years, Not Months, Iran Says in Report', *New York Times*, (13 June 2014).

²¹Dan Reiter, 'Exploding the Powder Keg Myth: Preemptive Wars Almost Never Happen', *International Security* 20/2 (Fall 1995), 20.

²²Karl-Ernst Jeismann, *Das Problem des Präventivkrieges im europäischen Staatensystem mit besonderem Blick auf die Bismarckzeit* (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber Verlag 1957); Mulligan, 'Restrains on Preventive War'.

policy would endure given Russian ambitions in the Balkans, the Straits and the Eastern Mediterranean. War was inevitable. Leaders in Berlin had to ensure that the war occurred at a time favourable to Germany.²³

Nearly all historians agree that German leaders perceived that underlying trends in power favoured Russia and the Triple Entente over Germany and the Triple Alliance, that they were particularly worried about the planned expansion of the Russian army by 40% and the completion of Russia's strategic railways in Poland by 1917, and that preventive logic was an influential factor in German decision-making in 1914.²⁴ The emphasis on Germany's deteriorating security situation and the need to deal with the threat sooner rather than later is shared both by those who argue that German decision-makers wanted a preventive war against Russia, and by those who argue that those decision-makers believed that a localised Austro-Serbian war in the Balkans would be sufficient to weaken and possibly break up the Entente and hence end the 'encirclement' of Germany.²⁵

Given these assumptions, German leaders made another inference. If Russia were to intervene against Austria–Hungary at a time it was relatively weak, rather than waiting until it was stronger, that action would be a clear signal of Russia's implacably hostile intentions. It would be better to learn of those intentions sooner rather than later. As a German publicist explained to the

²³Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Deutschland und der nächste Krieg* (Cotta Verlag: Stuttgart 1912), 53–54, 97.

²⁴On European perceptions of Russia's growing power see William C. Wohlforth, 'The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance', *World Politics* 39/3 (April 1987), 353–81. On the impact of tightening bonds between the Entente partners on German leaders' thinking in May and June 1914, see Stephen Schröder, *Die englisch-russische Marinekonvention. Das deutsche Reich und die Flottenverhandlungen der Tripleentente am Vorabend Des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2006). The strongest proponents of the preventive war interpretation are Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton [1961]1967); Annika Mombauer, *Helmut von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2001); and Dale C. Copeland, 'International Relations Theory and the Three Great Puzzles of the First World War', in Levy and Vasquez (ed.), *Outbreak of the First World War*, 167–98. Critics concede that Chief of the German General Staff Helmut von Moltke and other military leaders advocated preventive war, but question whether that view was shared by Kaiser William II and Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg. Vasquez, 'Was the First World War a Preventive War?' in Levy and Vasquez (eds.), *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2014), 199–223. Falling in between is Jack S. Levy, 'The Sources of Preventive Logic in German Decision-Making in 1914,' in Levy and Vasquez, *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2014), 139–66.

²⁵In the latter interpretation German leaders expected – at least until very late in the July Crisis – that Russia would probably stand aside in an Austro-Serbian war. They assumed neither Russia nor France was ready for war in 1914 and that time was on Russia's side. Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to war in 1914* (London: Penguin 2012), 417, 440, 518; T.G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP 2014), 311. The implicit assumptions are that Germany preferred a localised war to a continental war and grossly misperceived Russian intentions. Jack S. Levy, 'Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914', *International Security* 15/3 (Winter 1990/91), 151–86. German leaders were also influenced by arguments by Kurt Riezler, Bethmann Hollweg's trusted advisor, that states would always seek to postpone conflict to a later date unless the immediate threat was compelling, and that the additional security generated by Russia's size allowed that country to postpone nearly any war to the future. J. J. Ruedorffer [Kurt Riezler], *Grundzüge der Weltpolitik in der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1912), 135–6.

section chief of the Austrian Foreign Ministry, aggressive action 'would be the touchstone whether Russia meant war or not'.²⁶ Christopher Clark argues that the Austro-Serbia crisis was for Germany 'a means of establishing the true nature of Russian intentions'.²⁷ This German mindset helps to explain why Russian deterrent strategy was counter-productive – it hardened the belief in Berlin that Russian leaders were bent on war against Germany in the not-too-distant future. This line of argument also has important theoretical implications. It suggests that preventive, better-now-than-later logic can drive not only decisions for war, but also decisions for high-risk, coercive strategies for which war is an accepted but not preferred outcome. This aspect of preventive logic has been neglected in the theoretical literature on preventive war.

Did Russian leaders recognise Germany's preventive logic?

It is easier to document Russia perceptions of a general military threat from Germany than to demonstrate conclusively that they believed that the threat arose primarily from German preventive logic. Observers outside Germany were sensitised to the possibility of a preventive war by the publication of Bernhardt's book as well as by a Russo-German press war in spring 1914. Provocative articles in the German press elicited a variety of responses from Russian politicians and journalists, ranging from claims about Russian military readiness to sober calls for peace and even proposals for a continental league. The press war demonstrated the range of possible options open to the Russian government just months before the July Crisis.²⁸ Foreign diplomats paid close attention to these public debates and publications. The French military attaché, Colonel Pellé, argued that preventive war had become more likely due to the rising influence of pan-German militarists amongst conservatives and army officers, and attributed particular significance to Bernhardt's book.²⁹

In addition, statements from Russian officials suggest a widespread recognition of German preventive thinking. The Russian ambassador to Berlin, Sergei Nikola'evich Sverbe'ev, noted during the press war in March 1914 that German leaders and their public were already fearful of Russia's Great Programme of military reform, the completion of which in 1917 would end Germany's ability to dictate to Russia. Consequently, he said,

²⁶Victor Naumann to Alexander von Hoyos, 1 July 1914, in Imanuel Geiss, ed., *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War, Selected Documents* (New York: Scribners 1976), 65–66.

²⁷Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 416–19.

²⁸Dominic Lieven, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2015) 177–8, 290; Christoph Schmidt, *Russische Presse und Deutsches Reich 1905–1914* (Vienna: Böhlau 1988) 88.

²⁹Memorandum, Colonel Pellé, 26 May 1912, cited in Raymond Poincaré, *Au service de La France*, vol. 1, *le lendemain d'Agadir* (Paris: Plon 1949) 132–38. Pellé also noted that William II, Bethmann-Hollweg, and the majority of the German public were committed to peace.

... it is not surprising, that in Germany one is straining every nerve to be ready for the scenario of a military conflict with us. Nor is it surprising that they try to rattle us, and at the same time, not to give the impression that even Germany fears Russia. But one sees this fear ... in every line in the recently printed articles devoted to Russo-German relations.³⁰

In May, the General Staff of the Russian army heard from the chief of Russia's police forces about the widespread fear in Germany of Russia's growing military power and the possibility that German leaders would find and exploit an 'insignificant pretext' to start a war 'while victory was still a possibility' for Germany.³¹

After learning of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia, A.N. Bronevski, the chargé d'affaires in Berlin, concluded that the war party in Berlin was dominant and wanted to use the crisis to unleash a preventive war.³² Two months into the war, Paul Milyoukov, a liberal Russian and foreign minister after the February revolution, stated that Sarajevo was merely a 'pretext ... in order to conceal the ambitious design to wage a decisive war for a place in the sun. We were all aware that a "preventive" war was coming – the war long since preached by General Bernhardi and his like ...'.³³ Three years after the war, explaining why he pressed the Tsar for general mobilisation on 30 July 1914, Russian Chief of Staff Nikolai Yanushkevich stated that

... we knew well that Germany was ready for war, that she was longing for it at that moment, because our big armaments programme was not yet completed ... and because our war potential was not as great as it might be.³⁴

Others saw a growing threat from Germany but did not tie that threat directly to shifting power. Foreign Minister Sergey Sazonov was particularly troubled by the German military mission to the Ottoman Empire under Liman von Sanders in late 1913.³⁵ Although Sazonov did not anticipate war in 1914, he was concerned that the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire would provide the occasion for a scramble for spoils and a possible European war, one that might be beyond Russian control. In a November 1913 memorandum, he stated that Russia needed continued peace to consolidate domestic political stability, but had to be prepared 'if

³⁰Sverbe'ev to Sazonov, 12 March 1914, in *Internationale Beziehungen im Zeitalter des Imperialismus*, series 1, vol. 1, (14 January to 13 March 1914), (Berlin: Reimer 1931) 435–37.

³¹Lieven, *Russia and the Origins*, 49.

³²'Aufzeichnung A. N. Bronewski über die letzten Tage, in denen er die Botschaft in Berlin 1914 geleitet hat', *IBZI*, series 1, vol. 5:350; John Röhl, 'Jetzt gilt es loszuschlagen', *Die Zeit*, 22 (June 2014).

³³Professor Milyoukov, 'Russia and the War,' *The Manchester Guardian*, 21 October 1914.

³⁴Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, trans. and ed. Isabella M. Massey (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1952–1957), vol. 2: 559.

³⁵Sazonov to Grigorovic, 17 February 1914 in *IBZI*, series 1, vol. 1, 256; see also documents 387, 421, 426 in this collection.

events impose upon us the duty of defending ... [Russian rights and interests] with armed force'.³⁶

Having summarised Germany's preventive motivation for war, and the recognition of the German threat in Russia, we now turn to the Russian response.

The Russian puzzle

Historians agree that Russian leaders pursued a fairly confrontational policy in the July Crisis.³⁷ Russia's strong support of Belgrade encouraged Serbian intransigence³⁸; its initiation of a 'Period Preparatory to War' on 26 July was an important escalatory step in the crisis³⁹; and the Russian general mobilisation on 30–31 July tilted the balance significantly towards a European war.⁴⁰ This Russian behaviour poses a puzzle. If underlying trends in power favoured Russia over Germany, and if German leaders were driven, to one extent or another, by better-now-than-later logic, why did Russia not pursue a strategy of buying time and delay a confrontation until it was stronger?⁴¹

Scholars have noted the opposing strategic logics of declining and rising states and the puzzle of 1914, but few have used this as a point of departure for explaining Russian behaviour.⁴² Noting Germany's diminishing military advantage, I.V. Bestuzhev writes that 'just as it was a temptation for Germany to exploit this advantage, so it was desirable for the ruling circles of Russia to postpone the clash, if only to 1916–17' when it would be stronger.⁴³ Marc Trachtenberg notes that in 1914, ' "window" arguments should have had opposite effects on the two sides: Germany's "window of

³⁶'Après la guerre des Balkans', 23 November 1913, in *Un livre noir. Diplomatie d'avant-guerre d'après les documents Des archives russes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie du Travail 1923), 364.

³⁷Lieven, *Russia and the Origins*; Bobroff, 'War Accepted but Unsought'; McMeekin, *Russian Origins*. Arguing that French leaders actively pushed Russia towards a highly confrontational stance is Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Außenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914* (Munich: Oldenbourg 2009).

³⁸Some historians argue that Serbia would have rejected some of the terms of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum even without Russian support. Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 325, fn.23.

³⁹L.C.F. Turner, 'The Russian Mobilisation in 1914', in Paul M. Kennedy (ed.), *The War Plans of the Great Powers 1880–1914* (Boston: Allen & Unwin 1979), 262; Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 326; Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., 'July 1914 Revisited and Revised: The Erosion of the German Paradigm,' in Levy and Vasquez (eds.), *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2014), 30–62.

⁴⁰Albertini, *Origins of the War*, 3:31; Turner, 'The Russian Mobilization.' Niall Ferguson argues that 'war by timetable' commenced the moment Russia decided on full mobilization.' Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York: Basic Books 1999) 158.

⁴¹It is interesting to note Jennifer Siegel's argument that in the Great Game competition with Britain in Central Asia, Russia's primary aim in agreeing to the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 was to 'buy time' for Russia to recover from the war with Japan and the 1905 revolution, so it could 'regroup' and then 'resume the forward policy in Central Asia.' Siegel, *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris 2002), 197.

⁴²An exception is Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 2017), Ch.7.

⁴³I. V. Bestuzhev, 'Russian Foreign Policy February–June 1914,' in Walter Laqueur & George L. Mosse (eds.), *1914: The Coming of the First World War* (New York: Harper Torchbacks 1966), 90.

opportunity” was the Entente’s “window of vulnerability”, and although Germany had an extra incentive to act, Russia and France had an extra incentive to be cautious and put off the conflict if they could.⁴⁴

Similarly, David Herrmann argues that ‘[i]f given the choice, the Entente leaders would have preferred to wait and fight a war later if necessary’. Herrmann goes on to say, however, that Entente leaders feared that an unfavourable outcome of the July Crisis might lead to the break-up of the Entente and thereby to a ‘sinister’ future.⁴⁵ Jack Snyder recognises the paradox of strategic logics in 1914, but gives more emphasis to the ‘puzzle of simultaneous optimism’. He argues that Russia was both optimistic about 1914 and pessimistic about the future, and that 1914 was ‘everyone’s favored year for war’.⁴⁶

We argue, to the contrary, that 1914 was not Russia’s favoured year for war. Russian leaders were pessimistic about their military prospects in 1914, optimistic about trends in military power, but fearful of the diplomatic consequences of an unfavourable outcome to the Austro-Serbian crisis. They feared that significant concessions in 1914 would lead to a loss of Russian credibility and of Russian influence in Serbia and the Balkans. Setbacks in the Balkans would have consequences for Russia’s position in the Ottoman empire and access through the Straits. These losses would be difficult to recover in the future, despite Russia’s continued growth in relative military power. The changing dynamics of elite politics in St. Petersburg also contributed to a more assertive Russian stance. Ministerial changes reflected a hardening of pan-Slavic public opinion, admittedly representing a small proportion of the Russian public, but one with political access and influence.⁴⁷

Explaining Russian behaviour

One possible explanation for Russia’s surprisingly assertive behaviour in the July Crisis is that Russian leaders wanted a major war. McMeekin advances this argument, emphasising the aim of gaining control of the Turkish Straits and eliminating any threats to Russian trade.⁴⁸ Most historians reject this

⁴⁴Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1991), 70; Jack S. Levy, ‘Preventive War: Concept and Propositions,’ *International Interactions* 37/1 (March 2011), 94–95.

⁴⁵David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1996), 217–18.

⁴⁶Jack Snyder, ‘Better Now Than Later: The Paradox of 1914 as Everyone’s Favored Year For War,’ *International Security* 39/1 (Summer 2014), 71–94. For a critique and response, see Jack S. Levy and Jack Snyder, ‘Everyone’s Favored Year for War – or Not?’ *International Security* 39/4 (Spring 2015), 208–17.

⁴⁷Dietrich Geyer, *Russian Imperialism: The Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policy, 1860–1914* (New Haven: Yale UP 1987); David MacLaren McDonald, *United Government and Foreign Policy in Russia, 1900–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1992); Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, Ch.6, 285–95, 331–2.

⁴⁸McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 28–32. The Russian agricultural economy was critically dependent on trade through the Straits, through which passed 43% of Russian exports, including the vast majority of grain exports. Maintaining a favourable balance of trade was also critical for supporting the foreign borrowing needed to sustain Russia’s economic development. Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 74–75. The Russian economy had suffered significantly during the closure of the Straits during the Balkan Wars. Emphasizing Russia’s traditional policy preference for control of the Straits by a weak

argument. They point to the Tsar's well-known 'fear and abhorrence of war',⁴⁹ his beliefs that William II shared that aversion and that the two leaders could maintain the peace, the fact that Russia had been cautious during earlier crises, and widespread concerns about Russia's readiness for war.⁵⁰ Scholars generally argue that most Russian leaders shared both Sazonov's preference for peace and his willingness to use military force if necessary to defend Russian interests and maintain prestige.⁵¹ These explanations raise questions about Russian leaders' perceptions (during the July Crisis) of their military readiness, their interests and the relative costs of backing down and risking war.

Russian perceptions of their readiness for war

As David Stevenson argues, '1914 was far from an optimum moment' for war for either Russia or France.⁵² The 1909 assessment of Aleksandr Roediger, Minister of War, that the army was not capable of fighting even a defensive war against Austria–Hungary and Germany forced the Tsar to capitulate to German threats in the crisis over Bosnia–Herzegovina.⁵³ A similar assessment would have precluded a confrontational stance by Russia in 1914. As Vladimir Sukhomlinov, Chief of the General Staff, wrote later, 'It would have been altogether different if in 1914 I had been in the same position as Roediger in 1909'.⁵⁴

Perceptions of weakness and the logic of buying time continued to influence Russian security policy after 1909. Referring to the 1911 period, Sazonov wrote in his memoirs that '[i]t was essential for the Russian government to placate German hostility for a long time to come, by means of all possible concessions in the economic sphere'.⁵⁵ A December 1913 secret report of Russia's naval general staff had recommended that 'What Russia desires in the next few years is a postponement of the final settlement of the Eastern question and the strict maintenance of the political status quo'.⁵⁶ However, subsequent improvements in Russian forces led to growing confidence.⁵⁷ In the critical Council of Ministers meeting on 24 July, where a decision was made to support Serbia, Sukhomlinov, along with naval minister Ivan Grigorovich, provided assurances that the Russian armed

Ottoman Empire is Ronald P. Bobroff, *Roads to Glory: Late Imperial Russia and the Turkish Straits* (London: I.B. Tauris 2006).

⁴⁹Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 512.

⁵⁰Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 307.

⁵¹This interpretation is captured by Bobroff's title, 'War Accepted but Unsought'.

⁵²Stevenson, 'Was a Peaceful Outcome Thinkable? The European Land Armaments Race before 1914' in Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (eds.), *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914* (Oxford: Berghahn 2007), 139.

⁵³Lieven, *Russia and the Origins*, 108.

⁵⁴Quoted in Herrmann, *Arming of Europe*, 214.

⁵⁵Serge Sazonov, *Fateful Years, 1909–1916* (New York: ISHI 1928), 33.

⁵⁶Bestuzhev, 'Russian Foreign Policy,' 91.

⁵⁷Russia was stronger economically and financially than in 1908–09. Otte, *July Crisis*, 116–22.

forces, though not superior to those of Germany and Austria–Hungary, were up to the task.⁵⁸

There is good reason to believe, however, that these assurances did not fully reflect the serious concerns of Russian military leaders about their prospects in any war with Germany. Articles in General Staff journals emphasised the ‘superiority of German training, German technology, and German mobilization.’⁵⁹ One day before the above-mentioned Council meeting, Sukhomlinov asked Nicholas de Basily, deputy head of the Chancellery, to convey his concerns about Russia’s current military weaknesses to Sazonov. After a detailed summary, and noting that Russia’s Great Programme could not be completed until 1917, later if war intervened, Sukhomlinov stated that ‘even with France’s support, we would find ourselves until 1917...[or] 1918, in a position of indisputable inferiority to the combined forces of Germany and Austria. Consequently, we should do everything in our power to avoid war.’⁶⁰ Similarly, Grigorovich stated privately that ‘Our fleet is in no state to measure up to the German navy ... Kronstadt [the naval fortress blocking maritime access to Petersburg] will not save the capital from bombardment’.⁶¹

Sukhomlinov’s anxieties about war were noted by Sazonov, who said in his memoirs that ‘the most pronounced opponent of any sort of policy of adventure was General Sukhomlinov ... probably because the unsatisfactory condition of his Department was better known to him than to anyone else’.⁶² Sergei Dobrorolski, the Director of the Mobilization Section of the Russian General Staff, states that Sukhomlinov signed the mobilisation orders unwillingly, because, Albertini argues, the general realised that ‘Russia was throwing herself unprepared into a venture beyond her strength’.⁶³ Sukhomlinov’s willingness to discuss Russian military weakness in informal conversations, but not in the Council of Ministers, demonstrates the weakness of collective decision-making in St. Petersburg (a characteristic repeated in other capitals). His position depended on upholding conventional military values, defending his bureaucratic fiefdom and asserting the army’s readiness to protect Russian honour. Nor were other ministers willing

⁵⁸Russian Council of Ministers meeting, 24 July, 1914, in Annika Mombauer (ed.), *The Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents* (Manchester: Manchester UP 2013), 330.

⁵⁹William C. Fuller, Jr., ‘The Russian Empire,’ in Ernest May (ed.), *Knowing One’s Enemies: Intelligence Assessments before the Two World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1984). Russian assessments of relative military strength were plagued by institutional problems and psychological biases. Military analysts and the diplomatic corps often disagreed on intelligence matters (the diplomats generally being more pessimistic), and there was no system for resolving their differences. Otte, *July Crisis*, 247, 519. Psychologically, ‘The world of the General Staff was a closed world. Staff officers did not listen to diplomats...[or]...to civilian journalists. The General Staff remained in bondage to its prejudices’. Fuller, *Russian Empire*, 126.

⁶⁰Nicolas de Basily, *Memoirs: Diplomat of Imperial Russia, 1903–1917* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1973), 90–91.

⁶¹Lieven, *Toward the Flame*, 323–24.

⁶²Sazonov, *Fateful Years*, 32–33.

⁶³Albertini, *Origins of the War of 1914*, 2, 546.

to question him – the absence of Kokovtsov and Stolypin, who had forcefully questioned previous Ministers of War about Russia's military readiness, was significant. Sukhomlinov later explained his reluctance to articulate his concerns in meetings with the Council of Ministers and with the Tsar: 'I was a soldier and had to obey, once the army was summoned to defend the country, and not get involved in arguments'. If he had conceded military weakness, which would be taken as an argument for avoiding war, 'people would have had a right to accuse me of cowardice'.⁶⁴

Arguments by civilian ministers for a confrontational strategy were based more on the expected costs of inaction than on beliefs about Russian military strength and preparedness. Aleksandr Krivoshein, the minister of agriculture, argued strongly for a firm line against Germany in the Council of Ministers meeting, but conceded that it was 'doubtful whether our Army and our Fleet would ever be able to compete with those of Germany and Austro-Hungary as regards modern technical efficiency'. Krivoshein also acknowledged Russia's non-military weaknesses in stating that Russia would probably never equal the Central Powers in industrial strength.⁶⁵ After making his argument against inaction, Sazonov introduced an additional concern when he conceded that

war with Germany would be fraught with grave risks because it was not known what attitude Great Britain would take Should Britain decide to remain neutral, the situation would become extremely difficult for Russia and France, even if they were adequately armed and prepared.⁶⁶

This echoed Sazonov's analysis in the previous December that Germany feared a war with the entire Entente, but not one against Russia and France alone.⁶⁷ The domestic perils were discounted – the Minister of the Interior, Nikolai Maklakov, was absent, while the Minister of Finance, Petr Bark, failed to address the financial risks, in striking contrast to Kokovtsov's regular warnings.⁶⁸

The readiness of the Russian navy was particularly questionable.⁶⁹ Russian naval planning focused primarily on the Straits, where Russia's traditional policy of relying on the Ottoman Empire to assure Russian access had become increasingly problematic, particularly after the closure of the Straits during the Ottoman–Italian and Balkan wars and after the Liman von Sanders affair revealed German influence and the lack of Entente support.⁷⁰ A conference of diplomatic, military and naval advisers in February 1914 discussed the possibility of seizing Constantinople and the Straits in the

⁶⁴Lieven, *Toward the Flame*, 323. Fuller emphasises the 'foreign and domestic propaganda' motivations for Sukhomlinov's optimistic statements. Fuller, 'Russian Empire,' 111.

⁶⁵Lieven, *Toward the Flame*, 322.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Journal einer Sonderkonferenz, 31 Dec., 1913, in M. Pokrowski, ed., *Drei Konferenzen. Zur Vorgeschichte Des Krieges* (Berlin: Redaktion Russische Korrespondenz, 1920).

⁶⁸Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 115.

⁶⁹Lieven, *Russia and the Origins*, 109–10.

⁷⁰Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 285–87.

context of a European war, though they recognised that Russia could not initiate such a war because of the imperative of avoiding certain British opposition. They concluded that military action in the Straits could not be achieved until 1916 at the earliest, after the expansion of the Black Sea fleet, building of railway infrastructure and training of additional army corps.⁷¹

The Russian army faced fewer problems, but it was not fully ready for war in 1914, particularly given the requirements of its mobilisation plan. The growth in Russian strength and the tightening of the Franco-Russian alliance had led Russia to shift, in 1912, from a defensive to more aggressive war plan, Schedule 19, which called for offensive operations against both Germany and Austria–Hungary. The dual offensives overcommitted Russian resources and made it likely that on neither front would Russia have sufficient forces to succeed.⁷² The overcommitment problem was compounded by the Russian promise to France that it would attack Germany with 800,000 men within 15 days of the declaration of mobilisation, putting added pressure on Russia's underdeveloped strategic railways.⁷³ Moreover, Russian planners sometimes ignored problems rather than confront them. Their April 1914 war games, for example, conveniently neglected railway logistics so as 'not to complicate the play'.⁷⁴

The condition of the French army gave Russian leaders additional motivation for postponing any conflict. In 1913, France had introduced a 3-year military service law which increased its frontline army. The Three Year Law was confirmed, if only just, by the new government, following an election in May 1914.⁷⁵ The military changes were in their initial stages and would take several years to complete. In a speech to Parliament on 13 July 1914, French senator and former army officer Charles Humbert detailed extensive material and organisational deficiencies in the French army. General Christian Michelet stated that 'L'armée est un malade'.⁷⁶ Whereas the German army had increased troop numbers and improved artillery since 1912, the Russian and French military were in the initial stages of their major military reforms, and would

⁷¹Journal einer Sonderkonferenz, 8 Feb., 1914, in Pokrowski, ed., *Drei Konferenzen.*, 46–67. McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 28–32; Bobroff, 'War Accepted but Unsought', 239–240.

⁷²On the logroll that generated these dual offensives, see Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision-Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1984), ch. 6–7; Bruce Menning, 'Pieces of the puzzle: the role of the Iu. N. Danilov and M. V. Alekseev in Russian war planning before 1914,' *International History Review* 25/4 (2003), 783–96.

⁷³William C. Fuller, Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600–1914* (New York: Free Press 1992), 439. Some French loans for strategic railways had been diverted to fund commercially viable routes. David Stevenson, *Armaments and the coming of war. Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1996), 146–59, 315–323; Herrmann, *Arming of Europe*, 191–98.

⁷⁴Bruce Menning, 'War planning and initial operations in the Russian context,' in Richard F. Hamilton, Holger Herwig (eds.), *War Planning, 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2010), 120–26; Menning, 'Pieces of the puzzle.'

⁷⁵Gerd Krumeich, *Armaments and Politics in France on the Eve of the First World War: The Introduction of Three-Year Conscription, 1913–1914* (London: Berg 1985).

⁷⁶J.F.V. Keiger, 'France's Unreadiness for War in 1914 and Its Implications for French Decision-Making in the July Crisis,' in Levy and Vasquez, *Outbreak of the First World War*, 261.

benefit from a delay. Indeed the positive view of the French army held by Russian diplomats and officers in 1912 and 1913 was largely absent in the summer of 1914, as their republican allies set about conscription reform following a difficult election centred on the Three Year Law in May 1914.⁷⁷

Historians generally agree with David Rich that most officials in St. Petersburg had 'an acute awareness of Russia's military ill-preparedness'.⁷⁸ Fuller argues that there was an 'unwritten but generally accepted conception of Austria-Hungary as beatable and Germany as well-nigh unbeatable'.⁷⁹ For Russia, 1914 was not a favourable moment for war.

Russian calculations of the costs of war went beyond concerns about military readiness.⁸⁰ A long, destructive war could trigger an economic and social crisis at home and have serious implications for the legitimacy and stability of the Tsarist regime. This fear was shared by many Russian leaders. Former Interior Minister Petr Durnovo, in his famous 'Durnovo memorandum' in February 1914, argued that the greatest danger of war was revolution at home, to which Russia was uniquely vulnerable because of its history and culture.⁸¹ When Dobrorolski called on the Interior Minister, Maklakov, to secure his signature for the general mobilisation order, he found the arch-conservative praying. 'The war will not be popular in the deepest recesses of the popular masses', Maklakov lamented, 'and the ideas of revolution are more concrete for the people than a victory over Germany. But one cannot escape fate'.⁸²

Alternative policy choices

Some might argue that Russian leaders adopted an increasingly hardline policy during the July Crisis because they had no choice, given the harsh terms of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia, Russia's historic ties to Serbia, and the absence of any evidence that Vienna or Berlin were willing to compromise. As recent scholarship on the July Crisis has demonstrated,

⁷⁷Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 257–64.

⁷⁸David Allen Rich, 'Russia,' in Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig (eds.), *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2003), 214. Rich argues (219) that Sazonov knew 'Russia was scarcely in a position to act militarily against Austria, even in response to aggression against Serbia.'

⁷⁹Fuller, 'The Russian Empire'.

⁸⁰The preceding discussion raises the question of what Russian leaders meant when they said they were or were not 'ready for war.' This is a widely used but theoretically underdeveloped concept. Most of the statements above implicitly adopt a realist standard of relative military capabilities – being stronger than the adversary. Some statements, however, seem to define readiness more in organisational terms. As Snyder suggests, from this perspective the question is 'whether the military feels that it is coherently organised to implement its basic plan from an administrative, logistical point of view, and whether its basic force structure is in place for the plan.' Snyder argues that in this sense all European militaries felt operationally 'ready' for war in 1914. Snyder, 'Better Now than Later,' 90. We believe that Russian views were mixed on this criterion.

⁸¹Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 303–7; Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. I: *To Arms* (Oxford UP, 2001), 81–82.

⁸²Sergei Dobrorolski, *Die Mobilmachung der russischen Armee 1914* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte 1922), 24–6.

however, Russian decision makers entertained an array of scenarios, considered different initiatives and often pursued different lines of crisis prevention and management.⁸³ They did have a choice.

Russian policy had been quite flexible since 1905. Russia faced highly coercive German threats in the crisis over Bosnia–Herzegovina in 1908–09 and, to a lesser extent, in the winter 1912–13 crisis emerging from Austro-Hungarian mobilisation in the Balkan wars. In 1909, Russia backed down rather than risk escalation to a costly war. In 1912–13, Russia made concessions and rowed back on support for Serbia, in return for some Austro-Hungarian concessions. True, each subsequent retreat added to the reputational stakes for Russia in the next crisis, but this did not necessarily require an unyielding hardline policy.⁸⁴ In the Liman von Sanders crisis in late 1913, Sazonov was willing to compromise, in part due to British and French pressure.⁸⁵

That crisis reinvigorated an ongoing debate since 1909 about the future direction of Russian foreign policy. While Sazonov had moved towards a more assertive defence of Russian interests, others advocated a more cautious policy. The Finance Minister, Vladimir Kokovtsov, after spending almost a decade rebuilding the state's finances, 'asked bluntly if we wished war and if we were ready to assume even part of the responsibility for war'.⁸⁶ Kokovtsov, along with Durnovo and former Finance Minister Sergei Witte, represented an alternative approach to Russian foreign policy. Durnovo argued that war would cause a revolution in Russia and that a conservative Tsarist regime had common interests with the conservative German monarchy. Russia should avoid participation in a major European war, as the primary rivalry was between Britain and Germany, not Russia and Germany.⁸⁷

Kokovtsov's advocacy of fiscal retrenchment, peace and a cautious foreign policy represented a coherent alternative, emphasising domestic stability and economic growth as the route to secure Russia's place in the world. In November 1913, Kokovtsov set out his political prognosis in a lengthy report. He claimed that improving the Russian economy provided the best means of securing the national interest and preserving the dynasty, even if such a policy required sometimes painful compromises with Germany. The Russian Finance Minister argued that the resolution of the Balkan Wars without a general European war signalled the ability of the great powers to compromise. Referring to the independent policies of the Balkan states

⁸³Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, Ch.7–12; Otte, *July Crisis*; Lieven, *Towards the Flame*.

⁸⁴On reputation see Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale UP 1966); Robert Jervis, 'Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior,' in Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder (eds.), *Dominoes and Bandwagons* (New York: Oxford UP 1991), 20–50.

⁸⁵William Mulligan, "'We can't be more Russian than the Russians': British policy during the Liman von Sanders crisis, 1913–1914," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 17/2 (2006), 261–282.

⁸⁶V.N. Kokovtsov, *Out of My Past: The Memoirs of Count Kokovtsov* (Stanford UP, 1935), 402–3.

⁸⁷Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 303–4.

during 1912–13, he urged that small states would have to submit to the united will of the great powers – such was the price of peace. This implied that Russia would restrain Serbia and prioritise European peace over its interests in the Balkans. Kokovtsov told Theodor Wolff, editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, that the Russian people ‘simply want to live peacefully and work towards their economic development’. In the loan negotiations Kokovtsov had resisted French demands to accelerate the construction of strategic railways towards the west. He noted that it took between 3 and 6 years to build these railways, and argued that economic as well as military considerations had to be taken into account.⁸⁸

Kokovtsov also feared the consequences of a general European war, which he expressed on several occasions. ‘Most of the ministers’, he claimed in a discussion of the war scare of November 1912, ‘had an implicit faith in the might of the Russian people to meet any national crisis. I, on the other hand, felt that a war would be a catastrophe for Russia, for by comparison with our enemies our army was ill-equipped and poorly led’.⁸⁹ In a debate with Sazonov in January 1914, Kokovtsov argued against escalatory measures in the Liman von Sanders crisis that might provoke a war against Germany. War would be ‘the greatest misfortune for Russia’, Kokovtsov argued.⁹⁰ Nor was Kokovtsov an isolated voice. Conservatives, fearful of the revolutionary consequences of a war, urged a conciliatory policy.⁹¹ Witte warned that war, however it started, would soon make all previous wars look like ‘child’s play’.⁹²

These views were becoming increasingly marginal amongst key Russian decision-makers. Kokovtsov’s removal from office in early 1914 signalled a more belligerent mood in Russia. While Witte was able to broadcast his views in the influential *Novoe Vremja*, most conservative politicians shied away from public debate, ceding this terrain to the Pan-Slavs, which made Russian public opinion appear more belligerent than it really was.⁹³ Although Kokovtsov had openly declared his readiness to defend Russia’s vital interests ‘with all our strength in the name of the honour and dignity of our country’, his unwillingness to risk fiscal stability by increasing expenditure on armaments ensured his association with a ‘peace at any price’ policy.

Sazonov wanted to abandon this orientation. He believed that Russia could now pursue a more assertive defence of her interests without continually conceding to German and Habsburg demands. Count Orlov, the head of Nicholas II’s

⁸⁸ ‘Rapport de V. N. Kokovtseff’, in *Un livre noir*, vol. 2, 385–417; Menning, ‘War planning’, 126–42. On the loan negotiations see Jennifer Siegel, *For Peace and Money: French and British Finance in the Service of Tsars and Commissars* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2014).

⁸⁹ Kokovtsov, *Out of my Past*, 346–9.

⁹⁰ ‘Journal der Sonderkonferenz’, Pokrowski, *Drei Konferenzen*, 44.

⁹¹ Dominic Lieven, ‘Pro-Germans and Russian foreign policy, 1890–1914,’ *International History Review*, 2, 1 (1980), 34–54; Francis W. Wcislo, *Tales of imperial Russia. The life and times of Sergei Witte, 1849–1915* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2011), 245–9.

⁹² Ludwig Stein, ‘Politische Rundschau’, *Nord und Süd*, vol. 38 (April 1914), 116–8.

⁹³ Schmidt, *Russische Presse*, 76–9.

military cabinet, told the French ambassador that the Tsar decided to remove Kokovtsov in November 1913 because he had subordinated foreign policy to the needs of the Treasury.⁹⁴ In his annual report, sent on 4 February 1914, the British ambassador, George Buchanan, reflected on what he deemed the 'mistaken conception' that Russia would follow a policy of 'peace at any price'.⁹⁵

Along with the replacement of the deceased Kiderlen-Wächter by Gottlieb von Jagow as the German Foreign Secretary, the removal of Kokovtsov, the dominant figure in the Russian Council of Ministers, was the most significant change of personnel amongst key decision makers between the height of the crisis over the First Balkan War in late 1912 and the July Crisis. It did not mark a decision for war, but it did signal a more assertive, less conciliatory approach to foreign policy. It also left Sazonov as the most influential actor in the making of Russian foreign policy.⁹⁶

Changes in the international environment

In addition to its growing economic strength and relative military power, Russia benefited from favourable developments in international politics in 1912 and 1913, but these developments were at an embryonic stage. Russia would have profited from delaying any confrontation, not just for its Great Programme of military expansion and reform to come to completion, but also for its relationships with Balkan states and its French ally to mature. Relations with Britain were complex in 1914, as tensions over Persia and the Anglo-German détente of 1912 and 1913 lessened the value of the Entente while Anglo-Russian naval conversations (which we discuss below) signalled an affirmation of the Entente. However, the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum fundamentally changed the strategic environment, creating the prospect of a severe diplomatic defeat that would undo many of these favourable developments, most importantly Russia's improved position in the Balkans following the wars of 1912 and 1913. As we will argue, decision makers in St. Petersburg feared that even if Russia's relative power continued to increase as projected in 1914, they would not have been able to reverse the setbacks that would have followed from the failure to support Serbia in the July Crisis. It was the threat of the loss of recent advances, and the inability to recover those losses anytime soon, that explains Russia's confrontational stance in the July Crisis.

Serbia's victory in the Balkan Wars had improved Russia's position within the European constellation in two ways. First, it tightened relations between St. Petersburg and Belgrade, despite Sazonov drawing back from supporting Serbian demands for a port on the Adriatic coast. In February 1914, the Serbian Premier, Nikolai Pašić, had visited St. Petersburg and secured a

⁹⁴Paléologue to Doumergue, 13 Feb., 1914, *IBZI*, series 1, vol. 1, 241–2.

⁹⁵Buchanan to Grey, 4 Mar., 1914, 'Russia: Annual Report, 1913,' TNA, FO 371/2092, fo. 53.

⁹⁶Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 297.

Russian promise to deliver armaments.⁹⁷ Second, Serbia's victory altered the military calculus across Europe. In the tight military balance on the eve of the First World War, small margins played an important role in great power calculations. Serbia had put 400,000 soldiers in the field. While observers noted some deficiencies in training, they recognised that these were battle-hardened troops and a significant factor in the European military balance. To give a sense of proportion, the German army bill of 1913 increased the size of the army by 129,000 men, while the Russian government planned to increase its peace-time forces by 468,000 men.

In this context, the future alignments of the Balkan states were important, as demonstrated by the efforts of the belligerents to bring these states into the war after it started. In an early signal of the seriousness with which leaders in the great powers took the changing balance in the Balkans, William II arranged a meeting of civilian and military leaders on 13 October 1912, just days after the outbreak of the Balkan War. They were particularly preoccupied with the deterioration of Austria–Hungary's position and its consequences for German security. The Balkan Wars confirmed the increasing optimism of Russian planners in their assessments of future threats. In a report on the French Plan XVII, stressing the links between the military balance in western and eastern Europe, French officers concluded that the 'growth of the Balkan peoples has modified, to a certain extent, the European balance'.⁹⁸ Austria–Hungary now had to devote more troops to its Serbian frontier, easing pressure on Russia's south-west frontier. This reduced the Dual Monarchy's capability to contain Russian forces in the first weeks of a war while the bulk of the German army sought victory in France, and put greater pressure on the Schlieffen Plan.

The Balkan Wars also reinforced the importance Russian leaders attached to the Straits and its connection to Balkans geopolitics.⁹⁹ In late 1912, Russian decision makers became anxious as Bulgarian armies approached Constantinople. Had Bulgaria seized the city, it would have been a major blow to Russian efforts to control the Straits and its access from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean – not to mention the humiliation of a 'Slavic younger brother' taking a prize long-coveted by successive Tsars. Because the Balkans served as the geopolitical hinterland to the Straits, Russian credibility in the

⁹⁷Katrin Boeckh, *Von den Balkanstaaten zum Ersten Weltkrieg. Kleinstaatenpolitik und ethnische Selbstbestimmung auf den Balkan* (Munich: Oldenbourg 1996), 285–93.

⁹⁸Oliver Stein, *Die deutsche Heeresrüstungspolitik 1890–1914. Das Militär und der Primat der Politik* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh 2007), 316–24; Bruce W. Menning, 'The Russian Threat Calculation, 1910–1914,' in Dominik Geppert, William Mulligan, Andreas Rose, eds, *The Wars before the Great War. Conflict and International Politics before the First World War* (Cambridge UP, 2015) 151–75; Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Außenpolitik in der Julikrise. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte Des Ausbruchs Des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009), 200.

⁹⁹Bobroff, *Roads to Glory*.

region was tied up with long-standing ambitions to dominate the Straits. In emphasising, quite properly, the importance Russian leaders gave to Russia's historic role as protector of the Balkan Slavs and its sentimental attachment to Serbia, historians often underestimate the strategic importance of the Balkans' position as the north-west approach to the Straits.

Losing out to Austria–Hungary in the Balkans also would have wider implications for Russo–German relations and their competition for influence in Constantinople. Often seen as a proxy for Berlin, Vienna's victory over Serbia would have eased the encroachment of German dominance stretching through the Balkans to the capital of the Ottoman empire. The Berlin–Bagdad railway alarmed Russian officials and foreign policy intellectuals as much as it did their British counterparts. The Pan-Slav journalist, M. Menshikov, described the railway project as the 'artery of German colonisation'.¹⁰⁰ Were Russia to step aside in the conflict between Serbia and Austria–Hungary, this would simply signal to Ottoman leaders the weakness of Russia, its unwillingness or inability to defend its allies. This would reinforce the tendencies within the Young Turk regime to look to Germany, which, thanks to an Austrian victory over Serbia, would have had a direct path through the western Balkans and Bulgaria to Constantinople.¹⁰¹

Russian civilian and military leaders had discussed the role of the Balkan states at a February 1914 conference. Although the primary theme of the conference was developing contingency plans for the seizure of the Straits, Zhilinski had emphasised the importance of Balkan states, especially Romania, in a general European war.¹⁰² Poised on Russia's south-west border and as the strongest Balkan power following the ending of the Second Balkan War, Romania was an important element in the Russian military calculus.¹⁰³ Although Romania had a military convention with Germany and Austria–Hungary, its commitment to the Dual Alliance wavered after 1912, and St. Petersburg launched an initiative to detach Romania from its commitments to the Triple Alliance. In June 1914, the Romanian Prime Minister, Bratianu, assured Sazonov that Romania was not bound to Austria–Hungary in the event of a Russo–Austrian War, but would act according to the national interest. When Sazonov said he could only imagine such a war in the case of an Austro–Hungarian attack on Serbia, Bratianu replied that Romania did not want to see Serbia weakened.¹⁰⁴ By the summer of 1914, King Karl, the pro-German king of Romania, was ill. Public opinion in Romania was increasingly sympathetic to the Triple

¹⁰⁰Schmidt, *Russische Presse*, 87.

¹⁰¹Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 331.

¹⁰²Journal der Sonderkonferenz, 8 Feb., 1914, in *Drei Konferenzen*, 49–50.

¹⁰³Menning shows that Russian threat assessments took seriously the power of small states. Menning, 'Pieces of the Puzzle', 784.

¹⁰⁴Vortragsaufzeichnung, 24 June 1914, *IBZI*, series 1, vol. 3, 293–8.

Entente and was alienated by the mistreatment of the Romanian population in the Siebenburgen region of Hungary. Sazonov believed these factors would restrain Romania from entering a war against Russia. Nonetheless, Sazonov was sufficiently uncertain about Romania's intentions and so alarmed at the prospect that it might side with Austria–Hungary that in late July he offered support for Bucharest's ambitions to take over Transylvania, a Habsburg province with a large ethnic Romanian population.¹⁰⁵

From a Russian perspective, however, the picture was not uniformly favourable. Sukhomlinov lamented that the Second Balkan War, between Bulgaria and her erstwhile allies, had split the Balkan League and 'relieved Austria of the threat of a million Slavs in her rear'. He blamed Sazonov for failing to mediate effectively between Serbia and Bulgaria.¹⁰⁶ Serbia was still recovering from two expensive wars and tensions between the civilian and military hampered the integration of newly acquired territory.¹⁰⁷ In addition, the two losers in the Balkan Wars, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria, were moving closer to Germany and Austria–Hungary. Despite these difficulties, the net result of the wars of 1912–13 was a vastly improved position for Russia in the Balkans.

Although the alliance with France had been the main pillar of Russian foreign policy since the 1890s, the bonds of the alliance had tightened significantly since early 1912, when Poincaré became Premier. The conditional support that the two allies had displayed for each other in the crises between 1904 and 1911 was replaced by firmer commitments. During the Balkan Wars, Izvolski, now Russian ambassador to Paris, had invested considerable efforts in clarifying France's position in the case that Russia declared war against Austria–Hungary following a Habsburg attack against Serbia. As Poincaré correctly predicted, Germany would support its Austro-Hungarian ally and attack Russia, hence activating the alliance commitment.

The clarity of Poincaré's position – that if Germany joined the war France would follow, even if the source of the war lay in Habsburg–Russian rivalry in the Balkans – gave Sazonov confidence that he could adopt a more assertive stance against German and Austro–Hungarian demands.¹⁰⁸ Poincaré's commitment to Russia erased the distinction between a war due to Balkan issues and a war due to more direct conflicts between the two alliances. This is what Clark calls the 'Balkan Inception Scenario', defined

¹⁰⁵Sazonov to Poklewski (Bucharest), 28 & 30 July 1914, in *IBZI*, Series 1, vol. 5, 133–4, 194.

¹⁰⁶Lieutenant Colonel Knox to Buchanan, 22 January, 1914, TNA, FO 371/2092, fo. 238.

¹⁰⁷James Lyon, *Serbia and the Balkan Front: The Outbreak of the Great War* (London: Bloomsbury 2015).

¹⁰⁸Izvolski, telegram, 15 January 1912; Izvolski, telegram, 12 Sept. 1912, in *Un livre noir. Diplomatie d'avant guerre d'après les documents Des archives russes, novembre 1910 – juillet 1914*, vol. 1, (Paris: Librairie du Travail 1922) 180, 323–6.

by the emergence of a 'geopolitical trigger along the Austro-Serbian frontier'.¹⁰⁹ The promise of French support should Germany attack was bolstered by meetings between French and Russian general staff officers between 1912 and 1914, and affirmed during Poincaré's visit to St. Petersburg, between 21 and 23 July 1914.

The discussions during Poincaré's visit concentrated on the contingent circumstances of a Habsburg attack against Serbia. The French president was well informed about Vienna's intentions – as were his Russian hosts. The attaché in the French embassy, Louis de Robien, noted on 22 July: 'Already in the conversations one sensed that the atmosphere had changed since the previous day. ... one was speaking openly about war, which nobody had bothered about a few days previously'.¹¹⁰ The commitment of the two allies aimed to deter Germany and Austria–Hungary from war, but both governments were prepared to risk war if necessary.¹¹¹ Therefore, before the crucial meeting of the Council of Ministers on 24 July, Sazonov counted on French support. Although Poincaré did not demand restraint or put conditions on French support, neither he nor other French leaders would have opposed Russian restraint on Serbia or seen it as a sign of weakness. France was not going to defect from its alliance with Russia.

The final development in the spring of 1914 was the agreement of Britain to begin naval conversations with Russia. Since January Sazonov had argued that tighter bonds between the Entente partners would contain Germany.¹¹² While Russian leaders expressed doubts about whether France and Russia could defeat the Austro-German alliance, they were confident that with British support, they would emerge victorious. Grey, however, had been cautious in his support for Russia in crises in 1912 and 1913, emphasising that British public opinion would not consent to a war that started in the Balkans. In early 1914, Sazonov launched his initiative to affirm the bonds of the Triple Entente. The proposed naval conversations had some strategic merit – cooperation of British and Russian fleets in the North and Baltic Seas, respectively – but their true importance was symbolic.¹¹³ After 18 months of Anglo-German détente, which worried some French and Russian diplomats, Grey's agreement to the naval conversations signalled the solidity of the Triple Entente.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 349–50.

¹¹⁰Schmidt, *Frankreichs Politik*, 66–9, 77–8.

¹¹¹Schmidt, *Frankreichs Politik*.

¹¹²Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 297.

¹¹³German intelligence about these conversations, combined with Grey's lack of openness about them, generated considerable concern in Berlin. See Arthur von Zimmermann to Bethmann-Hollweg, 27 Jun. 1914, in Max Montgelas and Walther Schücking (eds.), *Outbreak of the First World War: German Documents Collected by Karl Kautsky* (New York: Oxford UP 1924) no.5.

¹¹⁴Schröder, *Die englisch-russische Marinekonvention*.

Nonetheless, Russian confidence in the Entente was by no means complete in June 1914. Anglo-Russian relations were deteriorating in Persia, weakening the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention and straining the relationship between Grey and Sazonov.¹¹⁵ As the July Crisis escalated, the French were worried by the squabbling between their allies.¹¹⁶ In London, Grey was preparing to reach out to Germany in the summer of 1914. His private secretary, William Tyrrell, was due to meet German Foreign Secretary Jagow in July. Although the meeting never took place – due to Jagow’s wedding and the crisis – it represented another possible direction of British foreign policy.¹¹⁷ Russian diplomats were unaware of the proposed meeting, but the possibility of improving Anglo-German relations was already of great concern in St. Petersburg. Given the importance Russian civilian and military leaders attached to Britain’s participation in a war, the uncertainty surrounding the Anglo-Russian entente and the prospect that naval conversations (which had been postponed until late summer) would strengthen the relationship suggested a ‘better-later-than-now logic’ for Russia.

Beyond the balance of power

Russian calculations operated partly, but not solely, according to a well-informed assessment of the relative balance of forces. Concerns about status and domestic instability also played a role in Russian decision-making in late July, as did misperceptions of Austro-Hungarian and German intentions, miscalculations about the efficacy of deterrence, and the pressures of mobilisation schedules. The variety of considerations influencing Russian leaders is evident in Krivoshein’s important contribution in 24 July Council of Ministers meeting. After questioning whether the Russian army and navy could compete with those of Germany and Austria–Hungary in terms of ‘modern technical efficiency’, he noted that

general conditions had improved a great deal in Russia in the past few years and public and parliamentary opinion would fail to understand why, at the critical moment involving Russia’s vital interests, the Imperial Government was reluctant to act boldly [...]. Our exaggeratedly prudent attitudes had unfortunately not succeeded in placating the Central European Powers [...]. No one in Russia desired war. The disastrous consequences of the Russo-Japanese War had shown the grave danger which Russia would run in case of hostilities. Consequently, our policy should aim at reducing the possibility of European war [but] if we remained passive we would not attain our objective. War could break out in spite of our efforts at conciliation [...]. In his view stronger language than that we had used hitherto was desirable. All factors tended to prove that the most judicious policy Russia could

¹¹⁵Siegel, *Endgame*, Ch.8.

¹¹⁶McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 13, 250.

¹¹⁷T.G. Otte, ‘Détente 1914: Sir William Tyrrell’s secret mission to Germany,’ *Historical Journal* 56/1 (Mar. 2013), 175–204.

follow in present circumstances was a return to a firmer and more energetic attitude towards the unreasonable claims of the Central-European powers.¹¹⁸

Herein lay the dilemmas in Russian thinking in July 1914: the acknowledgement of the unfavourable balance of military power, the articulation of vital interests under the pressure of public opinion, the hope that a firm stance would deter Germany and Austria–Hungary and the readiness to risk war.

Krivoshein's reference to public opinion also indicated the ways in which the expansion of popular debate about foreign policy impinged on the thinking of decision-makers. Since the 1905 revolution, the press had flourished in Russia. Nonetheless, only a limited section of public opinion – the upper middle classes in St. Petersburg and Moscow – shaped foreign policy debates. This accentuated the importance of Pan-Slavism in Russian foreign policy. Pan-Slavic writers viewed international politics in terms of racial conflict, mirroring the Pan-German belief in a coming showdown between Slavs and Germans. Thinking in these racial terms increased the strategic significance of Serbia, which would play an important role in a war between Slavs and Germans. Pan-Slavs were not necessarily committed to war – Menshikov, for example, warned of the risks of war against Germany in early 1914. However, the failure of Germany to restrain Austro-Hungarian demands in late July 1914 confirmed a view that had emerged during the Bosnian crisis, namely that Vienna carried out Germany's dirty work in the Balkans. In the final days of peace, the press assumed that the Russian government would support Serbia and that Austria–Hungary would retreat from its demands. The elite press, such as *Novoe Vremja*, did not articulate a way for Russian statesmen to retreat, buy time, and allow for the growth of Russian power. In this respect, the press did not determine Russian policy, but it placed limits on the policy options.¹¹⁹

Nor were diplomats immune to the 'sentimental' considerations found in the press. Prince Grigorii Trubetskoi, a senior official in the Foreign Ministry and formerly an influential writer, claimed that Russian support for Slav states was a mix of interest and morality and that policy was often dictated by emotion.¹²⁰ Russian leaders were able to separate Russian from Pan-Slav interests, but in the July Crisis, they often conflated the two owing to elite public opinion and the growing importance of Serbia in the broader European balance. Sazonov emphasised Russian prestige and also referred repeatedly to Serbian 'dignity' and the unacceptable 'humiliation' that Austro-Hungarian demands threatened to inflict on its Balkan neighbour. At 24 July Council of Ministers meeting, Sazonov warned that Russia would forfeit 'all her authority' and 'prestige in the Balkans', and be

¹¹⁸A. V. Krivoshein's summary of Russian Council of Ministers meeting of 24 July 1914, in Mombauer, *Documents*, 333.

¹¹⁹Schmidt, *Russische Presse*, 80–91; Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 165–79.

¹²⁰G. Trubetskoi, *Russland als Grossmacht* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1912), 135–36.

reduced to 'second place among the powers', if the Tsarist government abandoned Russia's 'historic mission' in the Balkans.¹²¹ Russian diplomats subsequently argued that the Serbian response to the ultimatum offered 'satisfaction' to Austria–Hungary, so that the demands infringing the sovereignty of Serbia could be withdrawn without loss of honour to the Habsburg empire.¹²² Honour could be negotiated and preserved by both sides, but the refusal of Austria–Hungary to accept the Serbian response was seen as an unnecessary humiliation and evidence that Vienna, directed by Berlin, was bent on war.

These statements and others by Russian leaders have led many scholars to emphasise the importance of status, prestige, honour, dignity and avoiding humiliation for Russia in the July Crisis. These concepts were part of the accepted coinage of European diplomatic exchange in this period. Russian leaders invoked them regularly, but they rarely articulated what this meant beyond standing up for Serbia. Prestige and status are ambiguous concepts, and the international relations literature has only recently made progress in conceptual clarification and theory development.¹²³ Scholars have invoked these concepts to explain behaviour in the First World War, but the tendency is to emphasise status as an intrinsic value – an end in itself – while neglecting its instrumental role in advancing state security interests and perhaps the domestic interests of political leaders as well.¹²⁴ Reinhard Wolf, for example, argues that 'Russian decisions provide the clearest evidence for the predominance of status concerns since they made so little sense in terms of national security'.¹²⁵ Jonathan Renshon also emphasises the symbolic aspects of status for Russia. He argues that in contrast to the dominance of security concerns in Germany's decision calculus, 'Russian leaders saw the conflict as mostly – though not totally – about status', and that for Russia 'the *material* values at stake [were] extremely low'.¹²⁶

¹²¹Sazonov to Schebeko, 22 Jul. 1914, in *IBZI*, series 1, vol. 4, 292–3; Strandtmann to Sazonov, 25 July 1914, *IBZI*, series 1, vol. 5, 65; Lieven, *Russia and the Origins*, 142.

¹²²Sazonov to Russian ambassadors, 27 Jul. 1914; Schebeko to Sazonov, 30 July 1914, in *IBZI*, series 1, vol. 5, 106, 208–09.

¹²³Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (New York: Cambridge UP 2010), Ch.6; Thomas Lindemann, *Causes of War: The Struggle for Recognition* (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press 2010); Reinhard Wolf, 'Respect and disrespect in international politics: the significance of status recognition', *International Theory* 3/1 (2011), 105–42; T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth (eds.), *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP 2014); Tudor A. Onea, 'Between dominance and decline: status anxiety and great power rivalry', *Review of International Studies* 40/1 (January 2014), 125–52.

¹²⁴On the intrinsic/instrumental distinction see Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, Ch.2. On honour and status in the First World War see Avner Offer, 'Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honour?' *Politics & Society* 23 (June 1995), 213–41; Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, Ch.6–7.

¹²⁵Reinhard Wolf, 'Status Fixations, the Need for 'Firmness', and Decisions for War,' *International Relations* 28/2 (2014), 258.

¹²⁶Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, Ch.7. Italics in original.

We do not deny that Russian honour and Serbian dignity played an important role in Russian calculations, but we emphasise that status and honour were inextricably bound to the credibility of Russian threats and promises and to Russian security interests and influence. Russian leaders feared that concessions during the July Crisis would undercut Russian reputation for resolve in great power politics, significantly reduce its influence in the Balkans, and – given the growing importance of that region in the wider European constellation – lead to a significant adverse shift in the balance of power.¹²⁷ In his report to Nicholas II on 25 July, focusing on the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia, Sazonov said little about status or honour but emphasised instead that Russia's 'sole aim it is to prevent the establishment of Austrian hegemony in the Balkans' because 'the balance of power in Europe ... is seriously threatened'.¹²⁸

In the eyes of Russian leaders, the most obvious stakes in the July Crisis – the future of Serbia and its relations with Austria–Hungary and Russia – threatened to reverse many of the gains that Russia had made in the Balkans in 1912 and 1913. In the immediate term, if Austro-Hungarian military action against Serbia went unopposed by Russia, Serbia would have been absorbed into the Habsburg sphere of influence. Although Habsburg control of Serbia did not present an immediate threat to Russian territorial integrity, a more prominent consideration was Russian credibility. In the context of Balkan politics, Russian inaction in the face of Austro-Hungarian aggression could have had severe consequences. Romanian leaders might have despaired of the Triple Entente and Russia in particular, and decided that their security was best served by moving closer to the Triple Alliance. During the final days of the July Crisis, Sazonov devoted considerable efforts to winning over Romania, conscious of its leading role in Balkan politics since the Second Balkan War. The Russian envoy to Bulgaria, Savinski, warned that Russophile parties in the region would lose ground if Russia did not support Serbia. In this respect, Russian prestige was connected with the dynamics of domestic politics in the Balkan states, which faced questions about aligning themselves with one or other group of great powers. 'I cannot deny', he concluded, 'that our prestige in the Slavic world and in the Balkans would irretrievably perish'.¹²⁹

¹²⁷Similarly, Lieven, while noting the role of honour in the Russian ruling elite and in the military in particular, in the end links concerns about Russian prestige to its security interests: 'capitulation to open Austro-German coercion would have dealt a tremendous blow to Russia's prestige and thus to her ability to defend her interests and retain her clients and allies in the Near East.' Lieven, *Russia and the Origins*, 115, 147.

¹²⁸"25 July: Draft report of the Russian Foreign Minister for Nicholas II," in Mombauer, *Diplomatic and Military Documents*, 343–44.

¹²⁹Sazonov to Poklewski, 26 & 28 Jul. 1914, Savinski (Sofia) to Sazonov, 29 Jul. 1914, in *IBZI*, series 1, vol. 5, 84, 133–4, 177–8. It is also plausible that Romania, fearful that Austria–Hungary was striking out against Balkan nation-states which had links to minority populations within Austria–Hungary, might move quickly to consolidate its improved relations with Russia.

This highly negative evaluation of the consequences of inaction or compromise left Russian leaders the choice between either a conciliatory policy that they believed would lead to another humiliating diplomatic setback with serious strategic consequences or an uncompromising deterrence strategy that by the last few days of July looked likely to lead to a general war. In fact, with diplomatic options rapidly narrowing in the last week of the July Crisis, the other great powers and Serbia came to evaluate their own decisions in a similar way – as the choice between two possible outcomes that were each catastrophic: a general European war or a humiliating diplomatic defeat. How European decision makers came to define their choices in this way at the end of July is a key to understanding the outbreak of the First World War.

Earlier in July, Sazonov and other Russian leaders were confident that a hardline deterrence stance would preserve the peace, while German leaders were confident that deterrent threats would prevent a local Austro-Serbian war from spreading.¹³⁰ Their confidence in deterrence was reinforced by expectations that normative restraints on war would help maintain peace. On 24 July, for example, Nicholas II affirmed his belief that William II's record of keeping peace would serve as a restraint against aggressive war.¹³¹ The Tsar clung to this hope in his first letter to William II on 29 July:

Soon I shall be overwhelmed by the pressure brought on me and be forced to take extreme measures, which will lead to war. To ... avoid such a calamity as a European war, I beg of you in the name of our old friendship to do what you can to stop your allies from going too far.¹³²

The gap between civilian and military understandings of mobilisation, and in particular Russian political leaders' assumption that mobilisation could serve as diplomatic signal of one's resolve, further undermined deterrence and escalated tensions.¹³³ During the crisis between Russia and Austria-Hungary in late 1912 and early 1913 Sazonov had used limited military measures, such as the decision on 4 November 1912 to retain conscripts in the army until the end of the year, as a means to signal Russian intentions and interests, in response to the concentration of Austro-Hungarian forces since October 1912. On one occasion, Kokovtsov had intervened to ensure that the Russian measures did not risk an escalatory spiral. The perceived lesson of the

¹³⁰On Germany's erroneous assumptions about the feasibility of a local war see Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 417, 440, 518. On Sazonov's flawed deterrence strategy and faulty signalling see Otte, *July Crisis*, 519. Otte also argues (516) that Austro-Hungarian leaders were afflicted by a 'tunnel vision' and failed to think through the possible expansion of an Austro-Serbian War.

¹³¹Peter Bark's account of his meeting with Tsar Nicholas II, in Mombauer, *Documents*, 334.

¹³²Otte, *July Crisis*, 241–7, 395.

¹³³For theoretical discussions of the lack of political-military integration see Risa A. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton: Princeton UP 2008); and Jack S. Levy, 'Organizational Routines and the Causes of War', *International Studies Quarterly* 30/2 (June 1986), 193–222.

'mobilization crisis' of 1912–13 was that these measures could be choreographed and controlled to serve diplomatic purposes.

Owing to the rapid developments in July 1914 and the extent of the Austro-Hungarian demands, however, Sazonov's confidence that he could repeat the choreographed measures of late 1912 was misplaced. He understood partial mobilisation as a means of deterring Austro-Hungarian aggression against Serbia. Partial mobilisation had served as a regular instrument of diplomatic signalling in previous crises, but in July 1914, as diplomatic options ran out, military logic assumed precedence. Russian civilian ministers failed to understand that the mobilisation schedule was predicated on plans for a war against both Austria–Hungary and Germany, or that a partial mobilisation followed by a shift to general mobilisation would create chaos. By 29 July Sazonov had recognised that Russian mobilisation would likely lead to German military counter-measures. He believed that it no longer made sense to postpone Russian general mobilisation, which would either provide a last minute deterrent against Germany or, more likely, place Russia in a better position in case of war.¹³⁴

General mobilisation also contributed significantly to pressures for pre-emption by both sides. Memories of their delay in detecting the extensive Austro-Hungarian mobilisation in Galicia in 1912 left the Russia generals 'determined not to be caught napping again'.¹³⁵ This helps explain both Russia's initiation of the Period Preparatory to War on 25 July and the general mobilisation order of 30 July. Each of these moves increased German fears of that Russia might gain an early advantage and created pre-emptive incentives in Berlin, as did news of Belgian preparations on 29 July.¹³⁶

Another consequential misperception was the failure of Sazonov and his colleagues to comprehend Vienna's determination to inflict a military defeat on Serbia. On 16 July, the Italian ambassador to St. Petersburg asked Moritz von Schilling in the Russian Foreign Ministry how Russia would react to an Austro-Hungarian attack on Serbia. This was a hint at the extent of Vienna's aims and an invitation to make clear to Austria–Hungary the limits of Russian policy. Yet, when Sazonov met the Austro-Hungarian ambassador, Szapary, on 18 July, Szapary claimed disingenuously that Vienna had no plans to increase tensions with Serbia. 'He was as meek as a lamb', Sazonov concluded after his meeting with Szapary.¹³⁷ Although Sazonov advocated a hard line in support of Serbia at the 24 July Council of Ministers meeting, he had not given up hope for a compromise with Austria–Hungary. He

¹³⁴Otte, *July Crisis*, 15, 399–402, 431–4.

¹³⁵Lieven, *Russia and the Origins*, 149; Bruce Menning, 'Russian Military Intelligence, July 1914: What St. Petersburg Perceived and Why It Mattered', *Historian* 77/2 (Summer 2015), 236.

¹³⁶Van Evera, *Causes of War*, Ch.7.

¹³⁷Diary entry of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 16 Jul., 1914; Schebeko to Sazonov, 16 Jul. 1914; Diary entry of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 18 Jul. 1914; *IBZI*, series 1, vol. 4, 225–8, 252.

proposed, and the Council endorsed, the idea that Russia should work with other great powers to secure from Vienna a postponement of the ultimatum, and that Russia should urge Serbia to offer no military resistance to an Austro-Hungarian attack and 'entrust its fate to the judgement of the Great Powers'.¹³⁸ That policy was reversed within a day, but it does reveal the complex nature of Sazonov's response to the ultimatum. Sazonov's deterrence strategy, including the decision on July 25 to begin the Period Preparatory to War, was based on his misperception of Vienna's willingness to compromise, but it also had the value of hedging against the risk of a general war.

The Halt-in-Belgrade idea, proposed by William II on 28 July 1914 in an attempt to prevent a general European war, shows the distance between Russia and Austria-Hungary. The Kaiser, who thought the Serbian response to the ultimatum was adequate, believed the Habsburg occupation of Belgrade would satisfy the requirements of great power honour. The territory would serve as a 'forfeit' (*Pfand*) to be used in further negotiations, and the limited extent of the occupation signalled that Serbia would be restored to its full integrity.¹³⁹ Berchtold, however, doubted the proposal would resolve the chronic tensions between Serbia and Austria-Hungary and feared the eventual retreat of occupying Habsburg forces would weaken Austro-Hungarian prestige in the Balkans.

There was other opposition to the Halt-in-Belgrade. Bethmann preferred an Austro-Serbian war, which he still thought could be localised. Russian leaders did not view the Halt-in-Belgrade proposal as either feasible or desirable, unless it was accompanied by a European solution.¹⁴⁰ Allowing the Habsburg forces to occupy Belgrade would entail a massive violation of Serbian sovereignty. It would immensely damage Russia's prestige and reputation and significantly undercut the credibility of Russian threats and promises. 'Russia's vital interests', Sazonov told Pourtalès, 'demand not only the respect for the territorial integrity of Serbia, but also that Serbia does not sink to the level of a vassal state of Austria by accepting Austrian demands, which affect its sovereign rights'.¹⁴¹ Once the crisis was framed by Russian leaders in terms of prestige, it became more difficult to negotiate a solution without major concessions from Austria-Hungary – namely the removal of any threat to Serbian sovereignty and the acknowledgement that the crisis was a European, not bilateral affair. Had Russian leaders sought a last minute

¹³⁸The Council also agreed to order the mobilisation of the four military districts of Kiev, Odessa, Moscow and Kazan, and the Baltic and Black Sea fleets. Russian Council of Ministers meeting, 24 Jul. 1914, in Mombauer, *Documents*, 331–32.

¹³⁹Otte argues that the proposal offered a 'realistic framework' for resolving the crisis. Otte, *July Crisis*, 347.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 426.

¹⁴¹Portalès to Foreign Office, *Deutsche Dokumente*, vol 2, doc., 412, 141–2.

option to avoid war, then the Halt-in-Belgrade would have been attractive, enabling them to buy time. But time was immaterial. The prospects of vastly improved relative military power and of a more cohesive Triple Entente in several years did not solve the problem of how to regain the credibility and loss of influence that Russia would have forfeited by not supporting Serbia.

Successive decisions – to support Serbia on 24 July, to insist on the respect of Serbian sovereignty, to ignore the Halt-in-Belgrade proposal, and finally to mobilise – demonstrated that Russian leaders privileged the maintenance of influence in the Balkans over peace. Concessions made in July could not be made good later. Michael Giers, the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, warned on 27 July that an Austro-Hungarian diplomatic and military triumph would mean the ‘complete ruin of our prestige’, destroying Russian credibility in the region and ensuring the Ottoman Empire were firmly in the camp of the Triple Alliance. Giers noted that the gains of recent years during the Balkan Wars would be rendered meaningless. ‘This will create such an intolerable situation for us’, he concluded, ‘that the time is perhaps not far, when to find a way out of it, we ourselves will be necessitated to take the initiative for a war’.¹⁴²

The historical record since 1871, however, had demonstrated the growing material and normative constraints against initiating a war in Europe. Moreover, an aggressive war by Russia would nearly guarantee that Britain would stand aside. Even if military and diplomatic developments in the coming years were likely to benefit Russia, it was not clear that Russia would be able to exploit a favourable balance of power in the future to undo the losses involved in abandoning Serbia to Austria–Hungary. Moreover, it had few other options, as Russian leaders were well aware that they could not compete with the more advanced economies of its rivals. Considerations of credibility, great power status, and Russia’s influence in the Balkans led Sazonov and his colleagues to opt for war, while the experience of past-crises had led them to abandon ‘peace at any price’. The improvements in Russia’s army, the tightening alliance bonds with France, and the hope of British support made them less pessimistic than they had been in previous years, but they hardly faced the war with confidence.

Conclusions

We began with the theoretical question of whether power shifts that give one state better-now-than-later incentives for preventive war against a rising adversary give the prospective target better-later-than-now incentives to delay a confrontation until it is stronger. After developing the opposing strategic logics of declining and rising states, we asked the empirical

¹⁴²M. Giers to Sazonov, 27 Jul. 1914, *IBZI*, series 1, vol. 5, 126.

question of whether rising states understand their adversaries' incentives for preventive war, and, if so, what kinds of strategies rising states tend to adopt. Historical examples suggest that victims of preventive attacks sometimes anticipate an attack, but sometimes do not. We posit that the alternative strategies available to rising states include some combination of secrecy, delaying a confrontation until they are stronger, building-up arms, seeking alliances, and, if all else fails, pre-empting the preventer.

We then turned to the First World War and the puzzle of Russian behaviour in the context of German incentives for preventive war in response to an adverse power shift. Most analysts conclude that although few, if any, Russian leaders wanted a war with Germany, Russia pursued a fairly confrontational policy in the July Crisis through a strategy of strong support for Serbia, unyielding deterrent threats against Austria–Hungary and Germany, and early mobilisation. Given Russia's growing power, the anticipated completion of its Great Programme of army reform and of its strategic railways in Poland by 1917, and given the fears this induced in Germany, the question is why Russia did not make a greater effort to delay a confrontation until it was stronger.

We argue that in the year before the July Crisis most Russian leaders recognised the potential threat from Germany emanating from preventive war thinking and other sources. However, Russian elites were far from unanimous in pushing for a hardline policy. Influential officials like Kokovtsov and Durnovo argued for a buying time strategy to promote the peace that was necessary for Russia's further economic and military development, and to minimise the risk of revolution at home. By early 1914, however, Russia abandoned a policy associated with 'peace at any price' and moved to a more hardline strategy. The Austro-Hungarian ultimatum fundamentally changed Russia's strategic calculus by threatening to reverse Russia's gains of the last few years.

We identified a number of factors contributing to Russia's more hardline choices in the July Crisis. First, in contrast to earlier crises, in which the Russian army's lack of readiness for war forced the political leadership to back down from a confrontation, in 1914, the Russian army was strong enough to put up a credible fight, even if Russian military leaders feared German military strength and understood that the Russian army would be considerably stronger in a few years. Second, growing Russian military strength left its leaders less willing to tolerate the humiliations of earlier crises. After they were forced to capitulate in 1908–09 and make substantial concessions in 1912–13, their prestige and reputation were much more on the line in 1914.

The consequences of a loss of prestige and status were inextricably linked, in the minds of Russian leaders, with Russian influence in a post-crisis world. The outcome of Balkan Wars, by substantially

increasing the power of Serbia and triggering a diplomatic realignment in the Balkans, represented a serious setback for Austria–Hungary and its German ally and a major gain for Russia. Russian leaders feared that a diplomatic defeat in the July Crisis – resulting from either a complete Serbian capitulation to Austro-Hungarian demands or from a crushing military victory of the Dual Monarchy over Serbia if Russia stood aside – would result in a loss of all Russian gains in 1912–13. Russian leaders believed that either outcome would leave Serbia subservient to Austria–Hungary, result in a loss of Russian credibility, status and influence, and lead to a diplomatic realignment in the Balkans. Pro-Russian opinion and parties in key Balkan states such as Serbia and Romania would be undermined by Russian retreat. In addition, free from the threat on its southern borders, Austria–Hungary would be able to shift a significant portion of its army to its north-eastern border with Russia. All of this would make it very difficult for Russia to reverse the situation and recover these losses any time soon, despite the significant expansion in the size of the Russian army, artillery support, railway network, and navy over the next few years.

Our analysis suggests that German and Russian leaders focused on different elements of power in 1914. German leaders looked to the future and saw the growth of the Russian army and strategic railroads posing an ever-increasing security threat, particularly in the context of the Franco-Russian alliance, Russia's seemingly unlimited financial resources and financial and political constraints on Germany's ability to keep up with Russia in an arms race. Russian leaders focused not only on military power but also the likely consequences – for Russian power and influence and for domestic stability – of another retreat in the face of coercive threats from the Central Powers. They anticipated that the failure to stand firm would include the humiliation and loss of independence of its Serbian client, the diminishing of Russian prestige and credibility among the great power and in the Balkans, and a likely diplomatic realignment in the Balkans that would significantly reduce Russian influence and that could not be easily be reversed with the future growth of Russian military power. What appear to be conflicting strategic logics of Germany and Russia become somewhat less paradoxical when one considers the different conceptions of power and influence held by German and Russian leaders.¹⁴³

¹⁴³This is another reminder of the need for international relations scholars to adopt a more differentiated conceptualisation of power that recognises its multiple dimensions. Steven E. Lobell, 'Bringing Balancing Back In: Britain's Targeted Balancing, 1936–1939,' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35/6 (December 2012), 747–73.

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