

Russia's Renewed Military Thinking: Non-Linear Warfare and Reflexive Control

by Can Kasapoglu¹



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Introduction: A Renewed Russian Military Thinking

Since the Russo – Georgian War in 2008, the Russian Armed Forces' new way of warfighting has been drawing attention. Especially following the Crimean campaign, which ended up with the illegal annexation of the peninsula in March 2014, and given Moscow's ongoing open and covert military activities in Eastern Ukraine and recently in Syria, many experts started to focus their assessments on what they call Russia's hybrid, or non-linear, warfare. On the other hand, there are also some voices in the Western strategic community advancing the analysis that Moscow's understanding of non-linear warfare is simply an "attempt to catch up conceptually to the realities of modern war with which the United States has been grappling for over a decade in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere."²

Indeed, the Russian and the Western understandings of hybrid warfare differ to a great extent. Without a doubt, one of the most explanatory conceptualizations on hybrid warfare was offered by Frank Hoffman in his 2007 work. He defined hybrid warfare as a fusion of war forms that blurs regular and irregular warfare. Hoffman underlined that hybrid warfare would incorporate "a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder."³ Therefore, referring to this conceptualization, it would be fair to say that from a Western standpoint, the key word for defining hybrid wars would be 'multi-modality.' In parallel, NATO preferred to use the expression of "wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures

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² M. Kofman and M. Rojansky, *A Closer Look at Russia's Hybrid War*, Kennan Cable, Wilson Center, no. 7, 2015.

³ F. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Virginia, 2007, pp. 7-8.



employed in a highly integrated design” when defining hybrid threats in 2014 Wales Summit declaration.⁴

On the other hand, in his report Russian expert Andrew Korybko defines hybrid warfare, or “indirect warfare” as he frequently preferred using, being a Western effort in general that aims to destabilize Russia’s neighborhood through “colored revolutions,” fifth column-driven regime changes, subversive use of social media and internet, and a “Lead From Behind” policy.⁵ In his work, Korybko places Russia in a defensive, even victimized position suffering from destabilizing and subversive hybrid warfare aggressions. Of course, one could label Korybko being politically biased, and such a claim could well have a fair point. Still, such a label would not help us to get a good grip on the Russian understanding of hybrid warfare. Korybko’s negative stance on hybrid warfare might be emanating from the Western innovation of the concept and / or Russia’s geopolitical uneasiness with the West’s influence on the geography that Moscow prefers to call ‘the neighborhood.’ Yet, being biased or not, Korybko’s conceptualization is still defensive, and we are looking for an analytical framework to explain Russia’s understanding of offensive non-linear or hybrid warfare.

Within the aforementioned context, this study argues that while the key word for depicting the Western understanding of hybrid warfare remains ‘multi-modality,’ the key word for the Russians’ offensive non-linear warfare paradigm would be ‘penetration.’ In fact, a 2005 RAND Corporation report, penned by Sean Edwards, might be ‘accidentally’ guiding us to the roots of contemporary Russian offensive non-linear warfare paradigm. Although Edwards’ work intended to focus on operational art, tactical approach, and maneuver aspects of non-linear warfare, he touched upon the Soviet Deep Operation Theory which was advanced by Marshal Mikhail Tukachevsky. In brief, Tukachevsky considered tanks as “an integral part of a combined arms team,” and thereby, the Soviet marshal argued that along with other traditional duties, Soviet tanks were to be used for “breaking-out into the operational

depth” in order to cut the adversary’s communications, destroy its logistics, deep-deployed assets, and command mechanisms. Furthermore, Soviet military planners in the 1980s based their tank operations on Tukachevsky’s understanding, and generated “Operational Maneuver Groups” that were small enough to conduct deep maneuvers in rear areas of the enemy, but at the same time, large and powerful enough (some 500 tanks) to bring enough fighting power.⁶

In fact, as this paper explains in detail, the aforementioned deep penetration theory could be considered as the very determining basis for the contemporary reorganization of the Russian Armed Forces’ elite units, and even for the establishment of a Russian Rapid Reaction Force that would be centered on the airborne troops (VDV).

However, still there could be unaddressed gaps when depicting Tukachevsky’s deep penetration theory as an explanatory framework for the Russian understanding of contemporary offensive non-linear warfare. Above all, what Tukachevsky underscored was to be a military manner of conduct within a declared, conventional warfare situation. Yet, Moscow seized Crimea in 2014 through ‘deep penetration’ of its military, intelligence, and information warfare assets, but without open armed conflict or inter-state conventional war.

At this point, another Soviet-legacy theory that this paper will explain in detail, ‘reflexive control,’ comes into the picture. In brief, ‘reflexive control’ refers to the systematic methods of shaping the adversary’s perceptions, thereby decisions, and latently forcing him to act voluntarily in a way that would be favorable to Russia’s strategic interests.

In sum, it could be argued that Moscow’s non-linear warfare understanding reflects a ‘new,’ or ‘renewed,’ Russian military thinking, not a strategy or concept. It is a ‘renewed’ thinking as it combines the Soviet-legacy Deep Operation Theory and Reflexive Control Theory in order to create a ‘disguised blitzkrieg impact.’ In doing so, Moscow uses a core group of elite troops along with

⁴ NATO 2014 Wales Summit Declaration, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm, (accessed 2 October 2015).

⁵ For an explanatory work on the Russian understanding of ‘hybrid warfare’ see A. Korybko, *Hybrid Wars: The Indirect Adaptive Approach to Regime Change*, Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia, Moscow, 2015.

⁶ S. J.A. Edwards, *Swarming and the Future of Warfare*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2005, pp. 56-59.



a wide-array of non-military means while concealing its true geopolitical intentions and surreptitiously influencing its competitors' decision-making algorithms.

Non-Linear Warfare and the 'Gerasimov Doctrine'

The Russians' conduct of hybrid warfighting breaks ground in operational art and the military strategic thought, as it strongly stresses the efficiency of intelligence and strategic forecasting efforts.

The new Russian military thinking underlines "undeclared wars" and nonlinear conduct of warfighting. In a February 2013 article for the Russian 'Military Industrial Kurier' on contemporary Russian military thought, General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation's Armed Forces, frankly argued that there is a blurring divide between 'war and peace' in the 21st century threat landscape: "Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template."⁷ According to the top Russian general;

"... a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war."⁸ Even more importantly, General Gerasimov argued that "the role of non-military 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 non-military measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military

means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces."

As the Gerasimov doctrine underscores, the contemporary Russian military thinking shifts away from traditional military methods, in which military action follows strategic deployment and declaration of war, large ground units conduct frontal clashes under strict hierarchy, and manpower/fire power remain the main determinants of war. Instead, the new Russian military thought focuses on "non-contact clashes between highly maneuverable units" within undeclared wars, peace-time military action, use of "armed civilians," and "management of troops in a unified informational sphere."¹⁰

The renewed Russian military thinking poses risks and threats to the North Atlantic Alliance's defense and security in several ways. Firstly, although Moscow's official rhetoric voices some legal and grounds for its recent aggressions and interventions, Russian geopolitical calculus is the very basis for the conduct of non-linear warfare. In this respect, it would be noteworthy to remind that the "Liberation of Crimea" medal, which decorates some participants of the Russian campaign in the peninsula, is dated February 20 – March 18. Clearly, 'the medal' does not start the campaign on February 22, 2014 when President Yanukovich fled Kiev.¹¹ Thus, the new military thinking, by all means, depends on a cold blooded *realpolitik* approach and 'necessary expansionism.' Secondly, it paralyzes the target state's main functions by all means necessary to implement 'deep penetration.' In this regard, the Ukrainian intelligence apparatus, and probably high political echelons too, was so systematically penetrated by several Russian intelligence agencies (GRU, FSB, and SVR) that although the Ukrainian General Staff warned Kiev about "unusual Russian activity in Crimea"

⁷ For English translation, see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-coalson/valery-gerasimov-putin-ukraine_b_5748480.html, For the original Russian text, see: http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf, (accessed 28 September 2015)

⁸ For English translation, see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-coalson/valery-gerasimov-putin-ukraine_b_5748480.html, For the original Russian text, see: http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf, (accessed 28 September 2015).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ J. Berzins, *Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Forces*, National Defence Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research, 2014, p. 4.

¹¹ R. N. Mcdermott, *Brothers Disunited: Russia's Use of Military Power in Ukraine*, The Foreign Military Studies Office, Kansas, 2015, p. 9.



in January 2014, this was completely ignored.¹² Thirdly, deployment of nuclear warhead delivery-capable, high-precision Iskander-M missiles and S-400 long range, advanced air and missile defense systems in Kaliningrad sends a strong politico-military signal to the West.¹³ Last but not least, current Russian Military Doctrine (2014) itself openly categorizes NATO as one of the “main external military dangers.”¹⁴

Although Russia overall tends to adopt a new military thinking, which has indoctrinated several echelons of the Russian Armed Forces with the new strategic thought, finding a viable compromise among Moscow’s political-military elite for attaining adequate force generation and military modernization, as well as conducting the strategic, operational, and tactical requirements of the new doctrinal approach would not be an easy task. Clearly, in Clausewitzian words, in doing so Russia has to promote a massive ‘fog of war’ and ambiguous ‘center of gravity’ for its adversaries, while ensuring minimum ‘friction factor’ in its hybrid warfare campaigns. Such military thinking necessitates a highly centralized politico-military structure in Moscow, while requiring decentralized freedom of movement, permanent readiness, and combined arms warfighting capabilities at least at battalion level for elite formations.

It would be accurate to claim that catastrophic results of the first Russo-Chechen War (1994-1996) paved the ground for a comprehensive evolution of the Russian combined arms concepts. As Moscow was faced with a new fragmented battlefield of unconventional warfare with a high surprise factor and light but continuing casualties, the Russian military thinking began to attach utmost importance to combined arms units; mostly battalions that can sustain fighting for extended periods of time. Within this military context, Russian defense planners no longer perceive unconventional warfare solely as a light infantry mission, but a true combined

arms effort that tanks fulfill vital duties with infantry, supported by engineers, and under accompanying artillery with direct fire roles.¹⁵ In fact, this reorganization effort, namely organizing combined arms units below regiment or brigade level, is not new to the Russian military thinking. It is reported that “*artillery was attached in 77% of motorized rifle battalion exercises and 73% of tank battalion exercises. Attachments ran from a battery to several battalions, with a full artillery battalion being the most common (80%). Artillery was in support of 18% of motorized rifle battalion exercises and 13% of tank battalion exercises. Engineer elements (usually a platoon) were attached in 62% of motorized rifle battalion exercises and 57% of tank battalion exercises.*”¹⁶

Contemporary Russian military modernization is based on three main criteria; *modern weapons, readiness, and manpower*. Although the exact Russian depiction of ‘modern weapons’ remains ambiguous, readiness and manpower stand for, briefly, the ability to rapidly move from permanent basing positions especially for force protection, and a significant increase in combat capabilities and level of training of Russian military units.¹⁷ However, none of these main criteria would be solely adequate for assertive campaigns from the Western perspective, i.e. the annexation of Crimea, the 2008 invasion of Georgia and breaking of its territorial unity permanently, and the challenging military buildup in Syria at a time when US-led coalition is flying combat missions over Syrian skies. Therefore, the Russians would be in need of a ‘strategic disguise’ and some form of semi-covert ‘political warfare’ for their complex hybrid warfare strategy. Although many could think that the incumbent Russian elite have invented a new method for fulfilling all these tasks, in fact, they found what they needed deep in the Soviet theoretical studies, i.e. ‘reflexive control.’

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 8-10.

¹³ For a comprehensive assessment on Russian deployments see S. Forrs et al. “The Development of Russian Military Policy and Finland,” Finland National Defense University, Series 2, *Research Report no. 49*, Helsinki, 2013.

¹⁴ Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2014.

¹⁵ L. W. Grau, “*Restructuring the Tactical Russian Army for Unconventional Warfare*,” Red Diamond, Forth Levenworth, vol. 5 no. 2, 2014, pp. 4-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁷ K. Giles and A. Monaghan, “Russian Military Modernization-Goal in Sight,” *The Letort Papers*, SSI, 2014, pp. 2-3.



The Element of ‘Reflexive Control’ in Russian Hybrid Warfare Conduct

Berzins argues that Russia’s military strategy depends on three interrelated levels of doctrinal unilateralism, a strong adherence to legalism, and a systematic denial of use of open military force.¹⁸ Within this context, doctrinal unilateralism refers to the idea that legitimacy could be derived from using force successfully, while adherence to legalism refers to Moscow’s effort to base its actions on some “legal” grounds; and finally, the denial of use of open military force can be better understood given the Russian diplomatic rhetoric in Crimea.¹⁹

Although Berzins’ aforementioned points have valid grounds in depicting the Russian campaign’s main pillars, there could be another explanation for this manner of conduct other than “simply” military strategy. While the Russians have been following the aforementioned interrelated “strategy,” two questions need to be addressed: What kind of measures prevented the West from decisively reacting to Moscow’s territorial gain by threat and use of force? How did these same measures prevent the Kiev leadership from developing a swift and accurate understanding of the possible trajectory of the conflict and Kremlin’s actual intentions?

In fact, Russian information warfare and psychological operations in Ukraine are by no means entirely new or unique. Notably, the current Russian efforts to conceal its hybrid warfare campaign root back to the Soviet-legacy theory and the concept of ‘reflexive control.’ Without having a good understanding of ‘reflexive control’ operations, one cannot fully grasp Moscow’s *modus operandi*.

A concept more of military art than military science, effective ‘reflexive control’ over the adversary would render possible exerting utmost influence over his battle plans, his assessment of the situation, and the way of

warfighting. Within this theoretical context, a ‘reflex’ is tantamount to generating “certain model behavioral in the system” that is exposed to ‘reflexive control’ activity.²⁰ Therefore, the ‘control’ activity itself is to signal necessary reasons and motives to the ‘target system’ to make a significant impact on its decision-making process and perceptions. Within the aforementioned ‘control’ efforts, ‘reflex’ should be understood as a set of interrelated and specific procedures which aim to imitate the adversary’s reasoning and possible behavior in order to drag him into an unfavorable decision for himself.²¹

Based on the early Soviet concept of *maskirovka*, studies on ‘reflexive control’ evolved through several decades, i.e. scientific research (the early 1960s to late 1970s), practical orientation (late 1970s to early 1990s), psychological–pedagogical processes (early to mid-1990s), and the psycho-social processes (the late 1990s onward).²² The insidious merit of ‘reflexive control’ is the fact that the theory and related concepts have been designed to be executed at strategic, operational and tactical levels. Furthermore, the conduct of ‘reflexive control’ incorporates an advanced toolkit that utilizes means of hard power, disinformation and manipulation, tools of influencing the adversary’s decision-making algorithms, and altering the adversary’s response time simultaneously.²³

‘Reflexive control’ gives a fairly competitive edge to Russia, and constitutes a vital component of its hybrid warfare strategy. The theoretical approach and related concepts go well beyond psychological warfare, information warfare, and information operations in terms of direct and indirect effects on the battleground at strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Firstly, the primary ‘input’ of ‘reflexive control’ mechanism is carefully-tailored “information” that would drag the enemy towards a pre-determined decision, i.e. the intended output, voluntarily. Therefore, the theory and

¹⁸ J. Berzins, *Russia’s New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Forces*, National Defence Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research, 2014, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ T. Thomas, “Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, no. 7, 2004, 237-256.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*



related concepts have enjoyed mathematical and scientific components, as well as psycho-cultural and historical elements. Secondly, the Soviet roots of the theory well reflect a special focus on “control” and psychological elements of a totalitarian authority.²⁴ Thirdly and most importantly, being a Soviet theory and concept makes ‘reflexive control’ a product of Marxist-Leninist paradigm. According to this paradigm, “cognition results from the reflection of the material world in human mind, which determines social consciousness. Man’s intelligence and cognitive processes are dependent on his sensory awareness of the outside world, which in turn determines the content and the dimensions of his consciousness.”²⁵

In the light of the brief theoretical discussion above, it is argued that the current Russian approach to ‘reflexive control’ and *maskirovka* aims to manipulate Moscow’s competitors’ ‘sensory awareness of the outside world,’ and thereby, their consciousness about Russia’s aggressions through disinformation on the cognition that derives from ‘the material world.’ ‘The material world’ here could refer to the ongoing invasion in Georgia since 2008, or the fact that Moscow launched a war of conquest in Crimea. Besides, ‘the material world’ could well be tantamount to snap exercises conducted by the Russian Armed Force at NATO’s eastern doorstep. In other words, the contemporary Russian hybrid warfare conduct aims to create a ‘hallucinating fog of war’ and consistent deception that aims not to paralyze the West’s intelligence and anticipatory capabilities, but to ‘alter’ Western analytical end-results and perceptions of Russia’s strategic intentions.

As a matter of fact, since the very outset of the current conflict, Ukraine has been serving as a ‘laboratory’ that can be observed to determine the characteristics of the Russian ‘reflexive control’ concepts. At the strategic level, the Russians managed to confuse the West about their deployed troop numbers and true political-military goals in Ukraine for a long time. Furthermore, Moscow managed to keep a stance in Ukraine that cannot be

fully considered within the context of either “the law of belligerent occupation,” or –by no means– peaceful relations under contemporary international norms due to flow of Russian arms and military assistance to the separatists. As a result, the Russian Federation has managed to be recognized as one of the signatories of the Minsk accords, instead of a warring party, which does not hold Moscow primarily responsible for the settlement. At the tactical angle, in Crimea, the systematic Russian ‘reflexive control’ campaign has proven efficient by providing a critical cover of deception for Russian forces for executing deployments and maneuvers to take control of key facilities and positions,²⁶ as well as penetrating deeply to paralyze a possible Ukrainian response. At the operational level, the Russian military buildup along the border areas during the ‘stealthy invasion’ of Crimea did not only serve by pinning down Ukrainian military formations, but also by confusing the Kiev leadership and the West about the true scope and limits of the Russian intentions in Ukraine.

The Right Force Generation for ‘Reflexive Control’-Driven Hybrid Warfare

Without a doubt, the uniquely advanced way of fighting hybrid wars depicted above would demand an extraordinary force generation and doctrinal order of battle for Kremlin to reach its politico-military goals. Therefore, it would not be accurate to underscore the setbacks of “regular” branches and principal units of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in training and technological gaps, e.g. precision-guided munitions, in order to judge Moscow’s ability to run its hybrid warfare campaigns.

As indicated by Berzins, especially the Crimea campaign reflects the maturation of the Russian operations in the light of new military guidelines with 2020 reference:

“The campaign’s success can be measured by the fact that in just three weeks, and without a shot being

²⁴ For a comprehensive study published during the last years of Cold War see D. Chotikul, *The Soviet Theory of Reflexive Control in Historical and Psychocultural Perspective: A Preliminary Study*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey-California, 1986.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁶ M. Snegovaya, *Putin’s Information Warfare in Ukraine*, ISW, Washington D.C., 2015, pp. 15-17.



fired, the morale of the Ukrainian military was broken and all of their 190 bases had surrendered. Instead of relying on a mass deployment of tanks and artillery, the Crimean campaign deployed less than 10,000 assault troops –mostly naval infantry, already stationed in Crimea, backed by a few battalions of airborne troops and Spetsnaz commandos– against 16,000 Ukrainian military personnel. In addition, the heaviest vehicle used was the wheeled BTR-80 armored personnel carrier.”²⁷

Under the aforementioned circumstances, a limited number of elite forces, ‘reflexive control’ efforts by several agencies of the Russian state apparatus, speed, intentional ambiguity, and clandestineness within deep penetration operations remain the major assets and critical abilities that Moscow requires to run its hybrid warfare agenda. At the beginning of the incumbent Shoygu-Gerasimov military leadership, the understanding of speed in ground forces depended on a terrain-based approach that led to the initial categorization of Russian brigades as “light,” “medium,” and “heavy” by which wheeled armor, coupled with a good network of roads, was expected to be used in interventions, possibly in Moscow’s Western neighbors’ territories.²⁸ However, Russian defense planners recently faced standardization problems in the aforementioned categorization of brigades, thus they have had to subdivide the light brigades into ‘motor-rifle,’ ‘mountain,’ and ‘air-mobile’ formations. More importantly, most of the brigades, which were initially planned to be light, i.e. the 11th, 56th, and the 83rd army air-assault brigades, were reassigned to the Airborne Forces (VDV - *Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska*).²⁹

At this point, the importance of the VDV units within the Russian doctrinal order of battle in conducting recent hybrid warfare efforts should be underlined. It is reported that these elite ‘blue berets,’ along with other special-operations units from the *Southern Military*

District, spearheaded the Russian operations in Ukraine, particularly in Crimea.³⁰ The transition from Soviet to contemporary Russian military thinking witnessed the transformation of VDV from a principal deep-interdiction force into an elite infantry with counter-guerrilla missions due to the situation in Chechnya at that time. Since the last VDV unit, *spetsnaz* units of the 45th *Separate Reconnaissance Regiment*, left Chechnya,³¹ VDV had to wait for approximately two years for adapting to its new role as the military spearhead of Russia’s ‘reflexive control’-driven hybrid warfare efforts.

VDV, a 35,000 elite force, is commanded by a battle-hardened, notoriously powerful ‘maverick’ under President Putin’s political cover, Lieutenant General Vladimir Shamanov, a high-profile figure who was twice designated a *Hero of the Russian Federation*. Following a series of reorganization efforts for about two decades, and “thanks to” General Shamanov’s strong lobby among top political-military echelons in Moscow, VDV’s doctrinal order of battle cannot be compared with typical Western airborne units. It is organized in four divisions (*the 7th, the 76th, the 98th, and the 106th*) of which only the 98th and the 106th divisions have kept their airborne role, namely air-drop into zones of action. The 7th (which was restructured as a *Mountain Air-Assault Division*) and the 76th divisions have only one parachute-trained battalion, yet they enjoy increased organic fire-power capabilities with extra self-propelled artillery assets. Apart from its four robust divisions, VDV force structure includes a separate airborne brigade that resembles its Western equivalents, the 31st Brigade, and its own *spetsnaz* force, the 45th *Separate Reconnaissance Regiment*.³²

Military assessments by Russian experts indicate that following the 2006 reforms in VDV, as well as the lessons-learned from the 2008 Russo – Georgian War, the Airborne Troops have been subject to a significant modernization process. In terms of firepower and ability

²⁷ J. Berzins, *Russia’s New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Forces*, National Defence Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research, 2014, p. 4.

²⁸ K. Giles and A. Monaghan, “Russian Military Modernization-Goal in Sight,” *The Letort Papers*, SSI, 2014, p.18.

²⁹ IISS, *Military Balance 2015*, Routledge, 2015, p.160.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

³¹ R. Thornton, *Organizational Change in the Russian Airborne Forces: The Lessons of the Georgian Conflict*, SSI, Carlisle Barracks – Pennsylvania, 2011, p. 5.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.



of taking on armor as well as fortifications in close quarters, VDV units were granted widespread arsenal of single-use *RPG-18*, *RPG-22*, and *RPG-26* anti-tank weapons, while reusable *RPG-7* anti-tank rockets were assigned to specialist machine gun and RPG squads of the companies.³³ In addition, the length of the combat training was increased from six months to one year, and the training program now includes battalion-level tactical firing exercises rather than company level in order to enable VDV units to fight in large formations.³⁴

The 2008 Russo – Georgian War marked a turning point for VDV, and its top figure, General Vladimir Shamanov: Despite all the problems with communications, reconnaissance, and the lack of adequate equipment that VDV – as well as other Russian forces in Georgia – suffered from, the ‘blue berets’ showed a good performance in 2008. In this respect, two battalions from the 76th Division deployed some 2,000 km away from their base in Pskov to Beslan-North Ossetia in 24 hours, and they moved into area of operations and positioned in the vanguard of the campaign even before the 58th Army’s elements that were actually based in Chechnya and North Ossetia. More importantly, the *spetsnaz* from the VDV’s 45th *Reconnaissance Regiment* were so swift to move into the hot zone that they were involved in the defense of Tskhinvali to confront Georgian elements.³⁵ In the Abkhazian sector, about eight VDV battalions were deployed within the five days of hostilities, and four battalions from the 7th Division actively engaged in combat. More importantly, unlike the situation in South Ossetia, there was minimum number of Russian ground troops’ in support of the operating VDV units, and the military transport priorities were given to the South Ossetia front. As a result, the story for the blue berets in Abkhazia was nowhere being as ‘satisfactory’ as it was for their ‘brothers in arms’ in South Ossetia.³⁶

The aforementioned picture is where General Shamanov had become involved. General Shamanov, who joined the Russian Armed Forces in 1978 and had his first VDV post as artillery platoon of the 76th Division, served as the Chief of Staff of another VDV division, the 7th, during the first Russo – Chechen War in 1994. Coming from the ranks of VDV with some other high command posts, Shamanov gained his notorious fame during the 1999 – 2000 Second Russo – Chechen War by indiscriminate use of force and accusations of extreme brutality. So much so that, General Shamanov’s methods were not even approved by the top echelons of the Russian Armed Forces, and he was forced to retire in the year 2000. Nevertheless, being President Putin’s protégé, General Shamanov was assigned to top political roles such as governor of Ulyanovsk *oblast* in 2000, assistant to the then PM Mikhail Fradkov in 2004, and assistant to Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov in 2006. Finally, he ended up in the armed forces once more as the Director of Combat Training upon a Presidential edict in 2007, which was an extraordinary case for Russian and Soviet military traditions.³⁷ This was his official post when he was assigned to the command of VDV units in Abkhazia. Apparently, due to his success in 2008 he was appointed as the commander of VDV in 2009, and since then the general has kept his post.³⁸ Due to his military success, albeit some with unethical methods, and thanks to his political connections, General Shamanov managed to keep VDV, being a reserve force of the President of the Russian Federation, privileged and immune to many cutbacks of the Russian defense reforms.

Unlike the VDV, Russian Special Operations Forces (SOF) have been much more affected by domestic power politics among Moscow’s political elite and Kremlin circles. Firstly established to counter the tactical nuclear weapons threat during the Cold War, after more than five decades, Russian SOF structure was first

³³ A. Lavrov, “Reform of the Airborne Troops”, in *Russia’s New Army*, M. Barabanov [ed.], Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, Moscow, 2011, pp. 33-35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

³⁵ R. Thornton, *Organizational Change in the Russian Airborne Forces: The Lessons of the Georgian Conflict*, SSI, Carlisle Barracks – Pennsylvania, 2011, p. 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

³⁷ For a detailed biography see: R. Finch, “One Face of the Modern Russian Army: General Vladimir Shamanov,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, no. 24, pp. 396-427, 2011.

³⁸ *Ibid.*



drastically altered by the Serdukyov reforms in 2008, and subsequently by the establishment of the Special Operations Command in 2013.³⁹

Intelligence failures during the 2008 Georgia War put the military Main Intelligence Directorate's (GRU) *spetsnaz* forces under the radar, as did the traditional rivalry between the Federal Security Service (FSB) and GRU in the Russian Federation.⁴⁰ Last but not least, some open-source intelligence reports even suggest a GRU-FSB confrontation in Ukraine, a rivalry based on Vladislav Surkov's⁴¹ influence on Kremlin's Ukraine policies.⁴²

Yet, despite the underperformance in 2008 Georgia, Ukraine is now seen as a test-field for the reorganization of the new SOF structure and the Special Operations Command (*KSO*). According to *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Russian *spetsnaz* now embraces a vital role for non-linear warfare, especially in terms of "political warfare" and behind-enemy lines penetration for long-term reconnaissance and surveillance. Furthermore, Russian *spetsnaz's* footprint in Eastern Ukraine suggests that this elite force is assigned to training and coordination missions with proxy forces.⁴³ In this respect, some Russian weapon systems, such as Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile and T-72B3 main battle tanks, a new variant that entered service in the Russian Ground Forces in 2013, have been spotted in Eastern Ukraine.⁴⁴

Although some Russian military experts suggested that special operations forces should member some 5-7 percent of the armed forces total for Russia, the current global trends in most states range between 1-3

percent. Considering a rough total of some 14,000 current Russian *spetsnaz* (estimated 12,000 GRU, 1,500 Special Ops Command, some 700 VDV), which refers to 1.9 percent of the Russian Armed Forces' manpower, the mentioned 5-7 percent would probably remain an unrealistic ideal.⁴⁵ Moreover, distinct from many world armies today, Russia uses conscript soldiers in SOF units, so much so that in 2011, the 16th *Spetsnaz* Brigade was manned by only %30 contract soldiers.⁴⁶ Therefore, a much larger SOF force may not naturally translate into more military efficiency for the Russians.

On the other hand, General Shamanov of the VDV puts forward an interesting -albeit menacing for NATO- idea that could find the way-forward for the Russian reflexive control- driven hybrid warfare force generation. In his *RIA Novosti* interview, General Shamanov proposed a "fifth, mobile strategic command in addition to four static strategic commands" in order to unify special forces and airborne troops under a single command which would be responsible for confronting "threats and challenges both inside and outside of the country."⁴⁷

Notably, General Shamanov's comments were followed by Moscow's decision to establish a 70,000-strong *Rapid Reaction Force* that would be based on VDV as backbone.⁴⁸ This force would possibly have an automated command & control (C2) system, i.e. *Andromeda*, which VDV has been working on in recent years in order to increase its combat mobility. Within this context, VDV, being the planned backbone of Russian Rapid Reaction Forces, is to be augmented by tank battalions for higher fire-power and %80 of its units are planned to be manned by professional soldiers.⁴⁹

³⁹ T. Bukkvoll, "Military Innovation under Authoritarian Government-the Case of Russian Special Operations Forces," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, no. 5, 2015, pp. 602-625.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Vladislav Surkov is the former deputy PM of the Russian Federation, and now serves as personal advisor to President Putin on South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Ukraine. He was accused of arranging sniper teams during the Ukrainian *Euromaidan*.

⁴² Stratfor, *Reviving Kremlinology*, 2015, p.15.

⁴³ *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 2014, pp. 5-7.

⁴⁴ R. N. Mcdermott, *Brothers Disunited: Russia's Use of Military Power in Ukraine*, The Foreign Military Studies Office, Kansas, 2015, p. 29.

⁴⁵ T. Bukkvoll, "Military Innovation under Authoritarian Government-the Case of Russian Special Operations Forces," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, no. 5, 2015, pp. 602-625.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ http://in.rhth.com/economics/2013/04/29/special_operations_force_to_power_russian_army_24329, (accessed 1 October 2015).

⁴⁸ Jamestown Foundation, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?cHash=40bf42c159bd77b6f78ee1d37fd073c1&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44010#.Vg1MVk3AK70, (accessed 1 October 2015).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*



Last but not least, referring to General Shamanov, *TASS (Russian News Agency)* reported in 2014 that the new Rapid Reaction Force could be supported by army aviation brigades.⁵⁰ These developments suggest that the Rapid Reaction Force may well transform into the ‘5th, mobile Strategic Command’, or ‘a new military district without a permanent area of responsibility’, depending on Kremlin’s geopolitical ambitions and calculus.

Such a rapid reaction force would probably constitute Moscow’s main asset to run ‘reflexive control’-driven hybrid warfare efforts. Given General Shamanov’s political power and ‘special relations’ with President Putin, placing VDV at the core of the new rapid reaction forces would not be a solely military decision, but also a political one. Furthermore, the FSB elite, who are reported to be in rivalry with GRU, would not oppose GRU-*spetsnaz’s* possible absorption within VDV’s doctrinal order of battle. Yet, should the new rapid reaction force’s status remain the same with VDV, which comes into the picture as President’s reserve force, then the Kremlinology calculus in Moscow would have to be re-assessed.

Military Buildups and Snap Exercises as a Strategic Tool of the New Russian Military Thinking

Although the Russian ‘reflexive control’-driven hybrid warfare efforts are run by a core group of elite forces, proxies as ‘armed civilians,’ trained and coordinated by Russian special forces, along with other ‘non-military measures,’ still, massive military buildups remain important to the Russian strategy. From a military standpoint, lessons-learned from the 2008 Russo-Georgian War demonstrate that Russia could overcome its setbacks in tactical engagements by strategic surprise factor through a swift buildup, as well as fast and direct operational art.⁵¹ Moreover, the Ukraine case shows that as a tool of ‘reflexive control,’ Moscow uses massive

snap exercises to disguise military buildups and its actual political intentions. Therefore, in addition to an enhanced elite force, Russia would always be in need of a large army regardless of developments in rapid reaction force generation. Yet, mobilizing such a large force at short notice necessitates centralized political-military control.

The 2012 – 2013 period witnessed additional important changes in the Russian defense apparatus. President Putin began to work with his new Chief of Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, and his new Defense Minister, Sergey Shoigu. In parallel, the military reforms, which were tailored by the previous Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdukyov, were replaced by the 2013 Defense Plan. Moreover, new legislation adopted in late 2012 changed the top command structure of the armed forces, and since then, General Gerasimov has been subordinated to President Putin as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Last but not least, the new General Staff position was reinforced by drastic new functions such as control over local authorities outside the Ministry of Defense in order to execute territorial defense.⁵² These organizational changes have brought along a highly centralized politico-military decision-making mechanism that enabled massive snap exercises and effective cooperation between military and non-military bodies of the Russian state apparatus.

In order to avoid possible escalation and conflict with Russia, Kiev had intentionally avoided formidable deployments and military buildups along border areas. In this regard, Timothy Thomas underlines that “only a handful of Ukraine’s 38 or so military formations were originally located east of the Dnieper River.”⁵³ On the other hand, such a doctrinal order of battle, and its geostrategic reflections, were cunningly exploited by Moscow during the annexation of Crimea. During Moscow’s Crimean campaign, the Russian military buildup in the vicinity of Chernihiv – Luhansk in eastern Ukraine put significant pressure on Ukrainian

⁵⁰ TASS, <http://tass.ru/en/russia/743211>, (accessed 1 October 2015).

⁵¹ For a comprehensive assessment on the Russian Armed Forces’ performance in Georgia 2008, see A. Cohen and R.E. Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgian War: Lessons and Implications*, SSI, Pennsylvania, 2011.

⁵² K. Giles and A. Monaghan, “Russian Military Modernization-Goal in Sight,” *The Letort Papers*, SSI, 2014, p. 1.

⁵³ T. Thomas, “Russia’s Military Strategy in Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric-and Putin-led”, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, no. 28, 2015, pp. 445-461.



troop dispositions, and thereby, forced Kiev to shift military formations from west to east, instead of the Crimean peninsula and surrounding regions.⁵⁴ Besides, although the Ukrainian Armed Forces were strong on the paper, due to low defense budget (around 2,4 billion USD in 2013) and poor maintenance, more than half of its main battle tanks were in storage during the Crimean campaign.⁵⁵

As mentioned earlier, the highly centralized decision-making structure of the Russian doctrinal order of battle enables “snap exercises” to disguise menacing military buildups along border areas. In this respect, Russian snap exercises conducted between February 26 and March 7, 2014 played a key role by deterring and diverting attention of the Kiev government, and prevented the Ukrainian leadership from focusing on the troublesome contingency in Crimea.⁵⁶ Although the Russians did not launch a massive conventional incursion into Ukraine, the menacing military buildup, shaded by a “snap exercise,” deterred the Kiev government from taking decisive actions against Moscow’s “little green men” and local proxies.⁵⁷ Russian sources reported that between February 26 and March 3, 2014, some 150,000 troops from the Western and Central Military Districts, including all three army-navy-air force branches, supported by more than 200 air force assets (up to 90 fixed-wing and 120 rotary-wing aircrafts), 880 tanks, 80 warships, and 1,200 piece of other military equipment, conducted massive drills to test “combat readiness” of these forces.⁵⁸ Indeed, one of the major aims of the Russian massive snap exercises is to test combat readiness of the armed forces. Yet, they also serve as a politico-military tool to send signals to NATO, as well as to the countries of the ‘near abroad,’ as defined by the contemporary Russian geopolitical paradigm.⁵⁹ Furthermore, a series of snap exercises have become the Putin administration’s “justification tool”

for using the threat of force in international disputes.

This manner of conduct complicates determination of the necessary force-to-force ratio when defending against Russian aggression. Clearly, the Russian way of hybrid warfare depends on swift and massive deployments along border areas, as well as elite units’ deep penetrations and subversive activities in parallel with proxy elements’ irregular warfare efforts on the ground. Such an operational art brings along the problem of taking both conventional force-to-force ratios and required troop density for low intensity conflicts, including adequate force-to-population levels to fight insurgencies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

NATO is not facing a new Russian military strategy, but a new military thinking that brings about shifts at strategic, operational, and tactical levels along with doctrinal order of battle and military strategic culture. Therefore, the right panacea would not be centered on the question of ‘how to confront the Russian hybrid warfare challenge;’ rather, the question of ‘how to best understand the Russian hybrid warfare challenge.’

Without a doubt, the Russian challenge posed to the North Atlantic Alliance’s strategic interests of collective defense and cooperative security is a serious and imminent one. Within this context, what is at stake is Russian hybrid warfare challenge is neither a perfect revolution in military affairs (RMA), as some tend to exaggerate, nor just conduct of a decades -if not centuries- old way of warfighting, now cunningly discovered by the Russian military machine’s “little green men.” Rather, the contemporary Russian warfighting concept managed to put a new face on hybrid warfare by incorporating non-military measures into the battlefield

⁵⁴ I. Sutyagin and M. Clarke, *Ukraine Military Dispositions: Military Ticks Up while the Clock Ticks Down*, RUSI, https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/UKRANIAN-MILITARYDISPOSITIONS_RUSIBRIEFING.pdf, (accessed 27 September 2015).

⁵⁵ IISS, *Military Balance 2014*, Routledge, London, 2014, pp.194-195.

⁵⁶ A. Racz, “Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy’s Ability to Resist,” *FIIA Report 43*, pp.74-75.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 88.

⁵⁸ Министерство обороны Российской Федерации, (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation), http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11905664@egNews, (accessed 28 September 2015).

⁵⁹ T. Frear et.al. *Preparing for the Worst: Are Russian and NATO Military Exercises Making War in Europe more Likely*, Policy Brief, European Leadership Network, August 2015, p.4.



in intensive ratios effectively, conducting a good refinement of the Soviet legacy ‘reflexive control’ concepts to disguise Kremlin’s campaigns abroad, and also by linking strategic, operational, and tactical levels of a campaign efficiently within the context of full spectrum operations, proxy war, special operations, and subversive activities. This strategic perspective is supported by a new force posture, renewed doctrinal order of battle, and robust combined arms capabilities for elite units at permanent readiness levels.

In sum, what NATO is facing could well be depicted as a *maskirovka-driven hybrid blitzkrieg*. Such a conceptualization should not confuse the North Atlantic Alliance strategic community about the Russian Armed Forces’ military capabilities, as regular conscripts with inadequate training and poor equipment cannot counterbalance a highly-trained, well-disciplined conventional force using precision strike assets and conducting technology-driven network-centric operations. In other words, as the character of warfare shifts towards more traditional and conventional, the Russians could face serious shortcomings emanating from lack of trained personnel in large numbers and of modern equipment. On the other hand, Russian defense modernization, and its hybrid warfare aspect, remains menacing as such a manner of conduct poses dire challenges not only to Western military capabilities, but also its strategic culture, operational art, and military thought.

The overall picture serves Russian interests by enhancing the fog of war from the perspective of the North Atlantic Alliance, thereby making it harder to utilize traditional intelligence analysis and strategic forecasting procedures to understand Moscow’s moves. Through a Clausewitzian lens, by effectively conducting ‘reflexive control’ theory and related concepts, Moscow made it extremely hard for the West to predict any Russian campaign’s center of gravity.

Another aspect of the Russian hybrid warfare campaign is the fact that it is supported by an authoritarian but stable political authority. As seen in every segment of warfare, military capabilities can only be proven effective when they are supported by strong and determined political will. Thus, it would be fair to say that Moscow’s current *Siloviki* elite have done well on their part to stand behind the Russian Armed Forces,’ or its “little green men’s,” operations abroad.

Russian military trends with regard to establishing and equipping Rapid Reaction Forces should be monitored and

assessed carefully. In fact, as being hinted by General Vladimir Shamanov by his ‘fifth strategic command’ expression, the Rapid Reaction Forces are believed to be the main arm of the Russian hybrid warfare approach in the 2020s. Clearly, as VDV cannot be explained by the Western militaries’ parameters for airborne troops, Moscow’s Rapid Reaction Forces would probably show little resemblance with the concept of ‘rapid reaction forces’ that would resonate among the North Atlantic Alliance strategic community.

The conclusion is that NATO needs new intelligence analysis and strategic forecasting capabilities for getting a grip on the new Russian challenge. This should be followed by adequate military strategies, concepts, and of course, hard power capacity. First and foremost, the North Atlantic Alliance strategic community should recognize the Russian ‘reflexive control’ campaign that could bring about a menacing ‘analytical paralysis’ when assessing Moscow’s true intentions and manner of conduct in its future hybrid warfare efforts. This ‘analytical paralysis’ may well include ‘buying’ the less-risky options that the Russian elite offer in order to pursue a policy which might be seen ‘carefully-calculated and risk-averse,’ but unintentionally paving the ground for more gains for Moscow through use or threat of force. In order to confront the aforementioned challenges, this study recommends the North Atlantic Alliance to promote necessary institutions and concepts to develop a thorough understanding of hybrid warfare, and the Russian interpretation of it, in the form of ‘reflexive control-driven nonlinear warfare.’ In this regard, a new Center of Excellence particularly focusing on hybrid warfare and related works within Allied Command Transformation is recommended.

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