

DEFENSE AND INTELLIGENCE PROJECTS

# The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare

Stephen R. Covington

Foreword by Kevin Ryan



HARVARD Kennedy School

**BELFER CENTER**

for Science and International Affairs

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## **Defense and Intelligence Projects**

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Cover photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, listens to Chief of Russia's military's General Staff Valery Gerasimov, right, as he observes military exercises near the Baikal Lake in Russia on Wednesday, July 17, 2013.

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# About the Author

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# Foreword

Steve Covington's insightful explanation of Russian military strategic culture helps observers understand what Russia is doing now on the international stage and what it might do next. Together with his previous Belfer Center published papers, "Putin's Choice for Russia" and "The Meaning of Russia's Campaign in Syria," this new installment rounds out a must-read trilogy for understanding the thinking going on inside both Russia's General Staff and the Kremlin.

**BG Kevin Ryan** (USA ret), Director,  
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Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, listens to Chief of Russia's military's General Staff Valery Gerasimov, right, as he observes military exercises near the Baikal Lake in Russia on Wednesday, July 17, 2013. (AP Photo/RIA Novosti, Alexei Nikolsky, Presidential Press Service)





## Introduction

In September of 1991, I met with Russian general officers in Minsk at a military reform seminar. Our discussions took place against the backdrop of the August coup attempt in Moscow, the subsequent collapse of Soviet power, and the so-called parade of sovereignty by former Soviet Republics. At the same time, President Yeltsin was signaling his intent to change dramatically the national security strategy, military doctrine, and military system the Soviet Union had developed since the 1940s.

A senior Russian three-star general had listened to the discussions on concepts such as defensive defense and preventive defense—recognizing that change to the Soviet military system was on the immediate horizon, one that would probably match the change to the Soviet political system witnessed over the previous weeks. At the end of the conference, he approached me with a puzzled look on his face, as though he had been questioning the basic assumptions of his thinking, assumptions that had driven a lifetime of professional military decisions. He asked, “Do people in the West understand that Russia has a unique geostrategic position, unlike any other nation in the world? Do people in the West understand that how the rest of the world defends itself, builds its doctrine and strategies, simply won’t work in Russia?”

His question in 1991 reflects one of four fundamental cultural pillars of Russian strategic military thought, a culture that I have encountered over the last two decades in every discussion with Russian military

officers ranging from Ministers of Defense, Chiefs of General Staff, Chiefs and generals of the Main Operations Directorate, across services from Strategic Rocket Forces to Airborne Forces, and from operational-strategic level commanders down to tactical-level commanders.

In the Cold War, this culture of Russian military strategic thought played a fundamental role in the Soviet system, shaping the structure of the Soviet Armed Forces, the type of strategic operations to be conducted in war, and the military system designed to meet the requirements of that unique strategic environment in accordance with the Soviet political leadership's aims in peace and war.<sup>1</sup>

After years of marginalization, Russian military strategic culture has returned to a position of great influence inside Russia's political system, and strikingly so over the last four years. This culture of strategic thought plays a dominant role in the country's military preparations for war, and shapes the country's economic priorities. Russian military strategic culture also provides President Putin a strategic framework for Russia's most critical security and defense calculations in peace, crisis, and war. This return of traditional Russian military strategic culture to the forefront of Moscow's security policy decisions comes at a critical juncture in Russia's post-Cold War development.

# Four Pillars of Russian Strategic Culture

Russian strategic culture has a set of underlying assumptions and values that drive goal setting, interactions, capabilities, structure and ultimately behavior. These fundamental underlying assumptions shape all military concepts and establish a unique way for measuring how much or how little military security the Russians have, need, or should be attained. Organizational psychology, led by Edgar Schein's work, holds that the strongest organizations are the ones with leaders that are aware of their own culture and cultivate it.<sup>2</sup> Organizational psychology also holds that most organizations are not conscious of their culture, and therefore lose it over time or leaders lose control of it.

The Russian military leadership is very conscious of its culture of strategic thought, and the Russian military as a whole has a common understanding of what this strategic culture is built upon. It is the role of the General Staff as the 'brain of the army', the General Staff Academy, and other academies to institutionalize this culture of strategic thought into their officer corps. They cultivate it and reinforce it in almost every sphere of their education, thinking, planning, assessment, and decision-making. It was not lost during the tumultuous Yeltsin years, when the Russian military maintained its strategic thought despite being neglected by their political authorities and lacking the capabilities to act strategically.

Russian military strategic culture reaches deeply into other security services and other government ministries, facilitating how the country functions as a whole in war. There is no Western equivalent to Russian strategic culture, and Western service culture should not be confused with Russia's culture of strategic

thought. In fact, it is virtually impossible to create a single system of strategic thought in the West that approximates the Russian approach—and for good reason. The traditional autocratic, non-liberal Russian political system—like the one under Putin—allows for a single, dominant form of military thought to merge with the political leadership to shape government-wide decision-making. In Western liberal democracies, the decentralization of political power and distributed responsibilities across ministries and agencies—many with their own organizational culture—prevent the rise of a single, dominating culture of strategic thought for national security decision-making. Western military leaders simply cannot achieve the influential decision-making role or dominate the internal political process to establish national economic priorities for the country as the Russian Minister of Defense and Chief of the General Staff can achieve in President Putin’s system.

As the Soviet military held, Russia’s military today holds that war is not only a competition between respective weapons’ capabilities and forces, but is a clash between military systems. How a nation organizes itself for war constitutes a single system that competes head on with the system of its opponent, and victory goes to the superior military system. The military system corresponds to their thinking about war, specifically political-military objectives, strategy, and operational art in war—and how pre-war crisis periods are managed. The Russian military system is designed to accentuate strengths, minimize weaknesses, and bring to bear in war every element key to generating combat power. Strategic culture is the glue for this military system as a whole.

In my experiences of working with the Russian military, there are four fundamental assumptions that constitute the pillars of Russian strategic culture: *Strategic uniqueness* demands unique military approaches to maximize and seize opportunity; *Strategic*

*vulnerability* demands aggressive counter-surprise measures for a Russia perceived as potentially ‘undefendable’; Going to war with Russia means ”**Going to war with all of Russia**; and, the *Decisiveness of the initial period of war*.

Each pillar is clearly reflected in Russia’s current military thinking on war, and each pillar mutually reinforces the other pillars. The Russian military ‘system’ today—with its snap exercises, military district administrative structure, regional operational-strategic commands, nation-wide control over mobilization, logistics, and transportation, and central national armed forces command and control center in Moscow—is tailored to conduct war in a way that upholds the traditional elements of Russian strategic culture, departing sharply from Western doctrine, strategy, and practice. Russian military behavior in peacetime is not sabre rattling solely for political effect or narrative. Russia’s military behavior and modernization program correspond to contemporary Russian military assessments of the post-Soviet, modern strategic environment and Putin’s political worldview, priorities, and aims -understood and acted upon through these four pillars of traditional strategic culture.

## **Asymmetry in Culture — Asymmetry in Strategy, Posture, and Practice**

President Putin’s divergent aims vis-à-vis the European security system constitute on its own a significant challenge for the West to manage. At the same time, the assumptions and values of traditional Russian General Staff strategic culture—the prime drivers of Russia’s military modernization, reorganization, and behavior over the last few years—are very different from

Western values and assumptions. These differences are key to the emerging strategic asymmetry between Russia and the West on 21<sup>st</sup> century approaches to military security—an asymmetry that will impact Europe’s security in periods of peace, crisis, and conflict.

Strategic culture is also the glue for Moscow’s management of the peace-crisis-conflict spectrum for the Russian military. In comparison with the West, Russia’s strategic approach in the military sphere is producing peacetime conventional and nuclear posture, as well as military exercises with scale, purpose, and rhythm, that differ significantly from that of the West. In crisis, Russia’s very different assumptions and values can produce a different crisis management style and behavior from that of the West. This different Russian crisis management approach may be shaped by different war avoidance strategies, potentially colliding with Western approaches at the outset and during a crisis. In conflict, Russia’s strategic culture can produce approaches that differ with the West in how war is conducted, the initial and ultimate goals in war, and how war is terminated.

Collectively, the traditional pillars of Russian strategic culture will shape how the Russian military evolves its military posture and strategies, sharply influencing Europe’s future military security and equilibrium—even absent a Russian intent or interest in war with neighbors or the West. Combined with President Putin’s worldview, and Russia’s geo-strategic situation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the reemergence of Russia’s military culture of strategic thought has significant implications for Europe’s security for years to come, whether measured in the short-term, a crisis avoidance context, or from a long-term, strategic military balance perspective.

# Strategic Uniqueness:

## Russia's Homeland Hybrid Strategic Offense—'Little Green Men, Big Green Tanks, and Bigger Green Missiles'

The starting point of Russian strategic culture holds that Russia's geographic, political, economic, and strategic position is unique, and consequently military solutions for Russia's defense must be unique. The Russian military sees lessons learned in wars they wage or conflicts they observe through their understanding of Russia's strategic uniqueness. Strategic uniqueness demands that Russia must, and will take a tailored, unique approach to its security from that of its neighbors and competitors—an approach that advances Russia's strengths and exploits the weaknesses of others. Their formulation of uniqueness contrasts sharply with the U.S. notion of exceptionalism. U.S. exceptionalism can be seen in its most basic sense as the innovative integration of ideas, ideals, and practices. Strategic uniqueness for the Russian military at its core is built on the rejection of other ideas, ideals, and practices. In their view, strategic uniqueness means that Western or other defense models will not work for Russia, but only make Russia vulnerable and weak. In their rejection of other ideas, models, and practices, the Russians embrace their own unique course buoyed by an air of *superiority*, and sometimes even accompanied by misplaced vindication in the actual rejection of other approaches. However, this Russian approach is driven by a calculation of Russia's unique weaknesses and limitations as much as an assessment of Russia's unique capabilities and strengths. Russia's unique way of war conforms to these realities. This conformity produces a strategically unique approach to defense that the Russians sometimes refer to as an asymmetric approach.

Asymmetry in this sense, however, speaks more to the unique strategic political-military landscape that Russia occupies, their economic-technological base, and the corresponding security and defense solutions it demands—not the conduct of warfare with ambiguous means. The Russians do not invest in asymmetric means of warfare for the sake of it; they invest in the totality of their security appropriate to the strategic security situation they face and based on what their country can develop and produce for its defense. For example, if ambiguous, non-attributable warfare means have a valid role in their unique strategic approach to war, then the Russians apply it. If it does not have a valid role, they just as easily reject it. The Russian military simply believes that Russia's unique strategic disposition demands different approaches from other countries, and this different unique approach is not similar or symmetric to neighbors or other great powers.

Russian strategic uniqueness has been used to reject Western military reform models over the last two decades, reforms that would have contributed to creating more symmetry between Russian and Western defense models. Internal political attempts also were made to reform the Russian military in the early Yeltsin period. However, the term *reform* is more clearly understood by the Russian military as disenfranchisement, disempowerment, and defunding internally. Reform is also understood as Western attempts to undermine Russia's military system and thought. Numerous Western national and NATO attempts to assist Russian military reforms over two decades were rebuffed by layers of protective bureaucracy inside the Russian Foreign Ministry, Defense Ministry, and General Staff. The Russian military never made their rejection of Western models or practice a secret.



# A Strategically Unique Approach to Hybrid Warfare

Russia's approach to hybrid warfare is an excellent example of Russia's strategic uniqueness driving approaches that differ from the Western practice of "out of area operations" or "operations at strategic distance" in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan. It is common in the West to think of the term "hybrid warfare" as being synonymous with 'ambiguous, non-attributable warfare'. Western attention to Russia's capability for employing special forces ("little green men"), information warfare, cyber attacks, political sabotage, economic pressure, "lawfare", and energy blackmail — routinely called Russian hybrid warfare—is justifiable. However, the attention to the ambiguous, non-attributable warfare dimension of Russia's campaign on occasion has obscured the fact that the Russians wage hybrid warfare uniquely.

In Russia's approach to hybrid warfare, the word 'hybrid' is applied to warfare in a way that is more similar to how hybrid is applied to the term hybrid car. A hybrid car functions as a single vehicle with two different sources of power that interact with one another to propel the vehicle to a single destination. Russian hybrid warfare is a single form of warfare that couples the ambiguous, non-attributable means of war to 'non-ambiguous' means of war—conventional and nuclear forces. These two sources of power—ambiguous and non-ambiguous—are united and employed simultaneously in accordance with a single strategy to achieve a single set of objectives in a hybrid military operation. In effect, Russia's actual approach to hybrid warfare involves not only "little green men", but requires big green tanks, and even bigger green nuclear-capable missiles.

Over the first two decades of the post-Cold War period, Moscow conducted ambiguous, non-attributable actions against her

neighbors and other countries. The Russian military has a deep respect for the power of cyber attacks, recognizing that employing these ambiguous means can shock and stun an opponent at the outset of a campaign, destabilize the battlefield, and achieve initial results that weaken and disorient an opponent. However, disorientation effects are not permanent. Ambiguous means of warfare cannot seize and hold terrain, and are not on their own capable of achieving the final decisive result of a military campaign. However, conventional and nuclear posturing was not integrated into these ambiguous warfare actions against her neighbors during this period.

In the Russian view today, conventional and nuclear activities now are connected to employing ambiguous means of warfare, and the two military campaigns against Ukraine signal this shift in Russian thinking—strategically, operationally, and tactically. In the Russian view, conventional forces that can threaten to defeat or defeat the conventional capabilities of an opponent, and hold the strategic advantage are critical to an integrated hybrid campaign. Moreover, this unique Russian approach to hybrid offensive war can involve conventional and nuclear posturing *at the outset*, even if Moscow only elects to employ its non-attributable arsenal against an opponent. For example, Russia's large-scale posturing of its conventional forces and concurrent posturing of nuclear capable systems for the Crimean operation were designed to pressure Kyiv, shield Russia's other activities inside Ukraine, and intimidate Kyiv with the prospect of a larger-scale conflict with Russia if Ukraine acted decisively against the Russian ambiguous campaign.

In this sense, Russian conventional and nuclear force posturing represented a pressure and shield approach, maximizing the impact of Russia's ambiguous campaign against Ukraine. From a Russian strategic uniqueness perspective, this approach to hybrid warfare is based on an unquestioned assumption for the

Russian military given the fact that Russia's ambiguous campaign against Ukraine, adjacent to Russian borders, placed the Russian homeland at risk with the potential for both substantial military counter-actions by Kyiv. As a result, Russia's echeloned buildup of its conventional posture and nuclear activities were designed to counter, and dominate potential Ukrainian escalatory moves.

Russia's conventional and nuclear posturing not only dissuades Russia's direct adversaries in regional hybrid warfare, but also reflects conventional and nuclear contingency thinking as Putin described in a 2015 interview.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the strategic posturing of Russian conventional forces in the Southern and Western military districts and nuclear force exercises and activities around Russia in support of the Russian Crimean and Donbas campaigns were examples of traditional Russian thinking to signal, prevent, and counter if necessary, third party involvement in crises. Third-party involvement contingencies are a standard feature of how the Russian military thinks about military operations that have the potential, no matter how remote, for escalation with other nations. Russian forces are postured, contingencies are pre-prepared, and as a war unfolds, the Russians are prepared at day one of the conflict for the range of possible ways the war could evolve, including nuclear options.<sup>4</sup>

This Russian approach is fundamental to controlling the operational and strategic levels of conflict and maintaining dominance over escalation options at higher levels—even as the ambiguous campaign is launched and waged. *Russian hybrid warfare is informed by Western military experience, but it is a very different approach to hybrid warfare. Most importantly, it is based on different national capabilities and conditions—and is a strategically unique approach that can be described as homeland hybrid strategic offense.*

Russian military thought is continuously evolving, and has evolved even from the theory and practice of two years ago in Ukraine. In his March 2016 article, Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov, further clarified Russia's understanding of hybrid warfare, now seeing it as being composed of one or several strategic operations that actually encompass the full spectrum of means and weapons available from information warfare to space-based weapons.<sup>5</sup> As such, homeland hybrid strategic offense by Russia would combine the most powerful means of ambiguous warfare and Russia's conventional and nuclear forces. Homeland hybrid strategic offense also implies the redefinition of geographic theaters of military operation or strategic directions to be ground-air-space theaters of military action, requiring coordinated action and dominance across all domains in a campaign. In this all-domain Russian concept, conventional and nuclear forces in a hybrid strategic offense may move to higher levels of readiness, shift their posture on an operational or even strategic scale, or commence deployments from the outset of the conflict—both within Russia proper, and by forces located outside Russia's borders.

Russian strategic planners pride themselves on multi-variant military planning at the operational and strategic level. It cannot be assumed that the roll out of ambiguous, conventional, and nuclear capabilities in an incremental, sequential, or phased way as observed in Ukraine is the sole approach for the future. Nor can it be assumed that Russia's hybrid campaign against Ukraine serves as an inalterable template for a potential campaign against NATO nations. Most certainly multiple models and variants for homeland hybrid strategic offense are being examined by the Russian General Staff and associated institutes—models that reflect General Gerasimov's characterization of modern hybrid war. This Russian concept of hybrid warfare, and its continuing evolution, is a modern example of strategic uniqueness in Russia's culture producing an asymmetric approach to war that diverges from Western concepts and practice.

# Strategic Vulnerability and Expecting Surprise:

## Strategic Command and Control and Mobility for Counter-Surprise

The second fundamental assumption in Russia's strategic culture centers on perceived geo-strategic and technological vulnerability that feeds an uncertainty about Russia being truly defensible. As such, there is a striking duality in Russian strategic culture about war with seeking strategic advantage and exploiting political and military opportunity coexisting alongside perceptions of strategic vulnerability and fears for surprise. In this context of duality, Russia's strategic uniqueness motivates the military to seek opportunistic employment of the armed forces with an overly strong sense of superiority and decisive purpose. Simultaneously, the military strategist holds a view that Russia is strategically vulnerable, susceptible to surprise, and not completely defensible, at least in a traditional Western understanding of a defensive approach.

As a land based power conducting military operations on or adjacent to its territory, it is unquestioned by the Russian military that they will need to attack and defend simultaneously, punching offensively and blocking defensively at the tactical, operational, or even strategic levels. Accordingly, the strategic offense requires defensive actions and an effective strategic defense depends on offensive actions. Moreover, it is commonly understood in Russian strategic thought that any distinction between offensive and defensive capabilities in general has been further blurred by the lethality, range, and readiness of modern weapon systems. In their view, because wars with neighbors and even wars with countries at greater distances can involve other nations or other Alliances, Russian strategic planners must look at the totality of

potential actors and plan for the appropriate defensive actions to protect offensive moves, as well as the appropriate offensive actions to protect defensive moves—at various levels and at various distances from Russian territory.

Despite Russia's long-held priority attached to surprising her opponents, the Russian military expect to be surprised at all levels. Perceptions of their vulnerability to surprise in Russian strategic culture drive approaches to war designed to minimize Russia's vulnerability to anticipated surprise by maximizing the counter-surprise power of Russian military actions. In particular, strategic command and control, strategic mobility, and military shock operations in anticipation of surprise are characteristic of offensive types of actions, and are also critical to mitigating their perception of strategic vulnerability.

The well-known, traditional Russian focus on preemption, escalation dominance, surprise (suddenness and deception), shock, strike power, and speed of action are classic features of Russian military operations. These features contribute to gaining strategic advantage. They are also seen as measures needed to counter perceived strategic vulnerability at the outset, during, and at the end of a military conflict. As a result, the Russian military thinks, plans, and acts more preemptively than many in the West would believe, focusing on the moves and next moves of an opponent and decisively disrupting those moves with preemptive action. In their view, there is no contradiction between this preemptive interpretation of 'countering anticipated surprise with surprise' and being defensive. The entirety of the armed forces and its supporting military system are poised for quick, early action in a crisis, conflict, or war to preempt their opponent's ability to surprise them on multiple levels and in multiple ways.

## Strategic Command and Control and Mobility

Strategic command and control (C2) is fundamental to the aim of preempting anticipated surprise. Russian strategic command and control is characterized by the breadth of interaction between ministries in Moscow and throughout the country, a single point of command over a crisis and war, and strategic direction of a war management process for the country as a whole. The single most important requirement for this system is speed in decision-making, designed to mitigate the strategic effects of inevitable surprise by operating at speeds and on scales opponents cannot match. For the Russian military, strategic command and control can effectively execute counter-surprise moves through varying types of operations to seize the initiative or reverse the impact achieved by an opponent's surprise actions.

Russia has established a modern command and control center for the armed forces and other governmental organizations in Moscow. This strategic command and control center is a modern day descendent of the Stavka practice from World War II. Russian General Staff exercises are managed by this organization in peacetime, and the armed forces would be commanded and controlled through this organization in crisis and war. General Gerasimov stated that the purpose of this new center is to accelerate the speed of decision-making, consolidate command and control of forces, and harmonize nation-wide actions with other ministries strategically and effectively.<sup>6</sup> The strategic C2 center is the mechanism for exercising President Putin's and the Russian General Staff's consolidated political and military control over the country. For example, Russia's September 2016 'Caucasus' exercise was a strategic command staff exercise for the country, its armed forces, ministries, and organizations, even including representatives from Russia's Central Bank.<sup>7</sup>

This strategic command and control center under Putin and the military, with operational-strategic command centers for each military district constitutes a nation-wide instrument for assessing potential regional conflict and prosecuting war on a strategic level.<sup>8</sup>

Strategic mobility is also fundamental to offsetting perceived vulnerabilities, disadvantages, and surprise by an opponent. In practice, the Russian military cannot be deployed continuously around its almost 60000 kilometer-long border. Strategic mobility and speed of movement are fundamental for the Russian military to reach critical areas around the country and move forces between strategic directions faster than an opponent. At the same time, strategic mobility is inherently applicable to strategic offensive warfare as was the case for the Soviet Army that envisioned movements from within the USSR to Western Europe as part of strategic offensive operations.

In 2014 and 2015 respectively, Russian military exercises moved ground forces East and West and North and South at significant distances.<sup>9</sup> For example, some Russian forces in Vostok 2014 moved over 12,000 kilometers. In many exercises, air forces, airborne forces, strategic aviation, naval, military transport aviation, and ground forces deployed or redeployed to unplanned training areas, regrouped, and executed operations simultaneously in many of these exercises. The Russian General Staff has also exercised differing tasks and missions for various strategic directions in the same strategic command staff exercise, placing enormous emphasis on nation-wide strategic mobility, a prerequisite for strategic and operational flexibility in the employment of armed forces.



## Exercising Strategic and Operational Flexibility

While decisive advantage is always sought by the Russian military, perceived vulnerabilities about where and how a war might begin or escalate on Russia's periphery also drive the priority for strong, durable command and control over strategically mobile forces prepared and poised for strategic and operational-level counter-surprise. It is common in the West to look at a potential Russian military action as a deliberate, pre-decided action with a preconceived set of strategic military objectives that will support a set of pre-determined political objectives. This was certainly the case in the Cold War with Soviet and NATO forces lined up on either side of a potential line of contact. In the Cold War model, Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces operated with a single understanding of war—one that would begin on the Western strategic direction and its course would determine the outcome of war.

More recent Russian writings and exercises suggest that the modern Russian approach is very flexible, examining multiple variants for war, where war could begin, and how war might evolve. From Moscow's perspective, Russia's periphery is unstable and unpredictable with multiple actors, all perceived as being capable of triggering actions in a specific region that could expand to encompass multiple nations and regions. In their view, future war could begin in the Arctic, Baltic, or Black Seas, or with a specific country like Turkey or Ukraine for example.<sup>10</sup> Russia's own destabilization campaign against the European security system has not made the General Staff's task of forecasting where and how a future war could start any easier. The destabilization of Europe and the ongoing transition in the global security system have made it even more difficult to construct a single scripted scenario for war with forces structured and deployed accordingly.

At the same time, there are too few Russian forces and too few rubles to replicate the entirety of the Soviet military's approach with extensive force deployments around the country. The modern Russian approach is far more flexible, more multi-variant than its Soviet predecessor. It is also far more difficult for the West to discern.

Russia's exercises and writings reflect this flexible, multi-variant approach with strategic C2 and mobility key to the posturing of forces for counter-surprise. A nation-wide command staff exercise in 2015 depicted a crisis in the north, triggering a nation-wide activation of the armed forces as a whole, including combat operations in the Baltic and Black Seas. Each strategic direction had a very different military situation, with correspondingly different Russian tasks and aims.<sup>11</sup> In this strategic command exercise, the Russian military tailored campaigns on different strategic directions that were not scripted, but reportedly responded to situations on an hourly basis. A range of tasks were executed including the strategic regrouping of Russian forces after deployments, bastion defense of Russian strategic nuclear submarines in the Barents Sea, the defense of Kaliningrad, the control of the Black Sea and targeting of 'enemy' ships at its western entrance, multi-theater force management with vertical and geographical escalation, varying tasks by each theater as well as the integration of tasks and forces in each strategic direction, and the exercising of a newly established HQ in the north. This exercise vividly illustrates the priority the Russians attach to strategic C2 and mobility required for flexible, multi-variant approaches to war.

The Russians are also using their exercises as rehearsal exercises for regional contingencies, maintaining the traditional practice of rotating exercises among their distinct geographical regions on an annual basis. Russia's February 2016 exercise of the Central

and Southern Military Districts suggests that Russia also exercises and rehearses new contingencies related to specific events. This exercise in the southwestern strategic direction involved the generation of combat capabilities from two military districts and the Black Sea Fleet.<sup>12</sup> Conducted a few short months following the shoot down of the Russian Su-31 and during heightened tensions with the Turkish government, the exercise suggests the Russian General Staff was focusing on a contingency originating to her southwest and one that would involve large-scale military operations, large air operations by an opponent, and counter-air space operations by the Russians. This is an example of how the Russian military repackages strategic, operational, and tactical capabilities to align with multiple possibilities for how potential conflict could arise.

The Russian military also use large-scale exercises to rehearse operations. This was confirmed last fall when the Russian military disclosed that CENTER 2015, the largest exercise of the year, was actually a rehearsal for their future operations in Syria, notably even including the now well-documented Kalibr missile strikes from the Caspian Flotilla.<sup>13</sup> This is a common feature of the Russian military system, a system built on military districts and strategic directions. As Russia has few bases and commands outside her borders that would mirror a US-type approach of forward-based geographical commands, Russia's military leadership uses their highest strategic and regional commands to look at strategic directions from the interior of Russia to greater distances beyond their borders. This 'beyond the borders' framework for Russian strategic planners is the result of Russia's global interests, a military formula of looking at the totality of Russia's periphery to assess her security, and a military approach that attaches as much strategic importance to an opponent's capabilities at operational and strategic depths as capabilities at tactical depths. For example, the southwest strategic direction reaches the entire Black Sea region, Syria, and the broader Middle

East.<sup>14</sup> Russia's firing of Kalibr missiles from the Caspian Flotilla to Syria in the fall of 2015 is an example of Russian capabilities from the interior of Russia being employed at great distances inside an established strategic direction, and well beyond Russia's borders. The Kalibr missile firing also reflects the flexible approach the Russian military has adopted—an approach that reaches back to the homeland for a broad array of military capabilities to achieve desired effects with the use of force. This flexible, hard to predict employment of a diverse set of homeland-based capabilities that can impact multiple theaters at great distances is a modern day demonstration of the Russian approach to 'counter-surprise' and shock.

In many ways, this approach to war reflects the much-changed strategic conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the capabilities of modern weapon systems, and the limits of post-Soviet Russia. In this very different environment today, the Russian military seeks to create flexible strategic options and operational constructs that can be employed in all strategic directions, all preserving Moscow's control of the strategic initiative over an external opponent and internal opposition. Externally, Moscow seeks to control the strategic initiative through escalation dominance options over an opponent. Internally, Moscow seeks to control political and social forces at home. Moscow's aims and decisions in crisis and war are driven by these two security calculations—and their potential interaction.

## Threat Perceptions — External and Internal

There is often Western debate about Russia's threat assessments. Are they real or just narrative to justify their own actions? While the use of the Western threat does indeed mask Russian actions or attempt to legitimize them, there is all too often a tendency to dismiss Russian assessments of the threat as *only* being a narrative. This is a narrow perspective as now understood through revelations about how the Russians had actually developed plans to act on the threat perceptions of the Cold War that many had dismissed.<sup>15</sup> From the tactical to the strategic level, the Russian military are convinced by their institutional intelligence and security assessments and think, plan, and act in accordance with their threat perceptions.

This Russian approach to acting on threat perceptions in no way contradicts or undercuts the Russian practice of exaggerating the threat to achieve political aims, both external and internal. Russian narratives on the threat can be established to legitimize political aims or for deception purposes. The advantage of attaining narrative dominance in information warfare and dominance in the posturing of forces and military actions in crisis coexist—and both support Moscow's grander aims.

However, threat assessments are reflected in the structure and behavior of the Russian Armed Forces. The Russian General Staff builds and calibrates its military strategy against their assessment of the speed, lethality, mobility, and destructiveness of their opponent's ambiguous, conventional, and nuclear arsenal. As a matter of practice, Russian assessments of their opponents' military capabilities are interpreted through their own culture of thought, and project how the Russian military would prosecute war against Russia if they possessed these Western

capabilities. In this sense, Gerasimov's March 2016 article is an inaccurate characterization of Western doctrine and strategy, but simultaneously a clear description of how Russia's military leaders would conduct these operations with Western capabilities. However, this form of Russian mirror imaging sometimes leads Western observers to dismiss Russian assessments because they inaccurately represent Western military policy and strategy.

Russian assessments of technological inferiority reinforce perceptions of strategic vulnerability in traditional Russian culture, impacting on Russian approaches to war. Technological vulnerability is seen first and foremost as the inability to match the West's revolutionary leaps in technological innovation and rapidly transition the economic base for weapons system development. In their culture, Russia's approaches to war require a different approach, a unique compensatory approach against this perceived Western advantage.

General Gerasimov has written about Russia's vulnerability to strategic surprise, most recently describing what he sees as potent Western capabilities, particularly in the U.S, that are grouped together in what he called "The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Blitzkrieg".<sup>16</sup> Gerasimov describes the West's "plan" for lightning fast, global, long range strikes, the application of weapons of new physical principles, cyber, and more traditional means of ambiguous warfare—all united to achieve a decisive strategic result in a war's initial period. His characterization of modern warfare suggests the Russians are not convinced that a future war will be preceded by a long mobilization period. In his view, modern conventional and nuclear weaponry simply do not require mobilization to generate the requisite firepower to achieve objectives, and the West has the potential not only to surprise, but to achieve strategic surprise.

Some Western analysis suggests the Russians perceive the West and Russia as already being in a period of mobilization, at least the early stages of intensified, narrow mobilization with the employment of ambiguous means of warfare.<sup>17</sup> General Gerasimov's article clearly indicates the Russian military believes that an ambiguous war with the West for decisive political aims could escalate into a broader war involving conventional and nuclear means. This assessment of how surprise could be achieved by one of Russia's competitors in the current environment contributes to the rationale behind Russia's practice of "sudden checks of combat readiness exercises" or so-called snap exercises for their conventional and nuclear forces. These exercises assess combat readiness and reflect their perception of the demands of modern warfare.

The modern Russian approach to war also has integrated internal threat perceptions. There is a long-standing appreciation for revolution in Russia. The Russians know how to export political instability, and they know its impact on their power at home when it is imported. Their thinking about political change and revolution is a common, dominant, if not constant, feature in their mentality and worldview. This can be difficult for the Western mindset to grasp in principle given the relative stability most North American and European liberal democracies have experienced since the end of the Cold War. There is also a long-standing Russian view that political instability at home will be accompanied by foreign military intervention or exploitation. The experience from the Russian Civil War is commonly cited as an example of Western interference and military intervention concurrent with internal strife.

In the modern context, Russia's military sees color revolutions in the former Soviet space as one model of internal interference with strategic consequence that the Russian military must

integrate into their thinking about war. In the Russian view, what happened in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, is the direct application of military force to produce political change. The Russians assert that this model combined with the employment of advanced weapons could have a similar impact on Russia.

Russia has merged internal and external threats into one framework. Russia's military doctrine formalized this connection of internal and external threats, and the Russians have acted upon this doctrine over the past two years.<sup>18</sup> With this merger, Russian military actions externally can be driven as much by internal political threat perceptions as external military perceptions. In this regard, Russia's Internal Troops and Armed Forces have a long history of overlapping roles. More recently, the week after the completion of their nation-wide strategic command staff exercise in 2015, Russia's Internal Troops conducted a nation-wide "anti-Maidan" type exercise.<sup>19</sup> Given a centralized national command and control system for the Ministry of Defense and other security institutions, it is not difficult to envision a link between these two exercises.

This Russian merger of internal and external security in practical terms is more than a linkage. Russia's new national guard is designed to protect President Putin's power and further strengthen the overlap between the military and the country's internal security. However, General Staff external threat assessments can feed Moscow's internal threat assessments, and vice versa, and can produce extremely distorted views of political and military reality. This merger of assessments can lead the Russian military and political leadership linking events and actions in a way that Western observers may not be able to anticipate or fully understand.



Perceived vulnerability is a driver of Russian military thinking and decision-making, and the Russian military understands their own vulnerability when they are on the offensive, ambitiously pursuing strategic aims as they are now doing with their effort to reformat the European security system. President Putin's destabilization campaign essentially is punching, literally and figuratively, at the European and global system in multiple domains of power and influence. In this regard, the Russians suspect the West will not let the regional and global system go easily.<sup>20</sup>

Paradoxically, as noted above, President Putin's destabilization campaign of the European security system stresses Russian military capabilities and increases Russian General Staff perceptions of vulnerability, destabilizing as well the Russian military view of their own security and how it could be challenged. Consequently, the Russian military cannot discount worse case scenarios—from their perspective—for how the West could react with military forces to stop Russia's destabilization campaign. As a result, just as the Soviet Army defended the gains of socialism, the Russian army now sees itself as defending Russia's ambitious system change agenda from potential actions that could be taken by those nations intent on preserving the current security system.

Their emerging national strategy reflects the coexistence of strategic uniqueness and strategic vulnerability in their military thought, and their merger into one strategic approach to security and defense of the Russian state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This emerging approach appears to be designed to allow Russia to pursue ambitious political aims against the system around Russia, use the military for strategic effect in support of these aims, protect Russia's leadership from internal color revolutions, and simultaneously protect Russia during an unpredictable, transitional period in global security.

# Going to War with All of Russia:

## Strategic Operations, Extended Forward Perimeters, and Potential Impact on Nuclear Deterrence Approaches

The third pillar of Russian strategic culture is one that is central to their thinking on deterrence; namely, if you go to war with Russia—even on a local or regional scale—you go to war with all of Russia. Russian strategic culture holds that opponents will only be deterred and defeated by nation-wide, force-wide, integrated strategies united through *strategic operations*. No other country in the world accords the priority to thinking and preparing for war holistically at the strategic-level as do the Russians

‘Going to war with all of Russia’ drives the demand for swift force movement across and between regions, speed of decision, concentrating massive fires and forces, and posturing nuclear forces simultaneously throughout the country. In their view, any other approach risks ceding the strategic initiative to an opponent at the outset of war, and perhaps leading to operational-strategic decapitation of command and control, breakdowns in the offensive or defensive campaign, and attrition of Russian nuclear potential that unfavorably shifts the strategic nuclear balance. All of these outcomes could present to the Russian strategic planner the need to wage war against an opponent on Russian territory. For the Russians, this outcome constitutes failure and must be avoided at all costs.

## Nation-wide Strategy and Strategic Operations

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century application of this principle, ‘all of Russia’ means all of Russia’s forces irrespective of their peacetime geographic dispositions. It also means all of Russia’s weaponized ambiguous, non-attributable means of warfare, her conventional weapons across all services, and her nuclear arsenal—tactical, operational, and strategic. Russia’s strategic approach to deterrence and waging war are based on this principle.

This pillar of strategic thought drives military preparations across the entire spectrum of conflict for any contingency near Russia’s borders or beyond. All Russian military actions in a single region are supported by a national military strategy and nation-wide effort from the outset of a crisis and conflict. While some Western strategists may look at a local conflict in isolation and see its potential for widening over time—Russian military thought does not take the same approach. The Russian military must look at the entirety of Russia’s ground, air, maritime, cyber, and space situation and orchestrate forces on a nation-wide basis using forces deployed throughout the country, acting in the strategic direction or theater in which they are based, or deploying to other strategic directions in support of other Russian forces.

The recently concluded strategic command staff exercise “Caucasus 2016” is one example of a nation-wide strategic framework being applied to one of Russia’s key strategic directions. While the official field training dimension of this exercise in the Southern Military District involved 12,500 personnel, the strategic command staff exercise, directed by Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov, was a nation-wide activity and involved over 120,000 personnel from Russia’s military, other ministries, and organizations.<sup>21</sup> Russia exercised twelve other

preparatory exercises, including Central and Western Military Districts, other forces from throughout the country, activated civilian reservists in Russia, and conducted territorial defense actions in Crimea.<sup>22</sup>

The Caucasus 2016 exercise culminated the 2016 training year for the Russian military and appears to have involved forces from every branch and special service, as well as a range of tactical and strategic actions. According to General Gerasimov, the exercise involved “all” types of operations and focused on the creation of integrated force groupings to conduct a variety of tasks, including air defense, space defense, and Kalibr missile strike planning from the Caspian Sea. Ground maneuvers and training was conducted at 14 different combined arms training centers in Russia.<sup>23</sup> The importance of the exercise was demonstrated by President Putin’s visit to Crimea and the conduct of a National Security Council meeting. Minister of Defense Shoigu visited Crimea during the exercise, and had earlier stated the exercise would focus on how forces in other military districts would support the Southern military district in wartime.<sup>24</sup> The same day the exercise concluded, Russia conducted a test launch of its strategic intercontinental ballistic missile Topol-M and conducted concurrent training of its Strategic Rocket Forces during the Caucasus exercise.<sup>25</sup> This strategic command exercise is a modern example of this critical pillar of Russian strategic culture—going to war with Russia means going to war with all of Russia.

In accordance with this traditional pillar of strategic thought, Russia’s General Staff also appears to have concluded that the best way to manage their ‘going to war with all of Russia’ principle in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is through a nation-wide strategy for multiple strategic directions based on a strategic framework anchored around four regions—the Arctic, Baltic, Black Seas, and the East. The three European regions of this strategic framework are very

different, but connected to one another to make up a nation-wide framework for managing strategic military operations. While similar weaponry may be deployed to these regions or designated within Russia to support these regions, the Baltic, Black, and Arctic regions are set on top of three very different geographic, political, and military regions and will execute tasks tailored to these unique regions. In this ‘all of Russia’ approach, Moscow’s decisions in crisis and war would be based on how the conflict impacts all of Russia, not one region, and Moscow would bring to bear all of Russia’s military capabilities—not only those deployed forward, where, and when necessary to sustain the strategic operations designed to support the political leadership’s intent.

While this nation-wide approach is commonly referred to in the West as “A2AD” (Anti-Access, Area Denial), this term is not used in the Russian military. In Russia’s approach, A2AD is only a part of a single Russian strategic operation or several strategic operations. Consequently, Russia would not conduct an “A2AD operation”, but Russia would conduct a strategic operation or strategic operations that have A2AD actions, along with cyber, informational warfare, offensive action with air, land, maritime, and conventional missiles—while all the time simultaneously posturing and readying other conventional forces and nuclear forces for employment when necessary. These strategic operations would be designed to achieve several objectives simultaneously, giving the Russian leadership maximum options, maximum opportunity, minimizing their vulnerability, and simultaneously limiting the options of an opponent. These aims go well beyond the purpose of establishing a defensive buffer zone for Russia to replace the buffer played by the Warsaw Pact in the Soviet period. In essence, the core purpose of Russian strategic operations involving A2AD capabilities is actually best described as *Strategic Area Control—Opponent Options Denial*.

The “war with all of Russia” pillar in their strategic culture can be seen in two types of Russian strategic operations. The Russian Strategic Air-Space Operation(s) is probably at the center of Russia’s emerging nation-wide strategy.<sup>26</sup> According to Russian military literature, this operation involves air and space forces acting in coordination with other branches and services of the Armed Forces, including ground forces and nuclear forces, in accordance with a single plan and intent on one or several strategic directions. The objectives in this strategic operation are diverse, including stalling (repulsing) air-space attack by the enemy, achieving air superiority in the strategic zone, inflicting destruction on air and ground based elements, breaking the enemy’s governmental and military command and control system, delaying enemy strategic and operational deployments, interdicting the enemy’s inter-theater deployments, and decreasing the enemy’s economic and military potential. This Russian strategic operation would also envision the concurrent protection of their key governmental and military strategic. This is a large-scale operation, involving a mix of offensive and defensive actions, to achieve a single objective in a particular strategic direction.

Another type of operation described in a 2014 Russian article as “the strategic operation for the destruction of important targets of the enemy” integrates air-space defense operations with offensive air and missile strike operations in a single or multiple strategic directions.<sup>27</sup> According to the author, this Russian operation could be conducted in anticipation of an attack by an opponent’s air and space forces, and is designed to destroy targets in their opponent’s depth to weaken and disrupt the planned enemy air assault. Offensive (preemptive counter-offensive) actions in this strategic operation are seen as strengthening the Russian defense and protecting Russia’s own key strategic facilities and forces. This strategic operation involves multiple scales of military actions—operations, combat actions, battles, and strikes.

In Russian military strategic culture, this type of strategic operation is considered ‘defensive’ even if it is executed preemptively and involves offensive strikes. These operations differ fundamentally from European approaches to defense, crisis management, and war avoidance. These Russian operations also put President Putin’s comments on targeting NATO BMD into a different context, one with strategic military significance along with obvious strategic communications purposes. Russian military thought continuously evolves and contemporary Russian military literature indicates that Russia is still experimenting with the right mix of forces and objectives in their development of modern strategic operations—work that could produce other variants and models in the future.

## **Strategic Operations and Complex 21<sup>st</sup> Century Environments**

Russian strategic culture dictates that strategic operations must be executed across ground-air-space domains, at tactical-operational-strategic scales, and with ambiguous-conventional-nuclear means is a complicating factor for Europe’s security, but fundamental to Russia’s security. These traditionally preemptive ‘surprise to counter anticipated surprise’ operations now overlay tactical, operational, and strategic environments around Russia that are perceived to be extremely complex. Perceptions of encirclement and counter-encirclement coexist with a view that Russian and Western forces are capable of operating in the operational and strategic rear areas of each other from the outset of a crisis or conflict. This Russian perception certainly gives further meaning to their thinking about non-linear warfare, and has implications for the depth and complexity of Russia’s strategic operations in their emerging national strategy. In these kinds of operations, Russian strategic thought would

not solely focus on the correlation of forces along Russia's border with neighbors, but examine the tactical, operational, and strategic correlation of forces in the theater and in other theaters. Consequently, Russian strategic operations are strategic, not tactical. By their very nature and method of construction, these operations are preemptive, offensive, and defensive.

Russian strategic thought will have certainly embraced multiple models and developed multiple approaches for strategic operations in the three regions, going beyond limited objectives to secure air and maritime lines of communication. This was exemplified in the strategic exercise conducted in March of 2015.<sup>28</sup> In the Baltic Sea, for example, Russia's A2AD operational construct in the Kaliningrad region could extend a Russian perimeter well beyond Kaliningrad's borders. These extended forward lines could be sustained by defensive and offensive weapon systems present in the forward area, reinforced with other offensive and defensive capabilities generated from within Russia to strengthen and deepen forward-based A2AD capabilities.

In this context, Russia's extended forward lines may align with Russia's longer-range strike capabilities. As a result, Russian strategic operations in the Western strategic direction or other strategic directions could be designed to hold at risk Alliance strategic capabilities like Ballistic Missile Defense sites, air fields, logistic centers, command and control centers. Paradoxically, this extended Russian perimeter simultaneously could place the Baltic States in the operational rear of Russia's strategic operations, highlighting the complexity of the strategic European military environment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Despite this complexity, Russia's modern strategic operations and diverse military capabilities can create strategic and operational level options in crisis and war. In the Russian view, the actions



required for a durable strategic defense in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are the very same actions required for a preemptive offensive (counter-offensive). Russia's regional A2AD capabilities, strategic operations, and nation-wide management of peace, crisis, and conflict are a clear demonstration of the duality of Russian strategic thought and the priority of maintaining multiple options and seizing the strategic initiative in peace as well as during the crisis management and conflict periods with densely overlapping tactical, operational, and strategic-level environments.

## **Escalation Dominance, Regional Domes, and Potential Impact on Approaches to Deterrence**

A2AD capabilities and Russia's strategic operations potentially impact Russia's 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to war avoidance and deterrence as well. In the context of traditional Russian strategic culture, A2AD extended perimeters could delineate clear lines for a Russian strategic planner and political decision-maker in a complex, and possibly blurred operational and strategic situation. The integrity or non-integrity of these extended zones could represent decision points for how Moscow might manage a crisis and war, its escalation or termination.

While the tactical dimension of Russia's thinking about modern war remains vitally important, the strategic level in Russia's thinking plays a fundamental part as well and indeed frames the tactical, ground dimension where Russia perceives it holds advantage along its borders. General Gerasimov's March 2016 article made it clear that Russia's military operations indeed foresee a strategic dimension to future war at its very outset. His article reflects a consistent theme in Russian strategic

thought where strategic stability requires a balance in strategic air, land, and maritime nuclear forces—and a balance of risk posed by long-range high precision strike systems and missile defense capabilities to these strategic nuclear capabilities. This modernized formula for strategic stability appears to differ from its Cold War predecessor and could be central to understanding Russian thinking on managing a crisis, avoiding war, and waging it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their formula for strategic stability and deterrence is framed by a long-standing, unique Russian approach to managing the contradiction in Russian military thinking between avoiding war and preparing for short wars.

Avoiding war and preparing for short wars indeed has co-existed in Soviet and Russian thinking for decades. Soviet military strategists long held that any future war with the West would be extremely difficult to keep from transitioning to a strategic nuclear exchange. Therefore, avoiding nuclear war was essential. At the same time, Soviet military planners held that the West's superior economic and technological base would not make a long war one Russia would seek. Consequently, Russian military thought defaulted to thinking that emphasized short conventional wars, backed with nuclear escalation options, to seize the initiative to undercut Western strategic advantage.

In a potential modern application of this unique military strategic culture, Russia's strategic operations with operational-strategic scale A2AD capabilities could emerge as Moscow's approach to modern deterrence, linking the tactical to the strategic levels, and connecting the four major regions of Russia. In this Russian culture-driven logic to crisis and war, the establishment of a strategic shield for all of Russia, composed of offensive and defensive actions nested inside operational-strategic scale A2AD capabilities, could be intended to wage war as well as stop a future crisis short of war on Russia's terms by denying viable options to their opponents at the outset of a crisis.

In this approach, Russia's *escalation dominance* practice in the crisis period, a practice designed to maintain Russia's escalatory advantage over an opponent at tactical, operational, and strategic depths and levels, would play a critical role. This modern approach would attempt to turn a weak strategic hand into a strong operational-tactical hand, to dissuade movement to war or control and dictate the movement of crisis to war on Russian terms. The evolution of Russia's strategies in this direction would hold serious consequences for Europe's future stability, and would represent clear differences between the West and Russia on how crises are managed and how wars are avoided.

Moscow's traditional emphasis on strategic operations reflects an approach that can integrate ambiguous warfare or not, but one that clearly demonstrates the principle of what going to war with "all of Russia" means in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This fundamental element of Russia's strategic culture—going to war with all of Russia—intentionally produces an unambiguous military posture in a crisis period, designed to communicate the unambiguous consequences of crossing Russia's decision lines in a crisis or war. In the context of traditional Russian strategic culture, this Russian approach built upon strategic operations and nation-wide strategy is not mobilizing to demobilize, but attaches priority to the accumulation of combat power from all services and from all parts of the Russian Federation to achieve the decisive conventional advantage needed at a specific point in time and in a specific region. In the context of Russia's unique strategic culture, it would put more emphasis on escalation than deescalation to terminate a crisis or wage war on terms advantageous to Russia. The application of this traditional pillar of Russian strategic culture to a complex 21<sup>st</sup> century environment gives Moscow flexible, strategic and operational scale options for crisis, conflict, and deterrence. It also has a risk-taking character in it, one that aligns actions rooted in opportunism with actions to counter anticipated surprise with surprise in the conduct of strategic operations.

# Decisiveness of the Initial Period of War:

## Setting Russia's Military Posture and Rhythm For Future War in Peacetime

The fourth fundamental assumption of Russian strategic military culture is its fixation on the decisiveness of a future war's initial period of war and how it impacts the overall outcome of war. How the Russians think about conflict and war and how they organize themselves in peacetime is set by their strategic assessments of the initial period of a future war. Therefore, the characteristics of the initial period—the geostrategic political situation in a region, military technical capabilities of weapons likely to be employed, and political and military aims of potential opponents—determine how the Russian military postures itself in peacetime, how operational art and tactics are developed, and how forces are orchestrated to achieve military and political objectives in this future war. None of these key elements of Russia's military approach to war are possible without securing control of the strategic initiative in peacetime, in crisis, and in war. In its most basic form, seizing the strategic initiative is achieved through surprise (counter-surprise), suddenness, deception, superiority in military force and firepower, and decisiveness of decision and action.

Recent Russian General Staff writings describe a potential future war with the West as one characterized by lightning fast, hybrid blitzkrieg actions.<sup>29</sup> The Russian military holds that the West, the US specifically, has the ability to employ modern means and weapons to achieve decisive strategic political and military results in a very short period of time with minimum preparations. The Russians military and President Putin himself, have described this

form of future war, the weapons involved, and their impact on Russia for years.<sup>30</sup>

The destruction experienced by the Soviet Union and its military in the Great Patriotic War led to a fundamental tenet to never fight another war on Russian territory. Simply put, future wars waged by Russia are wars that will be waged on the territory of another state. The Soviet model for forward deployed Groups of Soviet forces in Eastern Europe's was one model for attaining this aim.

However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Russians understand that buffer zones will not protect Russia from the modern means of non-attributable warfare that erase lines on the battlefield. The Russians also know that advanced high-technology conventional weapons have the effectiveness of small yield nuclear weapons on the battlefield, and the long-range air, maritime, and ground variants of these weapons can mass fires faster than land forces may mass forces. The blurring of offense and defense, conventional and nuclear weapon effects on the battlefield, tactical and strategic levels, and forward areas and rear areas is dominant in Russian thinking about war without lines, or non-linear warfare. In effect, the Russians believe modern weapons allow forces to move and act at the *speed of light*. Cyber, new weapons built on new physical principles, combined with advanced, long-range high precision weapons and, advanced ground, air, and space-based C4I allow for seizing the strategic initiative and controlling a war's initial period.

In their view, Russia currently cannot match the West with these same advanced technologies and weapons. However, the requirement to move and strike quickly to not surrender the strategic initiative remains imperative. At the same time, the Russians hold the view that the initial period of future war has heightened the requirement for Russian conventional and nuclear

force readiness, decreasing dependence on full mobilization as a prerequisite for readying its armed forces for war. Even Russia's June 2016 nation-wide mobilization exercise operated on timelines for reserve mobilization in hours and days, not weeks and months.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the readiness of the Armed Forces to act strategically, and act with speed, is central to Russia's approach to war.

Sudden or 'snap' exercises of conventional and nuclear forces are Russia's asymmetric move for lightning quick movement of Moscow's main strike capabilities. While conventional and nuclear forces cannot move at the speed of light, they can have a decisive impact on seizing, reseizing, and securing the strategic initiative in a war's initial period. The speed and scale of this Russian action, and the asymmetry involved in its execution is by design. These exercises began in 2013, pre-dating the Russia's Crimean campaign and raise conventional and nuclear forces to full combat readiness—a readiness level for war—in 24-48 hours. These sudden checks of combat readiness are connected directly to Russia's view of the character of future war and the need to seize or re-seize the strategic initiative in its initial period. In this regard, Russian snap exercises in 2015 and 2016 are good examples of Russia's emphasizing conventional and nuclear force readiness in line with their assessment of the initial period of future war, as General Gerasimov described in his March 2016 article.

Russian culture's fixation with the initial period of war sets the peacetime posture and exercise behavior of the Armed Forces. The initial period of war also places the other three pillars of Russian culture into a tactical, operational, and strategic context. Collectively, the cultural pillars of strategic uniqueness, vulnerability to strategic surprise, and going to war with all of Russia cross, connect, and unite in the initial period of war. In turn, the initial period sets the strategies and priority means the Russian military will use to wage war at the outset of conflict.

# Final Thoughts:

## Putinism and Russia's Military Strategic Culture

In the 1980s, Gorbachev's reforms wrestled control of the USSR's security policy formulations from the Soviet General Staff by intellectually challenging the pillars of their strategic thought, and corresponding requirements for war with the West. In the 1990s, President Yeltsin defunded, disempowered, and disenfranchised the Russian military—seeing it as a legacy threat from the Soviet era to his democratic course for Post-Soviet Russia. In the post-Cold War period, Western nations provided extensive opportunities to the Russian Ministry of Defense to learn and apply different models for building security and defense. These Western reform models were rejected.

Over those tumultuous and challenging years for the Russian military, the Russian General Staff never abandoned the most basic precepts of its traditional culture of strategic thought. Few military organizations can lose fundamental capabilities like personnel, weapons, infrastructure, defense economy, territory, political support, and political cohesion over more than a decade, yet retain their strategic organizational culture. This is testimony to the deeply rooted nature of the Russian military's traditional culture of strategic thought.

The West is witnessing a deliberate, strategic recoupling of the military to Russia's core geo-strategic interests and Putin's core political aims. This strategic recoupling represents a remilitarization of Russia's overall security policy, and the end of a post-Soviet process where Russia's leaders sought to rethink how security is built and achieved. President Putin is defining what constitutes security for Russia, and the Russian General Staff is

determining how it is achieved with military power—applying fundamental cultural pillars of Russian strategic thought to the current situation.

Traditional elements of Russian military culture also have reemerged in a modernizing military, supported by a revamped, purpose-driven military system, and fueled by Putin's worldview, aims, and priorities. In fact, Putin's worldview has set a new purpose and identity for the Russian military, one built on the emotion of humiliation from the end of the Soviet Union and Soviet Army and the perception of subsequent exploitation by the West to Russia's great disadvantage. The Russian military has embraced both the vanguard role in erasing these disadvantages, and setting the competition between Western and Russian visions of European security on advantageous terms and azimuths for Russia. This shift in identity and place in the Moscow power structure has coincided with Putin's ever increasing dependency on the military, as one of many instruments of power, to preserve his internal power and achieve his external policy aims. The Russian military, in turn, benefits from the restoration of its prestige and military power, and place in the Russian power system.

Over the past three years, Russian writings and exercises constitute a laboratory of experimentation in Russia's approach to modern warfare. This experimentation continues, informed further by the development of theory, execution of strategic exercises, and absorption of lessons learned from their military experiences notably in Ukraine and Syria. Moscow's military experimentation appears to center on building operational and strategic flexibility to create as many military options as possible for its security, while simultaneously denying its opponents the same flexibility. This is a fundamental requirement for a Russia that has perceived advantages and suffers disadvantages,



particularly in political, economic, and technological power at the strategic level. While strategic disadvantage may constrain Russia's strategic options in some ways, disadvantage in Russian strategic culture also demands that Moscow dictate decisively the strategic terms for how war is waged, where it is waged, and when. Moscow's modern strategic thought reflects intent to control this aspect of the strategic initiative from the strategic competition phase to crisis and conflict phases. In this way, Russia's diverse military approaches for war are based on the principle of Russia securing herself at the expense of the security of others, and the Russian military will think, plan, and act in accordance with their views of this defining principle.

Russia's strategy for hybrid homeland offensive warfare against neighbors requires the operational coupling of ambiguous means of warfare to Russia's conventional and nuclear arsenal for success, taking advantage of the vulnerability of neighboring states to large-scale Russian military actions while a non-attributable, ambiguous campaign is conducted. This military strategy reflects Russia's perceptions of its strategic uniqueness, and aligns with Putin's aims to dominate Russia's periphery, deter further Western security integration, and stop the strengthening of the European security system that in any way undercuts Russian interests.

Russia's emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century national military strategy for securing Russia in a period of global transition is a strategic analogue of the 'pressure and shield' tactics used by Moscow in Ukraine. Russia's nation-wide shield also has a sword, in the same way that defensive operations have offense, and offensive operations have defense in Russian strategic culture. Moscow's strategic approach to offensive actions—ambiguous or non-ambiguous—under the protective strategic shield of its conventional and nuclear power gives Putin options to pursue his grander strategy for security system change, options that

would not be available to Moscow if based solely on its strength and strategic competitiveness. The use of force to destabilize the existing security system without recklessly risking Russia's security is clearly one of those options.

Mirror imaging Western approaches and assumptions or relying on weapons capability-centric analysis alone, will not capture how Moscow sees future conflict and war. Russia's emerging thinking on major war is not the equivalent of NATO's Cold War strategy of forward defense and flexible response. Russian strategy is not defensive in the sense that it is designed to give away territory in the face of an adversaries' offensive with geographic lines in the country's interior serving as trip wires for conventional counter-attacks or nuclear escalation. This Western approach would trade territory for decision space in a crisis or war. Traditional Russian strategic culture would suggest that this is a trade the Russians will not accept.

Modern Russian military strategy under Putin is inherently both offensive and defensive in character, involving strategic operations that combine both offensive and defensive actions. These military operations would be conducted on a strategic scale across multiple strategic directions, with forward deployed forces operating in tandem with forces from Russia's interior—all managed centrally in Moscow by Putin and the General Staff. Moreover, the Russian approach is far more preemptive in character than reactive, driven by their conclusions about the character of 21<sup>st</sup> century capabilities, modern long-range conventional strike systems, and the need for tactical, operational, and strategic counter-surprise. Russia's traditional reservations about their ability to secure political aims in a long war actually makes counter-surprise all the more necessary for a non-competitive Russia to achieve her aims in war, especially in its initial period.

Consequently, there is a contradiction between the pillars underlying Russian strategic culture—strategic uniqueness, strategic vulnerability, going to war with all of Russia, and the decisiveness of the initial period of war—and the stated and implied political aims in its military doctrine to limit geography, restrict weapons used, and prevent escalation to large-scale war. The pillars of Russian strategic thought make it virtually impossible for a Russian strategic planner to be defensive, reactive, and use force in a restricted way, as would their Western counterparts in this modern era. The body of military academic work on more Western approaches to defense is missing in Russian writings because it is missing from their strategic culture. In fact, Russian military thought emphasizes exactly the opposite. Seizing the initiative, establishing perimeters that extend well beyond Russia's territory onto the territory of other nations, taking space to take away time to resolve a crisis, and posturing and readying to use all weapons in strategic operations is a destabilizing national military strategy.

Putin's worldview and political aims reinforce a Russian military approach to security that is fundamentally asymmetric to the West's approach. This unique, strategically asymmetric approach to security is a dominant factor in Europe's future stability. The asymmetry with the West goes beyond the realm of policy. Russia's peacetime military exercise regime does not align with Alliance exercise practice because modern Russian wartime military strategies break with the strategies of other European nations. Russia's emphasis on counter-surprise, the sudden movement of conventional and nuclear forces to war readiness, strategic command and control, mobilization, use of shock operations involving long-range maritime, ground, and air-based strike platforms, and posturing Russia's forces internally for strategic operations contrasts sharply with European practice. They also underscore a very different Russian approach to crisis management, conduct of war, and war termination.

While the goal of avoiding war in Russian thinking may be the same as the Western goal, the Russian approach to war avoidance may be very different. Traditional Russian strategic culture would hold that the Russian approach to war avoidance is based on decisive, dominant superiority in preparations and posturing of forces at the outset of a crisis for strategic operations—not necessarily their employment—to reduce the number of options for an opponent to wage war against Russia. At the same time, their threat perceptions and assessments of weapons and capabilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that can be employed with the speed of light or in lightning strikes may impact the speed of Russia's decisions in their unique approach to managing the crisis to war spectrum.

Moscow's strategic recoupling of its military to core geo-strategic interests also suggests the window has closed for now on internal Russian military reforms that would create tactical balance, strategic equilibrium, and symmetric approaches. Russia has altered security policies, changed military strategies, and is rearming in accordance with the most narrow of internal political objectives and extremely ambitious external security objectives. General Staff-led internal military reforms do not appear to be a likely catalyst for reducing or altering Russian military thinking, particularly in the midst of a multi-year military modernization program and destabilization campaign against the European security system.

Unfortunately, it also appears for the foreseeable future this closed window will be difficult to open with arms control initiatives. In the late 1980s, mutual arms reductions, mutual reductions in defense spending, geographic separation of NATO and Russian forces, and the willingness to change security and defense postures were the main elements that led to military security at reasonable, but much lower levels. These 20<sup>th</sup> century arms

reduction tools do not appear to be tailored to diffusing Russia's new round of strategic competition with Europe. There is no common basis for *mutual* arms reduction between the West and Russia, mutual changes in military strategy, or mutual reductions in defense spending to restore the equilibrium destabilized by Russia's changed policies and strategies. Geography will not make the task of applying arms control measures any easier. New approaches will have to be forged with a Russian leadership not predisposed to compromising to restore military equilibrium and military security in Europe.

Counter-balancing the destabilizing duality of Russian thinking on crisis and war where they simultaneously seek strategic advantage and seek to counter anticipated surprise with surprise is especially complex in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This traditional duality in Russian strategic culture is now interwoven with a more modern duality, one that pairs Putin's ambitions for *European security system change* with fears for *regime change* in Moscow. Moscow's holistic approach to competition, crisis management, and war will be influenced substantially by this modern formula. This will be a very complex Russian decision-making dynamic for the West to understand. This merger is also a Gordian knot for the Russian national security system that future internal Russian reforms would find difficult, if not impossible, to unwind.

General Staff assessments, preparations, and concepts to secure Russia will continue to be dominant, as will its culture of strategic thought. Real strategic asymmetry between Russian and Western military policy, strategy, posture, and practice will continue for the foreseeable future. These differences are produced by a long-standing culture of Russian strategic thought, one the Russian military upholds, advances, and practices. It is also a culture they will not replace.

Russia's strategic culture will produce security concepts and strategies the military value and trust, ultimately evolving into institutionalized approaches to war that will serve as the formal baseline for how Moscow will measure the military security it has or lacks. Guided by their traditional culture of strategic thought and merged with the geo-strategic realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the unrealities of President Putin's worldview, Russia's evolving military security course comes at a crucial period in the country's post-Cold War development. This unique, asymmetric path is an enduring, multi-dimensional challenge for the West, one that will impact Europe's security and sense of well-being for years to come.

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The author wishes to acknowledge his deep gratitude to PH Vigor (1917-2013) and distinguished members of the Soviet Studies Research Centre, Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, England, (1973-1992).

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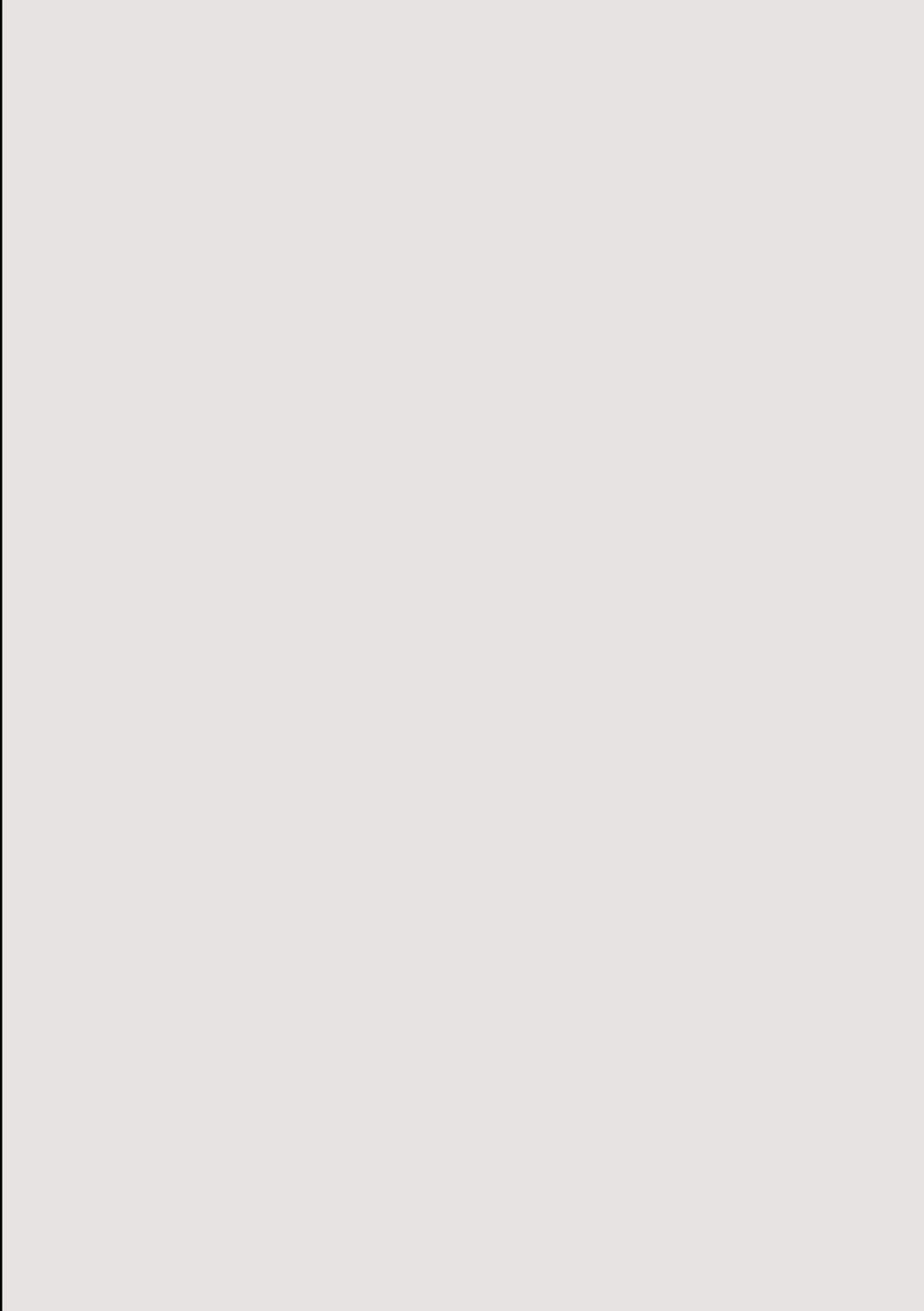
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