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Understanding Russia's Measures of War

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Abstract

In the context of NATO and its member states seeking to enhance deterrence and defence postures and looking ahead to 2030, the article argues for a shift from seeing Moscow's activities as "measures short of war," blurring the lines between war and peace, toward greater clarity on Russian military strategy and the blurring of lines between the offensive and the defensive.

Introduction

NATO is attempting to look to the future. Through the spring and summer of 2020, the alliance launched the NATO 2030 reflection process to make sure that the "alliance and its member states are prepared for new threats and challenges." This process has three broad priorities: to ensure political strength, military strength, and a more global approach. It includes and seeks to enhance the alliance's deterrence and defence posture that has taken shape over the last two years, not least by developing a new Military Strategy. In this context, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, Chairman of NATO's Military Committee, recently described an effective deterrence posture as being one that convinces a potential aggressor that the consequences of coercion or conflict outweigh the potential gains.

If NATO points to a number of challenges and threats, Russia stands out as one of the most prominent concerns driving this reinvigoration of military and political strength: Moscow's aggressive actions are seen to constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security and the rules-based order. Indeed, since the mid-2010s, the question of how to deter and defend against threats posed by Russia has been the key concern driving the Euro-Atlantic discussion about security. Much attention has focused on the annexation of Crimea, the destabilization of eastern Ukraine, and Russian "hybrid actions"—including interference in domestic politics and elections through disinformation and propaganda campaigns—and malicious cyber activities.

These challenges are defined as being in the "gray zone" between normal state relations and armed conflict. This view was well illustrated in September 2020 by the UK's Chief of General Staff, General Sir Nicholas Carter, who stated that Russia cannot "afford to go to war as we define it, so Moscow seeks to achieve its objectives by using attacks below the threshold that would prompt a war fighting response." His characterization of Moscow's approach to conflict as being one that was

"predominantly political rather than kinetic," and a continuous struggle that blends non-military and military instruments in a way that blurs the lines between war and peace, reflects what has been a widespread orthodoxy since the mid-2010s. Yet rather than looking ahead to 2030, thinking about the challenges Russia poses appears to be anchored to the mid-2010s and important aspects of Russian thinking about war are being missed.

Gerasimov's "Sacred Text" and Russian Measures Short of War

The characterization of Moscow as using "measures short of war" emerged in the mid-2010s with the sense that Russia had shaped a new form of warfare: "hybrid warfare," a "fight in the shadows" in which non-military means such as information warfare, propaganda, and cyber-attacks predominated. Such hybrid warfare was thus tantamount to an epithet for a wide range of hostile actions in which military force played only a small part; instead the measures were intended to emphasize ambiguity, to deceive, subvert, influence and destabilize societies, to coerce sovereign governments and to disrupt or undermine an existing regional order. Only in this asymmetric way could Moscow hope to gain an advantage over the West.

Much of this understanding of Russian activity was based on a narrow and partial reading of an article published under the name of the then newly appointed Chief of the Russian General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov, in early 2013, an article that became something of a sacred text for those seeking to understand Russia. But an over-reliance on—and misinterpretation of—this one source has warped Euro-Atlantic views of how Russia understands war, giving rise to a series of epithets attempting to depict Russian activity. These include, among others, "Russian hybrid warfare," the "Gerasimov Doctrine," "gray zone operations," "non-linear warfare," and "liminal warfare." Some believed that this set a doctrinal model for assessing future Russian activity; others

¹ This article is based on: Andrew Monaghan, *Dealing with the Russians* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019); *How Moscow Understands War and Military Strategy* (forthcoming: Washington, D.C.: Centre for Naval Analysis, 2020).

even suggested that with its emphasis on such asymmetric approaches, the Russian military now sought to avoid the use of violence.

This has served to create considerable confusion about Russian thinking, intentions, capabilities, and actions. Gerasimov did indeed write that the role of non-military means in war had grown, to the extent that they exceeded the power of military force. He also pointed to the role of special operations forces and even the blurring of the lines between peace and war. But these epithets do not relate to actual Russian military concepts (Russian officials and observers were emphatic that hybrid warfare is not a Russian concept but a *Western* one). Moreover, they served to anchor Western thinking about Russia to the methods used in the annexation of Crimea and the early period of the outbreak of war in Ukraine, even as conditions and Russian actions were evolving.

Thinking in these terms served to draw a veil over the ongoing importance of conventional aspects of war-fighting in Russian thinking and action—what might be called Russia's measures of war. Yet these more traditional conventional measures were very visible, not least at the battles of Debaltsevo, Donbass airport, and Ilovaisk, during which much of the fighting involved high-intensity combat, including massed bombardments. And just as the Euro-Atlantic focus on hybrid warfare was reaching its peak, Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war again emphasized Russia's growing conventional capability.

Any reference to Gerasimov's reflections on the growing importance of non-military means in Russian thinking must therefore be balanced against President Putin's statement in 2015 that "a great deal has been done over the course of the past year to expand the potential of our armed forces ... Russia has reached a new level of operational use of its troops." And by 2017, senior officials were stating that the Russian armed forces were emerging on a "principally new level of military readiness" and that improvements in combat capabilities meant that it was possible to extend Russia's military presence in strategic areas of the world.

War in Russian Thinking

But Gerasimov himself had already suggested this, and the broader context of the Russian defence community's debate about war offered a very different view to that found in the Euro-Atlantic discussion. Even in his 2013 article, Gerasimov had highlighted the importance of the military means of conducting war, noting that military actions are becoming more dynamic and pointing to the role of mobile groups of forces. He has also written on 21st-century blitzkrieg and the significance of territorial defence. In a noteworthy article in 2017 entitled the "World on the Brink of War," he stated

that an analysis of the characteristic features and tendencies in the development of contemporary war "indicates a common quality to all: the use of military force."

This "World on the Brink of War" article is significant because it reflects a reappraisal of the conceptual aspects of war that has been underway in Russia since the mid-2010s as the Russian defence community attempts to understand war's changing character. Again, Gerasimov acknowledged the mixed methods of struggle and the application of political, economic, diplomatic, and other non-military measures. This created a new perception of peacetime, he suggested. But (again) he emphasized both that the spectrum of reasons and justifications for using military force is broadening and it is now used more often, and that the main characteristic of today's wars and those of the foreseeable future is armed struggle.

If, therefore, there is ongoing debate in Russia about the characteristics of war between those who advocate a more classical definition and those who advance the case for the definition of war to be revised to include economic and information aspects, the classicists remain in the ascendency. War is still understood to be the extreme form of resolving policy disagreements, characterized by a sharp change in relations between the parties, and its content is armed conflict.

And while the changing character of war remains a subject for debate, the focus has now shifted to the question of military strategy in contemporary conditions. In 2019, for instance, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that "conflicts of the new generation reflect the merging of classical and asymmetric means of conducting armed conflict, where military actions are short and fast-flowing and there is simply no time to correct mistakes"—and therefore Russia needed to "modernize its theory of armed confrontation."

This has significant consequences for our understanding of how the Russian leadership thinks of war. And again, Gerasimov sheds a light on this that too rarely illuminates the Euro-Atlantic discussion about Russia. Addressing the Russian Academy of Military Science in 2019, he stated that the priority of military strategy is the study of the means of increasing Russia's combat power, not least the size and quality of the armed forces and their level of preparation and combat readiness. Indeed, the main content of military strategy, he stated, even in an era of new spheres of confrontation in modern conflicts, is about the question of preparation for war and its conduct in the first instance by armed forces. While there are non-military measures that affect the course and outcome of the war, these are separate activities with their own strategies, means of action and resources which the military should coordinate rather than direct.

Noteworthy, too, was his emphasis on three features of Russian military strategy: an enhanced system of territorial defence; an “active defence strategy” that frames measures for pre-emptive neutralization of threats to state security; and a “strategy of limited actions” that seeks to carry out tasks for the protection and promotion of Russia’s national interests. These features of military strategy chime with a broader strategic outlook that emphasizes growing global competition for resources, trade routes, and access to markets, a competition that is seen in Moscow as likely to grow through the 2020s, and thus to require the ability to project power.

Conclusions

It may be that an effective deterrence posture is one that convinces a potential aggressor that the consequences of coercion or conflict outweigh the potential gains. But it can only be so effective on the basis of an ability to communicate: being able both to transmit signals to the adversary and receive the adversary’s signals in turn. This requires a dynamic and evolving understanding of the adversary.

If NATO is attempting to look to the future to address evolving challenges and strengthen the alliance, however, there is too strong a sense that, at least where Russian activity is concerned, Euro-Atlantic thinking

remains stuck in the mid-2010s even as a new stage is taking shape in Russia’s conceptualization of war and military strategy. If references to the mythical “Gerasimov doctrine” are finally decreasing (though still too frequent in policy circles), the “sacred text” of his 2013 article remains the central point of reference for many in the policy and analytical community. This could be useful—his revealing references to Russian military thought, his emphasis on the importance in contemporary warfare of mobile groups of forces, and his discussion of Libya are all instructive. But many of these remain unnoticed, let alone analyzed. More importantly, much has since been said by Gerasimov himself and other senior figures that is more illuminating about Russian military thinking and strategy—Russia’s measures of war.

Coming to terms with these “measures of war” will require a shift in thinking beyond the blurring of the lines between war and peace toward an understanding of Russian military strategy, and thus the blurring of the lines between the offensive and the defensive. Without this shift, the alliance and its member states will become engaged in the wrong competition with an abstract and largely mythical adversary, leaving themselves open to strategic and operational surprise. As a result, deterrence and defence will become increasingly reactive as the risks of misunderstanding and miscalculation grow.

About the Author

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