

# RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE U.S. ARMY'S INFANTRY

MAJ AMOS C. FOX

In Eastern Europe, Russia has been employing an emergent version of hybrid warfare that is highly integrated, synchronized, and devastatingly effective. While hybrid warfare is not new — it is a natural progression of the concepts of combined arms and joint warfare — Russia's approach to it warrants analysis. Russia's approach has significant relevance for the U.S. Army's Infantrymen and the formations in which they find themselves. While not an all-encompassing analysis of Russian hybrid warfare, this article will highlight a few of the major trends of which Infantrymen should be aware. Additionally, it will close with the implications of those trends and recommendations for moving forward in light of the evolving operating environment.

## Emerging Trends of Russian Operations

Russia's approach to war in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and the Donbass region of Ukraine (2014-present), coupled with a massive reinvestment in their military has yielded startling results on the battlefield. Russia's actions in the Donbass provide an interesting look at the direction in which war is likely trending. Furthermore, these actions demonstrate how a nation or potential adversary observes the world around it and adjusts its military capabilities to the contemporary environment, with consideration of economic means and political objectives.

Russia, observing the hollowing out of U.S. Army Europe and NATO through the mid-to-late 1990s and into the 2000s, capitalized on that by rebuilding a robust conventional ground force. According to Andrew Monaghan, a Chatham House research fellow, Russia invested more than \$640 billion to modernize its force, increasing its capabilities by more than 700 modern attack aircraft, 2,000 tanks, and 2,000 tracked and self-propelled guns.<sup>1</sup> This includes major upgrades to conventional Russian ground combat platforms such as the T-72B3, T-80, T-90, the BMP-3, and MT-LB family of infantry fighting vehicles and personnel carriers, and the introduction of the T-14 Armata.

Next, Russia made extensive use of conventional mechanized ground forces during initial phases of the Ukrainian incursion. Most of the fighting consisted of high-intensity combat operations highlighted by the ubiquitous employment of tanks, mechanized infantry, and artillery (tubed and multiple launch rocket), in conjunction with drones, and electronic and cyber warfare, according to Monaghan.<sup>2</sup> Ukrainian forces were largely unprepared for the large armored assaults the Russians launched. As a result, the Ukrainians paid dearly for

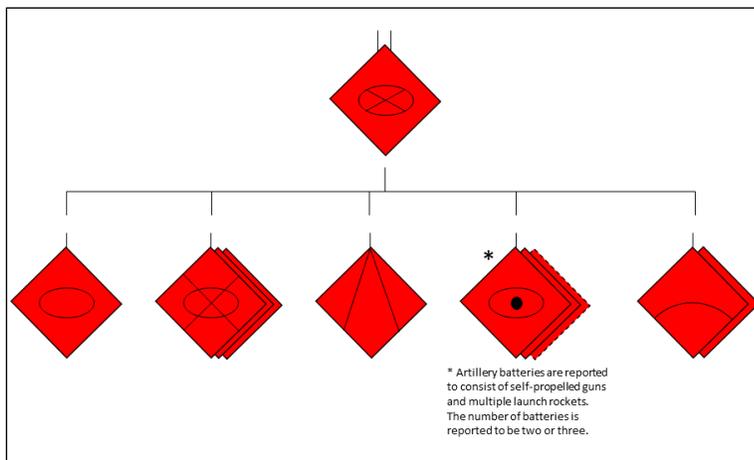


Figure — Reported Task Organization of Russian Combined Arms Battalion

their unpreparedness, as illustrated by Russian mechanized forces routing Ukrainian forces around eastern Ukraine in August 2014.<sup>3</sup>

Russia has revamped its task organization, building much larger and diverse combined arms battalions which are capable of operating along fronts of approximately 40 kilometers.<sup>4</sup> These battalions are characterized as highly integrated, extremely powerful, and exceptionally mobile. The combined arms battalions operating in the Donbass region of Ukraine generally consisted of a tank company, three mechanized infantry companies, an anti-tank company, two to three batteries of artillery (self-propelled guns and multiple launch rocket), and two air defense batteries.<sup>5</sup> Reports indicate that Russia will employ its artillery assets in a direct-fire role, proving frontal firepower out to approximately six kilometers to set the conditions for the maneuver elements to launch concentrated, rapid attacks — all of which comes on the heels of the targeted employment of cyber, electronic, and information capabilities.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, Russia maintains a robust integrated air defense system (IADS) — from strategic capabilities to tactical-level capabilities. Russia's recent operations in Eastern Europe demonstrate the integral role IADS plays in Russian operations. The employment of IADS immediately on the heels of territorial acquisition serves to deter aerial counterattack or aerial support; thus, Russia essentially takes the territory they want, then quickly transitions to a highly integrated defense, challenging foes to evict them from the conquered territory. The Russian IADS wall provides a formidable barrier for those whom Russia wants to keep at bay.<sup>7</sup>

## Implications and Recommendations

Leaders in infantry and mechanized units must heed the lessons being provided by Russia's operations in Eastern Europe because they provide insight into the evolving nature of conflict. Leaders must understand that Russia's anti-access/air defense and intensely concentrated IADS capability will mean that U.S. domination of the air is no longer a guarantee. In addition to the IADS capability, tactical Russian ground combat formations, down to the company level, are often equipped with man-portable air defense surface-to-air missiles.<sup>8</sup>

U.S. Army land forces must be capable of fighting and winning without relying on airpower, whether that be rotary wing or fixed wing. It is a very real possibility that U.S. Infantry units and combined arms battalions might find themselves in a forward engagement, operating under contested skies, and having to fight and win with their organic equipment and direct support fire support. Leaders must acknowledge this environment and incorporate it into their unit training plans.

The re-emergence of armor on the modern battlefield swings the pendulum back towards mechanized warfare. This has two primary implications for Infantrymen — the necessity to reinvest in anti-armor operations (mounted and dismounted, increasing proficiency with the Bradley Fighting Vehicle [BFV]) and to reemphasize the role of mechanized battle.

Furthermore, the inherent protection of the Russian tanks — most outfitted with the latest in reactive and active-armor defense systems technology — provide a real problem for U.S. tank crews. As such, Infantrymen must play a vital role in defeating armor threats through the effective employment of antiarmor capabilities. Anti-armor units — and their leaders — must

take a renewed interest in anti-armor doctrine.<sup>9</sup> The Army cannot allow anti-armor formations and anti-armor training to stagnate. Leaders must reinvigorate these capabilities to meet the threat of armor and mechanized warfare head-on. Leaders must reinvest in training their anti-armor teams and crews — from employment and engagement techniques to the clever use of tactics to functionally, positionally, and temporally dislocate enemy armor.

Similarly, mechanized units cannot assume risk with BFV TOW (tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided) missile training. Mechanized leaders must routinely train on employing the TOW missile. Additionally, mechanized leaders must continue to emphasize the importance of gunnery proficiency and effective BFV employment techniques in relation to terrain. An inexpensive idea is getting Soldiers more time with the Bradley Advanced Training System (BATS) to work on engagement techniques; more time in the Close Combat Tactical Trainer (CCTT) and terrain walks can assist leaders in understanding how to use terrain to their advantage.

Lastly, in light of the tangible, existential threat posed by the reemergence of mechanized warfare — coupled with the largely unknown effects of novel approaches to hybrid warfare — the U.S. Army Infantry School and the Maneuver Center of Excellence would be wise to reevaluate the role the BFV, mechanized warfare, and anti-armor doctrine play in their respective curriculums.

***Soldiers maneuver Bradley Fighting Vehicles during an exercise on Fort Benning, Ga.***

Photo courtesy of author



## Conclusion

In conclusion, Russia's recent operations in Eastern Europe demonstrate a threat the U.S. Army has not had to deal with in very many years. These operations pose some unique challenges to the U.S. Infantry and ground combat formations. Specifically, the sophistication of IADS and tactical air defense systems means the U.S. Army will potentially find itself fighting on battlefields where air superiority is not guaranteed. Thus, ground combat formations must be capable of fighting and winning without dedicated air support. Next, the re-emergence of Russian armor means that Infantrymen must be deft at employing U.S. anti-armor systems and in employing tactics to effectively dislocate armor threats positionally, functionally, and temporally. BFV-equipped formations must focus on increasing proficiency with engaging and destroying targets with the 25mm gun while developing the know-how to meld the use of the BFV with terrain. Each of these recommendations is fairly simple and does not require extensive resources. Failure to begin thinking about these changes on the modern battlefield will prove disastrous for U.S. ground forces.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Monaghan, "Putin's Way of War: The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare,'" *Parameters* (Winter 2015-16): 69.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Army Special Operations Command, "'Little Green Men': A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014," 52.

<sup>4</sup> Russian combined arms battalions are often referred to as battalion tactical groups. They are part of Russian brigades; Russia has not been deploying brigades, but task organizing combined arms battalions to operate in Ukraine. In 2014, it was reported that 13 Russian combined arms battalions were operating in Ukraine. See "Little Green Men: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014," 42.

<sup>5</sup> Phillip Karber and LTC Joshua Thibeault, "Russia's New Generation Warfare," *Army* (June 2016): 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 5.



Photo by SPC Marcus Floyd

**Soldiers with the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division conduct training using the BATS at Camp Konotop, Poland, on 28 April 2015.**

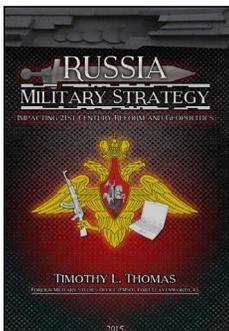
<sup>7</sup> Sydney J. Freedburg Jr., "Russians 'Closed the Gap' for A2/AD: Air Force Gen. Gorenc," *Breakingdefense.com*, 14 September 2015, <http://breakingdefense.com/2015/09/russians-closed-the-gap-for-a2ad-air-force-gen-gorenc/>.

<sup>8</sup> P.A. Barker, "Russia's New Generation War: Ukraine Lessons Learned for the U.S. Army," (lecture, U.S. Army Capabilities Center, Fort Eustis, Va., 14 December 2015).

<sup>9</sup> MAJ Amos C. Fox, "A Look at Officer Education at the Maneuver Center of Excellence," *Armor* (January-March 2015): 91.

**MAJ Amos Fox** is currently a student at the School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, Kan. His previous assignments include serving as commander, L Troop, 2nd Squadron, 16th Cavalry Regiment (Armor Basic Officer Leadership Course); commander, D Company, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR); commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division (2/4 ID); assistant operations officer, 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 2/4 ID; and assistant operations officer, 1/11 ACR. MAJ Fox has a bachelor of science degree in secondary education from Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis and a master of arts in secondary education from Ball State University. He has attended the Field Artillery Officer Basic Course, the Bradley Fire Support Vehicle Commander's Course, the Maneuver Captains Career Course, the Cavalry Leaders Course, and Airborne School.

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