

PUTIN'S ARMY AND THE COMPLEX APPLICATION OF RUSSIAN STRATEGIC LANDPOWER

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We live in uncertain times, facing adversaries willing to wage war in complex and unconventional ways. Many of you experienced the impact of facing an adaptive and innovative foe firsthand in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such a challenge is now rising in Europe; Russia is adapting its approach to war in both a multifaceted and innovative manner. As rising leaders in the U.S. Army, it is imperative that you understand the nature of the strategic environment so that should you confront such an adaptive foe in the future, you will be able to innovate faster, retain the initiative, and thereby accomplish your mission.

Recent events demonstrate the complex and adaptive approach being employed by Russia to exercise its influence over areas of Europe. The changing face of Russia's operational approach began in 2007 when it launched a crippling cyber attack on Estonia. The cyber attack was in retaliation for the decision to move a Soviet-era Red Army monument, a move that Moscow opposed. This was followed by a large Russian conventional attack against the country of Georgia in 2008, occupying two large areas of the nation (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). In 2014, the world witnessed the Russian annexation of Crimea using soldiers in unmarked uniforms. In only one week, Russia seized control of Crimea "without firing a shot." The annexation of Crimea was rapidly followed by a Russian inspired/led subversive war in eastern Ukraine. The common thread among these diverse Russian operations is its use of ambiguity to confound and confuse decision makers in the West. The "so what" question is that should you deploy to Europe, what is the nature of the threat and what form will it take?

Russian Landpower

The 2008 invasion of Georgia and the ongoing intervention in Ukraine demonstrates Russia's reliance on the military and security services as instruments of its grand strategy. The application of the Russian military instrument of power has taken various forms over recent history. For instance, the Russian operation in Georgia was largely conventional. The 2014 Russian operation in Crimea diverged from the conventional approach by manipulating a sympathetic population and using a robust security infrastructure built up for the Sochi Olympics. Finally, Moscow inspired and is leading a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine hidden behind a cloak of ambiguity and backed by the powerful capabilities of its army.

Despite the differences, these operations exhibit common features of Russia's use of military force. First, Russia depends on landpower to achieve its strategic military objectives in the region. This landpower-centric approach has been part of a broader Russian strategy to roll back the expansion of Western influence (especially NATO and the European Union [EU]) in the former Soviet republics. Second, Russia has adjusted the use of its army to conduct hybrid, irregular warfare as the primary means of warfare against its neighbors so as not to provoke a decisive response from either the United States or other European nations. Finally, it has shifted to a less centralized military structure, relying on special operations forces and other unconventional units to achieve its strategic ends. With this in mind, information operations (IO) and cyber capabilities have emerged as key components of Russian military operations.

The importance of modernization is an ongoing concern for Moscow and its armed forces. These reforms are directed to developing a capability that can intervene quickly and decisively in the region that is able to conduct anything from small special purpose forces missions to large scale conventional operations. It is this ability to tailor forces across the range of operations that makes it uniquely adaptive and capable. To do this, Russia is concentrating resources on a small number of elite units, primarily airborne and special operations forces that make up the core of its emerging rapid reaction force.

The Emerging Russian Operational Approach

Moscow uses deception and disinformation to prevent a quick response from the West. Such was the case in Crimea, where, despite evidence to the contrary, Putin denied that the "little green men" were his soldiers until



Figure — Putin's Strategy of Ambiguity
(Graphic courtesy of author)

after he had completed annexation of the region. By doing this, Putin operated inside the decision-making cycle of NATO and thus retained the strategic initiative. Additionally, this approach exploits fissures in NATO and the EU. When Putin believes that employing conventional forces is too risky, he resorts to using unconventional forces, scaled and adapted to the strategic environment to confound American and European decision makers. This “strategy of ambiguity” was used to great effect in Crimea and continues to succeed in eastern Ukraine.

Putin’s adaptable and long-term approach encompasses two phases comprised of 11 factors. Phase 1 of this emerging operational approach is to create or shape an environment favorable to Russian strategic interests. Phase 2 exploits divergences in the NATO alliance created during Phase 1 and seeks to alter the strategic environment through an ambiguous/hybrid landpower intervention in Eastern Europe. The following discusses this adaptive, multi-faceted approach being employed by Russia:

Phase I — Shaping a Strategic Environment Favorable to Russian Interests:

1. Consolidate political power and use nationalism to maintain domestic support. At the core of the strategy of ambiguity is the maintenance of Putin’s power base and his need for popular support. Putin secures his base by casting the West as the enemy of Russia and thus fuels the engine of nationalism. Staying in power is at the root of Putin’s “strategy of ambiguity” and is the driving force behind it.

2. Modernize and leverage Russia’s nuclear arsenal to bully neighbors. The recently announced modernization of Russia’s already massive nuclear arsenal is a threat to regional stability. Yet, a greater concern is the rhetoric coming out of the Kremlin threatening to use nuclear weapons against any European nation that it views as a challenge to its national interests. Such was demonstrated when Moscow threatened Denmark with nuclear targeting should it join NATO’s missile defense shield in March 2015. The use and threat of nuclear strikes is clearly a part of Russia’s emerging strategic/operational approach to bully and intimidate nations stepping outside its view of the region.

3. Modernization of Russian conventional land forces. The May Victory Parade in Moscow witnessed the unveiling of Russia’s intent to replace its fleet of armored vehicles with significantly modern systems. Although facing economic challenges, it seems that at least the Western Military District will benefit from this incredible boost to conventional land force capability and capacity. When completed, this will alter the strategic dynamics of the continent.

4. Apply economic incentives and blackmail to pressure neighboring countries' economic well-being. Although this tactic has been successfully waged against Ukraine, the dynamics of doing this against other European nations is a bit more complex. However, it is unlikely that Germany and other NATO members, who rely on Russian energy, are willing to have their economic well-being put at long-term risk and thus are less willing to take a hard stand against Russian expansionist activities in the east.

5. Capitalize on long-term IO campaign. The tools of the IO campaign include high-quality Russian television, radio programming, hockey clubs, youth camps, and the Internet. They are designed to export Moscow's strategic messaging across Europe, specifically targeting the Russian Diaspora. This brilliant campaign barrages the viewers/listeners with an unrelenting one-sided view of the world (a pro-Moscow view).

Phase II — "Invade" an Eastern European nation through a hybrid mix of irregular forces, augmented by Russian intelligence and special forces personnel, supported by a gradual introduction of conventional forces (only when the conditions are right).

6. Use subversive activity to create instability in ethnic Russian areas. With a continuous IO campaign brewing in the background, the groundwork is laid to manipulate disgruntled ethnic Russians in any region Putin chooses. As in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, these movements start as peaceful protests but ultimately lead to taking over government buildings and inciting armed insurrections. Once engaged in low-level combat, the Russian rebels proclaim their right to self-determination and eventually appeal to Moscow for aid. However convenient it is to have local support in an uprising, the Kremlin does not need popular support in the Russian Diaspora to achieve its strategic ends. Should the local populace in a contested region not support an uprising, Moscow can simply export a separatist movement from Russia to provide the pretext for an intervention, as in evidence in eastern Ukraine.

7. Move a large conventional force along the borders to dissuade action against the subversives. As in eastern Ukraine, Moscow responded to the instability by deploying a large conventional force along the border under the guise of aiding refugees and containing unrest. The real reason, however, was to intimidate Ukraine, which hesitated out of fear of provoking a response from Moscow.

8. Leverage ambiguity to maintain strategic flexibility. Deception and disinformation are the key ingredients of the Russian approach, and Putin uses these tools to sow ambiguity and thus obscure his strategy. As a result, Putin remains a step ahead of NATO's decision-making process and quickly adapts his actions to keep the alliance off balance.

9. Violate international borders and support the pro-Russian insurgents. As the Ukrainian army launched its offensive to subdue the rebels in eastern Ukraine, the Russian army was poised to provide support to their comrades. These "volunteer" soldiers provided armor, artillery, and air defense assets that blunted Ukrainian offensive action. Meanwhile, the Kremlin equivocated about its intentions and denied involvement in the conflict. Had there been a determined international response against Moscow, Putin could have withdrawn support from the separatists, denied complicity in the violence, and waited for a more opportune time to try again.

10. Seize an area to achieve a limited strategic end. When the security of a targeted region collapses, the international response is mired in debate and a humanitarian crisis ensues. The conditions are set for Russian forces to intervene. Despite characterizing the intervention as a temporary salve to an unacceptable human crisis, Putin would deploy forces for as long as needed to achieve a security environment favorable to Moscow. With such an approach, Russia can attain limited strategic objectives with minimal risk. The ultimate goal of this methodology would be, in the long term, to discredit NATO and thereby undermine the security of any NATO member. In the short to midterm, such an approach could easily be used against Moldova or other area outside of NATO to expand Russian influence.

11. Use nuclear blackmail to blunt a coherent NATO response. As Russian forces move to bite off a piece of territory for humanitarian assistance or any other purpose, the Kremlin will threaten to use nuclear weapons against any nation acting against its interests.

The two-phased, 11-part tactic demonstrates an adaptive strategic approach. Yet, despite the flexibility inherent in Putin's two-phase and multi-faceted approach, concerted action now can preserve European security. The only way to do this, however, is through decisive and comprehensive action as delineated above. The aggressive tone — its history of intervention bolstered by an antagonistic landpower and nuclear force modernization — is something

that must be taken seriously. These have the real potential to alter the strategic environment in Europe and the world. The unpatrolled peace that most of Europe has enjoyed since the end of the World War II is an anomaly in the continent's history. This peace came at a high price. Moscow's emerging operational approach is a threat to this security, and if not countered could alter the way of life of people around the world, especially in the United States.

There are an array of advantages that Russian strategic landpower enjoys in the region. Foremost of these is geography. Although NATO expansion into Eastern Europe has deprived Moscow of buffer states, it now has "interior lines of communication," which means it now has the ability to rapidly shift or move forces along its western frontier. It is such a capability that makes the so called unannounced "snap exercises" that Russia conducts close to NATO's eastern borders such a concern.

Another factor working in favor of Russian strategic landpower is the traditional and at times extended presence it has had across broad areas of the region. For instance, Russian domination over Estonia began in 1704 with the defeat of the Swedish army in Narva at the hands of Czar Peter the Great. Russia completed its occupation of Estonia by 1710. It would not be until 1917 that Estonia shook free from the Russian occupation, but then had to contend with the German army and after the World War I the Red Army. Independence was finally secured in 1920. But this would end with another Soviet occupation in 1940 (interrupted by a brief Nazi occupation 1941-1944). During the Cold War, the region was a key location for the Soviet armed forces, with Russian troops remaining in the country until 1994. This extended and enduring presence of Russian troops and influence, spanning a greater portion of 200 years in Estonia, is something that should not be so easily ignored. This is why Putin, in part, is so belligerent toward Baltic integration into NATO and why Article V of the Washington Treaty (an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all) is integral to their security.

However, the greatest advantage that Russian strategic landpower retains is the application of a hybrid mix of forces to befuddle and confuse Western decision making. As the West prevaricates during a crisis, Russian troops move toward achieving their objective, which can be rapid in the case of Crimea or slower and messier as in the case of eastern Ukraine. Yet, the appearance of Russian intelligence and special forces in eastern Ukraine pretending to be a local independence movement would be laughable if it did not so brilliantly confuse and baffle Western politicians, who continue to lack unanimity and resolve on how to contend with this threat to European security.

Yet, one should not be lulled into a false sense of security, even should NATO figure out a way to deter or mitigate the hybrid application of Russian forces. In the background remains the real threat of its conventional force, which is poised to support cross-border hybrid operations as experienced in the Ukraine. However, "supporting" a hybrid effort is just one course of action. Another, often viewed unthinkable but not out of the realm of the impossible, is the hybrid war morphing into a conventional effort should the strategic environment prove opportune. It may be just this that is really in the back of Putin's mind with his stunning announcement to modernize and expand Russian's nuclear arsenal and armored forces.

If and when the political and economic environment favors a more aggressive and expansionist approach, in just a few years Moscow will have both a modernized conventional and robust unconventional force, backed by a large nuclear arsenal. It is key to note that the most modern of Russia's military is the one closest to NATO, the Western Military District. When the Kremlin begins to outfit its forces with the most modern ground equipment in the world, it will be the Western Military District that is the first to receive this new equipment.

The Western Military District includes Kaliningrad, the Russian land mass wedged between NATO members Poland and Lithuania along the Baltic Sea. This "unsinkable Russian aircraft carrier" is a boon for Russian strategic landpower in many areas. Foremost, however, is the "forward" presence that is expanding its forces here behind two key NATO member states. Looking at any map, one can see that Kaliningrad looks almost like a wedge, thrust partially between Poland and Lithuania — in effect, between Eastern Europe and the Baltic region. Such geography makes the land bridge between Poland and Lithuania key terrain and something that must be jealously guarded as any Russian move would include quickly blocking NATO land access to the Baltic region (and air and sea access thanks to the unsinkable Kaliningrad isthmus). Thus, one can see how painfully obvious it is to maintain a robust permanent forward NATO presence in the Baltic States.

A key part of Russian strategic landpower against the Baltic, or anywhere else in Europe, will be its nuclear arsenal.

The Kremlin will not hesitate to threaten its use against any nation acting against its interests. Russia has already threatened Denmark with a nuclear strike (to defend Crimea with nukes as well as fire nukes into the Baltics) should NATO activity there prove proactive to Putin. The threat and fear of a nuclear war will indeed have a chilling effect on the decision makers throughout NATO. It is such a gamble that may just be worth taking.

Russian landpower remains a potent force. The emerging hybrid cat-and-mouse application of its military force makes it rather complicated for the West to come up with a coherent response to any Moscow-inspired aggression. Yet, behind this hybrid pattern remains a robust and capable conventional force that enjoys interior lines of communication, the benefits of operating on familiar terrain, and the promise of being equipped with the most modern equipment that any army has ever enjoyed.

Then there is Russia's nuclear force. You can be sure that any future Kremlin-directed operations against Eastern European states will be backed by a real threat of a nuclear strike against any nation acting contrary to Moscow's interests. This is a consideration that completely changes the strategic calculus for NATO.

No matter what transpires, we should expect that Russian landpower will remain the center piece of any action it takes in the future to expand its influence across the region, and this is not something that can be easily ignored. This is an increasingly capable and adaptable force, which has come a long way since its invasion of Georgia. No longer should we expect clumsy or sloppy mistakes as occurred in 2008. The Russian army has come a long way in just a few years, and greater changes are on the horizon when its units receive a complete refitting of equipment that most analysts view as modern and revolutionary. The question remains, how will you respond when confronted by a sophisticated and adaptive foe? How can you train and adapt your unit to overcome the emerging hybrid application of warfare facing our Army?

For more information on Russian strategic landpower, the U.S. Army War College has published studies on the emerging threat to NATO security. These studies can be found online at: <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/>. Search for "Project 1704" and "Project 1721."

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