RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE : IMPERIAL AMBITIONS OR SELF PRESERVATION?

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INTRODUCTION

In the early months of 2014, the world, an in particular the Western nations of the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization (NATO) alliance, were taken by surprise as Ukraine underwent a political upheaval that

rapidly deteriorated, resulting in civil unrest, devolving into sporadic and worsening violence.[1] Before the

Ukrainian authorities could mount an effective response, Crimea had been separated from Ukraine and

absorbed into the Russian Federation (RF). Following on the heels of hostile Russian actions in

Chechnya, Georgia, and Estonia, this was perceived by many as the next step in Russia's quest for a

return to global superpower status.[2] Russian tactics in this endeavor, characterized in the west as hybrid

war, were seen as revolutionary innovations in modern warfare, espousing multi-domain integration, and

leveraging well-coordinated information operations and cyberwarfare to buttress conventional land and

air forces.[3]

This essay will examine this stance on Russian strategy and argue that it takes a myopic view of the larger

picture. Beginning by first examining the evolution of the Russian hybrid warfare in the context of

Russia's policy aims and strategic objectives, followed by an examination of Western and NATO

capabilities and readiness to meet this challenge, it will be shown that the applications of such a strategy

is limited in scope as well as in geography.

For years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, western nations had largely considered the newly

formed RF to be a faint shadow of its Cold War power and prestige. In fact, fledgling attempt by leaders

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[1] House of Lords. European Union Committee 6th Report of Session 2014-15, "The EU and Russia: before and beyond the crisis in Ukraine." 20 February 2015, 9.
[2] Mikheil Saakashvili. "Russia's Next Land Grab Won't Be in an Ex-Soviet State. It Will Be in Europe." Foreign Policy, 15 March 2019. Last Accessed 26 May 2019.
[3] Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely (2015) "Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal After Ukraine," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 28:1, 3.

like Mikhail Gorbachev to democratize and liberalize Russia gave a further veneer to the idea that the old rivalries were fading and Russia will ultimately join the modern world order – one dominated by the United States.[4] A closer look at the armed forces of the RF and the strategic direction emanating from the Russian political and military leadership reveals several trends that challenge the Western assumptions and paradigms about Russia.

This essay will begin by examining these trends, particularly the evolution of the Russian Armed Forces' tactics and strategies, leading to the development of what Russian strategic leadership describes as 'New Type Warfare' (NTW).[5] This will be followed by an investigation of NTW and how it compares to the hybrid model developed by the West. Ultimately, this essay will demonstrate that although Russia was able to apply NTW to devastating effect in its Near Abroad region, this strategy does not constitute a revolutionary innovation in modern conflict, inclined towards achieving a Russian global hegemony, but rather its success can be attributed largely to the conditions where it was employed, and its application is thus greatly limited.

RUSSIAN MILITARY EVOLUTION

The armed forces of the Russian Federation in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union were rife with corruption, which saw the liquidating of military hardware for personal profit,[6] neglecting of training for the soldiers, and adherence to old military doctrine which no longer was relevant to modern military needs and had not kept pace with technological developments in the militaries.[7] Furthermore, as Russian

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[4] Glenn P. Hastedt and Kay M. Knickrehm, International Politics in a Changing World (London: Longman, 2002), 330.
[5] Timothy Thomas, "The Evolution of Russian Military Thought: Integrating Hybrid, New-Generation, and New-Type Thinking." *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *29*(4), 554.
[6] David Winston, "From Yeltsin to Putin," Hoover Institution Policy Review, 1 April 2000. Last accessed 15 May 2019. https://www.hoover.org/research/yeltsin-putin
[7] Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 161.

President Boris Yeltsin perceived them as a threat to the established political power structure, the armed

forces suffered from a lack of appropriate funding.[8] The result was a poorly trained, led and under

strength force, lacking critical equipment and logistics and therefore capable of limited operational

effectiveness. It was from under these conditions that Russia witnessed an increasingly expanding NATO

alliance, which continuously encroached further towards Russia's very doorstep,[9] evoking ominous

warning from the Russian political and military leadership.[10]

The first Chechnyan war in 1994 was characterised by the adoption of predictable tactics and doctrine by

the Russian military, owing to the underestimation of the Chechnyan separatists by the Russian strategic

leadership, believing that a strong demonstration will be sufficient to defuse the turmoil.[11] This was not

the case. Chechnyan separatists capitalized on the lack of preparation of the Russian forces, inflicting

high casualties and engaging in a prolonged irregular conflict that largely neutralized the Russian

numerical superiority, until Yeltsin's proposed ceasefire ended the conflict in 1996.[12]

With the ascension of Vladimir Putin to power in 2000, Russian armed forces saw a change of fortune,

not just in significantly increased allocation of budget and resources,[13] but also in receiving a bold

strategic vision that was far more decisive than previous administration's.[14] In contrast to the first

Chechnyan war, the second saw a nascent integration of force multipliers and the beginnings of a multi-

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[8] Stephen R. Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare.* (Cambridge: Harvard Kennedy School, 2016), 39.

[9] Mary Elise Sarotte, "A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion." Foreign Affairs (September/October 2014), last accessed 13 May 2019. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-11/broken-promise

[10] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West Fault." Foreign Affairs (September/October 2014), last accessed 13 May 2019.
https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault

[11] Timothy Thomas, "The Russian Armed Forces in Chechnya, 1994," in *Regional Peacekeepers: The Paradox of Russian Peacekeeping*, ed. John Mackinlay and Peter Cross (New York: United Nations University Press, 2003), 117.

[12] Hastedt and Knickrehm (2002), 349.

[13] Paolo Calzini, "Vladimir Putin and the Chechen War," *The International Spectator* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 25.

[14] Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith, "Russia and Hybrid Warfare: Going Beyond the Label," *Aleksanteri Papers* (Winter 2016): 18.

domain approach. In addition to closely leveraging air power in support of ground forces, the Russians also employed contractors and Chechnyan militias,[15] while demonstrating a land-air integration of forces that produced devastating effects on Chechnyan morale and infrastructure.[16]

These multi-domain integrations continued to see refinement and enhancement as Russian forces spilled over into Georgia in support of separatist elements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. This incursion was accompanied by a robust Information Operations (IO) campaign, which saw the disabling of Georgian media and broadcasting of Russian IO messaging.[17] The conduct of Russian operations in the Georgian campaign showed a high degree of planning and operational readiness, which although was synergized with an effective IO campaign, still showed significant room for improvement in C2.[18]

The steady transformation of Russian military forces continued, and their capabilities in the cyber domain saw considerable progress. This was evident following Russia's rebuke to Estonia in 2007 upon the relocation of a Soviet-era memorial, which Russia perceived to be a political slight.[19] Estonia was a target of a large-scale cyber attack, affecting government institutions and private businesses and industries alike.[20] Although this instance did not see any overt kinetic military action, a demonstration of Russian cyber capabilities and the willingness to bring them to bear while obscuring attribution,[21] was adeptly showcased.

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[15] Marcel H. Van Herpen, (2014), 190.
[16] Renz and Smith (2016), 18.
[17] Athena Bryce-Rogers, "Russian Military Reform in the Aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War," *Demokratizatsiya* 21, no. 3 (2013): 349.
[18] Dmitry Adamsky, "Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy," *Proliferation Papers*, no. 54 (Autumn 2015): 41
[19] Rain Ottis, "Analysis of the 2007 Cyber Attacks Against Estonia from the Information Warfare Perspective." *Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence,* Proceedings of the 7th European Conference on Information Warfare and Security, Plymouth, 2008: 164.
[20] Stephen Herzog, "Revisiting the Estonian Cyber Attacks: Digital Threats and Multinational Responses." *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2011), 51.
[21] Stephen Herzog (2011), 52.

The culmination of these capability developments in the Russian military forces was evident in the manner the crisis in Ukraine unfolded in early months of 2014. Ukrainian political situation was already mired in discontent,[22] while the military forces lacked readiness.[23] Russian intervention in Ukraine was staged and executed through a direct command and control (C2) relationship with the national strategic leadership, through the newly created and task tailored Russian National Centre for the Management of Defence.[24] This conflict also saw Russia deploy limited ground forces and small units in contrast to the previous engagements, which were characterized by overwhelming conventional forces.[25] Although it is challenging to accurately designate the commencement of the information operations, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that elements of propaganda and deception were present well in advance of military operations on the ground.[26] These were followed by the arming and equipping of separatist elements within the country and coordinating their activities through Spetznaz advisors present on the ground.[27] As the situation continued to spiral out of control, and Ukrainian authorities remained unable to intervene,[28] Russian military forces, without identifying insignia, began to take control of key institutions and infrastructure, further paralyzing the Ukrainian national response. Finally, under a cloud of corruption and intimidation, a referendum was held to decide the fate of Crimea, which, being a positive result for Russia, was readily accepted and Crimea was absorbed into the Russian Federation.

OPERATIONAL EMPLOYMENT

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[22] Siim Nurk, *Russian Hybrid Warfare in the Ukraine.* Tallinn: Tallinn University of Technology, (2016), 19.

[23] Dorschner Ji, "Running Hot and Cold: The Potential for a Frozen Conflict in Eastern Ukraine," *Jane's Defence Weekly* (November 2017), 6.

[24] Renz and Smith (2016), 7.

[25] Renz and Smith (2016), 5.

[26] Michael Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), 13.

[27] Diego A. Palmer, *Back to the Future? Russia's hybrid warfare, revolutions in military affairs, and Cold War comparisons.* Rome: Research Division. NATO Defense College (2015), 9.

[28] Woo Pyung-Kyun, "The Russian Hybrid War in the Ukraine Crisis: Some Characteristics and Implications." *The Korean Journal of Defence Analysis* 27, no. 3 (2015), 387.

An examination of the Russian NTW reveals that it relies on several crucial criteria for delivering successes, many of which are conditions that are outside of the control and influence of the Russian strategy to create. One of the keys to success of NTW has been the presence of ethnic Russian populace in the targeted region.[29] A population that is sympathetic to and supportive of Russian rule. This factor exists in many of the near-abroad countries bordering Russia, however, it is largely absent outside of the Eastern European and Central Asian countries.

Russia seeks to utilize this ethnic diaspora as human terrain through information operations and through creating and exacerbating existing tensions, leading to a destabilized political situation. Russian information operations have frequently been found to be implemented via 'troll farms' manipulating the narratives on social media platforms and through false narratives in the media.[30] The media campaign is waged not just through its official outlet 'Russia Today', but also through local media outlets worldwide, some of which are fabricated.[31] Despite a countering narrative through accurate journalistic and official state messages, the magnitude of disinformation created by these troll farms creates an effect of information saturation where the targeted audience is often unable to distinguish between accurate and credible journalism, official national reports, and propaganda being generated through the IO campaign. As was the case in Georgia and Ukraine, the popular dissatisfaction with the ruling government and an increasingly polarized population leads to the heightened success of the IO campaign.

The NTW strategy also relies on the targeted country having inadequate military capability and operational readiness to rapidly respond to an incursion by conventional Russian forces. Once the military intervention has taken place, the weaker country would see it in its interest to avoid a direct confrontation.

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[29] Oncel Sencerman, "Russian Diaspora as a Means of Russian Foreign Policy." *Revista De Stiinte Politice* no. 49 (2016): 101.
[30] Geir Hågen Karlsen. "Tools of Russian Influence: Information and Propaganda." Chapter 9 in *Ukraine and Beyond: Russia's Strategic Security Challenge to Europe*, Edited by Janne Haaland Matlary and Tormod Heier, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, (2016): 190.
[31] Geir Karlsen (2016), 183.

Thus NTW aims to contract the time elapsed between the initial invasion and seizing of the objectives before the opponent can mount an effective response. In Georgia, this was accomplished by developing infrastructure to support the eventual Russian forces' mobility,[32] while in Ukraine, international response urged Ukrainians to avoid a violent confrontation and seek a peaceful resolution.[33] This aversion to a violent confrontation was motivated, among other factors, by a reliance of European nations on Russian energy exports, and the potential risk of a deteriorating situation disrupting the vitally need supply lines.[34]

These economic constraints, lack of military readiness, weakened political institutions, the presence of dissatisfaction with the central government, and most importantly, the existence of ethnic Russian populations within the country, provided the necessary conditions for the NTW operations to be successful. The success of the operations also owes credit to the novelty of Russian approach, the rapid decision making ability from the strategic to the tactical level, and the level of readiness of the Russian forces to carry out the mission and achieve desired objectives. The targets of this approach, in terms of ideology, Western influence, and geography, also shed light on Russia's policy aims in securing its immediate sphere of influence against NATO encroachment.

WESTERN RESPONSE

Having examined the conditions on which the NTW critically relies on for success, it is prudent to note whether the response thus far to this supposedly novel multi-domain hybrid approach is relevant and effective. The events in Ukraine spurred a level of urgency at the international level in the move towards

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[32] Athena Bryce-Rogers (2013), 348.
[33] Klaus Bachman, "Why Germany Won't Lead the West." *New Eastern Europe, No. 1, XV*, 2015, 82.
[34] Vira Ratsiborynska, *When Hybrid Warfare Supports Ideology: Russia Today*. Rome: Research Division. NATO Defense College, 2016, 15.

cyber security,[35] strategies to counter misinformation campaigns,[36] and in many cases, pre-emptive troop deployments particularly in the Russian near-abroad region. The most impactful effect generated through this posturing is that the element of surprise is significantly degraded from the NTW strategy. Examples of this are becoming apparent not only in state sponsored measures, but also in private industries like popular social media platforms.

One of the key factors enabling Russian forces to maintain a high level of readiness for interventions in the near abroad have been prepositioning of units close to the region of interest. Under the guise of exercises, Russians have positioned combat ready forces near the border of neighbouring countries, heightening concerns for cross border incursions while maintaining deniability of hostile intent.[37] An effective counter to this measure has been the increased NATO presence and military activity in countries like Latvia and the Ukraine. Such forward positioning of friendly troops achieves two crucial objectives. Firstly, it compels any invading Russian force to confront and engage in hostilities with NATO soldiers, thereby initiating a conflict with highly ready and capable forces that can draw reinforcements from home nations, resulting in a conflict where Russia is faced with an alliance of other nuclear capable nations, not just the weak neighbour it intends to target. Secondly, the enabling components of NTW, misinformation campaigns and separatist insurgencies, are far less effective since their adversary includes a coalition of allied nations trained and ready for this eventuality.

The wide array of offensive and paralyzing cyber capabilities which Russia was able to leverage to great effect have generated an increased activity in not only protecting cyber infrastructure, but also investments in early warning, detection, and attribution capabilities, in particular the founding of the

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[35] Rex B. Hughes, "NATO and Cyber Defence: Mission Accomplished?" *Netherlands Atlantic Association*, Amsterdam, *Atlantisch Perspectief* 8 (2008): 2.

[36] Patrick Merloe, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Election Monitoring vs. Disinformation." *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (2015): 92.

[37] Gudrun Persson, *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2016* (Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2016), 52.

Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Estonia. These serve not only as a protective measure against cyberattacks, but further act as deterrents against states that may engage in covert offensive cyber operations, at risk of exposure and escalation to a hostile confrontation.

NEW TYPE WARFARE OUTSIDE THE NEAR ABROAD

In light of the efficacy of NTW, particularly in the Ukraine, followed by reactionary and proactive countermeasures from the international community, it is helpful to discuss the effects of NTW in regions where the Russian forces cannot leverage the key enabling criteria of NTW. These can be divided into two broad categories: Western nations, in particular members of NATO, and developing nations with weaker political institutions and inferior armed forces. Russia has sought to project forces beyond the near abroad region, namely in Syria, and more recently in Venezuela. Both countries, though opposed to NATO and US hegemony, lack a significant ethnic Russian expatriate community, elements of which could be leveraged and mobilized via irregular means or effectively targeted with influence activities. Although the use of mercenary forces and selective support of militias in Syria did have a destabilizing effect,[38] hampering the achievement of US objectives in the region, in neither instance was Russia able to replicate the successes observed in the Ukraine.

Similarly, Russia has sought to target western nations with misinformation and influence activities campaigns in addition to cyberattacks. Although not comprehensively attributable to Russia, evidence of this interference was markedly present during the 'Brexit' campaign leading up to the referendum in UK,[39] as well as during and after the US presidential election campaign in 2016.[40] These efforts have

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[38] Sarah Fainberg, "Russain Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict." *IFRI Proliferation Papers*, no. 105, (December 2017), 24.
[39] Vidya Narayanan et al, "Russian involvement and junk news during Brexit." Technical report, Data Memo 2017.10. Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford, UK (2017), 4.
[40] Nathaniel Persily, "The 2016 U.S. Election: Can Democracy Survive the Internet?" *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 2 (April 2017), 71.

yielded some of the desired effects, manifesting an increasingly polarized political climate, racial and ethnic tensions, and a veneer of disunity among the major NATO allies. However, it has failed to achieve the requisite preparation of a battlespace where irregular militias can be engaged, let alone a situation that Russian conventional forces can exploit.

On the other hand, the perception of a resurgent Russia with sights set on neo-imperialism has also raised some Cold War sentiments, evoking unity and solidarity against a common foe among the western nations. In particular, the imposition of targeted economic sanctions has had a three-pronged effect, leading to constrained resources for an economy largely dependent on hydrocarbon exports, isolation on the world stage, and providing a unifying purpose to western alliances, encouraging close cooperation and coordination in combating misinformation and cyber operations.

ANALYSIS OF NTW THREAT

Viewing the Russian capability evolution in the context of their underlying motivations and their strategic aims, it is apparent that the NTW is primarily tailored towards operations in the near abroad. However, attempts to target nations outside of Russia's region of influence buttresses the views that see a resurgent Russia seeking a return to domination on the world stage. In order to evaluate the threat posed by NTW, we can examine the preparation, posture, readiness, and operational capabilities of the Russian forces as well as the political will to pursue imperialist goals. Intelligence sources and journalistic investigations have revealed a prevalence of Russian state funded and coordinated troll-farms engaged in disaggregated information gathering, manipulating social media perceptions and trends, and carrying out misinformation campaigns with a view to promoting Russian interests, advancing Russian information and influence activities objectives, and perpetuating divisive and sectarian rhetoric in countries with politically, racially,

and ethnically diverse populations.[41] Although such measures have not yet been proven to deliver decisive effects in and of themselves in a kinetic conflict, there is sufficient evidence to show the force multiplier and enabling capability they can provide in preparing the human terrain, bolstering irregular elements, and degrading the adversaries' ability to effectively respond to kinetic operations that eventually follow.[42]

The western comprehensive approach, guided by elements of the multi-domain strategy, shares many parallels with NTW in seeking to integrate information and cyber effects within operational planning and execution phases along with the conventional land, maritime, and air domains.[43] This comprehensive approach has been implemented with various degrees of success in operations, against primarily irregular adversaries. Western interventions and conflict bear a stark dissimilarity in comparison to Russian incursions, however. Not only have they been geographically far removed from the Western nations themselves, but they have also primarily been in close geographical proximity of Russia. This factor lends further weight to the Russian rhetoric of self-preservation and standing as a bulwark against Western expansionism.

The rapid and steadily intensifying military developments in the Russian near abroad region may give one the perception that the Russian strategy seeks a resurgent return to imperialism, seeking to establish a global hegemony by usurping the current western monopolar order led by the United States. However, a more nuanced examination of the context, motivations, and desired goals reveals a significantly different narrative. The capabilities leveraged by Russian forces, and the synergies and coordination applied in their applications offer valuable insights and lessons for further evolution of the multi-domain battle space as well as for the comprehensive approach. The amplified urgency in efforts towards the study and development of cyber warfare and respective countermeasures is one such example. It is challenging to

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[41] Geir Karlsen (2016), 190.
[42] Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely (2015), 12.
[43] Luis Simon, "Command and control? Planning for EU military operations." *Occasional Paper* (January 2010), 17.

corroborate the view that Russian belligerence, although contravening international laws of armed conflict, is an effort to usurp and replace the international order. On the contrary, Russian objectives lie in securing its immediate sphere of influence against western intrusions. The expansion of NATO, expeditionary interventions in the Middle East and South Asia, and close partnerships with Japan and South Korea are all perceived with suspicion and seen as a tightening strategic constraint around Russia. Viewed with this lens, the activities of Russian armed forces in the context of their strategic aims far more accurately support the position that the political objectives aim to resist the influence and intrusion of the NATO alliance.

CONCLUSION

The Russian NTW strategy is neither unique nor novel. The successes it has delivered so far are contingent on the fine tuning and tailoring the approach to specific operations. The utility of such an approach is limited to the Russian near abroad region, owing to its reliance on several key factors, like political instability, ineffective armed forces, and the presence of a sizeable ethnic Russian diaspora. As these factors lie mostly outside the control of Russian strategic leadership, the application of NTW faces a significant hindrance and is largely limited to the Russian near abroad. The threat that NTW poses to western nations and the international peace and stability at large is often inflated and misrepresented. Nevertheless, cyber threats do pose serious security challenges in an increasingly digitized industry, economy, and government institutions, while divisive misinformation campaigns tend to be highly effective in a diverse population with a very high exposure to social media. Western governments' urgency in countering these threats and taking measures to defend against them are well placed.

Having the element of surprise neutralized, and heightened readiness of NATO forces combined with conscious efforts towards cybersecurity, countering disinformation, and reaffirming international partnerships, the Russian NTW is significantly degraded in its efficacy, particularly outside of Russia's

immediate sphere of influence. The evidence cited in this work demonstrates that the Russian strategy is neither intended to be a tool for global hegemony, nor does it pose a substantial risk to western nations so long as they continue to develop and evolve their countermeasures.

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