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IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSIAN
CONTROLLED ESCALATION

by

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Biography

COL Justin W. Brown is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. COL Brown's basic branch in the United States Army is Armor. He served in various levels of command and in staff positions for nine years in the Armor branch before transitioning to the Operations Research and Systems Analysis (ORSA) functional area. As an ORSA, COL Brown served in various Joint and Army billets that included assignments to a Combatant Command and various analytic agencies.



Abstract

Over the last 15 years, Russia has reemerged as a growing power and has sought to exert its influence among old members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). This is part of a Russian strategy focused on Russia reemerging as a dominant power within the region. When the West threatened Russian interests and Russia viewed the conditions as favorable in terms of being able to achieve its objectives with acceptable levels of risk, Russia utilized controlled escalation of military operations to promote its interests and achieve its objectives. Russia conducted military operations in Georgia, Crimea and the Donbass region of Ukraine as a means of reasserting its influence within the region while simultaneously seeking to reduce the Western influence of the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the European Union within Russia's zone of privileged interest. This paper argues that Russia utilized controlled escalation in their operations in Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbass region of Ukraine as a means to manage operational cost and risk and maintain the operational initiative in achieving objectives in pursuit of their interests. There are important lessons the United States and its allies can draw from the Russian operations in Georgia and Ukraine that will inform potential options in countering future Russian aggression.

Introduction

Since the end of World War II, Russia has sought to maintain influence over buffer and satellite states within its orbit. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and a series of revolutions and elections within these states greatly reduced Russian influence within the region and across the globe. Over the last 15 years, Russia has reemerged as a growing power and has sought to exert its influence among old members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). The expansion of Western influence of the United States (US), the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into Russia's area of "privileged interests" and countries with which Russia "share[s] special historical relations prompted a resurgent Russian foreign policy."¹ Russia conducted military operations in Georgia, Crimea and the Donbass region of Ukraine as a means of reasserting its influence within the region while simultaneously seeking to reduce the influence of the EU and NATO within Russia's zone of privileged interest. The Russian operations were initial steps as part of its strategy in pursuit of interests to enable Russia to emerge as the dominant state in the region. How did Russia utilize its military to achieve its interests and objectives? This paper utilizes a qualitative approach to argue that Russia utilized controlled escalation in their operations in Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbass region of Ukraine as a means to manage operational cost and risk and maintain the operational initiative in achieving objectives in pursuit of their interests. The following paper provides an overview of the Russian interests and objectives it pursued in their military operations in Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbass. The paper will then compare and contrast the Russian operations to glean insights. Finally, the paper will address implications and considerations for the US and NATO as they look to counter future Russian aggression.

Thesis

This paper utilizes a qualitative approach to argue that Russia utilized controlled escalation in their operations in Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbass region of Ukraine as a means to manage operational costs and risks and maintain the operational initiative in achieving objectives in pursuit of their interests.



Strategy

Strategy is a concept of relating means to achieve an end. Military doctrine has various definitions for strategy. Joint Publication (JP) 1-02 defines strategy as “[a] prudent idea or set of ideas for employing (ways) the instruments of national power (means) in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives (ends).”² The Air Force Doctrine Definition 1 incorporates risk into the strategy definition by stating it is “the continuous process of matching ends, ways, and means to accomplish desired goals within acceptable levels of risk.” A state’s ends are its interests. The means are the forces, tools, devices generally associated with national power that a state uses. The ways are a way to relate a means to an end. The ways explain how a state will utilize its means to achieve its identified end states. So what are the Russian interests that drove the operations in Georgia and the Ukraine?

Russian Interests and Motives

Hans J. Morgenthau describes national interests as the “interests of a nation as a whole held to be an independent entity separate from the interests of subordinate areas or groups and also of other nations or supranational groups.”³ A state’s interests are its goals and ambitions. Russia’s dominant interest is a return to glory. Russia hopes to regain the prestige enjoyed under the Soviet Union by reestablishing global influence and reasserting itself as a legitimate global actor.⁴

In order to do this, Russia feels it must first reassert dominance in the zone of privileged interests or the zone of the near abroad which contains the states of the former Soviet Union.⁵ Russia is pursuing this by attempting to establish a structure placing itself in the center of a new Eurasian order that includes an economic, political, security, and values component.⁶ Moscow is seeks to create a new and alternative order that would, at a minimum, include the Eurasian

Economic Union (EEU). The EEU is a Moscow-led political and economic union that would include Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.⁷ At the extreme, Moscow's plan would entail a new political entity that would include within its borders Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.⁸ From a security perspective, Russia is seeking to "[r]estore at least partial control over the security policy orientation of the [Commonwealth of Independent States] CIS region."⁹ Moscow is seeking to establish a division between Eurasia and the West based upon a Eurasian platform of "social conservatism, tradition, religion, and focus on state authority to generate social stability."¹⁰

A second interest, and almost corollary to the first, is to reduce Western influence within the Russian near abroad. Russia does not want the states of the former Soviet Union to seek integration into Western structures, like the EU and especially NATO, nor to host any new US military bases.¹¹ Moscow's agenda is to limit the foreign policy options of the former Soviet republics, prevent their integration into the EU and NATO, and ensure their deep integration into the Moscow-led economic and political institutions.¹² In doing so, Moscow can deny or at least reduce western influence within the Russian near abroad. Additionally, Russia has several "ideological, military, political, and economic motives in maintaining...Georgia and Ukraine in its sphere of influence and potentially reincorporating portions of their territories into the Russian Federation."¹³ Russia is seeking to achieve specific objectives pursuant to these interests. The following section provides additional detail on Russian interests, objectives, and background information for both the Ukraine and Georgia.

Background and Objectives

Ukraine – Background

In the fall of 2013, pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, decided not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union under the Eastern Partnership program. A string of protest movements developed which led to a heavy handed response from the government. This led to the removal of the Ukrainian President and the establishment of a pro-Western interim government.¹⁴ The events led to a sudden loss of influence for Russia with an important neighbor and a geopolitical defeat for the Russians.¹⁵ “Verkhovna Rada secretariat registered draft legislation that would reinstate the goal of joining NATO as a centerpiece of Ukraine’s national strategy.”¹⁶ This action was against Russian interests, and if achieved, would permanently constrain Russian potential as a European regional power.¹⁷

As a result, Russian leaders sought to re-exert influence over Ukraine and “retain the ability to control the country’s strategic orientation.”¹⁸ Russia judged it had a target of opportunity when the Ukrainian military and internal security forces were “fragmented, demoralized, and uncertain where their loyalties lay, having served under the Yanukovich regime that had so suddenly collapsed.”¹⁹ The Russian response was nearly concurrent operations in both Crimea and the Donbass region of Ukraine.

Ukraine – Russian Objectives

The Russians had four primary objectives for the operations in the Ukraine. From a broader sense, Russia wanted the Ukraine to serve in an “organic role as a binding link between the various part of the European space—a notion akin to a buffer zone—should be restored, which implied a ‘neutral and non-bloc status.’”²⁰ Russia also sought to deny the Ukraine the opportunity to join NATO and the EU.²¹ Russia wanted to convince the Ukrainian authorities to

federalize;²² Russia wanted the “[d]ecentralization of the Ukrainian state such that the eastern if not also the southern regions would exercise self-government, become still more integrated with the Russian economy and ideally be able to conduct their own foreign relations with Russia... eastern and potentially parts of southern Ukraine are increasingly viewed in Moscow as territorial assets for Russia.”²³ Ukraine has large natural gas reserves and shale gas exploration started in the eastern Ukraine in 2013. Additionally, the Donbass region is highly industrialized and have notable coal and iron ore deposits.”²⁴ The eastern Ukraine also has a lot of military industry to include helicopters, cruise missile engines, and maintenance for nuclear rockets and aircraft.²⁵ Lastly, Russia sought to retake ownership of Crimea and deny it to NATO and the EU. “[Russia] could not allow a historical part of the Russian territory with a predominantly ethnic Russian population to be incorporated into an international military alliance or the movement of NATO infrastructure... directly towards the Russian border.”²⁶

Georgia – Background

Prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, a bitter conflict existed between Georgia leadership in Tbilisi and South Ossetia. South Ossetian received support from North Ossetia which lies in the Russian Federation. Tensions rose but a ceasefire initiated a peacekeeping operation that included joint Russia-Ossetian-Georgian patrols. Georgia and Russia were locked in a frozen but relatively peaceful conflict from the early 90s to 2004 over South Ossetia. Russian peacekeepers were in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia although the Georgians did not see the peacekeepers as impartial in their role. Tensions between Russia and Georgia increased in 2004 with the election of President Saakashvili as he committed to restoring Georgia’s lost territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia developed a symbiotic relationship with both South Ossetia and Abkhazia

issuing Russian passports to large portions of their populations, and Tbilisi saw the Russian's as pursuing an absorption of South Ossetia.

These events were occurring as Georgia sought closer relations with the west as it pursued membership in NATO and closer ties to the United States.²⁷ Tensions continued to rise between Georgia and Russia from 2004-2008. In April 2008, Georgia attended the NATO Bucharest Summit in hopes of taking steps towards NATO membership. "Without a doubt the refusal of France and Germany to grant Georgia [and Ukraine] a Membership Action Plan (MAP) during the summit was instrumental in Russia adopting a more aggressive stance toward [Georgia], whose vulnerability had been suddenly exposed after being snubbed by these two leading EU countries...it was after the Bucharest summit the [Russian] preparations for a military confrontation began in earnest."²⁸

Georgia – Russian Interests and Objectives

"Georgia's position on the Black Sea and in the Caucasus, straddling Eastern Europe and Western Asia, is of clear strategic interest for Russia."²⁹ In the early 90s, Russian leaders identified that the strategic weight of Russia in the Black Sea depended upon a troop presence on the western coast of the Caucasus in the territory of Abkhazia.³⁰ South Ossetia offered Moscow leverage over Ossetian minorities in Russia and provided a means of diffusing internal problems.³¹ Based upon these interests and the broader interests mentioned earlier, Russia pursued three primary objectives with their operations in Georgia.

The primary objective for the operation was to heighten Georgia's strategic vulnerability.³² The second objective was to inhibit Georgia's ability to join NATO. The Russians saw Georgia joining NATO as a threat within their area of privileged interest. In 2011, President Medvedev stated that one of the objectives of the operations in Georgia was "to curb

the threat which was coming at the time from the territory of Georgia.” “If we had faltered in 2008,” Medvedev said, “[the] geopolitical arrangement would be different now and a number of countries in respect of which attempts were made to artificially drag them into the North Atlantic Alliance, would have probably been [in NATO] now.”³³ More precisely, the Russians wanted to stop or disrupt Georgia’s ability to become a member of NATO as it likely would have led to other nations seeking NATO membership. The third objective was shift the local military balance of power to Abkhaz authorities and away from Tbilisi.³⁴ The fourth objective was to establish military protectorates for the areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia which would quickly be followed by Russian recognition of statehood for each.³⁵ With the interests, objectives, and backgrounds laid out, let’s take a look at the comparison of the Russian military operations in Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbass region.

Russian Operations

There are many differences and similarities when assessing the operations in Georgia, Crimea, and in the Donbass region of Ukraine. Clausewitz highlights that each war and battle is unique as there are different variables and circumstances specific to each.³⁶ There are important insights in how the Russians conducted the operations and how the operations enabled the Russians to achieve objectives that supported their interests. The following section assesses each of the operations by looking at the Russian use of the following in the operations: covert and non-military measures, exercises and inspections as a cover to mass conventional forces, and the integration of fires to support ground forces.

Covert Operations and “Non-Military Measures”

The Russian military forces conducted covert operations and performed non-military measures during operations in Georgia, Crimea, and Donbass. Military forces are comprised of

both regular and special operations forces (SOF). Military forces are part of the official government and armed forces structure, and when openly deployed abroad, implies an act of interstate war, unless under the auspices of a United Nations Security Council mandate.³⁷ NATO defines SOF as “military activities conducted by specially designated, organized, trained, and equipped forces, manned with selected personnel, using unconventional tactics, techniques, and modes of employment.”³⁸ An overt operation is recognized by the state; whereas, a covert operation is denied by the state, and the forces conducting the operations are typically not identifiable as military forces in terms of uniform, unit designations, or possibly standard operating procedures. In Russian doctrine, “non-military measures” include change of military-political leadership, actions against opposition forces, economic blockade, and several others.³⁹ Military forces can perform non-military measures, but in some cases, it may require the forces perform the measures covertly or in a capacity in which the state may deny the operation. Therefore, a state may have their military forces adapt their appearance or operating procedures when performing a non-military measure like civil war in another country so the state may retain plausible deniability.⁴⁰

Russia utilized both regular forces and SOF for covert and non-military measures in the execution of operations in Georgia, Crimea, and Donbass. When the war in Georgia commenced, there was one battalion of Russian peacekeepers in the South Ossetia that numbered almost 500.⁴¹ There were close to 9,000 troops and 350 armored vehicles in Abkhazia.⁴² The Russian peacekeepers transitioned from performing a non-military measure, carrying out complex measures to reduce tensions in the form of peacekeeping, to a military measure, waging combat operations, in support of operations in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Some of the

peacekeepers in Abkhazia participated in a mechanized infantry advance through a UN security zone into undisputed Georgian territory.⁴³

In Crimea, the SOF conducted covert operations. Because of the speed of the operations on Crimea and the absence of engagements, the SOF role on Crimea was small but decisive in the operation.⁴⁴ The SOF, pretending to be a local “self-defense militia,” seized control of the Crimean Parliament and raised a Russian flag over the building.⁴⁵ This operation supported the non-military measure of change of military-political leadership in that it enabled the election of “marionette” Sergei Aksenov as new Crimean Prime Minister.⁴⁶ The Russian SOF and elite forces led the takeover of the Ukrainian military’s headquarters and a number of other hard-target military compounds on Donbass via direct action in order to disrupt command and control of Ukrainian forces.⁴⁷ The forces took pains to appear non-military.⁴⁸ The Russians utilized conventional forces from the 810th Naval Infantry in armored personnel carriers (APCs) to seize the city square and support the emplacement of a Russian mayor in Sevastapol. This demonstrated the use of conventional forces to perform the non-military measure of forcing a change in political-military leadership. The use of these regular military forces was the first unambiguous indication that Russia decided to intervene militarily to change the political order on Crimea.⁴⁹

Russia utilized SOF for various purposes in Donbass and deployed military forces in significant numbers to conduct operations, they would deny, that were associated with civil war in the Donbass region in the Ukraine.⁵⁰ “Evidence suggests Russia was involved in initiating part of the anti-Kiev rebellion in Donbass, and Russian SOF was one of the main tools.”⁵¹ Russian SOF also trained and provided intelligence to militia as well as conducted direct action on various occasions in Donbass.⁵² Russian forces anonymized conventional military force

equipment by removing unit markings and number plates on vehicles as they deployed military forces to carry out non-military measures.⁵³ There is no plausible explanation for the removal of the vehicle markings and the removal of distinguishing unit designations except to deny they were Russian forces.⁵⁴

The Russians utilized covert operations and/or non-military measures to differing degrees of effectiveness in the operations in Georgia, Crimea and Donbass. In all three operations, the Russians utilized different forces for non-military measures. In Georgia, there was a plausible explanation for the presence of regular forces as the Russians had peacekeepers with combat vehicles in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In Crimea, there was also a plausible explanation as the Black Sea Fleet had over 12,000 military personnel stationed in and around Crimea with substantial leeway in bringing additional units in from the mainland.⁵⁵ There was not a plausible explanation for Russian forces in Ukraine so they operated covertly and took great strides to remove identifiable markings from combat vehicles and personnel.

The Russian utilization of SOF varied widely between the operations due to the nature of the conflicts. In Crimea, the Russians used SOF to conduct decisive operations and setting conditions to cut the command and control capability. There were no exchanges of fire on Crimea so the conflict did not require the Russians to utilize SOF in a more expanded role. On Donbass, the Russians utilized SOF in direct action, covert action, and training militias. The difference in the operational use rests primarily in the fact that the war in Donbass escalated to battles between the Ukrainians and the Russians. The Russians utilized all means available to achieve their ends, and this included more extensive use of SOF. Although it is likely the Russians utilized SOF in direct action and possibly special reconnaissance in the war with

Georgia, there were no available authoritative sources on the topic so they are not included in the analysis.

Use of Exercises and Inspections as Cover for Massing Formations

The Russians utilized exercises and snap-readiness inspections as a cover for movement and mobilization of forces in preparation for operations and as a means of positioning forces during the conflicts in Georgia, Crimea, and Donbass. In late July and early August 2008, the Russian 58th Army, Russia's main military force in the North Caucasus region, conducted extensive joint force exercise, code named "Kavkaz-2008" (Caucasus 2008) just north of the Georgian border. The exercise, which consisted of close to 60,000 regular troops and paramilitaries, was a "...trial run for the invasion about to take place...it was a de facto war game to invade Georgia."⁵⁶ At the completion of the exercise, the troops remained in the field and deployed near the Georgian border with an eventual build-up to nearly 80,000 troops.⁵⁷

In preparation for the operations in Crimea, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an inspection of 150,000 troops from the Western and Central Military District. Inspections of this scale had become commonplace since 2013, but the Russians utilized this one specifically as a diversion and a cover for troop movements.⁵⁸ Similarly, in the spring of 2014, Russia deployed up to 90,000 service members from elite and regular units to the east and north of Ukraine. In March 2015, President Putin ordered another large-scale surprise inspection in western Russian involving 80,000 troops and 12,000 vehicles.⁵⁹

The exercise, deployments, and snap inspections enabled Russia to accomplish several critical elements of the military strategy. Strategically, the deployments served to deter Western or other third party intervention.⁶⁰ The posturing of forces provided Russia with the flexibility to quickly transition to large scale operations should the west attempt to intervene. Operationally,

the postured Russian forces served as a deterrent in the cases of Crimea and Donbass as the Ukrainian leadership recalled what occurred in Georgia with the employment of large formations of Russian forces. The exercises and inspections also enabled Russia to establish the infrastructure and logistical support for operations.⁶¹ The availability of large formations of conventional forces provided flexibility to Russian leadership in achieving their objectives.

Integration of Fires to Support Ground Forces

Russia's effective integration and delivery of fires was driven largely by its willingness to acknowledge the presence of military forces on the ground within the conflict areas. In Georgia, the Russians achieved decisive air superiority through the activation of over 300 combat aircraft—including Su-24, Su-25, Su-27 fighters, and Tu-22 bombers that flew over 400 total sorties against 36 targets.⁶² Russian maneuver forces combined with massive air and artillery attacks against Georgian forces created a significant shock effect.⁶³ On the Crimean peninsula, the deployment of attack helicopters, armored vehicles, and artillery units substantially reinforced lightly armed anonymized elite regular troops.⁶⁴ The Russians denied the deployment of these combat multipliers for weeks.⁶⁵ The employment of these capabilities enabled the Russians to neutralize Ukrainian armor and operate at night which gave them a great advantage over the Ukrainian forces.⁶⁶ In an attempt to make conventional forces appear non-military, Russia used air support very sparsely in support of ground force operations.⁶⁷ This hampered Russian operations despite the availability of forces (two regiments and ten squadrons of ground-attack aircraft, and one brigade and eight squadrons of attack helicopter) and impeded the suppression of opposing Ukrainian forces.⁶⁸ Regular artillery units supported rebel forces and militia with artillery fire across the border into Ukraine.⁶⁹

The more effective integration and utilization of fires in Georgia and Crimea was driven largely by the Russian's overt use of the capabilities. The use of fires, especially that of air delivered fires, were very effective in supporting ground operations in Georgia. In the Ukraine, Russia attempted to conceal the use of fires assets in support of ground operations. This more restricted use, or in some cases not using the fires assets at all, hindered Russian operations. Although limited in scale as compared to the Georgian operations, the artillery and attack helicopter use in Crimea enabled the Russian ground forces and, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, enabled support of Russian operations at night. When openly using their fires assets, the Russians were able to effectively utilize them to enable ground operations.

Implications

Russia utilized controlled escalation in their operations in Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbass region of Ukraine as a means of maintaining the operational initiative and managing the operational cost and risks. In order to maintain the operational initiative, the Russians methodically set conditions and used escalation to covert use of conventional forces to achieve objectives. This controlled approach enables them to manage the cost and effectively mitigate the risk in achieving their ends especially against a much smaller adversary. The controlled escalation enabled the Russians to minimize the likelihood of timely western influence or involvement and enabled them to exploit the blurred lines between war and peace in these operations.

The Russians set conditions for operations through the use of controlled escalation with covert operations from SOF. SOF conducted covert operations in both the Ukraine and Crimea. In Ukraine, the SOF created unrest through militia groups. This unrest set conditions for

escalated use of force by the Russians in the form of their regular forces conducting operations in Ukraine. In Crimea, the SOF seized parliamentary buildings and military headquarters compounds. These actions set conditions for elections in which Russian backed candidates took office eventually leading to Crimea becoming part of the Russian federation.⁷⁰ The seizing of the compounds by the Russians disrupted the Ukrainian ability to effectively coordinate operations across the peninsula within a week.⁷¹

The use of exercises and surprise inspections helped set the conditions for controlled escalation. The Russians utilized the exercises to posture large formations of regular forces along the respective borders of Georgia, Crimea and the Ukraine. The posturing served several purposes in the escalation. It masked the movement of forces to particular areas so they could posture for offensive operations. In Georgia, the exercise served to prepare the Russian forces for the operation as they rehearsed the large scale joint force operation. Although intended as a deterrent force, Crimea is the only case where it seems to have worked, but the speed in which the Russians conducted the operations and the lack of Ukrainian command and control on the peninsula likely contributed to the lack of action on the Ukrainians part as well. The massed formations, as a result of exercises and snap inspections, enabled the Russians to quickly escalate to overt operations with large formation of conventional forces.

The Russians set the conditions for the operations so as to conduct the rapid escalation with overwhelming combat power to mitigate the risk associated with achieving their objectives. This was effective in Crimea in that Russia was able to annex Crimea and seize Ukrainian bases on the peninsula without any direct casualties and little resistance from Ukrainian forces.⁷² The seizure of Crimea provided the Russians with naval and force basing in the Black Sea it desired without fear of losing it to NATO or a NATO member. By taking control of the Ukrainian naval

assets it wanted and relinquishing those it did not want, Russia asserted itself as the most powerful fleet on the Black Sea.⁷³ Having the most powerful fleet on the Black Sea supports its interest of reasserting itself within the region postures it to reassert itself globally.

Russia was able to achieve its other three objectives within Ukraine strategically, but it came at an operational cost. In Donbass, there was a slower transition to the overt use of force which led to less effective fires in supporting the ground operations. The Russian forces operating in Donbass were largely unmarked so they were not identifiable. Without an internationally justifiable reason to be in Donbass, the Russian forces utilized the unmarked vehicle technique in an apparent effort to maintain deniability of large scale Russian involvement in the conflict. While the Russians escalated to the use of regular military forces, the non-standard use inhibited their ability to quickly achieve their ends in Donbass. Russia's eventual employment of its conventional forces enabled it to gain the upper hand in the conflict and forced Ukraine authorities to eventually negotiate leading. Russia wanted the Donbass region as negotiating leverage to gain control of Ukraine's strategic orientation.⁷⁴ Russia's desire to use an escalatory approach so as to minimize the cost of the operation created significant operational challenges for the Russian forces as they operated covertly initially. Russia had to utilize its conventional forces to deny Ukrainian control of its eastern regions and not a member of NATO. As a result of the eventual successful operations of conventional forces, Russia was also able to maintain economic ties and influence in the eastern and southern portions of Ukraine.⁷⁵ Moscow was able to maintain an "opportunistic, low-cost, high return strategy of maintaining these frozen conflicts...to achieve its foreign policy goals and thus make life difficult for Kiev...as well as for NATO and the EU."⁷⁶

While Russia can utilize the controlled escalation to achieve objectives at a lower cost, it also accepts risk in doing so. If there is a mismatch between the forces Russia has available, means, and the identified objective, the ends, the foe has an opportunity to regain the initiative. Despite quick Russian actions in Georgia, the Georgian forces had a small window of initial success before the larger conventional Russian forces arrived in South Ossetia. In the case of Donbass, Russia avoided utilizing their conventional forces and miscalculated Ukrainian nationalism which served to rally the country against Russia. As this prolonged, Russia moved to eventually employ its conventional forces. While the employment of conventional raised the cost both militarily and with scrutiny amongst the international community, the forces provided Russia with the means to achieve its objectives.

In Georgia, the Russian's quickly transitioned to the overt use of conventional forces to achieve their objectives. The Russians justified the offensive operations in Georgia by claiming they were protecting their citizens and peacekeepers in South Ossetia.⁷⁷ The overt use of force included the effective use of fires to enable the ground forces to achieve their objectives. The Russians were able to shift the balance of power to the Abkhaz though the "destruction or seizure of Georgian army, air force, and naval military equipment and infrastructure, and the targeting of all Georgian military facilities and bases."⁷⁸ The Russian conventional forces attacked into Georgia, and with the assistance of Russian peacekeepers already on the ground, seized both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The combined effects of ground forces, fires, SOF, and militia enabled the Russians to escalate quickly and set conditions for the seizure. The Russians established protectorates and quickly moved by Russian recognition of statehood for both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.⁷⁹ The Russian accomplishment of these objectives collectively stood to heighten Georgia's strategic vulnerability.

Recommendations

Before discussing the recommendations, there are several points worth noting when reviewing the case studies and the success of the Russian operations in achieving their objectives in Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbass in Ukraine. Russia is likely to continue to pursue interests within the region utilizing the same tactics by exploiting the blurred line between war and peace. Russia will continue to assert its influence to attain dominance in its near abroad. The blurred area in which these operations sit within the spectrum of peace and war limits the ability of the West, NATO, and the international community to intervene militarily without risking much broader conflict. It is not likely that NATO will offer membership to states with ongoing border disputes as it could conceivably draw NATO into conflict almost immediately given the frozen conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the continued conflict in the Donbass could spark broader conflict. It would be difficult and not likely for Russia to utilize the same tactics in operations outside of the region because the conditions outside of this area would not be the same (proxy forces, mass formations for inspections and exercises, use of conventional forces for overt operations).

The US must determine its interests as it pertains to the region, the CIS, the Baltics, and based upon its interests, the US must develop a consistent and coherent foreign policy in regards to the region. Is it in the US's interest to take action against Russia to counter their assertiveness within what they view as their zone of privileged interest? Upon determining the US's interests and foreign policy for the region, the US must work with its NATO partners to determine an approach to dealing with Russia within the region and more specifically in regards to the Ukraine and Georgia.

The US and NATO must determine if it's in their shared interest to provide the Ukraine and Georgia for an opportunity to join NATO. As demonstrated by the Russian operations in 2008 in Georgia and in Ukraine 2014, NATO membership for these countries or moves by these countries away from Russian interests will prompt action from Russia. Because of the Article 5 defense requirements in the NATO charter, an attack on one member of NATO is an attack on all members. The continued disputes between Russia and the states of Ukraine and Georgia make NATO membership problematic as it would escalate tensions between NATO and Russia and possibly lead to further conflict. This does not mean that NATO should not continue to work with Georgia and Ukraine on prospective membership in the future. The US and NATO must weigh the risk and potential costs associated with likely tensions or conflict with Russia over the membership. Given the almost certain escalation by Russia in these circumstances, the US and NATO must be prepared to respond should they desire to take action pursuant to their interest.

Because of the rapid escalatory measures Russia can take in this style of warfare, the response time for the US and NATO is extremely narrow. With massed formations for inspections and exercises, Russia can take action quickly to achieve objectives before western forces can move forces into the region. The rapid escalatory measures inhibit the ability for international organizations to respond because of the typically slower more deliberate bureaucratic processes these organizations require for action.

Because of the narrow response time, the US must develop and wargame potential US and NATO actions to pursue interests or to counter Russian escalation within the region. Like Clausewitz points out, the situation and circumstances associated with any conflict will be different given the myriad of factors and variables that may exist. That being said, the US could develop and wargame feasible scenarios and determine what conditions would need to exist for

the US to take action within the region, be it unilaterally or with NATO. The wargame must be detailed in so far as it identifies the conditions that would likely lead to the use of some combination of power by the United States, NATO, or another ally to pursue interests or counter Russian escalation. The utilization of diplomatic, informational, and economic means of power will continue to be the predominant forms utilized to coerce Russia.

Because of Russia's ability to escalate and deescalate quickly, the US and its allies must be able to anticipate or recognize escalatory patterns to more effectively provide a timely response against Russian aggression to inhibit their ability to achieve objectives. Again, the proximity to Russia makes military or even clandestine operations more challenging and difficult. The United States could attempt to utilize national assets to determine if there were any patterns and to provide early warning of large formation movements by the Russians. The extensive use of Human intelligence, as well as open source intelligence will be critical in providing some early warning as to Russian intentions and movements.

The most opportune time to counter Russia will be when they are in a period of greatest risk. As identified in the implications section, Russia attempts to achieve its objectives at a lower cost and can be vulnerable in the periods before escalation. In both Georgia and Ukraine, Russia faced setbacks during these periods. Because their forces were far inferior to the Russian forces, they were not able to exploit the opportunity. If the US or NATO were to take action or want to provide assistance to states in the CIS to counter Russian aggression, these periods would be the most opportune. There is risk associated with this action as Russia will likely see any action to support a state within the CIS by the US or NATO as provocative.

Conclusion

The Russians will continue to pursue their interest of reasserting dominance within what they view as their zone of privileged interest. The historical use cases in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate Russia's willingness to exploit the blurred lines between war and peace and the use of rapidly escalatory means to achieve objectives in pursuit of their interests. The controlled escalation enables the Russians to gauge risk and balance costs stay ahead of their adversary's and the west's decision cycles. Understanding how the Russians utilize their military means of power to influence and coerce states within this zone is important in shaping potential options to counter Russian influence. The Russians have periods of risk in which there are opportunities to disrupt the momentum of their operations as they take escalatory measures, but the opportunities are fleeting. Understanding these case studies and their implications provide insights to the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union, and the international community in terms of how they might counter Russian military escalation if it is in their interest to do so.

Notes

¹ Roy Allison, "Russia resurgent? Moscow's campaign to 'coerce Georgia to peace'," *International Affairs* 84, no. 6 (2008), 1167.

² Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010 (As Amended Through 15 June 2015), 229.

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