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## RUSSIAN HYBRID STRATEGY AND WARFARE

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JCSP 43 DL

*Exercise Solo Flight*

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## RUSSIAN HYBRID STRATEGY AND WARFARE

### Introduction

Since 2007, Russia has conducted a revisionist campaign in former Soviet periphery countries, utilizing the full spectrum of capabilities, ranging from non-military to military. This approach is called hybrid warfare and is based on a comprehensive strategy to achieve geopolitical objectives, using an adaptive and highly integrated grouping of ambiguous<sup>1</sup> and non-ambiguous ways and means. Hybrid warfare has also been aptly described as the “dark reflection” of the comprehensive approach.<sup>2</sup>

Winning strategies correlate ends, ways and means, whereas incoherent strategies mismatch ends with means and generally fail, despite any tactical or operational successes. This essay asserts that Russia utilizes a hybrid strategy, with harmonized ends, ways and means, to dominate former Soviet periphery countries, such as Ukraine, and deter further integration with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). This hybrid strategy is founded on seven principles, which illustrate the ways and means used by Russia, as described in the following paragraphs. They include analysis of target country, employment of a unified command structure with access to all instruments of national power, ambiguous execution, curtailing the traditional mode of war, treating the population of target country as part of the terrain, exploiting the factor of time, and utilizing strategic deterrence to inhibit NATO escalation. Russian actions to prevent Ukraine’s economic and political assimilation into the EU

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ellen Connell and Ryan Evans, *Russia’s “Ambiguous Warfare” and Implications for the U.S. Marine Corps* (Arlington: CAN Analysis & Solutions, 2015), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Jens Stoltenberg (Keynote Speech, NATO Transformation Seminar, Brussels, Belgium, 19 May 2015).

exemplify these tenets. An examination of Russian strategic culture is presented as an opening to the principles of hybrid warfare and strategy.

### **Russian Strategic Culture**

During the Soviet era, the Communist Party, the Committee for State Security (KGB), and the Red Army formed a triumvirate which wielded state power. Although the Red Army was the most formidable element in terms of power resources, it never played a leading role in the trio. It was akin to a “performing crocodile” safeguarding the existence of the other two organizations but held firmly in check by them.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, a conspicuously Russian military strategic culture endured and was fundamental in shaping the armed forces of the Soviet Union, consistent with the objectives of the political leadership.<sup>4</sup>

In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Yeltsin underfunded and disempowered the Russian Armed Forces, as he considered it a “legacy threat” to the democratization of post-Soviet Russia.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, during the First Chechen War the Russian Army’s performance was unsatisfactory, and it was forced to withdraw from battle. In August 1999, the newly elected Prime Minister Putin initiated a Second Chechen War; this time, aided by Chechen proxies the Russian Army pacified the statelet and returned pseudo-control to Moscow.

Throughout this period, NATO advocated security sector reform, but it was always declined by Russia. The justification for this refusal was twofold; reform was equated with

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<sup>3</sup> Viktor Suvorov, *Soviet Military Intelligence* (London: Grafton Books, 1986), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Donnelly, *Red Banner: Soviet Military System in Peace and War* (London: Jane’s Information Group, 1988), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen R. Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia’s Modern Approaches to Warfare* (Cambridge: Harvard Kennedy School, 2016), 39.

disempowerment, and more significantly, the General Staff believed “Russia’s unique strategic disposition demands different approaches” from Western liberal democracies.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the tribulations of the post-Soviet era, the Russian Armed Forces retained its military strategic culture which is founded on strategic uniqueness to “maximize and seize opportunity,” strategic vulnerability of an “undefendable” Russia necessitating robust counter-surprise measures, a whole of nation approach to national security, articulated as “Going to war with all of Russia,” and decisiveness in the initial phase of war.<sup>7</sup> These ideas provide the foundational construct of hybrid strategy and warfare, as practiced by Russia.

Russia has historically attempted to maintain a defensive buffer zone adjacent to its borders. During the Soviet period, this consisted of the Warsaw Pact nations and the periphery republics of the Soviet Union. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Russia has understood that buffer zones may not always protect the country from modern, non-attributable means of warfare and multi-domain operations. It is also evident that aligned neighbors are more advantageous and less expensive than annexation of such countries. Accordingly, Putin’s initiative for a Eurasian Economic Union was intended to address the socio-economic crisis in Russia and assist in the restoration of its former glory.

### **Russian Approach to Hybrid Warfare**

Russian conceptualization of the word “hybrid” with respect to strategy and warfare is analogous to its use in the expression “hybrid car.”<sup>8</sup> Whilst a hybrid car is a single vehicle with two sources of motive power, propelling it towards a chosen destination; hybrid warfare is a

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<sup>6</sup> Covington 2016, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 9.

single stratagem with two sources of power, ambiguous and non-ambiguous, operating towards a desired end state. The ambiguous elements are non-attributable accelerants which, if unassisted, may not achieve the desired end-state. Thus, non-ambiguous capabilities including conventional and strategic nuclear forces are the decisive attributes of Russian hybrid strategy.

The tenets of Russian hybrid warfare are manifest in the associated ways and means, which are elaborated in the following paragraphs; however, they should not be construed as a rigid template, as each war is unique and demands comprehension of its circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

### **Identification of National Vulnerabilities**

Hybrid warfare aims to exploit national vulnerabilities across the political, military, economic, social, information and infrastructure (PMESII) spectrum. Russia conducts a systematic analysis of the target country to determine its strategic vulnerabilities.<sup>10</sup> In combination with this analysis, development of a hybrid strategy entails the formulation of a “synchronized attack package” which is tailored to the vulnerabilities of the target system.<sup>11</sup>

In 2014, Ukraine was susceptible to this form of aggression because of high levels of state corruption, popular dissatisfaction with authorities, inadequate military capability and low readiness of the armed forces, prevailing influence of Russian media in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, cultural and religious links with Russia, and porous borders.<sup>12</sup> The hybrid strategy to destabilize Ukraine also exploited economic and political levers to achieve strategic goals.

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<sup>9</sup> General Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,” *Military Review* (January-February 2016), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Charles K. Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” *Military Review* (January-February 2016), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Patrick J. Cullen and Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud, “Understanding Hybrid Warfare,” *Multinational Capability Development Campaign* (Oslo: MCDC, January 2017), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Jim Dorschner, “Running Hot and Cold: The Potential for a Frozen Conflict in Eastern Ukraine,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly* (November 2017), 6.

Specific vulnerabilities included Ukraine's dependence on Russian gas and significant financial debt to Russia.

### **Unified Command Structure**

Russia benefits from a centralized national command and control (C2) structure when conducting hybrid warfare activities, because it alleviates the complexity associated with this type of operation.<sup>13</sup> Prior to commencement of an operation, the unified C2 entity can tailor doctrine, training, organization, logistics, strategic communication (StratCom) and information operations (Info Ops) to facilitate achievement of the desired objectives. Once this shaping of capabilities is achieved, the Commander can launch the operation, coordinate all PMESII activities, and adjust the pressure on the adversary, to preclude intervention by external actors such as NATO. Actions undertaken by Russia indicate a strategic approach founded on centralized and coherent planning at all levels, that leverage opportunities and mitigate risks to achieve campaign objectives.

The centralized command structure does not tolerate interservice politicking or internecine fighting, so, the selection, deployment and commitment of military force elements is undisputed. Furthermore, weak links in the operational chain are quickly purged, while stronger personalities or groups are promoted, such as the sudden change in leadership of the Donetsk People's Republic, implemented during a Ukrainian offensive in August 2014.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, this shortened C2 structure simplifies communications throughout the chain of command.

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<sup>13</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, DIA-11-1704-161, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington DC: DIA, 2017), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Gabriela Baczyńska and Aleksandar Vasovic, "Pushing Locals Aside, Russians take top rebel posts in east Ukraine," *Reuters*, 27 July 2014.

## **Ambiguous Execution of Strategy**

Ambiguity, deception and denial is used by Russia when conducting hybrid warfare to make attribution, and response, problematic for the adversary and the international community. Ambiguous execution of a hybrid strategy is achieved by various ways and means, including the following:

- a. Interference in domestic politics and political subversion;
- b. Destabilizing or illegal activities carried-out by criminal organizations;
- c. Espionage and sabotage by intelligence operators;
- d. Direct action and reconnaissance missions by special forces;
- e. Other covert activities by unbadged conventional forces and private military companies;
- f. Energy blackmail and economic pressure by Russian government-affiliated companies and banks;

Gazprom, the world's largest natural gas extractor, is a state-owned company which, after Russia's nuclear arsenal, could be considered the most effective weapon in the hands of the Kremlin. The only difference is that Russia has never made use of its nuclear arsenal, while it has repeatedly and extensively used its energy weapon.<sup>15</sup>

- g. Disinformation and other influence activities by Russian-controlled media;

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<sup>15</sup> Giovanni Caldioli, "Belarus-Russia Energy Disputes – Political and Economic Comparative Analysis," *Portal on Central Eastern and Balkan Europe Energy Policy Studies* (20 February 2012), 7.

- h. Cyber-attacks against political parties, government structures, national media and critical infrastructure in the target country;
- i. Lawfare, misusing law as a substitute for military means, to achieve operational objectives; and
- j. Of note, the Russian Orthodox Church was not instrumentalized as a power resource, and the current patriarch was not supportive of Russian annexation of Crimea.<sup>16</sup>

The Russian approach to hybrid warfare seeks to create ambiguity, blurring the distinction between war and peace and concealing the instigator's role as a belligerent.<sup>17</sup> This smokescreen is a key feature in delaying and undermining the target country's decision-making process, thereby inhibiting the effectiveness of possible responses.

In concert with ambiguous activities, Russia employs the tactics of "maskirovka" which has various interpretations, including a little masquerade, hiding weakness, and disguising real objectives.<sup>18</sup> In hybrid warfare, maskirovka refers to strategic deception, which is planned and conducted at the national level. Deception at this level is primarily intended to hide Russia's involvement in destabilizing other countries, but also to mislead the adversary about one's real intentions, decisions and course of action. Political and diplomatic measures, and misinformation are the effectors of strategic deception. The application of maskirovka in Ukraine encompassed all those actions, plus the threat of use and actual use of military forces.

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<sup>16</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Russian Orthodoxy and Politics in the Putin Era." Last accessed 22 May 2018. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/09/russian-orthodoxy-and-politics-in-putin-era-pub-67959>

<sup>17</sup> Carnegie Moscow Center, "Blurred Lines Between War and Peace." Last accessed 22 May 2018. <http://carnegie.ru/2014/07/11/blurred-lines-between-war-and-peace-pub-56141>

<sup>18</sup> Michael Kofman et al, *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), 23.

Surprise and denial are constituent elements of maskirovka. Surprise is used to confuse and disorient the enemy about the time and location of attack. Surprise permitted the unchecked annexation of Crimea, starting with the seizure of the Crimean Parliament by Russian special forces, during the early hours of 27 February 2014. Subsequently, denial was used by Putin when he stated the occupiers were men from local self-defense units.<sup>19</sup>

Russian hybrid warfare in Ukraine also exploited the concept of “cover,” which involves planned measures for disguising or concealing an operation against an objective.<sup>20</sup> Including:

- a. Deploying soldiers without national emblems and rank insignia on their uniforms;
- b. Using paramilitary volunteers from Russian, ultra-nationalist, non-governmental organizations; and
- c. Shipping weapons, munitions, and fuel from Russian territory, under the guise of humanitarian assistance.<sup>21</sup>

The notion of going to war with all of Russia was manifest in the comments made by General Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, when he stated, “The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”<sup>22</sup> Gerasimov postulated a relationship of four-to-one in terms of non-military to military measures.<sup>23</sup> He also stated, “The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures, applied in coordination

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<sup>19</sup> Lucy Ash, “How Russia outfoxes its enemies,” *BBC News Magazine*, 29 January 2015

<sup>20</sup> Vego 2009, VII-98.

<sup>21</sup> Major General Volodymyr Havrylov, “How Putin’s Attempts at Deception Failed in Ukraine,” *The Cipher Brief*, 15 November 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Gerasimov 2016, 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

with the protest potential of the population.”<sup>24</sup> These comments were made in 2013, prior to the crisis in Ukraine, but foreshadowed how events progressed in the ensuing hybrid attacks in Ukraine.

The Russian approach to hybrid warfare is also highly adaptive, and different ways and means will be combined - as described in this section, to manipulate the vulnerabilities of the target country and to ensure the executed strategy is incomprehensible to the adversary.

### **Avoiding Conventional War**

Russia used hybrid warfare in pursuit of strategic-political objectives to keep its activities below a perceived threshold, thus not provoking a coordinated response from NATO. This includes avoidance of military-to-military confrontation with the target country; however, there have been various instances of overt military action during the conflict in Ukraine. When conventional warfighting is unavoidable it is seamlessly linked with non-military activities and discontinued as soon as practical, while other aspects of the hybrid threat can persist for the long-term. In August 2014, during a five-day period, the Russian Army evidently assaulted and neutralized Ukrainian forces that were threatening the rebel’s capital city of Donetsk.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, on 5 September 2014, a cease-fire agreement was endorsed by the Ukrainian government and Russian-backed separatists; regrettably, it was unsustainable.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Carlotta Gall, “Ukraine Town Bears Scars of Russian Offensive That Turned Tide in Conflict,” *New York Times*, 9 September 2014

## Shaping the Human Terrain

Russia considers the population of a target country as “part of the terrain” of the battlefield and capitalizes on preexisting ethnic and religious conflicts in its former sphere of influence.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the ideology of a supranational Russian identity was promoted to foster integrative patriotism amongst ethnic-Russians and Russophones. The specific means to achieve cultural and ideological penetration of those societies, included the “compatriot policy,” which mobilized ethnic-Russians and Russophones in Ukraine and provided paramilitary training to those groups.<sup>27</sup> Passportization was another subversive mechanism employed by Russia, to systematically provide citizenship and passports to those same ethnic and linguistic groups in Ukraine. Subsequently, and without any tangible cause, appeals for protection emanated from these newfound citizens, to Mother Russia.<sup>28</sup> Other than engendering local political support for Russian objectives, these programs were also used to encourage the local populous to volunteer in paramilitary and regular forces, as Russian proxies.

The annexation of Crimea was essentially unopposed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces because of ineffective leadership, low readiness and Russian endeavors to exacerbate divided loyalties within those forces. Agitation of Ukrainian military personnel encompassed all ranks, from enlisted sailors to senior leaders. For example, in 2014, Sergei Yeliseyev was First Deputy Commander of the Ukrainian Fleet, in other words the second highest ranking officer in the

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<sup>26</sup> Toni Pfanner, “Interview with General Sir Rupert Smith,” *International Review of the Red Cross* Vol 88 No. 864 (December 2006), 720.

<sup>27</sup> Kristina Kallas, “Claiming the diaspora: Russia’s compatriot policy and its reception by Estonian-Russian population,” *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* Vol 15, No 3 (2016) 17.

<sup>28</sup> Atlantic Council, “How Soft Power Works: Russian Passportization and Compatriot Policies Paved Way for Crimean Annexation and War in Donbas,” last accessed 22 May 2018.  
<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-soft-power-works-russian-passportization-and-compatriot-policies-paved-way-for-crimean-annexation-and-war-in-donbas>

Ukrainian Navy. On the day Russian forces occupied the Crimean Parliament, Yeliseyev deserted his post and accepted the position of Deputy Chief of Russia's Baltic Fleet.<sup>29</sup>

Strategic communications and information operations were also used to influence the will and understanding of the target population, challenge its unity, and gain support for Russian political objectives. There have been various instances of computer network attack affecting the websites of government and financial institutions, political parties opposed to Russia, and media outlets. For example, in May 2014, the Russian hacker group Cyber Berkut exploited cyber vulnerabilities of the Ukrainian National Election Commission to undermine the credibility of the elections.<sup>30</sup>

On the home front, Russia utilizes strategic communications to dominate the public narrative and strengthen social cohesion.

### **Exploiting the Factor of Time**

The factor of time can have strategic, operational or tactical consequences.<sup>31</sup> At the lower levels, the factor of time impacts planning, preparation and execution of tactical actions and joint operations. At the operational level, the unified chain of command enables Russia to compress the time for estimating the situation, making a decision, and adapting the plan as necessary. Conversely, the ambiguity induced by hybrid warfare prolongs the time required by the adversary to accomplish those same processes. Russia also has the advantage of speed in

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<sup>29</sup> Pavel Polityuk and Anton Zverev, "Why Ukrainian forces gave up Crimea without a fight." *Reuters*, 24 July 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Clayton, "Ukraine election narrowly avoided 'wanton destruction' from hackers." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 21 May 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare Theory and Practice* (Newport: United States Naval War College, 2009), III-20.

deciding when to mobilize and deploy military forces and other instruments of national power. During the annexation of Crimea, the rapidity of mission accomplishment resulted in a so-called *fait accompli*, which could not be challenged by Ukraine and the international community without provoking a warfighting situation.

At the strategic level, time is related to the duration of a conflict, and Russia has clearly demonstrated its acceptance of frozen conflicts; not only in eastern Ukraine but also in Georgia and Moldova. Maintaining frozen conflicts in former Soviet periphery countries is a conciliation prize for Russia, when those countries have refused to join the Eurasian Economic Union under its leadership. Frozen conflicts are intended to keep buffer-zone countries unstable and ineligible for membership in NATO and the EU, which ultimately impedes their economic development.

### **Escalation Dominance**

Russia's hybrid strategy imposes an "operational coupling of ambiguous ways and means" to its conventional forces and nuclear arsenal, exploiting the "vulnerability of neighboring states to large-scale military actions, while a non-attributable operation is conducted."<sup>32</sup> As previously noted, Russia is loath to blatantly use conventional forces in hybrid warfare; however, such forces can be massed on the Russian side of the border, suggesting preparedness for a rapid military incursion, accentuating political pressure and complicating decision making in the target country. The threat of nuclear escalation is also accessible, if necessary, to limit NATO's intervention appetite. These military stratagems provide insight to Russia's strategic uniqueness and aspirations to dominate former-Soviet periphery countries.

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<sup>32</sup> Covington 2016, 41.

Russia conducts large-scale and “Snap” exercises, often in the vicinity of former Soviet Republics, to test the combat readiness of its conventional and strategic forces, without prior notification to participating units.<sup>33</sup> When such exercises coincide with hybrid warfare developments, they serve to complicate decision making in the target country but also legitimize Russian deniability regarding their function.

In 2015, while the Ukraine crisis was ongoing, Russia conducted nine rigorous and wide-ranging exercises which included strategic posturing of conventional and nuclear forces; thereby signaling its readiness to support operations in Ukraine and counter third party involvement, if necessary. Snap exercises in March 2015, tested conventional and strategic nuclear elements, coordinated by the operations center in Moscow, and involved 80,000 personnel and associated equipment.<sup>34</sup> Subsequently, in September 2015, Exercise *Center-2015* involved 95,000 personnel responding to a fictitious conflict in Central Asia with the full spectrum of military capabilities.<sup>35</sup> This exercise also commenced with snap drills involving conventional forces situated in military districts adjacent to Ukraine.

## Conclusion

This essay describes how Russia used a hybrid strategy, with harmonized ends, ways and means, to dominate Ukraine and deter its integration in NATO and the EU. A hybrid strategy mandates a comprehensive formulation, to achieve geopolitical and strategic objectives, using a

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<sup>33</sup> Gudrun Persson, *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2016* (Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2016), 52.

<sup>34</sup> European Leadership Network, “Major Russian exercises conducted since 2014 in its European territory and adjacent areas,” Last accessed on 23 May 2018, [https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Major-Russian-exercises-TABLE\\_ELN.pdf](https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Major-Russian-exercises-TABLE_ELN.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

complex, adaptive and highly integrated combination of ambiguous and non-ambiguous ways and means. The Russian approach to hybrid warfare is ascribed to that nation's unique military strategic culture which exploits the enemy's vulnerabilities, mobilizes all national instruments of power, and aims at decisiveness in the initial phase of a war. It is disconcerting that Russia has chosen to "secure herself at the expense of the security of its neighbors" and is utilizing hybrid strategy and warfare to achieve this objective.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Covington 2016, 41.

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