

# Reconnaissance and Security Operations Are Essential to Thwarting Russian Interests in Western Hemisphere

by 1LT Anthony M. Analla

Leaders of the Russian Federation maintain a strategic foothold in the Western Hemisphere by preserving the presidency of Nicholas Maduro in Venezuela. Cooperation between Russia and Venezuela offers the Russian government an ability to bolster its intertwined military, economic and political interests. To that end, the Russian military continues a campaign of material support to the Venezuelan military to deter foreign and domestic threats.

The United States recognizes interim President Juan Guaido and considers the Venezuelan National Assembly, which he currently leads, to be the only legitimate federal institution, according to the Venezuelan Constitution. This pits Russian and U.S. interests in Venezuela at odds because Russia supports Nicolás Maduro, president of Venezuela since 2013, with his presidency under dispute since 2019. In this context, it is crucial to effectively train the U.S. Army and our allies in reconnaissance and security tactics that incorporate the lessons of post-Soviet acts of Russian aggression to prepare for potential hostilities in the region.

Maduro and his United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) present a desperate need for political, economic and military aid that complements the Russian desire for influence in the region. Venezuelan Socialists justifiably fear the threat of a coup because the PSUV temporarily lost power during a coup d'état in 2002.<sup>1</sup> Russia deters threats to the PSUV through arms sales,<sup>2</sup> private military contractors,<sup>3</sup> military advisers/trainers<sup>4</sup> and the United States' fear of confronting the Kremlin in open conflict if a move is made against the PSUV. Further, Russian veto power in the United Nations Security Council provides political cover for Maduro. Finally, the Kremlin bolsters Venezuela through direct financial aid and lines of credit.<sup>5</sup> In return, the Russians gain a foundation to build influence and undermine the interests of the United States in the Western Hemisphere.

With bolstering Venezuela the known objective of the Russian government, the U.S. Army must think critically and train effectively to counter Russian support for the Latin American country that could manifest itself into an armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere.

## Russian mindset

Since the late 1990s the Russian Federation has executed a series of military actions that reveal the character of the military forces the Kremlin has developed to actualize its political objectives and the mindset of its contemporary leaders. In June 1999, Russian forces successfully gained leverage in negotiations over the disposition of a newly created United Nations peacekeeping force by seizing the airport in Pristina, Kosovo, prior to the arrival of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces.<sup>6</sup> This was the first of many actions that demonstrated rising boldness among Russian leaders and a belief that Western powers will not risk the use of military force against Russians.

Russian actors launched a cyberattack in April 2007 against the government of Estonia in retaliation for the removal of a World War II monument honoring Soviet veterans.<sup>7</sup> False news reports that the Estonian government planned to destroy rather than just move the statue exacerbated the unrest among ethnically Russian populations in Estonia.<sup>8</sup> This unprecedented wave of cyberattacks led to major disruptions of government services, email, on-line banking, automated-teller-machine access, e-commerce and more. Cumulatively, the cyberattacks and ethnic tensions led to riots and crippled the country for more than two weeks.<sup>9</sup>

Notably, the Russian government never acknowledged its role in the cyberattack and the specific perpetrators remain unknown, though they are almost certainly government-supported, Russia-based actors.<sup>10</sup> Russia and many other nations learned that cyberattacks now present an effective and low-risk means of disrupting an enemy's ability to maintain order, which reduces its capacity for armed conflict.

One year later, Russia intervened in then-Georgian-controlled South Ossetia and Abkhazia in support of ethnically Russian populations.<sup>11</sup> Prior to the Russian occupation, the Russians recruited, organized and equipped separatists to prepare the battlefield.<sup>12</sup> They also conducted large-scale training exercises that served as rehearsals for the

occupation and a plausible cover for massing forces near the Russia-Georgia border.<sup>13</sup> In this conflict, the Russians fought in all domains to achieve limited strategic goals that included greater influence over the South Caucasus Energy Corridor and discouraging a partnership with NATO.<sup>14</sup> Post-conflict analysis reveals that the Russian military struggled to operate effectively in joint and combined-arms operations.<sup>15</sup> Georgian tactical success sparked a new determination to upgrade Russia's military equipment and move away from Soviet-era tactics.<sup>16</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin took his largest and boldest military actions to date by annexing Crimea and launching an offensive in the Donbass region of Ukraine in 2014. Russia has gained an advantage throughout the conflict through the effective use of deception to delay responses by the Ukrainians and the West.<sup>17</sup> Concrete steps taken to conceal Russian involvement include the use of unmarked soldiers,<sup>18</sup> military contractors<sup>19</sup> and the dubious use of humanitarian aid.<sup>20</sup> Despite these efforts to deny the extent of Russian involvement, unsubtle funerals for fallen Russian soldiers confirm the reality of the situation.<sup>21</sup> In conjunction with Russian actions in Georgia, these actions confirm a strong preference in the Kremlin for the use of military and paramilitary forces that afford the Kremlin deniability on the international stage.

## Lessons-learned

Members of the U.S. Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group, among others, have published studies based on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine that identified critical lessons for the U.S. military. Their findings indicate that the Russian military favors the use of snipers and boobytraps as a means of fixing larger forces and causing significant psychological strain on their enemies.<sup>22</sup> Russia has integrated unmanned aerial systems (UAS) with electronic-warfare (EW) capabilities to project jamming and spoofing effects on its enemies' locations. These systems also fuel the targeting of indirect weapons, often toward elements with a large electronic signature.<sup>23</sup>

Fire-support elements, as opposed to maneuver elements, take finishing actions in Russian offensive operations; this is a continuation of Soviet-style fighting.<sup>24</sup> Despite many advances since the end of the Cold War, resource constraints cause several vulnerabilities in the Russian fighting force. Specifically, their lack of resources causes a deficit of highly trained professionals, especially in the sustainment occupational specialties.<sup>25</sup> As a result, their force struggles to match top-tier maneuver and fires with top-tier sustainment, reducing the likelihood of success in expeditionary operations.

Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad requested military assistance from the Kremlin in 2015 as he struggled to fight a growing multitude of militant groups.<sup>26</sup> Officially, the Russian Federation Council approved only the use of air assets for combat operations in Syria, though the Russians maintain a ground force in the country.<sup>27</sup> Russia has equipped the Syrian army with main battle tanks and small arms while supporting with its own attack aircraft.<sup>28</sup> Sustaining this effort required the Russians to use reserve units and military contractors, which suggests a weakness in Russian capabilities with respect to personnel.<sup>29</sup>

Russian contractors became the subject of much debate when they attacked a combined U.S.-Kurdish force near Deir Ezzor, Syria, in February 2018. Some suggest leaders in the Kremlin used contractors to prosecute the attack to maintain deniability for the government. Others suggest the contractors acted in a cavalier fashion without explicit consent from the Kremlin.<sup>30</sup> Both of these possibilities require that the United States prepare for such actions by Russian contractors in the future. Through Russian assistance the Assad regime has regained much of its territory, and Russia now has a blueprint for strengthening other regimes in the future.<sup>31</sup>

Russian military forces currently train and equip Venezuelan military forces to inoculate the Maduro regime against internal and external threats. Economic turmoil poses the greatest threat to the Maduro regime, so the Russians have responded with billions in direct aid and credit.<sup>32</sup> Since 2000, Russia has made arms sales of more than \$7.5 billion to Venezuela, including fixed-wing and rotary aircraft, armored personnel carriers and small arms.<sup>33</sup> Venezuela also relies on embedded Russian troops to train its force and serve as a deterrent to potential aggressors.<sup>34</sup> Russian strategic bombers have also visited Venezuela, and the two countries have conducted combined military exercises, to the dismay of Western officials.<sup>35</sup> These means and methods of support indicate that any potential conflict in Venezuela will have a similar character to those in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria.

## **Aggressive intelligence collection**

Lessons of Russian intervention in the recent past indicate that reducing the effectiveness of Russian strengths and exploiting Russian weaknesses requires aggressive intelligence collection. Training reconnaissance organizations includes at least three audiences – the primary collectors (Soldiers and junior noncommissioned officers), platoon and troop-level leadership and the staff. Effective training for all audiences requires the use of technology for specific threats and scenarios that force us to think like our adversaries. Ultimately, developing muscle memory in the tasks that cause the right information to flow quickly to the appropriate decision-makers is the goal. This goal includes two important indicators of success: risk decisions made at the appropriate level and mid-operation changes to the enemy's course of action.

This conceptual framework and our synopsis of selected Russian actions leads to five focus areas for training:

- Improvised explosive devices (IED)/boobytraps;
- Snipers;
- UAS;
- Sustainment; and
- Information operations.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States invested significant resources to defeat the threat posed by IEDs and snipers, two strengths we expect to find in Russian supported forces. In contrast to Iraq and Afghanistan, Russian supported forces likely use military grade manufactured explosives – boobytraps – rather than IEDs.<sup>36</sup> We must also anticipate that the skill of a Russian trained sniper will surpass the skill of the snipers from Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup> Passivity significantly increases the risk to the force in an environment with snipers and IEDs/booby traps, while proactive reconnaissance efforts reduce both the psychological and material impacts of the threats.<sup>38</sup>

Proactive reconnaissance efforts for these threats begin with primary collectors and troop-level leaders learning to think like the enemy while analyzing the terrain. From this analysis, they identify positions of advantage from which to counter the threat and minimize the risk to their force. Currently, our force rarely teaches average scouts to think like a sniper. However, we would be wise to encourage this training. Members of the staff must use the analysis to identify the networks that support the battlefield effects of snipers and boobytraps. Analysis from the staff fuels an ongoing effort to plan future reconnaissance patrols among other operations. Ultimately, the feedback loop significantly increases the difficulty our adversaries have in achieving battlefield effects from either a sniper or a boobytrap.<sup>39</sup>

## **Leveraging technology**

U.S. and allied forces must leverage the latest technology in conjunction with battle drills to reduce and defeat the threat of boobytraps and snipers. Currently, U.S. forces infrequently train with gunshot-detection devices and jammers that increase our survivability. Technology, like the processes of information flow, requires extensive training that leads to muscle memory to yield a material benefit. For example, the placement of gunshot-detection devices within a convoy or on a piece of tactical infrastructure requires critical analysis from leaders at the platoon and troop level. Improper placement may yield no benefit to friendly forces.<sup>40</sup> Technology infrequently defeats threats on its own; rather, it enables maneuver forces to defeat an enemy threat. Therefore, training battle drills such as react-to-contact must accompany training with gunshot detection and jammers.

Unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) threats contrast threats from snipers and boobytraps in that the means and methods available to counter them lack thorough, real-world testing. Most commonly, UAVs serve as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets that frequently support the targeting process for indirect-fire assets. As noted, Russia specifically began using drones to project EW impacts to their enemies in Ukraine; however, it is unlikely Russia would support a country like Venezuela with such a scarce resource. This may change as Russia produces and fields more EW-capable drones or if the Syrian civil war stabilizes.

Equipping scouts with counter-UAS devices and weapons enables friendly forces to severely limit a key component of any potential adversary's fighting style. To leverage these resources effectively, the staff must analyze the enemy and predict the task and purpose of their UAVs. As a result, the staff enables commanders to establish engagement criteria. Primary collectors and troop-level leaders must train in identifying UAVs and employing

counter-UAS systems. Again, success requires a feedback loop with each component of a reconnaissance organization working effectively.

Effective employment of counter-UAS systems offers an important example of friendly forces exploiting the weaknesses of countries like Russia and Venezuela. If the United States even went to the extreme of using a Stinger missile (about \$38,000)<sup>41</sup> to destroy the common Russian Orlan-10 drone (about \$87,000),<sup>42</sup> U.S. forces gain a significant advantage. As the Asymmetric Warfare Group stated in its analysis, Russia struggles to compete with the United States in the sustainment warfighting function.<sup>43</sup> This weakness results from the United States maintaining about 30 times Russia's wealth, which translates into greater resources for defense activities.<sup>44</sup> Venezuela depends heavily on Russian support due to its own economic turmoil. It is likely, therefore, that U.S. and allied forces can significantly impact the means and ambition an actor such as Venezuela has to fight by attacking its scarce resources.

In an armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere, the lack of logistical support may constrain adversaries of the United States to the point that it yields a strategic benefit. To exploit weaknesses in sustainment, primary collectors and troop-level leaders must learn to identify the equipment Russia and its allies use for sustainment. Members of the staff must learn to analyze the types of forces that specific equipment sustains and assist the commander in valuating it properly. Ultimately, developing and disseminating engagement criteria that supports U.S. or allied strategic goals becomes paramount in this type of conflict. Reconnaissance organizations as a whole must only introduce a single limiting factor, such as food, water or ammunition, into an adversary's operations to give the following maneuver force a significant advantage.

## **Greatest risk**

Among likely threats from a Russian ally like Venezuela in the Western Hemisphere is the ability of the Russian government to manipulate information. It presents the greatest risk to the mission. Russia claimed that humanitarian needs necessitated their intervention in Georgia<sup>45</sup> and Ukraine,<sup>46</sup> while claims of fighting terrorism drove its intervention in Chechnya<sup>47</sup> and Syria.<sup>48</sup> Russia currently employs hundreds of military contractors in Venezuela, whose activities remain largely unknown.<sup>49</sup> Cuba – another Russian ally – maintains an estimated force of 20,000 personnel in Venezuela.<sup>50</sup> Also, the PSUV has driven Venezuela into a humanitarian crisis.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, Russia could use humanitarian concerns or threats posed by pro-Western, anti-Maduro militias as a justification for more direct military intervention.

Reconnaissance organizations make first contact with both the enemy and the civilian population. Scouts, therefore, must train to identify which Russian-supported actors are on the battlefield and where civilians require humanitarian assistance. In an information campaign, U.S. forces and our allies must consider ourselves guilty until proven innocent. By distinguishing between actors on the battlefield and identifying areas requiring humanitarian assistance, the United States takes important first steps toward denying Russia the ability to use information to its advantage. Distinction between actors on the battlefield in conjunction with thorough training on escalation-of-force procedures and the rules of engagement leads to justifiable actions. Non-lethal capability, means of restraint (e.g. flexcuffs) and other forms of technology increase the options available to commanders to support U.S. goals in an information campaign. When encountering a Russian-backed actor, tactical success becomes meaningless without the ability to control information.

## **Summary**

In summary, Russia has strong incentives to train and equip the Venezuelan military and defend Maduro's regime. Recent history suggests that a Russian-supported Venezuelan force will use IEDs/boobytraps, snipers, UAVs (possibly with EW capabilities) and Russian contractors on the battlefield. Outside of the battlefield, the Russian government will most likely use its political capabilities to create confusion while conducting an information campaign and cyberattacks on behalf of the Venezuelans.

To counter these threats and exploit the weaknesses of a Russian-supported Venezuela, the United States must properly equip reconnaissance forces and train them to aggressively collect information. Scouts, staff and commanders must rehearse specific collection and analysis tasks that enable us to destroy IED/boobytraps and sniper networks. Similarly, we must rehearse collection and analysis to engage enemy UAVs and sustainment

assets according to our strategic goals. Finally, we must train with the mindset of proving our innocence to an onlooking world to deny the Russians any advantage in an information campaign.

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## Notes

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## Acronym Quick-Scan

**EW** – electronic warfare

**IED** – improvised explosive device

**NATO** – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

**PSUV** – United Socialist Party of Venezuela

**UAS** – unmanned aerial system

**UAV** – unmanned aerial vehicle