

Hybrid Warfare

Russia's strategy to alter the international balance of power

by Maj Valerie McGuire, USMC(Ret)

For nearly sixteen years, the United States has been engaged in a seemingly endless whole-of-government campaign to counter the spread of terrorism and eliminate safe havens for terrorist organizations across South Asia and the Middle East. The attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in 2001 served as the tipping point that transitioned U.S. thinking and strategy from the great power politics espoused during the Cold War to a razor-sharp focus on counterterrorism and preventing another attack on the homeland. National defense spending soared in the years following the attacks from more than \$300 million in 2001 to nearly twice that amount just six years later as the United States sought to adequately train, equip, and deploy its military in the global fight against violent extremist ideology.¹ But even as U.S. troops remain on the front lines embattled in a war against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, Taliban, and al-Qaeda linked splinter cells in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, U.S. strategy and American dollars are shifting once again back to the great-power competition paradigm.

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, signed by then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis, states that for the first time in more than a decade, "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."² With a staggering \$700 billion defense budget authorized for fiscal year 2018—a fifteen percent increase over last year—Congress has provided the means for the DOD to invest billions in high-tech missile defense capabilities and overhaul nuclear deterrence programs to once again counter the threat imposed by the reemergence of strategic competition, namely China and Russia.

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These peer competitors, it seems, may have a wildly different approach to countering U.S. influence and power, and Russia in particular has proved particularly adept at employing innovative ways to gain legitimacy, destabilize the operating environment, and level the playing field against superior military and economic powers such as the United States and its NATO allies. With a defense budget assessed at \$42 billion dollars in 2017—a mere 6 percent of the approved U.S. defense budget bill for 2018—Russian President Vladimir Putin has increasingly opted for developing and employing low-cost and often ambiguous hybrid warfare tactics as a way to make up for a lack of adequate funding to support his Strategic Arma-

ment Program.³ This method of influencing the operating environment is the new normal for strategic competitors as indicated by the military concepts and strategies developed and disseminated by Russian senior leaders within the past decade and as demonstrated by Russia's actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Hybrid warfare, often employed in the gray zone between traditional peace and war paradigms, is the synergetic fusion of asymmetric tactics, unconventional methods, and traditional instruments of power and influence applied seamlessly across and within every warfighting domain—air, land, sea, space, cyberspace, and information—to pursue national and strategic interests. While the DOD still lacks a universally accepted definition for hybrid warfare, a 2010 NATO Military Working Group summarized its assessment in *Hybrid Threats Description and Context* as the "threats posed by adversaries, with the ability to simultaneously employ conventional and non-conventional means adaptively in pur-



Countering Russia's hybrid warfare will require deploying to train with partners in the region.
(Photo by GySgt Bryson Jones.)



The Marine air-ground team can provide inherently flexible options to counter hybrid threats.
(Photo by LCpl Camila Melendez.)

suit of their objectives.”⁴ As ambiguous as the definition may seem, it highlights the range of military and non-military capabilities—from cyberattacks, use of proxies, and energy politics to economic manipulation and covert employment of special operations forces—that may be employed by both state and non-state actors as they attempt to challenge the post-World War II international order, gain legitimacy, and project power.

The uniqueness of Russia’s application of hybrid warfare tactics is Putin’s emphasis on manipulating the information environment and swaying public opinion to win favor for his objectives and ambivalence toward actions that may have otherwise caused international backlash and retribution. Melanie Amann et al., in the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, underscore this paradigm in the 2016 article “The Hybrid War: Russia’s Propaganda Campaign Against Germany.” Amann and her colleagues articulate that Russia’s hybrid warfare strategy against Western democracy amounts to a

war without a formal declaration, rules or borders. The belligerent is anonymous, does not identify itself, and often operates invisibly. Rather than weapons, fighting is done with words. The Internet is the most important battlefield.⁵

As a low-cost and often ambiguous means to destabilize the unipolar post World War II international order, Putin’s hybrid warfare approach relies heavily on information warfare to counter U.S. economic and military supremacy.

The proof of this transition within Russia’s doctrine and strategy can be found in a 2013 article published in the Russian military journal *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier (Military-Industrial Kurier)*. Written by Gen Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations” outlines his perspective on the strategies of current and future warfare and prophesizes the actions that would later take place in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Often referred to as the Gerasimov Doctrine, the article highlights the evolution of Russian tactics to influence the operating environment with an emphasis on attaining political and strategic goals by breeding chaos and dissent within a disenfranchised population. Molly McKew in “The Gerasimov Doctrine” contends, “Gerasimov took tactics developed by the Soviets, blended them with strategic military thinking about total war, and laid out a new theory of

modern warfare—one that looks more like hacking an enemy’s society than attacking it head-on.”⁶

Gerasimov’s philosophy emphasizes Russia’s requirement to develop tactics that efficiently and effectively influences the operating environment while simultaneously avoiding the challenges of competing directly with the advanced technological capabilities and expansive military budget of countries like the United States. With unfavorable projected gross domestic product growth limiting Russia’s defense spending over the next several years, Putin and his senior political and military strategists clearly understand that deficiencies in Russia’s conventional military capabilities and inability to meet the objectives within the Strategic Armament Program require the development of cost-effective alternatives to shaping the strategic environment prior to large-scale, conventional military operations.

Gerasimov asserts the evolution of Russian strategy and perspective in “The Value of Science” as follows:

The very “rules of war” have changed. 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. 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 with the protest potential of the population.⁷

Gerasimov contends that to be successful, the use of hybrid warfare tactics, particularly nonmilitary measures, must be employed at the ratio of four to one to traditional military capabilities—further highlighting Russia’s commitment to applying all instruments of national power to ambiguously manipulate the operating environment just shy of traditional war contexts. Russia’s evolving doctrine and strategy intends to destabilize and delegitimize competitors, such as the United States and its NATO allies, to ensure conditions are favorable for attaining political and strategic objectives and ultimately generate

a paradigm shift in the balance of power within the international order.

By conducting an analysis of the strategy and tactics employed by the U.S. military and its NATO allies over the past century, Chivvis in *Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare”* contends that the Russians

seized upon the importance of an approach that seeks to influence the population of target countries through information operations, proxy groups, and other influence operations. Russia uses Hybrid Warfare to work within existing political and social frameworks to further Russian objectives.⁸

The Gerasimov Doctrine, while not prescriptive in nature, suggests a broad range of tools that can be employed to successfully achieve parity without resulting in the conventional application of military forces against superior powers. In addition to emphasizing the strategic importance of influencing the population, Russian hybrid warfare is characterized by the economic employment of conventional forces and the generation and application of persistent pressure and chaos across the spectrum of both traditional peace and war paradigms.

Putin successfully tested the concepts and strategy contained within Gerasimov’s article in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, exemplifying the complexity of unconventional and asymmetric hybrid warfare tactics that transcend traditional peace and war frameworks. Through the integrated and thorough employment of political, economic, and cyber warfare, infiltration of covert special operations forces, and an aggressive information operations campaign mirroring reflexive control (RC) theory, Putin was able to manipulate perceptions and control the narrative to achieve support for the annexation of Crimea and further military actions in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

Kier Giles, in *Russia’s New Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow’s Exercise of Power*, states Russian political leaders were able to set the conditions for their actions through the

purchase of co-opt business and political elites to create loyal or at least



Marine must be prepared to contest the environment across domains where the threat presents a vulnerability. (Photo by Cpl Ian Leones.)

compliant networks. Bribes and business opportunities combine with the appeal of a Russian business culture that embraces opacity and corruption to recruit agents of influence throughout target countries.⁹

The result, he argues, ensured complicit individuals and businesses were structured and aligned to support Russian influence throughout Europe. Additionally, Putin’s regime used coercion and manipulation of the energy markets to influence and threaten Ukrainian leadership. In the immediate aftermath of the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Michael Carpenter articulate in “How to Stand Up to the Kremlin,” that Russia made threats to cut off Ukrainian gas deliveries, “but thanks to intense diplomacy by the United States and the European Union, Kiev’s neighbors helped avert a crisis by ensuring an adequate supply.”¹⁰ Putin’s operatives also effectively infiltrated Ukrainian computer systems as far back as 2010, targeting government officials and diplomats with a computer malware code known as Snake—malicious software that effectively provided Putin’s regime with access to classified Ukrainian policy and strategy documents.¹¹ On the ground in Ukraine, Putin covertly employed his special operations forces, backed pro-Russian separatists in the

region, and inspired protests to garner local and international support for his agenda and promote chaos and confusion—hallmarks of the Gerasimov Doctrine.

Some argue it was the Kremlin’s long-standing practice of RC and its seamless integration into Putin’s aggressive information operations campaign that contributed most significantly to successes in the region. Timothy L. Thomas, in “Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military,” defines RC “as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.”¹² Putin was able to effectively manipulate the information framework, saturating Russian-speaking media outlets within former Soviet Union countries with targeted information and disinformation to influence public perception.

Despite a massive U.S. military budget that dwarfed Russia’s military expenditures and advanced technological capabilities to find, fix, and target an adversary’s military system, United States and NATO allies were unprepared for and unable to effectively counter Russia’s actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Relatively low-cost and ambiguous hybrid warfare tactics executed in the gray zone essentially set

the conditions for Russia to successfully counter U.S. and NATO influence in the region and destabilize the Ukrainian government. Their effective operations in eastern Europe illustrate the challenges associated with Hybrid Warfare and an increasing need for the United States to develop a deeper understanding of the Hybrid Warfare capabilities strategic competitors may employ to gain an advantage and legitimacy.

Despite the widespread belief that Gerasimov's article was a clear articulation of Putin's evolving military strategy and a foundation for Russian hybrid warfare tactics as employed in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, others were quick to assert flaws in that reasoning. Charles K. Bartles in "Getting Gerasimov Right" argues the concepts outlined by the Chief of the Russian General Staff in "The Value of Science is in the Foresight" were meant to be an analysis of the current operating environment in order to provide foresight for the development of theory and doctrine for future warfare. According to Bartles in "Getting Gerasimov Right," the indicator lies in Gerasimov's use of the word *foresight*, which he states in the Russian military lexicon means "the process of cognition regarding possible changes in military affairs, the determination of the perspectives of its future development."¹³ Additionally, Bartles argues that Gerasimov's discussion of Hybrid Warfare was misunderstood as an analysis of Russian strategy when likely the analysis was of the methods the United States executes against Russia and other competitors in which regime change is the ultimate objective. While the former may be an accurate assessment of the United States' employment of all instruments of national power to achieve strategic objectives, Russia's actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine are clear examples of Putin employing a calculated fusion of indirect, asymmetric, and non-lethal methods to achieve political and strategic objectives within the gray zone.

The United States continues to improve massive defense spending budgets and research, fund, and develop advanced technological weapons systems and capabilities to counter potential adversaries across all domains of war-

fare—air, land, sea, space, cyberspace, and information. But instead of challenging the United States head-on in a technology-by-technology conventional military fight, peer adversaries, and strategic competitors such as Russia will increasingly seek alternative methods to destabilize and delegitimize its biggest competitors—namely the United States and its NATO allies—in order to alter the international balance of power in the post-Cold War era. Determined to dismantle what it perceives as a unipolar world in which the United States wields unchecked influence and power, Putin has focused his comparatively limited financial resources on developing and employing asymmetric tactics and unconventional methods as a means to gain legitimacy and power in the global arena.

With the concepts espoused by Gerasimov in "The Value of Science is in the Foresight" as a guide, Putin successfully employed the synergistic fusion of a wide range of hybrid warfare tactics—with a heavy emphasis on information warfare—in Crimea and eastern Ukraine to achieve its objectives. Gerasimov in his namesake document concluded,

no matter what forces the enemy has, no matter how well-developed his forces and means of armed conflict may be, forms and methods for overcoming them can be found. He will always have vulnerabilities, and that means that adequate means of opposing him exist.¹⁴

The methods most likely to be employed by Russia include an arsenal of hybrid warfare tactics that if not studied and challenged, have the potential to destabilize the international balance of power. With its focus on asymmetric and unconventional tactics employed in the gray zone between traditional peace and war paradigms, hybrid warfare seems to be the new normal in countering Western democracy and U.S. global influence.

Notes

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2. Department of Defense, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

3. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations*, (Washington, DC: 2017).

4. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO Capstone Concept, Hybrid Threats Description and Context, IMSM-0292-2010, 31 May 2010.

5. Melanie Amann et al., "The Hybrid War: Russia's Propaganda Campaign Against Germany," *Der Spiegel*, (February 2016), available at <http://www.spiegel.de>.

6. Molly K. McKew, "The Gerasimov Doctrine," *POLITICO*, (September/October 2017), available at <https://www.politico.com>.

7. Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science is in the Foresight: The New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," trans. by Robert Coalson, *Military-Industrial Kurier*, (February 2013), available at <http://usacac.army.mil>.

8. U.S. Congress, *House Armed Services Committee Hearing 22 March, Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare"*, (Washington, DC: March 2017).

9. Keir Giles, "Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power," *Chatham House*, (March 2016), available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org>.

10. Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Michael Carpenter, "How to Stand Up to the Kremlin: Defending Democracy Against its Enemies," *Foreign Affairs*, (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations January/February 2017).

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12. Timothy L. Thomas, "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, (Abingdon on Thames, UK: Routledge, 2004).

13. Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," *Military Review*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, January 2016).

14. "The Value of Science is in the Foresight."

