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REVISING THE THEORY OF HYBRID WAR

Lessons from Ukraine

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The Issue

From the Editor: Experts in the West that were surprised by the rapid seizure of Crimea by Russia-backed “little green men” in 2014 have spent much time since then discussing the role of so-called “hybrid warfare” in Russian military doctrine. The Kremlin’s subsequent invasion of Donbas, however, has turned into a protracted conflict with the surprises and miscalculations that mark any war. Here is CEPA Andrássy Fellow Krisztián Jójárt’s assessment of lessons learned by Moscow in eastern Ukraine and the implications for the West.

Today, the term “hybrid warfare” is widely used to describe Russia’s approach to the war it has been waging in Ukraine since 2014. But this notion has largely been absent from Russian military literature. Some Russian strategists only adopted the term after its use by numerous Western journalists and experts. How has the Kremlin’s military thinking evolved with the introduction of “hybrid warfare” into the equation? And what are the implications for the West when considering potential hybrid threats in the future?
INTRODUCTION

William J. Nemeth, author of the term “hybrid warfare,” originally applied the concept to the tactics of Chechen militants who used a combination of irregular and regular combat operations against Russian forces two decades ago.¹ Nemeth argues that the unique hybrid nature of Chechen society—one in transition from a traditional, clan-based structure to a more modern one—engendered a form of warfare that was neither purely guerilla nor purely conventional. Rather, it consisted of a mix of guerilla tactics with operations that implemented Soviet and Western military doctrines, including the sophisticated use of modern technology.² However, the term is now widely used to describe Russia’s approach to the war it has been waging in Ukraine since 2014, one in which Russia has used a combination of irregular and conventional techniques supported by modern technology, especially during the early stages of its invasion. However, a very important difference between the Chechen and the Ukraine wars is that so-called hybrid warfare in Ukraine was planned and coordinated by a state actor—Russia—and executed during the first months of the fighting largely by proxies under Kremlin control. Looking forward, what can the West learn from the evolution of Russian military thinking on hybrid warfare?

HYBRID WAR AND RUSSIAN MILITARY THOUGHT

The notion of “hybrid war”—гибридная война—was absent from Russian military literature before 2014. It only took root in Russian military thinking after Western journalists and numerous experts popularized the notion to describe the Russian way of war in Ukraine. Ironically, Russian military experts often claim it is the West which wages hybrid war against Russia rather than vice versa.³ They use it to describe a perceived Western grand strategy aiming to weaken and contain Russia. Aleksandr Bartosh, member of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, has claimed that “[h]ybrid wars actually transform into a new type of international confrontation and along with strategic nuclear deterrence provide an effective instrument of non-nuclear deterrence for Russia’s opponents.”⁴ Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, called the current confrontation between Russia and the West the era of “Hybrid War,” an analogy to the Cold War.⁵ While it may be the case, as many Russian military thinkers claim, that the West uses hybrid warfare against Russia, what is more important is that the general consensus in Moscow is that Russia is in a new era of confrontation with the West.

Russian military thinkers believe that the future of warfare is largely determined by technology. Consequently, the technologically most-advanced countries (above all, the United States) are able to dictate whether a given modern war will be hybrid – defined as a mix of proxy and conventional war featuring the dominant use of non-military methods and high technology.⁶ Thus, if the United States prefers hybrid warfare, then that is the general form a given conflict will take. This ability confers a significant advantage. As former Soviet Chief of the General Staff Vasily Sokolovsky wrote: “[t]he knowledge of the general laws of armed conflict makes it possible for the military leader to foresee the nature of military events in a future war and to use these laws successfully in conducting the war, rationally directing the efforts of the armed forces. This is the subjective aspect of the use of objective laws...
The laws of strategy are objective and apply impartially to both hostile sides.”

That said, many Russian military thinkers believe hybrid warfare is the most likely form of war both today and in the future. They believe the side that better adapts to these “objective factors” is the one that will win. Indeed, another article by Bartosh, “Hybrid war – transition from failure to victory,” contemplates how the understanding and use of laws of hybrid war can lead to a turning point—and to the eventual winning—of a conflict. While he writes about hybrid war from the usual Russian perspective—that the West is an aggressor conducting hybrid warfare against Russia—he emphasizes that Russia’s operations in Crimea and in Syria demonstrate the effectiveness of Russia’s “non-linear strategy” in countering the West’s hybrid war. Non-linearity in war means that the outcome is not directly proportional to the efforts; so it is likely that Bartosh’s acknowledgement of successful non-linear approaches in Crimea and Syria is a credit to Moscow’s relatively minor efforts that resulted in a decisive and positive outcome for Russia. Since Bartosh’s article emphasizes the non-linear nature of hybrid war, it is safe to assume that for him “non-linear strategy” is a synonym for hybrid warfare. Consequently, Bartosh’s statements about the nature of hybrid warfare are at least as relevant to understanding Russia’s own strategy as to understanding Moscow’s perception of Western tactics used against it. Moreover, it is highly likely that the theoretical problems presented by Bartosh—for instance, the phenomenon of friction being more impactful in a hybrid than in a conventional war—actually derive from the very practical challenges Russia has faced during its hybrid warfare against Ukraine. Three challenges in particular warrant special attention: friction, fatigue, and the need for an exit strategy.

“Many Russian military thinkers believe hybrid warfare is the most likely form of war both today and in the future.”

Before launching its offensive against Ukraine, the Russian military leadership did not accurately account for the negative effects the phenomenon of “friction” poses on military operations. Carl von Clausewitz’s notion of “friction” refers to the factors that distinguish military theory and planning from what actually takes place on the battlefield. As Clausewitz notes, “[a]ctivity in War is movement in a resistant medium.” Examples of friction in war include danger, physical effort, uncertainty and unreliability of information, and accidental events. Despite the fundamental importance of these factors to a successful strategy in any conflict, Andrei Kokoshin, an academic

HIGH FRICTION IN HYBRID WARS
with the Russian Academy of Sciences, claims that after the Second World War, friction had disappeared entirely from Russian military thinking.13

Bartosh reintroduced the concept of friction into more recent military literature, particularly in his theoretical discussion of hybrid warfare. He argues that friction is even more impactful and its sources more diverse in hybrid versus conventional warfare, due to both the wide range of methods employed and the many actors in hybrid conflicts. When a state simultaneously employs a wide combination of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal activity to achieve political goals, therefore, the role of unpredictability increases significantly. While disorganized leadership and diverse proxy actors can help achieve the aggressor’s goals by sowing chaos, proxies are also causes of friction and sometimes evade the full control of the aggressor. Technology and the lawless nature of hybrid war enable these actors to sidestep international norms and drive the conflict toward a free-for-all game of anarchy and chaos. Friction thus can work to the disadvantage of the aggressor.

Bartosh’s observations about the sources of friction in hybrid warfare are seen in the fighting in Ukraine. Indeed, the above elements of friction resulted from the presence of different pro-Russia proxy groups in Donbas. Infighting between different militias in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR/LNR) was common, as were insubordinate commanders acting against the Kremlin’s will.

Moscow has managed to reduce this friction by strengthening its control over its proxies with violent crackdowns on rogue militias and likely ordering the assassination of insubordinate commanders.14 According to Ukrainian military sources, Russia has not only solidified its grip on so-called proxies through such methods, but practically micromanages their military activities at the battalion level. This is demonstrated by the presence of Russian military officers within the upper ranks of militias in DNR/LNR. While the commanders of these military formations may be locals, deputy-commanders subordinated to the Russian Armed Forces are in charge in key areas.15 Russia also ensures similar tactical-level micromanagement in its proxy war in Syria over the forces of the Syrian Arab Army and other militia units.16 However, as in Donbas, Russia has also faced serious disciplinary and coordination problems among its proxies in Syria.17

Thus, based on Bartosh’s analysis and the practical experience Russia has gained on the ground in Ukraine and Syria, it is very likely that, from an operational perspective, future hybrid wars will be better coordinated and increasingly centralized and controlled.

“After the Second World War, friction had disappeared entirely from Russian military thinking.”
The Blurred Line Between Strategy and Tactics

Bartosh claims that tactical actions can have strategic implications in hybrid war.\textsuperscript{18,19} This is due to the non-linear nature of hybrid war. Outcome is not directly proportionate to input in non-linear war. In the context of friction, we can assume not only war efforts but also tactical errors can have unintended strategic consequences. The case of the Malaysian Airlines civilian MH17 aircraft shot down over eastern Ukraine in July 2014 supports his argument. In that instance, Russia supplied its proxies in Donbas with effective air defense systems to restrict the Ukrainian Air Force’s room of maneuver in the air and to sever the aerial supply of Ukrainian ground forces. However, the tactical-operational advantage of strong area denial led to grave strategic consequences for Russia—namely solidifying Western support for a robust sanctions regime—after a Russian Buk missile system shot down the airliner.

FATIGUE

The long duration of the war in eastern Ukraine has illuminated another notion of Clausewitz that Russian military planners may not have not sufficiently considered: the “fatigue” or “exertion” of war. Bartosh writes that hybrid war drains not only manpower and military hardware, but also the strategy, ideological concepts, tasks, and methods of war waging. War fatigue also can force a reassessment or total change of strategic goals.\textsuperscript{20}

Such fatigue was probably among the factors that led Moscow to change its goals in Ukraine. Originally, the Kremlin’s strategic objective appeared to be the creation of a land corridor between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula or perhaps even outright annexation.\textsuperscript{21,22} As the possibility of these scenarios faded, Russia’s goals shifted toward the far less ambitious goal of supporting the so-called separatist regions, thereby weakening Ukraine and preventing it from entering either NATO or the European Union.\textsuperscript{23}
Since 2017, Russia’s military advantages have slipped further.\(^{24}\) While Moscow is constantly trying to impose additional costs in the war in Ukraine, it has lost military dominance. Recapturing it would require the deployment of significant numbers of Russian forces to Donbas, higher casualties, and possible popular opposition to the conflict at home.\(^{25}\) According to Ukrainian sources, the proxy fighters are increasingly worried about the prospect of a Ukrainian offensive. Recent Russian military articles underscore such a possibility.\(^{26,27}\) This is fatigue in action: Russia has reassessed its strategic goals as its military advantage has slipped.

**NEED FOR AN EXIT STRATEGY**

Because fatigue and exertion affect both the offender and the defender in hybrid war, both parties need an exit strategy to consolidate achieved goals. This conclusion contradicts earlier “hybrid war theories” put on paper by Gerasimov, Chekinov, and Bogdanov, which did not sufficiently account for the possibility of prolonged conflict. They predicted the total paralysis of the victim country as a result of purely non-military methods, even before the open use of armed force.\(^{28,29}\) Here Bartosh differentiates “color revolutions”—grass-roots movements using nonviolent resistances such as street demonstrations and labor strikes to protest against authoritarian governments—from hybrid wars. While both include extensive use of indirect means, color revolutions—due to their short timeframe—belong under the category of maneuver warfare, Bartosh concludes, whereas hybrid wars belong under attrition warfare.\(^{30,31}\) Like hybrid wars, Russia views color revolutions as a Western tool to topple regimes of countries in Russia’s near abroad. However, Bartosh notes that color revolutions do not work against stable countries. So an antagonist should prepare for an exhaustive hybrid war if it wishes to continue pursuing its desired goal *vis-à-vis* the target country.\(^{32}\)

**IMPLICATIONS**

Russian thinking on hybrid war is constantly evolving. The experience of the war in Ukraine has had a decisive impact on this progression as it has shed light on certain drawbacks which Russian military planners likely did not consider before invasion. NATO and other countries concerned about Russian hybrid aggression in the future should consider the following implications:

> “Because fatigue and exertion affect both the offender and the defender in hybrid war, both parties need an exit strategy to consolidate achieved goals.”
1. **Russian hybrid warfare is not a “magic trick” and has serious limitations.** Contrary to earlier statements of Russia’s Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov and other prominent Russian military figures, hybrid warfare cannot bring about the quick collapse of countries solely by relying on non-military means.

2. **The party that practices hybrid warfare is not insulated from its blowback.** Hybrid war provides deniability for the aggressor state—at least in the beginning of the conflict—as it relies on a wide range of proxies. However, the aggressor does not have full control over its proxies who may pursue parochial interests rather than those of their patron.

3. **Hybrid war is a strategy of attrition.** Hybrid conflicts, as a form of indirect warfare, aim to exhaust enemy resources and their will to fight. Logically, countries with stable political systems and prosperous economies are far from ideal targets for hybrid war. War fatigue not only affects the target but also the aggressor. As the war in Ukraine has underscored, Russia has paid a grave economic and political price for its aggression and the burden on Moscow is unlikely to lessen anytime soon. If it is considering launching hybrid wars in the future, the Kremlin should prepare for enduring and massive Western economic sanctions, as well as problems that will weaken the Russian military’s ability to conduct further military operations.
Endnotes


3 Valery Gerasimov claims that the U.S. and NATO countries use hybrid means. He also notes that the notion of hybrid war is used by Western media, but it is too early to use it as an established term. See: Валерий Герасимов, “Мир на гранях войны. Мало учитывать сегодняшние вызовы, надо прогнозировать будущее,” VPK, March 13, 2017, https://vpk-news.ru/articles/35591.


10 Vladislav Surkov, who has been a political advisor for the Kremlin and is widely regarded as one of the architects behind Russia’s plan of attack against Ukraine, also uses the term “non-linear war” in a short story he write under the pseudo-name Natan Dubovitsky. For the original short story, see: Натан Дубовицкий, “Без неба,” Русский Пионер, March 12, 2014, http://ruspioner.ru/honest/m/single/4131.


15 This information was shared with the author by a senior Ukrainian military officer. Александр Дворников, “Штабы для новых войн,” VPK, July 23, 2018, https://vpk-news.ru/articles/43971.

16 Wagner mercenaries launched an attack against the U.S.-supported Syrian Defense Forces. The U.S. military responded with a massive artillery and air strike on the advancing troops and tanks. Because the Wagner troops continued their operation despite repeated warnings from the United States to the Russian party via the established deconfliction communication line, it is very likely that Wagner’s plan of attack was not coordinated with the Russian military. See: András Rácz and Krisztián Jójárt, “A Deir ez-Zór incidens: amerikai légicsapás a Wagner orosz zsoldosai ellen Szíriában,” Center for Strategic and Defense Studies, February 26, 2018, http://www.mat.hu/hun/downloads/docs/SVKK_2018_8.pdf.


18 This observation is not Bartosh’s own. Aleksandr Svechin was one of the first who noted that tactical actions can take strategic scope under certain political circumstances. See: Timothy Thomas, Russia Military Strategy. Impacting 21st Century Reform and Geopolitics (Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2015), p. 63. This observation is also noted by other contemporary Russian military thinkers in relation to current information technology and the role of information warfare. As they argue, technology allows for the political leadership to have direct influence not only on the strategic and operational but also on the tactical levels. At the same time, tactical events can also change the state’s political aims. П.А Дульнев and В.И Орлянский, “Основные изменения в характере вооруженной борьбы первой трети XIX века,” Вестник, Академии Военных Наук, 2015/1, p. 45.


20 A former FSB general said in an interview in 2014 that it would be “totally foolish” to leave Crimea alone and that a land connection is needed between Russia and the Crimea. See: Марина Мартова, “Генерал ФСБ: Стрелков в Украине действовал на 90% по собственной инициативе,” Revising the Theory of Hybrid War, 9
Igor 'Strelkov' Girkin also admitted that the Novorossiya project was nothing more than propaganda and that the true goal was a Crimea-like takeover and not the establishment of an independent state. See: Dmitry Chekalkin, "How Russia invaded Ukraine as told by FSB colonel Girkin," Euromaidan Press, December 7, 2014, http://euromaidanpress.com/2014/12/07/fsb-colonel-girkin-tells-details-of-how-russia-invaded-ukraine-in-twice-censored-interview/.


Ibid.


While describing color revolutions as warfare might appear incorrect, it fits into the contemporary Russian understanding of war. As Gerasimov’s often-cited argument goes, the line between war and peace is blurred. This suggests that the Russian military elite believes that Russia is engaged in war that is fought using non-military means.