

Russian Hybrid Warfare and the Re-emergence of Conventional Armored Warfare: Implications for the U.S. Army's Armored Force

by MAJ Amos C. Fox

Russia's operations in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014-present) provide many interesting insights, but most notably they illustrate a departure from contemporary guerrilla and counterinsurgency operations and demonstrate the pendulum swinging back toward conventional, high-intensity land warfare. (Figure 1 illustrates this dynamic).

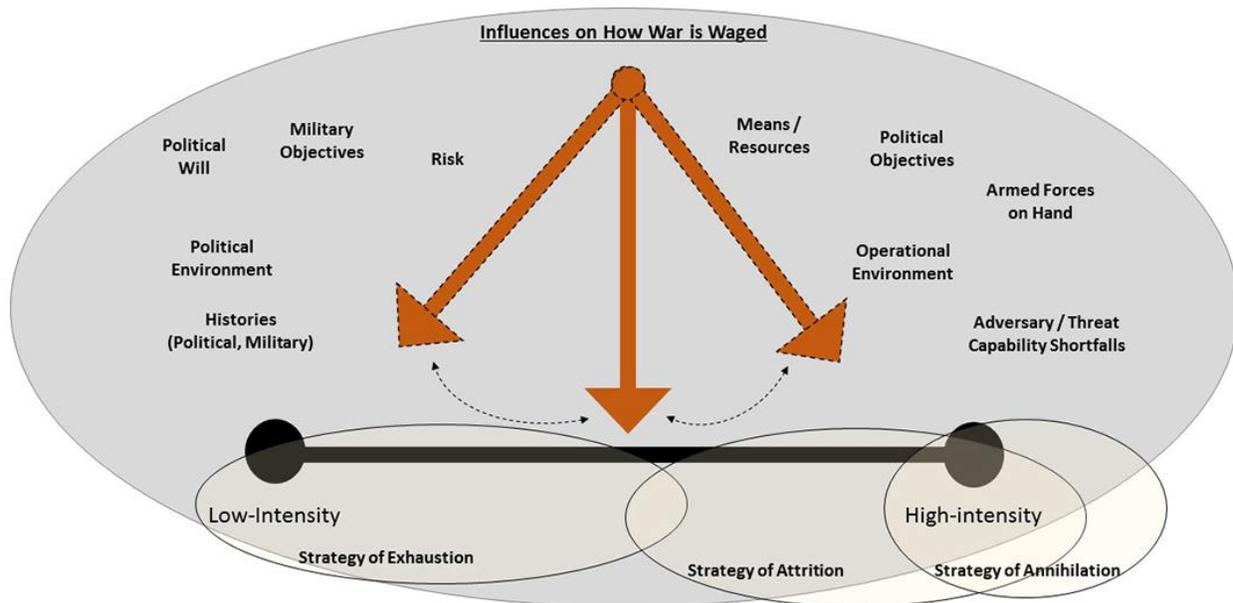


Figure 1. Continuum of conflict.

In light of the evolution in the character of the contemporary operating environment, the U.S. Army's armored force must be aware of the implications of these changes. This article seeks to illuminate the salient features of Russian operations in Ukraine in relation to armored warfare and their potential implications for the U.S. Army's armored force. This article does not call for a return to Cold War thinking – primarily because the Russian army's armored corps is not organized, nor does it operate in the same fashion as the Soviet army's armored corps.

Furthermore, this article is not intended to be alarmist or speak of hybrid warfare as something new. (Figure 2 provides an illustration of the evolution of warfare.) Instead, this article's purpose is to raise awareness about unfolding doctrine, tactical and operational approaches, and evolved task organizations.

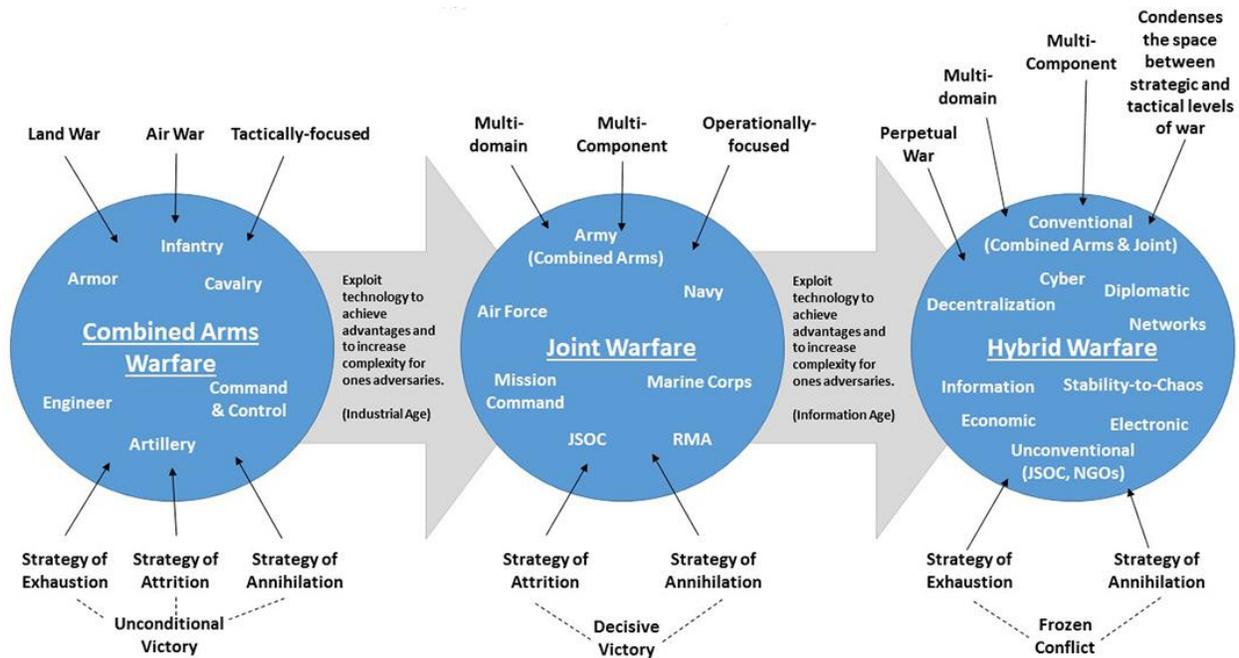


Figure 2. Evolution of hybrid warfare.

Lastly, this article will provide potential implications and recommendations for the U.S. Army's armored force as a result of the evolving character of tactical-level warfare.

Russian ground forces' evolving character

While the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) saw relative peace in the post-Cold War period and potential of Information Age technology as an opportunity to cut ground forces in Europe, Russia went in the opposite direction. Russia spent more than \$640 billion modernizing its force – and a substantial amount of work has gone into improving their ground combat capability. The Russian army used this funding to increase its army by 2,000 tanks and 2,000 self-propelled field-artillery guns. Also, they have upgraded their T-72s, T-80s and T-90s, incorporating the latest active-armor-defense system, reactive armor. What's more, Russia recently introduced the T-14 Armata, the most modern main battle tank in the world, to its armored fleet.¹

Likewise, Russia has heavily invested in drone technology. Russian operations in the Donbass demonstrated the omnipresent nature of Russian drone technology. Drones were integral to the Russian targeting process and the information-collection plan. Russian drones detected Ukrainian assembly areas, command posts, sustainment nodes and battle positions. The drones then transmitted that information to Russian field artillery and multiple-launch rocket (MLR) artillery, which then delivered massed, overwhelming firepower to devastate Ukrainian ground forces.²

Changes to Russian army task-organization have compounded the complexity wrought by the highly integrated nature of Russian armor, mechanized infantry, drones and indirect fire. Descriptions from the Ukrainian battlefield state that the preponderance of Russian formations are robust combined-arms battalions commonly referred to as brigade tactical groups (BTGs). The BTGs commonly consist of a tank company, three mechanized-infantry companies, two anti-tank companies, two artillery batteries³ and two air-defense batteries.⁴ (See Figure 3 for task-organization chart.)

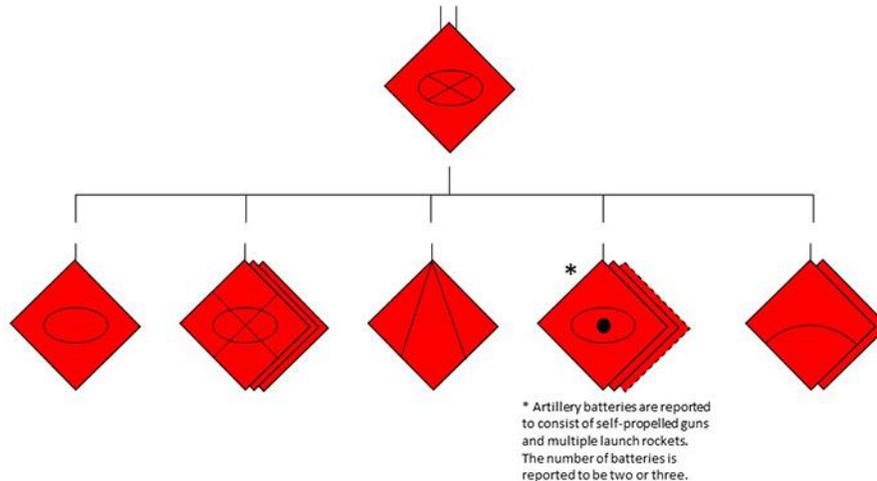


Figure 3. Reported task-organization of Russian combined-arms battalion.

An ample collection of electronic, cyber, information and unconventional capabilities complement the BTG. Those capabilities are used to set the conditions for massive artillery bombardments and mobile strikes from armor and mechanized forces.

Changes to Russian tactics typify the manner in which Russia now employs its ground force. Borrowing from the pages of military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, who stated, “It is still more important to remember that almost the only advantage of the attack rests on its initial surprise,”⁵ Russia’s contemporary operations embody the characteristic of surprise. Russian operations in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate a rapid, decentralized attack seeking to temporally dislocate the enemy, triggering the opposing forces’ defeat. These methods stand in stark contrast to the old Soviet doctrine of methodical, timetable- and echelon-driven employment of ground forces that sought to outmass the opposing army. Current Russian land-warfare tactics are something which most armies, including the U.S. Army, are largely unprepared to address.

Conversely, after achieving limited objectives,⁶ Russia quickly transitions to the defense using ground forces, drones and air-defense capabilities to build a tough, integrated position from which extrication would be difficult, to be sure. Russia’s defensive operations do not serve as a simple shield, but rather, as a shield capable of also delivering well-directed, concentrated punches on the opposition army.⁷ Russia’s paradoxical use of offensive operations to set up the defense might indicate an ascendancy of the defense as the preferred method of war in forthcoming conflicts.

Implications for U.S. Army armor and cavalry formations

Russia’s focus on limited objectives, often in close proximity to its own border, indicates that U.S. Army combined-arms battalions and cavalry squadrons will likely find themselves on the wrong end of the “quality of firsts”⁸ (Figure 4). The U.S. Army’s physical distance from those likely battlefields sets the Army at a great disadvantage because it will have to hastily deploy forces to the region, meaning the Army will arrive late; the arrival will also be known (location, time and force composition). The Army will have great difficulty seizing the initiative due to its arrival and movement being known, which weakens the Army’s ability to fight and win decisively. This dynamic provides time, space and understanding for the enemy to further prepare for combat operations and strengthen its integrated defensive positions. Therefore, U.S. Army combined-arms battalions and cavalry squadrons must be prepared to fight through a rugged enemy defense while maintaining the capability for continued offensive operations.

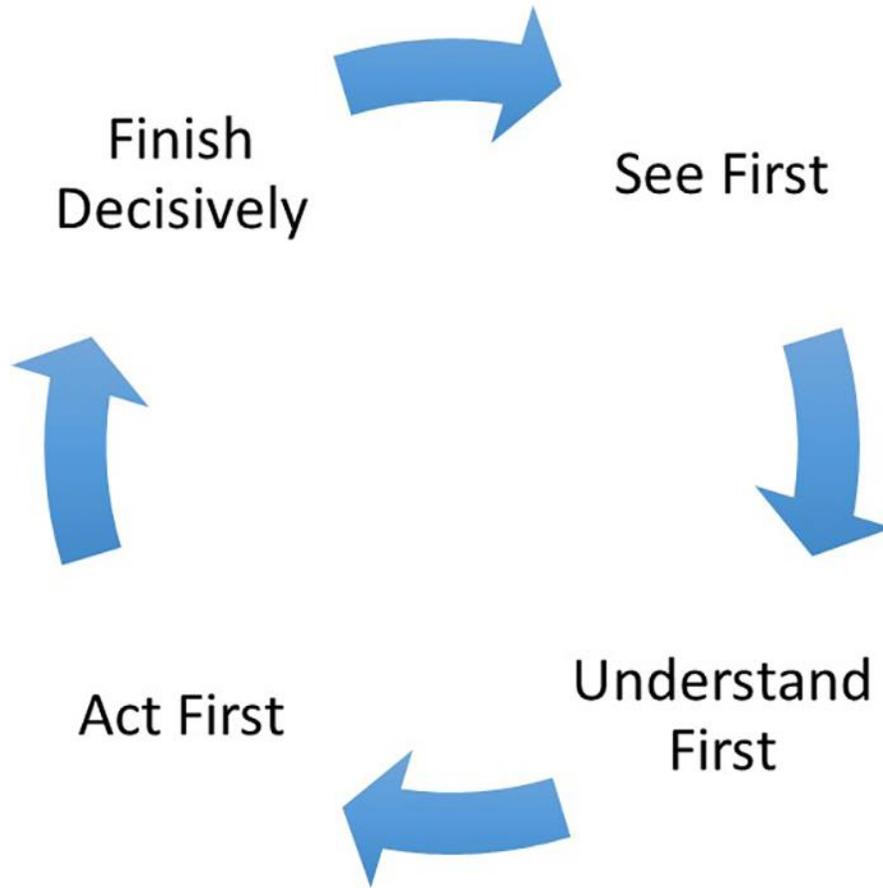


Figure 4. Quality of firsts.

U.S. combined-arms battalions and cavalry formations will be outranged and detected far earlier than their Russian counterparts. Russian weapons systems, from the T-72B3 to the MLR artillery, outrange their U.S. counterparts. (Figure 5 provides a graphical representation of how weapons systems compare.) Furthermore, the manner in which they are organized and employed presents a unique challenge for U.S. ground forces.⁹ As already discussed, the Russian BTG brings far more firepower to bear than the U.S. Army's combined-arms battalion; aside from the slight advantage in the quantity of tanks, the Russian BTG also brings more firepower to the battlefield than any of the U.S. Army's brigade combat teams (BCTs).

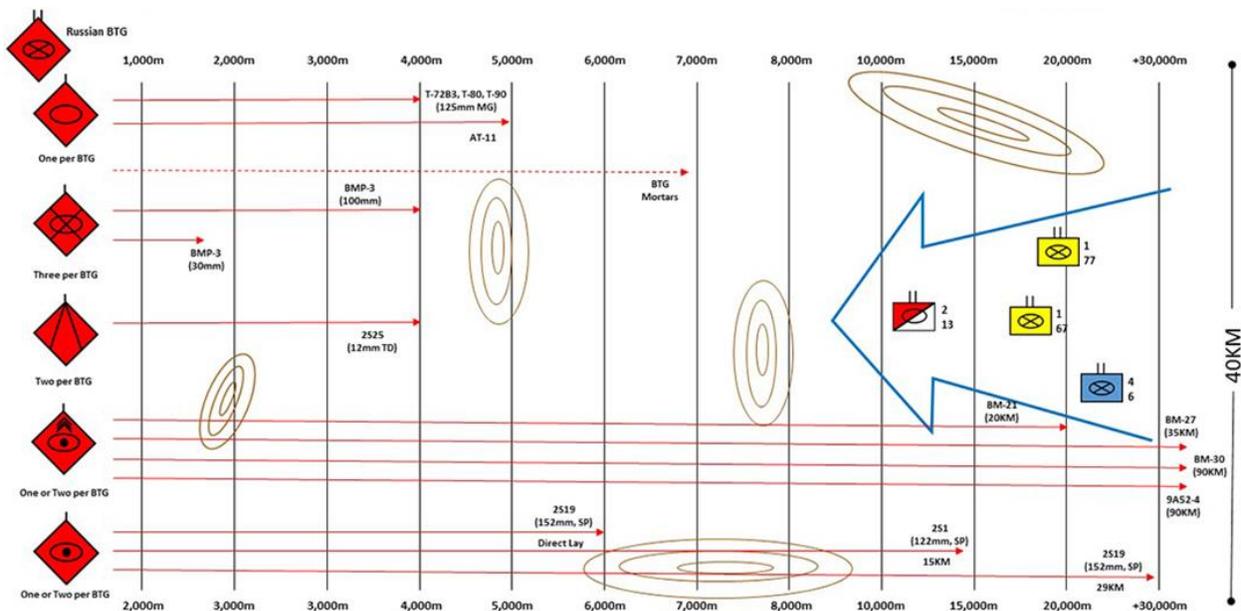


Figure 5. Russian BTG weapons capabilities.

Also, Russian ground forces have been reportedly using their self-propelled artillery guns in direct-lay mode, providing frontal fires out to six kilometers, which is used to set conditions for follow-on forces. Direct-laid artillery, used in conjunction with anti-tank capabilities, provide excellent standoff for Russian forces, allowing them to advantageously shape the battlefield prior to launching tank and mechanized forces¹⁰ (Figure 6).

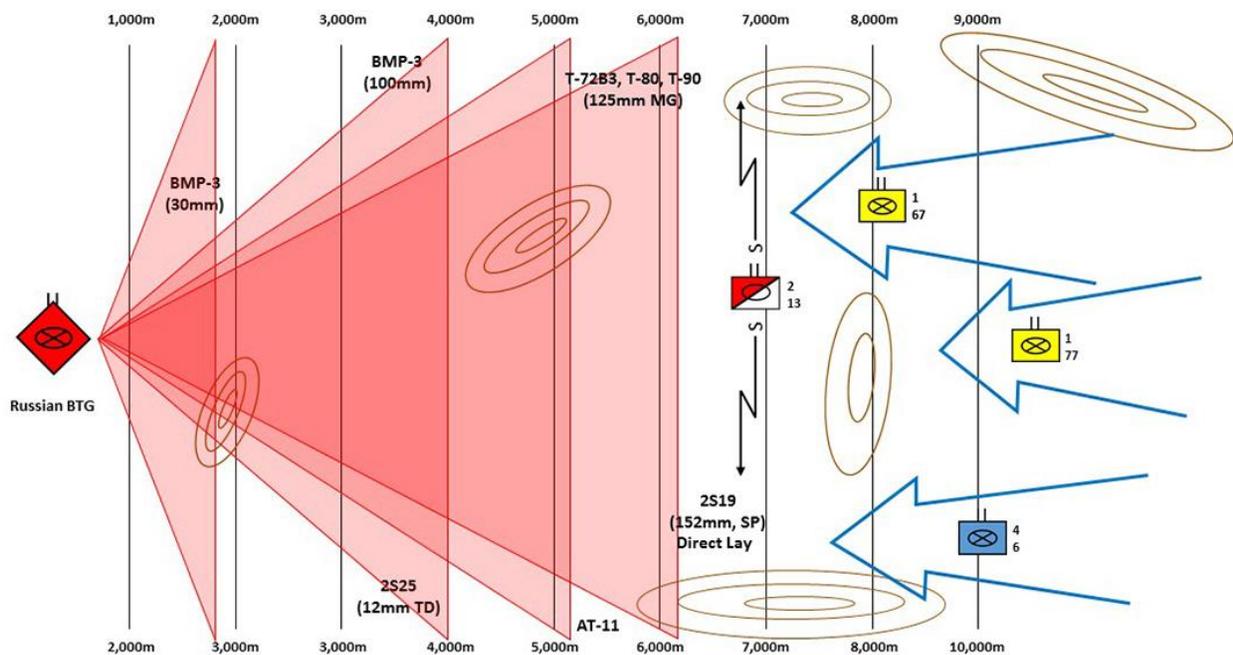


Figure 6. Direct-fire tactics and capabilities.

Next, contemporary Russian armored and mechanized forces embody the ethos of mission command – they are guided by shared understanding, a unifying purpose, mutual trust and the acceptance of prudent risk, as illustrated by their freewheeling destruction of Ukrainian ground forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine. The U.S. Army's armored force must acknowledge this reality and understand it will be dealing with equally adaptive and agile soldiers, leaders and formations on the battlefield.

What's more, the Russian armored force has recent, relevant combat experience fighting major armored combat operations, while the U.S. Army's armored force does not. Continual deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq and other contingency operations have eroded the U.S. Army's armored forces' ability to conduct effective land warfare as part of the joint force.¹¹ In addition, those operations have taught the U.S. Army many bad habits and to rely on tools that were effective for static, forward-operating base-centric, counterinsurgency operations; however, many of these bad habits and tools will prove deadly on the hybrid battlefield.¹²

Lastly, and perhaps more importantly, other nations are viewing how Russia is operating. Russia's operations in Georgia, Crimea and Ukraine provided a relatively successful paradigm in relation to the response time of NATO and the international community. Other nations with similar limited objectives and similar means could see the Russian paradigm of hybrid warfare, with its paradoxical employment of offensive operations to set up the defense, as a viable solution to achieve similar political objectives in future conflicts.

Recommendations

First, and perhaps simplest of all, Armor Branch leaders must focus on sharpening the minds of the leaders within their formation. A simple tool to do so is a reading and discussion program oriented on understanding conventional land warfare.¹³ There are several good articles that discuss armor's role in land warfare – two of the more insightful essays are Christopher Gabel's "The 4th Armored Division in the Encirclement of Nancy"¹⁴ and Robert Sunell's "The Principles of the Employment of Armor."¹⁵ Furthermore, frequent quality discussions on the importance of the U.S. Army Armor School's Armor fundamentals (i.e., mission command from the hatch, gunnery and sustainment) in relation to Armor's role in land warfare will further the education of subordinate leaders.

In addition, theorist and retired LTC Robert Leonhard's three books *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War*, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver Warfare Theory* and *AirLand Battle* are great discussions of land-warfare theory, while Martin Blumenson's *Kasserine Pass: Rommel's Bloody, Climatic Battle for Tunisia* provides great insight into the nature of land warfare. Specifically, Blumenson's book describes in great detail the effects of ill-preparedness for the rigors, character and application of armored warfare against an adroit opponent.

Centers of gravity and decisive operations – or a systems perspective. The robustness of the Russian BTG calls for an evolution in thinking about defeating an enemy. At the tactical level, specifically the BCT and battalion levels, the U.S. Army must move away from the fanciful idea of centers of gravity and decisive operations and instead think in terms of systems and main efforts. The center of gravity or decisive-operation style of thinking theorizes that there is a magic button that can be found and triggered to cause the enemy's rapid defeat. This approach generally seeks to defeat the enemy in one major, decisive battle. The problem with this approach is that history has proven it a hollow or disastrous proposition; two recent examples of the concept's failure include the quagmires that followed the toppling of the Taliban in 2001 and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003.

The Russian BTGs are resilient, integrated systems, designed to absorb shock and punishment and still be capable of delivering devastating firepower. They are designed to be anti-fragile, devoid of a center of gravity. A systems perspective suggests the overall capabilities within a system must be weakened to such a point that the system breaks or acquiesces prior to reaching its breaking point.

A quick assessment of the BTG illustrates this idea – will destroying the BTG's tank company trigger the BTG's defeat? Probably not – the BTG still possess three mechanized-infantry companies that retain mobile, protected firepower with their *Boyeva Mashina Pekhoty-3s* (Russian fighting vehicle), 100mm anti-tank gun and 30mm gun – plus, the BTG contains the anti-tank company.

Will destroying the BTG's mechanized-infantry companies trigger defeat? Probably not – the BTG still possesses significant firepower, direct and indirect, even with the loss of one or more of its mechanized-infantry companies. Furthermore, in all likelihood, armored BCTs and their subordinate battalions will not possess the capability to reach out and destroy the BTG's inherent field artillery or MLR artillery.

The robust nature of the Russian BTG begs the question of where does an organization focus its effort when meeting a BTG on the battlefield? The systems approach would dictate that effort be applied against the BTG at

any possible point along the breadth and depth of its formation, with the goal to reduce the BTG's inherent capabilities to the point the enemy can no longer continue to resist.

A systems approach could signal a return to attrition-based warfare as adversaries seek to degrade an opponent's capability to such a point they cannot continue to resist. This does not mean maneuver is no longer relevant, but that perhaps maneuver will now be used to enable attrition.

The operations process, staff procedures and manning. At BCT and battalion level, staffs will be critical to countering the efficacy of the Russian BTG and its contemporary approach to land warfare through increasing the speed of its operations process while not degrading its quality of work. Two of the most critical functions a staff must do on the hybrid battlefield is to rapidly and appropriately align and deploy cavalry formations and to plan the sequencing of operations to maximize the effects of temporally dislocating enemy forces.

At the tactical level of war, U.S. forces will lack the initiative due to the reactive nature of dealing with Russian operations. Therefore, combined-arms battalions and cavalry squadrons must develop more rapid staff-planning procedures and a more expedient operations process that enable forces to be rapidly committed to the fight with adequate information to enable mission command. The current operations process, which is detailed and information-rich, is slow and ponderous – both of which are characteristics that are incompatible on a fluid battlefield where adversaries seek to quickly acquire limited objectives.

Staffs must see beyond the current battle and sequence operations to maintain momentum and keep opponents off-balance. In his seminal work on land-warfare theory, Leonhard stated that in war, sequencing operations is the difference between victory and defeat.¹⁶ Leonhard continued, "Defining sequencing as the ordering of events and that dictating the order of events to the enemy is critical to success in land warfare."¹⁷

Sequencing operations is critical to defeating an integrated defense, the likes of which one could expect to see from Russian ground forces. The goal of sequencing in relation to the Russian BTG is threefold:

- Regain the initiative;
- Continue temporally dislocating the enemy; and
- Destroy as much of the enemy's warfighting capability as possible.

To develop the ability to sequence operations, commanders and their staffs must see beyond the current battle, asking themselves "what is next," while understanding how the current battle will influence future operations. Detailed and thorough staff work is critical to sequencing as it provides the commander with the information, analysis and professional judgment to make decisions about unfolding operations. As Leonhard reminds the reader, "Victory in warfare is linked inextricably with positive control of sequence. Nor is the link spurious or coincidental: the side that successfully strives to order future events will be the side that emerges victorious."¹⁸

Interrelated with the previous recommendations, units must quickly get their cavalry formations integrated into the fight. Commanders and staffs must expedite the nature in which they deploy their cavalry squadron and scout platoons to rapidly develop situational understanding. However, cavalry formations cannot be committed without a purpose and focus. One way to expedite the deployment of these forces is to sidestep the traditional military decision-making process model of developing Annex L and commander's reconnaissance and security guidance.

A proposed method for getting cavalry formations into the fight quicker, while providing purpose and focus, is to adopt a revised model of the commander's reconnaissance and security guidance that covers basic visualization (briefly describes the current situation, provides an idea about a desired future state, briefly describes the forecasted enemy and forecasts the duration of the reconnaissance or security operation), provides initial commander's critical information requirements (CCIR), named areas of interest (NAIs), tasks for reconnaissance or security, a reconnaissance objective(s) and any additional instructions. (Figure 7 provides an example.) Quickly and accurately committing cavalry formations is critical to sequencing operations and thus to defeating the integrated defense of Russian BTGs.

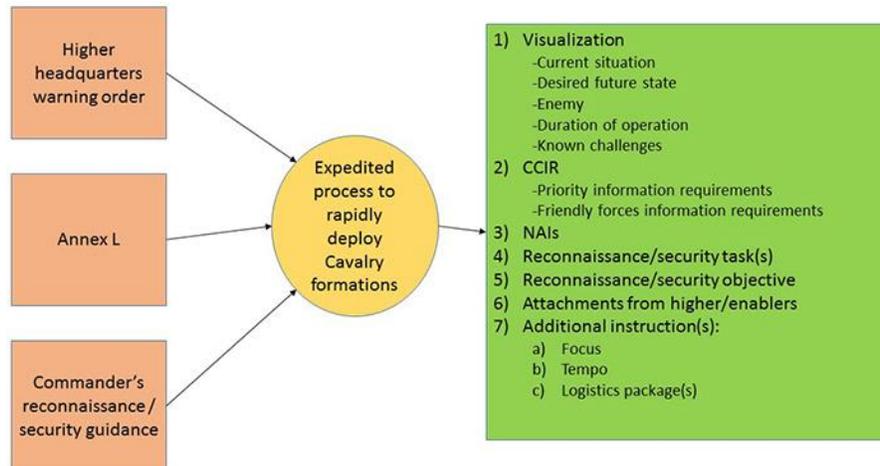


Figure 7. Reconnaissance-and-security guidance.

Lastly, the Army must re-evaluate whether or not it makes sense to reinvest in Europe. Withdrawing armored forces and shutting down headquarters in Europe created a power vacuum, one which a resurgent Russia has filled. Russia's actions challenge the stability and international integrity of European nations and the United States' NATO partners.

Currently there are no permanent formations between U.S. Army Europe and the two BCTs assigned to it. The 4th Infantry Division has established a semi-permanent headquarters in Germany, and 3rd Infantry Division is habitually rotating an ABCT to Europe,¹⁹ but as defense analysts David Shlapak and Michael Johnson point out, "Our analysis — which assumed brigades could be received, moved to the front and then commanded, controlled and supported once there — may have ignored significant shortfalls in all these dimensions. Deploying brigades is not enough. Without a plan, without adequate logistics, without robust command-and-control, a better-prepared adversary would still overwhelm NATO."²⁰

Perhaps the time has come to reactivate V Corps and 2nd Armored Division and plant those guidons in a friendly European nation.

Conclusion

Russia's operations in Eastern Europe demonstrate another evolution in the character of war, swinging the pendulum back toward high-intensity conflict while leveraging all the tools in their arsenal (including hard and soft power) to achieve military and political objectives. In his influential work titled "The Death of the Armor Corps," retired COL Gian Gentile warned that "[c]ompetent field-armies, skilled in all-arms warfare, are not made overnight."²¹ Russia's operations in Eastern Europe indicate the time has arrived for U.S. Army forces to again focus on fielding competent field armies, highly adept at combined arms and joint warfare.

MAJ Amos Fox is currently a student at Command and General Staff College (CGSC), Fort Leavenworth, KS. His previous assignments include commander, D Troop, 2nd Battalion, 16th Cavalry, Fort Benning, GA; commander, D Company, 1st Battalion, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), Fort Irwin, CA; assistant operations officer, 1-11 ACR, Fort Irwin; commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 1st Battalion, 10th Cavalry, 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, CO; and assistant operations officer, 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry, 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson. MAJ Fox's military schools include CGSC, Maneuver Captain's Career Course, Airborne School, Cavalry Leader's Course, Bradley Fire Support Vehicle Commander's Course and Field Artillery Officer Basic Course. He has bachelor's of science degree in secondary education from Indiana University and a master's of arts degree in secondary education from Ball State University. MAJ Fox is a recipient of the Draper Armor Leadership Award, Fiscal Year 2013.

Notes

¹ Andrew Monaghan, "Putin's Way of War: The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare,'" *Parameters*, Winter 2015-16.

² Phillip Karber and LTC Joshua Thibeault, "Russia's New-Generation Warfare," *ARMY* magazine, June 2016.

³This can be either two self-propelled field-artillery batteries or one self-propelled battery and one MLR battery.

⁴Karber and Thibeault.

⁵Carl von Clausewitz in Michael Howard and Peter Paret, editors, *On War*, Princeton University Press, 1976.

⁶Limited objectives are tied to far more significant political objectives – in Georgia, Russia’s limited objectives were supporting Abkhazia and the breakaway of South Ossetia; in Ukraine, the limited objectives were annexing the Donbass Region of the country, an area home to many ethnic Russians. The annexation of Crimea (2014) is not discussed in this article largely because it was a bloodless annexation within almost no real military action. However, in each case, the true political objectives were to punish Georgia and Ukraine for more openness with the West and working to become members of NATO. The point being, limited objectives often hide much larger strategic and political objectives.

⁷Von Clausewitz.

⁸The “quality of firsts” has been written about in several essays, including pieces by GEN Martin Dempsey and COL John Rosenberger. The quality of firsts are “see first, understand first, act first and finish decisively.” See Rosenberger, “Breaking the Saber: The Subtle Demise of Cavalry in the Future Force,” *Landpower* essay, No. 04-1 (June 2004).

⁹All data for Figure 1 are averages of the predominate weapons systems reported to be operating in the Donbass; data on weapon ranges was pulled from the *World Wide Equipment Guide*, Vol. 1 on ground systems, August 2014.

¹⁰Karber and Thibeault.

¹¹The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Capability Manager for ABCTs/recon included in its semi-annual report on operations at the National Training Center (NTC), providing a great deal of insight into the current state of the ABCTs. Also, reporting from the NTC and Joint Multinational Readiness Center and Joint Readiness Training Center echo this to a lesser degree.

¹²Bad habits: large, static, networked command posts; not employing camouflaging on vehicles and headquarters; absence of deception; misuse of cavalry squadrons (using them as battlespace owners instead of as reconnaissance and security operation forces); assumption of air and land superiority; over-reliance on digital systems; predication for setting conditions (could be interpreted as risk aversion). Tools: mission-command systems such as Command Post of the Future, Joint Capability Release, Voice over Internet Protocol phones, etc.; anything that emits a digital or electronic signature; Deployable Rapid Assembly Shelter tent command posts.

¹³Land warfare is inherently combined arms and joint – therefore, the role of indirect fire, air support and other aspects of combined arms and joint warfare should be naturally part of the discussion.

¹⁴Gabel’s work can be found on Fort Leavenworth’s Combat Studies Institute Website.

¹⁵Sunell’s work can be found at *eARMOR*’s historical-series essays under the “Armor” tab.

¹⁶Robert R. Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War*, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹R. Reed Anderson, Patrick J. Ellis, Antonio M. Paz, Kyle A. Reed, Lendy Renegar and John T. Vaughn, *Strategic Landpower and a Resurgent Russia: An Operational Approach to Deterrence*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016.

²⁰David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, “Outnumbered, Outranged and Outgunned: How Russia Defeats NATO,” *War on the Rocks*, April 21, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/04/outnumbered-outranged-and-outgunned-how-russia-defeats-nato/>.

²¹Gian P. Gentile, “The Death of the Armor Corps,” *Small Wars Journal*, April 17, 2010, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-death-of-the-armor-corps?page=1>.