A Militarily Regenerated Russia as a Future Threat to NATO?

Perspectives from Russia Itself

Stephan De Spiegeleire and Hryhorii Pavlenko, with Meta Llama 3.3 70B; OpenAI GPT-4o-mini, GPT-4o, o1, o1 pro; Google Gemini 1.5, 2.0 Advanced Experimental.

April 2025

**The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies**

A Militarily Regenerated Russia as a Future Threat to NATO?
Perspectives from Russia Itself

Authors:
Stephan De Spiegeleire and Hryhorii Pavlenko, with
Meta Llama 3.3 70B; OpenAI GPT-4o-mini, GPT-4o, o1,
o1 pro; Google Gemini 1.5, 2.0 Advanced Experimental.

Cover image: created with AI

April 2025

Executive Summary

Beyond Western interpretations, how is Russia debating its own military future and stance towards NATO? This report uniquely leverages AI-assistance to tap into Russia's still surprisingly rich internal discourse, parsing diverse perspectives often missed by traditional methods. Overlooking these internal perspectives, as arguably occurred before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, is perilous. This research project aims to begin filling that gap by providing insights derived directly from Russian-language sources on two crucial topics: Russia's capacity for military regeneration and its potential intentions towards NATO. It leverages an innovative analytical approach, combining deep domain expertise with AI assistance, to systematically process a scale of information previously unmanageable.
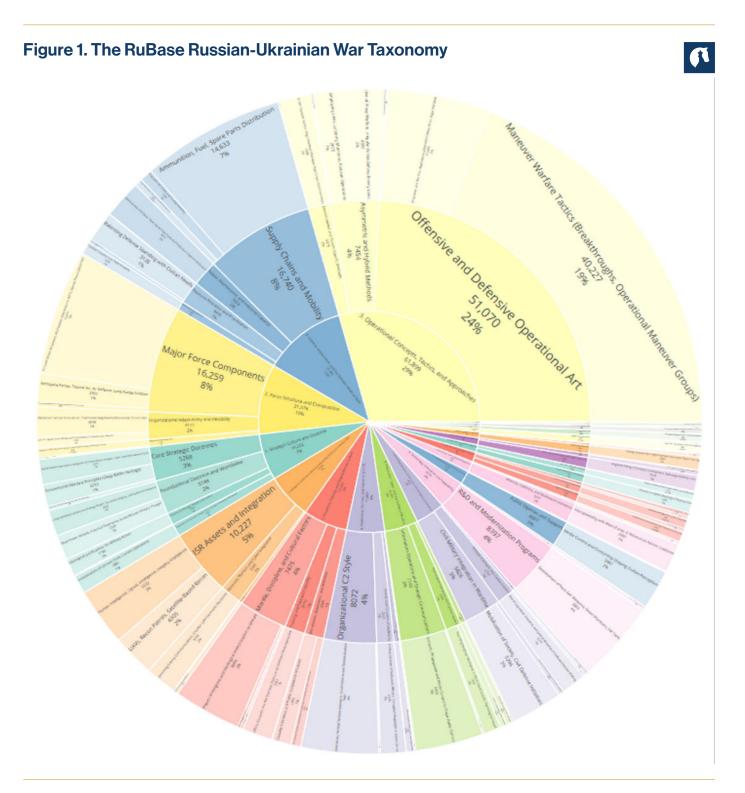
This research project serves as a proof of concept for an innovative analytical approach to complex geopolitical and security questions. Operating at an experimental Technology Readiness Level (TRL) 3/4, where basic components are integrated but not yet field-tested or fully validated, we demonstrate this methodology by examining two illustrative examples: Russia's military regeneration capacity and its potential intentions regarding potential operations against NATO territory. These topics exemplify the type of substantive questions that could benefit from more systematic analysis approaches.

By integrating human expertise with AI assistance (including models like Meta Llama 3.3 70B, OpenAI GPT-4 series, and Google Gemini series), our approach processed and analysed over 197,000 Russian-language documents—a corpus scale far exceeding what traditional human-only analysis could feasibly manage. It includes (Russian-only!) primary sources, milblogger posts, military periodicals, newspaper articles, academic sources, podcasts, etc. While this approach offers promising avenues for generating insights from vast datasets, it is crucial to underscore the experimental nature of this work. The findings presented below should be viewed primarily as illustrative examples of the type of analytical outputs this methodology can produce, rather than definitive, validated conclusions.

> This research project leverages an innovative analytical approach, combining deep domain expertise with AI assistance.

Structuring Insight:
The Central Role of Taxonomies

A cornerstone of this project's AI-assisted methodology, and crucial for navigating the vast 197,000+ document corpus, was the development and curation of detailed, structured taxonomies. These taxonomies served as the conceptual backbone for the analysis, enabling the systematic classification of information drawn from diverse Russian-language sources. Moving beyond simple keyword searches, they provided a granular framework to categorise nuanced discussions related to both Russia's military regeneration capacity and its perceived intentions towards NATO.

Figure 1. The RuBase Russian-Ukrainian War Taxonomy

Developed through an iterative dialogue between human expertise (leveraging prior work in the RuBase-RUW project) and multiple Large Language Models, these taxonomies allowed us to impose structure on the immense dataset. Specifically, a regeneration-focused taxonomy guided the analysis of Russia's evolving military strengths and weaknesses across key dimensions like Manpower, Industry, Logistics, Doctrine, Technology, and Societal Support. For assessing potential intentions towards NATO, a more extensive, multi-layered taxonomy was created, designed to capture indicators across Military, Political, Economic, Informational, and Technological domains, including assessments of intent (Benign, Malign, Ambiguous) and contextual factors.

The careful construction and application of such taxonomies are, we argue, essential for bringing analytical rigour to any complex knowledge field, particularly in strategic analysis where understanding multifaceted issues and tracking subtle shifts is paramount. They transform raw information into structured data, facilitating systematic analysis, the identification of patterns and trends otherwise obscured by volume, and ensuring a more transparent, traceable link between evidence and assessment. While requiring significant upfront investment, well-designed taxonomies are indispensable tools for managing complexity and enabling deeper, more reliable insights, whether human or AI-driven.

Selected Illustrative Findings from Russian Sources:
Military Regeneration

The AI-assisted analysis of the extensive Russian-language corpus surfaced numerous claims and discussions regarding Russia's military regeneration efforts. These illustrative examples highlight the type of nuanced insights the methodology can potentially uncover, pending further validation:

Manpower & Morale: Beyond simple recruitment numbers, Russian sources discuss systemic efforts to professionalise forces mid-conflict, such as significant reforms to NCO training programmes specifically incorporating lessons learned from the Special Military Operation, focusing on practical skills, tactical medicine, and new technologies.

Industrial & Economic Base: While narratives often emphasise dramatic production increases, the corpus also reveals discussions about the strategic adaptations required despite constraints, such as prioritising readily available legacy equipment over cutting-edge systems for immediate needs and leveraging dual-use manufacturing.

Logistics & Sustainment: Alongside state efforts like railway restoration and dedicated field repair units working around the clock, sources also highlight a notable reliance on grassroots volunteer initiatives to fill critical gaps, particularly in vehicle transport, suggesting potential deficiencies in formal military logistics. The systematic use of cannibalisation for spare parts is also frequently mentioned.

Doctrine & Tactical Adaptations: The analysis identified discussions not just about new unit types, but also about the underlying adaptive learning mechanisms, such as the formal integration of battlefield feedback into doctrine updates and the potential use of experimental units or cross-district knowledge sharing.

Technology & Equipment Innovation: Counterbalancing the focus on advanced systems like drones and EW, sources also frequently discuss the simultaneous activation and modernisation of older stored platforms (like T-62 tanks) to rapidly replenish forces, illustrating a multi-tiered approach to equipment regeneration.

Societal & Political Support: The corpus highlights extensive discussion around leveraging state-run media narratives to maintain domestic backing, alongside significant emphasis on the crucial role of regional governors and large-scale, coordinated volunteer movements in mobilising resources and supplementing state efforts.

Well-designed taxonomies are indispensable tools for managing complexity and enabling deeper, more reliable insights, whether human or AI-driven.

Comparisons & Lessons Learned: Russian sources analysed reportedly contain explicit comparisons to NATO capabilities, often identifying perceived Russian gaps in areas like high-precision weaponry, advanced logistics, and certain doctrinal models, framing regeneration efforts partly as a response to these comparisons.

Future Outlook & Sustainability: Discussions surfaced by the analysis touch upon potential long-term constraints, including demographic challenges affecting recruitment pools and the tension between sustained political will and potential societal war weariness impacting the durability of regeneration efforts.

Overall, the analysis of Russian sources through this methodology illustrates a complex picture of military regeneration. It highlights narratives of impressive adaptation, industrial mobilisation, and manpower generation, often drawing on deep reserves and societal efforts. However, it also surfaces discussions pointing to underlying constraints, potential vulnerabilities in logistics and morale, technological gaps compared to adversaries, and questions about long-term sustainability, painting a nuanced view of Russia's capacity to rebuild and sustain its military power.

Selected Key Findings:
Intentions Toward NATO

Overall, the analysis of Russian sources through this methodology illustrates a complex picture of military regeneration.

The AI-assisted analysis of the extensive Russian-language corpus surfaced numerous and varied claims, recurring themes, and specific discussions regarding Russia's view of, and potential intentions towards, NATO. These illustrative examples, requiring further validation, highlight the type of multi-faceted insights the methodology can potentially extract from Russian sources:

Military & Security: Russian sources discuss a significant conventional military buildup explicitly aimed at NATO, including plans for 10-15 new divisions along western borders, production increases far exceeding Ukraine conflict needs, and the modernisation of forces with advanced weaponry like hypersonic missiles. This is coupled with provocative military exercises described as simulating assaults on NATO members and the militarisation of border regions. Furthermore, the analysis surfaced debates around developing hybrid warfare and grey zone capabilities (cyber, electronic warfare, sabotage, proxies) tailored to exploit NATO vulnerabilities. Critically, sources discuss a disregard for arms control norms, withdrawing from treaties while developing potentially banned systems, alongside increasingly aggressive nuclear posturing, including lowered use thresholds and forward deployment of tactical nuclear systems.

Political & Diplomatic: The analysis highlighted Russian narratives advocating for support to anti-NATO political forces and movements within Alliance member states or their neighbours, aiming to weaken cohesion. This is reportedly linked to efforts aimed at undermining international institutions (like the UN, OSCE) and legal norms perceived as limiting Russian actions. Discourse also includes justifications for interference in the internal affairs and elections of NATO states through disinformation and other covert means, alongside potential diplomatic strategies employing coercion or the formation of anti-NATO alliances.

Economic & Energy: The corpus contains frequent discussions framing economic tools as levers against NATO. This includes using economic coercion through sanctions or trade disruptions, and particularly the strategic weaponisation of energy supplies. Narratives reportedly detail manipulating energy prices and threatening supply cuts to create instability, exert

political pressure, and fracture unity among European NATO members. Discussions might also touch upon using malign economic influence via corruption or strategic investments.

Information & Societal: Russian sources extensively discuss sophisticated disinformation and propaganda campaigns using state media, social media manipulation (bots/trolls), and fake news aimed at discrediting NATO, polarising societies, and undermining trust in democratic institutions within member states. These narratives are often coupled with cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure, government systems, and media outlets, alongside broader information warfare efforts designed to shape perceptions and exploit societal divisions.

Technological: The analysis surfaced Russian discourse framing technological development explicitly in competition with NATO. This includes the weaponisation of technology by advancing capabilities (AI, autonomous systems, cyber tools) seen as necessary to counter NATO's perceived technological superiority. Discussions also cover leveraging cyber espionage and intellectual property theft to close technology gaps, and potentially exporting advanced or weaponised technologies to anti-NATO actors to indirectly challenge the Alliance.

Taken together, the illustrative findings extracted by our AI-assisted analysis from Russian sources reveal a consistent, multi-domain pattern of discourse and described actions. Many indicators across the military, political, economic, informational, and technological spheres can be interpreted as potentially malign, suggesting preparations for sustained, multi-faceted confrontation with NATO that extend significantly beyond the immediate context of the conflict in Ukraine. This includes narratives discussing conventional and nuclear posturing, hybrid warfare tactics, undermining international norms and institutions, and the weaponisation of energy, information, and technology specifically aimed at countering or destabilising the Alliance.

> The illustrative findings extracted by our AI-assisted analysis from Russian sources reveal a consistent, multi-domain pattern of discourse and described actions.

However, interpreting intent remains complex. Russian sources frequently embed these actions within a defensive narrative, citing NATO's own military activities, eastward expansion, and robust support for Ukraine as necessitating Russia's strategic adaptations and military regeneration. Disentangling genuinely defensive reactions from potentially offensive preparations requires deep contextual understanding and continuous monitoring. Nevertheless, this proof-of-concept demonstrates the significant potential of LLM-based approaches for systematically identifying, categorising, and tracking the wide array of indicators across these multiple domains. Once rigorously validated, such methodologies could offer policymakers a far more comprehensive, evidence-grounded basis for assessing the evolving nature and potential direction of Russia's complex strategic posture towards NATO.

Methodological Innovation and Implications

Our AI-assisted methodology demonstrates significant advantages over traditional analytical approaches:

Enhanced Recall: Processing an exceptionally large corpus of Russian-language documents provides more comprehensive coverage than traditional expert analysis alone.

Improved Transparency: Our approach creates a clear, traceable path from raw data to conclusions, allowing verification and replication.

Human-Machine Collaboration: The project leverages complementary strengths of human judgement and computational power, enabling deeper insights through freeing human cognitive resources for higher-order thinking.

Crucially, however, this report remains a proof of concept. Large Language Models are known to sometimes generate plausible-sounding but inaccurate or biased text ('confabulations'). More recent LLM versions have shown significant improvements on this front, but the validation conducted for this initial report (using LLM judges and limited human review on small samples) was insufficient for drawing definitive policy conclusions from the findings themselves. Significant further work is therefore required to develop and implement robust, large-scale evaluation frameworks to rigorously validate the outputs of such AI-assisted analytical systems before they can be reliably used for high-stakes decision-making. [Since the finalisation of this report, our RuBase team has actually made substantial progress in developing a more comprehensive evaluation pipeline, which will be essential for future iterations and operational use.]

> The potential insights generated by this type of analysis could have profound implications for European security.

The potential insights generated by this type of analysis, once rigorously validated, could have profound implications for European security. Russia's demonstrated ability to regenerate military capabilities—even under severe sanctions and after substantial losses—underscores the need for European nations to fundamentally transform their defence institutions, economic structures, and strategic doctrines.

As Europe dramatically reinforces its defence potential, its analytical capabilities must evolve in lockstep. This requires a dual focus: first, boosting our research approaches, tools, and deliverables – embracing rigorously validated AI-assisted methodologies, like the one explored in this proof-of-concept, to better process vast datasets and generate evidence-based assessments. Second, and equally crucial, we must find smarter ways to make this research useful and swiftly exploitable for decision-makers, moving beyond traditional static reports toward more dynamic, responsive, and actionable insights.

This demands a fundamental rethink from us as researchers. While much of our RuBase/Stratbase effort has centred on 'stepping up our game' methodologically, improving research is only half the battle. We must proactively bridge the gap between analysis and action by applying 'design thinking' principles to the defence analysis process. By engaging iteratively with planners to understand their needs and rapidly prototyping different ways to present findings – perhaps through dynamic dashboards or 'evergreen' analyses – we can co-create analytical products that are directly relevant and readily integrated into planning cycles. Having focused significantly on enhancing research methods, we are now eager to explore how these design-led interactions can maximise the uptake and utility of our work for planners.

Ultimately, navigating the complexities posed by challenges like a potentially regenerated Russia requires this integrated approach. Combining vigilant defence transformation with validated analytical innovation and a commitment to effective researcher-planner integration through user-focused design is vital for ensuring our enhanced understanding translates into more effective responses in an uncertain world.