Old Generation Warfare

The Evolution— Not Revolution—of the Russian Way of Warfare

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The post-Cold War honeymoon with Russia is over. Russia's seizure of the Crimea and the subsequent conflict to annex the Donbas imperils the legitimacy of the NATO alliance. U.S. allies on NATO's eastern flank foresee the same aggression occurring in their countries and, having endured Moscow's suzerainty for over a half century, these nations prefer freedom to vassalage.

Consequently, U.S. military professionals must reacquaint themselves with the Russian way of warfare. The *U.S. Army Operating Concept* defines Russia as a "competing power" and a "harbinger of future conflict."[1] Moreover, the *National Security Strategy* speaks of the United States leading the effort toward "countering Russian aggression."[2]

Russian Way of War

One element of Russian resurgence that captivates Western defense circles is the emergence of *new generation warfare* (NGW). However, there is evidence to suggest that Russian actions are not new at all, but altogether consistent based on historical precedents. Russia has adapted its traditional

methods—not created entirely new ones— based on political, economic, informational, and technological changes in the operational environment.[3] Analyzing the ends, ways, and means of NGW shows historical consistencies with Russian approaches to warfare combined with adaptations based on the current operational environment.

Strategic Ends

In April 2014, Janis Berzins wrote a well-received paper for Latvia's National Defense Academy in which he defined Russian NGW. In his paper, Berzins argues that one aspect of Russia's military strategy is "doctrinal unilateralism, or the idea that successful use of force results in legitimacy."[4] Russian desires for security are manifested by the expansion of their borders into areas where they perceive threats or instability. A few prominent Russian experts note that the Russian mindset is "the best
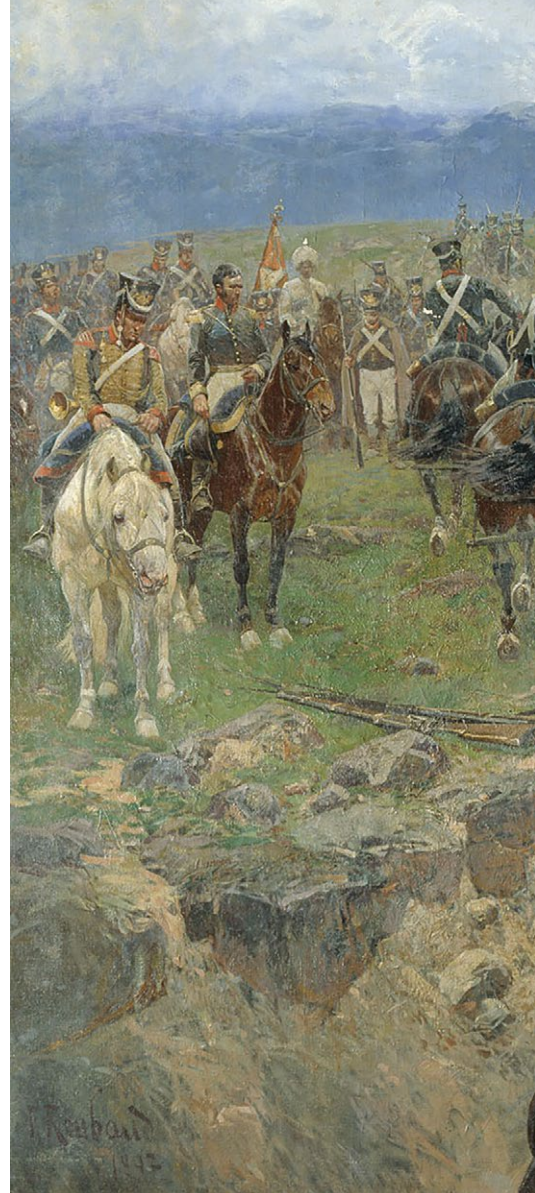
Live Bridge: A Scene from the Russo-Persian War (1892), oil on canvas, by Franz Roubaud. This painting illustrates an episode near the Askerna River where the Russians managed to repel attacks by a larger Persian army for two weeks. They made a "living bridge" so that two cannons could be transported over their bodies.

defense is a good offense." George Kennan, deputy chief of mission to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1947 and author of "Sources of Soviet Conduct," notes that Russian feelings of insecurity and inferiority are to blame for their expansionist tendencies.[5] Elsewhere, Timothy Thomas, a former U.S. Army foreign area officer to the Soviet Union and senior analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth writes how, after years of depression, Russia is eager to reassert itself in the world of geopolitics.[6]

Russian strategic ends appear to include achieving security by dominating the international order. Russian expansionist policy in the "Russian Military Concept: 2010" states that deterring and preventing conflict lies in Russia's ability "to expand the circle of partner states and develop cooperation with them," and that physically incorporating neighboring territory into the Russian Federation itself (e.g., Chechnya) or as vassal states (e.g., South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and the Donbas) is the best route for security.[7] U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, incredulous of Russia's 2014 intervention in the Ukraine, remarked, "You just don't in the twenty-first century behave in nineteenth-century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped up pretext."[8] Unfortunately, Russia's behavior from the ninth century to the present continues to be fairly consistent

and predictable despite the well-meaning objections of Kerry and like-minded individuals.

Strategic Consistencies

Continuous expansion is consistent with the history of the Russian nation. In 862 A.D., Novgorod, the progenitor of the Russian Federation, was about the size of Texas. After almost 1,200 years, Russia is now twenty-four times the size of Novgorod's original borders.

Catastrophic invasions drove Russian leadership to obsess over the need to establish strategic depth. These invasions include the thirteenth-century Mongolian conquest, the sixteenth-century Swedish invasion, the nineteenth-century Napoleonic invasion, and the twentieth-century Nazi invasion. Russia's public persecution complex ignores the fact that before and after those invasions, Russia routinely invaded weaker neighbors and incorporated their territory into the Russian state.

Skillful diplomacy did not expand Russia's borders, but rather an unceasing campaign of conquest and subjugation on the part of Russia's rulers. The Rurik and Romanov dynasties, as well as the Soviet Union, continually expanded the nation's borders. The deeply embedded national psychological mindset that relies on conquest as a means of self-defense stemming from a turbulent and aggressive history helps explain Russian foreign policy today.

Strategic Adaptations

Historically, Russia justified expanding its borders at the expense of its neighbors as a means of seeking security. However, the present-day pretense for why they are doing this is new. Russia's reasons for territorial expansion now have less to do with securing strategic depth and more with securing ethnic Russians outside of its borders.[9] In his book *A History of the Baltic States*, Andres Kasecamp explains how the Soviet Union disrupted ethnically homogeneous areas by forcing large groups of people to relocate from their homes.[10] Kasecamp writes:

> The most dramatic change for Latvia and Estonia during the Soviet era was demographic. Both republics saw [a] massive influx from the East during the postwar years. While Estonia was over 90 percent ethnically Estonian at the end of the war, by 1989

the percentage of Estonians in the population had dropped to 62 percent. During the same time period, the percentage of ethnic Latvians in Latvia dropped from over three quarters of the population to barely half.[11]

Either by accident or design, ethnic Russians colonized key locations within neighboring countries, providing strategic access to Russia, particularly in ports and areas adjacent to Russian borders. However, in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. Subsequently, national self-interests reemerged and the Soviet empire dissolved into several nations, leaving pockets of ethnic Russians living as minorities in former non-Russian Soviet nations outside of the newly formed Russian Federation.

The existence of Russian populations outside of Russia's current borders has recently provided the pretext for seizing terrain from the former Soviet states of Georgia and Ukraine. Figure 1 (page 12) shows the regions with the greatest concentrations of Russian citizens, ethnic Russians, and native Russian speakers outside the border of the Russian Federation. In 2005, Vladimir Putin stated that the collapse of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century," and that "tens of millions of our fellow citizens and countrymen [ethnic Russians] found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory."[12] After the 2008 conflict with Georgia, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev told the press, "Our unquestionable priority is to protect the life and dignity of our citizens, wherever they are. We will also proceed from this in pursuing our foreign policy. We will also protect the interest of our business community abroad. And, it should be clear to everyone that if someone makes aggressive forays, he will get a response."[13]

Following the seizure of terrain from Georgia in 2008 and seizure of the Crimean district of Ukraine in 2014, this rhetoric has neighboring countries with sizable Russian minorities worried. Ominously, Russia appears intent on meddling in its near abroad as Medvedev said, "Russia, just like other countries in the world, has regions where it has its privileged interests."[14] Berzins observes that Russia learned from Western-led peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. Cynically, Russian leaders will use the international norms of self-determination and an

A column of Russian armored vehicles move toward the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali, 9 August 2008. South Ossetia has a large population of Russians, and in 1990 it declared its independence from Georgia. Russian forces invaded South Ossetia in support of pro-Russian separatists after Georgian forces tried to regain control of the territory.

asserted responsibility to protect ethnic Russians in order to justify violating the national sovereignty of their neighbors.

Operational Ways

According to Berzins, Russian NGW favors an indirect approach of influence instead of a direct influence of physical confrontation. "NGW moves from targeting an enemy's physical assets for destruction towards psychological warfare to achieve inner morale decay."[15] Berzins demonstrated the success of the Russian indirect approach in the Crimea, stating that "in just three weeks, and without a shot being fired, the morale of the Ukrainian military was broken and all of their 190 bases had surrendered."[16] As Glenn Curtis points out in his 1989 paper, *An Overview of Psychological Operations,* targeting an adversary's morale is nothing new to the Russian military. The central goal of psychological operations is consistent: "If an opponent's attitude can be influenced favorably, his physical resistance will diminish."[17] He

states that Soviet psychological operations were "not invented by the Bolsheviks in 1917; it was used sporadically for centuries by Russian tsars in domestic and foreign relations."[18]

Although psychological operations hold a time-honored place in Russian military tradition, their central role against the West received special emphasis during the Cold War. They were used by Moscow to influence activities in Western domestic politics and to shape outcomes in the Third World. Disinformation, active measures (influencing an opponent through seemingly unrelated third parties) and propaganda represented the front lines between East and West. A few examples include KGB forgeries of "official" U.S. government documents authorizing assassinations and government overthrows as well as the KGB's use of the World Peace Council to petition the U.S. government to make nuclear disarmament terms that were favorable to the USSR.[19] Although Russia lost the Cold War, they did not abandon the indirect approach of psychological operations.

Figure 1. Countries with Ties to Russia

Sources: Censuses of Transdniester (2004); Ukraine (2001); Kazakhstan (2009); Belarus (2009); Estonia (2011); and Latvia (2011); Russian Embassy in Chisinau; mapbox.com
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Operational Consistencies

Russia's military operational ways of achieving its strategic ends incorporate classic deep operations. Soviet intellectuals invented deep operations theory as a reaction to the battlefield dynamics of the early twentieth century. Soviet deep operations theorists like Svechin, Triandafillov, and Isserson found the answer to the problem of layered defenses used during the First World War with an offensive that defeats the enemy throughout its entire depth: the deep operation.[20]

Deep operations expanded from a material focus to targeting the morale of the opposing force. In his 1927 book *Strategy,* deep operations theorist Aleksandr Svechin wrote, "War is waged not only on an armed front; it is also waged on the class and economic fronts." He goes on to say that the use of political agitators and propaganda within the opposition's country are crucial efforts to a military operation and must be coordinated.[21] Morale is a crucial factor for any combat force. Clausewitz recognized the importance of morale in the phenomenon of war, making it one of the sides of the paradoxical trinity (reason, passion, and chance).[22]

The adversary's morale became the decisive target for successful Soviet military operations. The Soviet Union was legendary for attacking the moral cohesion of its enemies, sowing division and doubt within its adversaries in hopes of sapping fighting spirit. B.H. Liddell Hart observed this in *Strategy* when discussing

the Ukrainian army capitulated after a well-planned and -executed information campaign.[24]

Russia perfected its use of information warfare through the use of *reflexive control*. In *Recasting the Red Star,* Timothy Thomas defines reflexive control as "a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action."[25] Russian reflexive control appeared successful targeting Ukraine's NATO partners as well. NATO members were reluctant to get involved in the conflict, effectively isolating the Ukraine from the international community.[26]

Russia uses reflexive control to put its neighbors on the horns of a dilemma. Either the countries allow Russian citizens within their borders and deal with eventual separatist movements, or those countries isolate their Russian populations and give Russia pretense for invasion. In his book *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West,* Ronald Asmus outlines how this occurred in Georgia in 2008.[27] Asmus accuses Russia of enabling separatist South Ossetians to attack Georgian towns from within Russian-controlled areas. After steady escalation, Georgia responded with a military attack of its own, killing fifty Russian peacekeepers in the process. The Russian response was severe, crushing the Georgian army and acquiring two new vassal states (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) at the expense of Georgian sovereignty. According to Asmus, however, the Russian counterattack force crossed into South Ossetia from Russia days before the Georgian attack even started. Russian information warfare spun a narrative of an aggressive Georgian military that attacked Russian troops, leaving Russia no choice but to counterattack. This classic example of reflexive control allowed Russia to gain territorially at the expense of Georgia. Russia won the information war as well. European news outlets and international bodies assigned Georgia the blame for the war.[28]

(Graphic courtesy of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

Lenin's ultimate deep fight, the indirect approach targeting Western morale. He stated that "the soundest strategy in any campaign is to postpone battle and the soundest tactics to postpone attack, until the moral dislocation of the enemy renders the delivery of the decisive blow practical."[23]

Operational Adaptations

Russia continues to use deep operations to achieve expansion of its borders, but it has also made great improvements targeting the psyche of adversaries and neutrals. Russian deep operations enabled its territorial ambitions by tearing off pieces of Georgia and the Ukraine with an excuse that it was protecting its native Russian populations abroad and promoting national self-determination. When Russia seized the Crimea,

Tactical Means

Berzins outlines two developments in Russia's tactical means. First is the use of a hybrid force; the "use of armed civilians (four civilian to one military)."[29] The U.S. Army's Training Circular 7-100, *The Hybrid Threat,* defines the
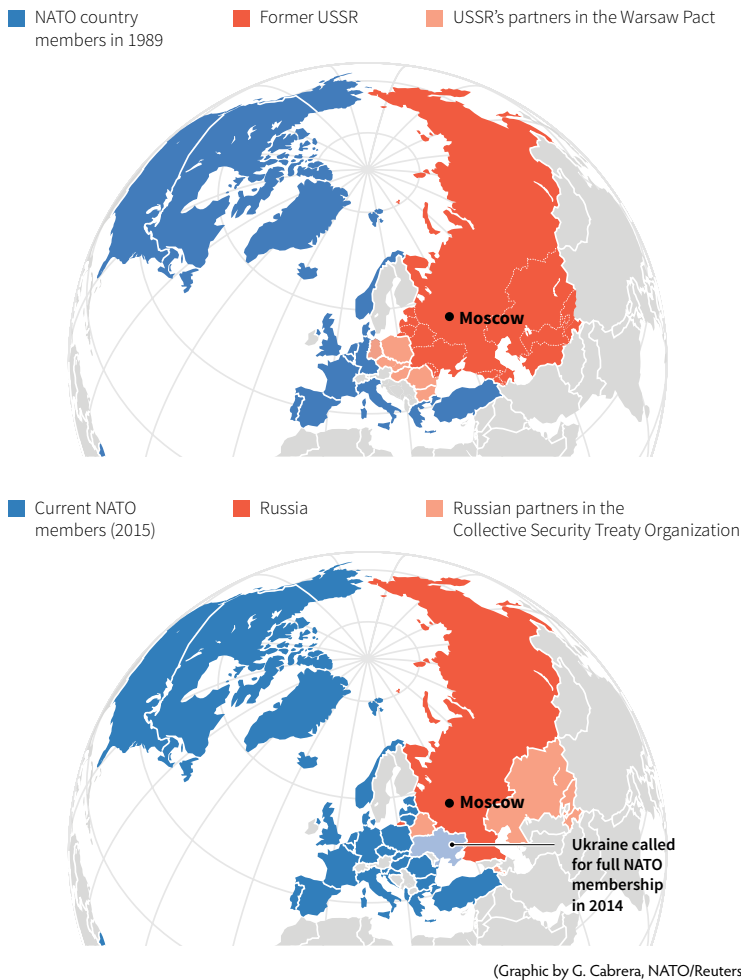
Moscow

Moscow

Ukraine called for full NATO membership in 2014

(Graphic by G. Cabrera, NATO/Reuters)

Figure 2. NATO Expansion

the encirclement and annihilation tactics of the last century.

Tactical Consistencies

Russia's hybrid force and encirclement and annihilation tactics are consistent with the military history of the nation. In 945 AD, Russian rulers employed a Tatar tribe, the Pechenegs, in a successful campaign against the Byzantine Empire.[32] Another employment of a hybrid force was the use of Cossacks against Napoleon's *Grande Armée* during the retreat from Moscow.[33] And, the Soviet Union's hybrid force during World War II was instrumental in defeating the German invasion. For the Soviets, the partisans provided reconnaissance, assisted in deception campaigns, and provided guides for Soviet forces attacking the Germans.[34]

The idea of encircling and destroying an enemy force has fascinated military planners since its perfection at Cannae. Modern technology made encirclement and annihilation tactics possible in the mid-twentieth century. The Soviets experienced success using this tactic in 1939 against the Japanese in the Battle of Khalkhin Gol (Nomonhan); against the German 6th Army in Stalingrad in 1942; and against the German Army Group Center during Operation Bagration in 1944.[35]

Tactical Adaptations

Russian tactics evolved to fit the modern operational environment. The Russian hybrid force includes regular forces, local militias, private contractors, extreme nationalists, criminals, and Muslim fundamentalists. This mixture of forces is particularly difficult to oppose because of their diverse backgrounds and motivations. The regional militias—trained and equipped by Russia—provide that homegrown, forward-deployed force that offers legitimacy to the cause. Private contractors are an evolution of the pan-Slav motivated force seen in Balkan conflicts of the twentieth century.[36] Employing criminals, extreme nationalists, and Islamic fundamentalists outside of Russia's borders are a win-win for Russia. It prevents problems within Russia's borders while allowing these actors to serve as cannon fodder and act out their aggression on a

hybrid threat as "the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, and/or criminal elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects."[30] A fighting force comprised predominantly of native militia provides not only an economy of force to the regular Russian military, but also gives legitimacy to the Russian side because the militia lives in the contested regions.

Second are tactics seeking to avoid conflict when possible through "noncontact clashes by highly interspecific forces."[31] These interspecific forces include protesters, rioters, militia groups, biker gangs, nationalists, mercenaries, and *spetsnaz* (special forces) to exacerbate the situation to force a reaction by the host government, which then gives Moscow the justification to intervene with conventional forces. When battle is unavoidable, however, Russian tactics are similar to

common enemy.[37] Conveniently, these disparate militant groups are more deniable than regular Russian forces.

Encirclement and annihilation tactics were decisive in Russia's war with Ukraine. In the battle for Ilovaisk, Ukrainian forces seized a critical road-and-rail junction between the separatists-held cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. Russian forces quickly surrounded and besieged the city. Casualties and demoralization weakened the Ukrainian forces, leading to an agreed withdrawal for safe passage. According to *Newsweek,* Putin himself sanctioned the agreement, but Russian forces ambushed and destroyed the retreating Ukrainian column. Officially, Kiev admits to 108 killed, but eyewitnesses report five-to-six times that number.[38] Russia used the same tactics in Debaltseve in January 2015. In this battle, Ukrainian armed forces once again occupied a critical road-and-rail junction between both separatist regions. Russian and separatist forces advanced against the flanks of the city, creating a salient. Fearing complete encirclement, Ukrainian forces retreated. Once again, Russian forces waited in ambush. One survivor recounted, "Yes, the Russians let us retreat and we were met with tanks and grads [mobile rocket launchers]."[39] The Ukrainian government announced that 179 Ukrainian soldiers were killed, 110 were captured, and 81 were missing.[40] Both battles left the Ukrainian forces demoralized. Internal division settled in with forces who blamed Kiev for abandoning them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Berzins's paper on Russian NGW provides an excellent framework to gain an understanding of what Russia was doing in April 2014. The benefit of hindsight is that it allows one to see that Russian actions in the Ukraine have a historical context strategically, operationally, and tactically with minor adaptations. There are a number of things the United States and NATO can do to counter Russian aggression; why not use what worked in the past against Russia with minor adaptations?

Strategically, Operation Atlantic Resolve, the U.S.-led operation in Europe to provide assurance to NATO allies, is very similar to the policy of containment outlined in NSC-68 (a National Security Council report) by the Truman administration.[41] The major advantage for NATO is the former Warsaw Pact enemies it now calls allies. Figure 2 depicts the spread of NATO after the demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1989. Partnership with these nations serves to assure NATO allies that they will not be abandoned in the face of Russian territorial expansion.

Operationally, NATO must counter the Russian deep operations that seek to delegitimize the sovereignty of vulnerable NATO members, and it must take measures to bolster its collective willpower. Additionally, failure to counter Russian information warfare could fracture the trans-Atlantic security framework that serves to protect the freedom, prosperity, and peace for millions.

Tactically, NATO should embrace the hybrid model. NATO operated as a hybrid force in Afghanistan and, given the small armies of NATO allies, the likelihood is high of partnering with militias in the event of future conflict.

Russia appears to have chosen recidivism over peaceful coexistence. Russia is setting the terms and defining the operational environment because of its relatively unchallenged aggressive audacity, but the Russian way of warfare and its historic propensity for expanding in the face of weak resistance has been generally consistent throughout its entire history. Consequently, the real problem facing NATO is not a new brand of Russian warfare or new policy of expansion, but its own reluctance to return to its original purpose of preventing Russian conquest. ■

Biography
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