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by Julian Lindley-French

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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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"A transition from sequential and concentrated actions to continuous and distributed ones, conducted simultaneously in all spheres of confrontation, and also in distant theatres of military operations is occurring."

Gen. Valeriy Gerasimov, as reported by the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, March 24, 2018

The purpose of this short briefing paper is to consider the capability and utility of contemporary Russian forces in relation to President Vladimir Putin's strategic goals. Specifically, this paper examines the critical role played by Russia's "New Look" military force in the realization of Moscow's political goals via complex strategic coercion.

Complex strategic coercion is the use of all national means and beyond by a "securitized" state such as Russia to systematically undermine the command authority, as well as the political and social cohesion of adversary states and institutions. This end is achieved by creating and exploiting divisions within diverse societies, interfering in national political processes and exacerbating tensions between democracies. Complex strategic coercion is underpinned by the threat of overwhelming conventional military power against weaker states at a time and place of the aggressor's choosing. This type of coercion is allied to the implicit threat of nuclear and other means of mass destruction to confirm the changed facts on the ground by preventing strategic peer competitors from mounting a successful rescue campaign.

Western strategists increasingly confuse strategy, capability and technology, thus undermining deterrence and defence efforts. Russian Chief of the General Staff Gen. Valeriy Gerasimov has been pioneering precisely the fusion of the three elements of warfare for a decade. The modernization of Russia's armed forces must thus be seen in the context of a new form of complex strategic coercion that employs systematic pressure across 5Ds: disinformation, destabilization, disruption, deception and implied destruction. Russia's strategic goal is to conduct a continuous low-level war at the seams of democratic societies, and on the margins of both the EU and NATO, to create implicit spheres of influence where little or no such influence would otherwise exist. In the worst case, complex strategic coercion would be used to mask Russian force concentrations prior to any attack on NATO and EU states from above the Arctic Circle and Norway's North Cape in the north, through the Baltic States and Black Sea region and into the southeastern Mediterranean. The strategy's enduring method is to use the implicit threat of force to keep the Western allies permanently off-balance, strategically, politically and militarily, and thus to offset any innate advantages afforded Western leaders by either their forces or resources. If the Alliance concept of deterrence and defence is to remain credible, an entirely new and innovative concept of protection and projection must be considered as a matter of urgency.

Why complex Russian strategic coercion?

There are three elements to Russian strategy which provide the all-important strategic rationale for Russia's military modernization: intent, opportunity and capability. The intent of Moscow's

complex coercive strategy is driven by a world-view that combines a particular view of Russian history with the Kremlin's political culture, which is little different from that of Russia prior to the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. For Russia, the end of the Cold War was a humiliating defeat which saw power in Europe move decisively away from Moscow to Berlin and Brussels. For Moscow, the loss of all-important prestige was compounded by NATO and EU enlargement as proof of an insidious West's designs to destroy what Russians see as the legitimate legacy of the Great Patriotic War and with it, Russian influence in Europe.

The 2014 EU Association Agreement with Ukraine reinforced the Kremlin's paranoia that Russia's voice no longer mattered. The traditional Russian reliance on force as a key component of its influence reinforced the Putin regime's tendency to imagine (and to some extent manufacture for domestic consumption) a new threat to Russia from the West. The increasingly securitized Russian state thus has come to see the threat of force as a key and again legitimate component of Russian defence, albeit more hammer and nail than hammer and sickle. Hard though it is for many Western observers to admit, it is also not difficult to see how Russia, with its particular history, and Putin's Kremlin with its particular world-view, has come again to this viewpoint. The West's mistake would be to believe that such a world-view is not actually believed at the pinnacle of power in Russia. It is.

An under-defended Europe, a fractured transatlantic relationship and an over-stretched America faced with the rise of regionally aggressive China all afford the opportunity for Moscow's complex coercive strategy. The Brexit fallout has reinforced Russian prejudices about the EU. From the Russian perspective, the supine British political and bureaucratic elites are an example of what happens to an old power that tries to negotiate constructively with a German-centric European Commission that sees itself on an historic mission to unite all the peoples of Europe via the aggregation of state power into a superpower organized around and for Berlin. For the Kremlin, there is no such thing as community in international relations, only power, the balance or otherwise thereof and the zero-sum reality of winners and losers.

Military-strategic analysis

Russia's military modernization began with the 10-year State Armament Program of 2010 and the so-called New Look reforms. The main elements are:

Russian Aerospace Forces

Strategic communications are central to Moscow's method of coercion, particularly for an aggressive but weaker power in competition with stronger, albeit more diverse and passive powers. The Russian Aerospace Forces are thus a vital component in Moscow's complex strategic coercion and act as a showroom to the West of Russian military capability. Together with the development of highly deployable airborne forces, the Russian Air Force and air defence have received the biggest tranche of funding in the 2011-2020 Strategic Armaments Program. Since 2014, the air force has acquired more than 1,000 aircraft – both fixed and rotary wing. Much

investment has been made in new hypersonic missile systems such as the Avangard, Kinzhal and Zircon systems. A new intercontinental ballistic missile, SR28 Sarmat, has been deployed together with further deployments of mobile systems such as TOPOL M, as well as a raft of short and (controversially) intermediate-range systems, such as 9M729 Novator. The latter breaches the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and once again raises the prospect of the U.S. strategic arsenal being de-coupled from the defence of NATO Europe. Nuclear torpedoes have also been tested as well as new ship-busting systems, such as the nuclear-capable SS-N-X18. Russia's air defence forces have been markedly upgraded to form a multi-layered air defence with the creation of 44 new missile battalions armed with the advanced S-400 surface-to-air missile and other systems. Russia's space-based systems are also being modernized with 85 military satellites, 21 of which offer high-resolution imagery and high-speed data transfer.

Russia is also seeking to better exploit unmanned and robotic systems, with a particular emphasis on the use of drones to enhance tactical and operational reconnaissance. However, while Moscow is keen to develop a heavy reconnaissance and strike drone, its programs are still some way from being completed.

Strategic Command and Control

The National Defence Management Centre (NDMC) acts as the brains of the force charged with considering the utility and application of force in line with presidential strategy. The NDMC balances centralization of strategic command with decentralization of operational command. Four smaller versions of the NDMC have been recreated in the four military oblasts (districts).

Critically, the NDMC has overseen a radical root-and-branch reform of Russia's strategic, operational and tactical command and control allied to the creation of new joint forces. This reform includes a particular emphasis on new airborne forces that combine airborne units, naval infantry (marines), special operating forces (Spetsnaz)) and the deployment of high-tech capabilities that enhance battlefield mobility and offensive and defensive performance. Particular improvements are apparent in the situational awareness of commanders, and communications between the supreme political authority and operational commanders. The adoption of a new joint battlespace information system has further enhanced the force's flexibility. Live streaming for commanders has also been introduced to improve real-time operational command and decision-making.

Personnel

The design aim is to improve the strategic and political utility and flexibility of Russia's future force. The creation of a core professional force is central to that ambition with a large augmentation force, built mainly around conscripts, reinforced, in turn, by significant reserves. The shift in the balance between conscripted personnel and professional personnel aims to achieve a 4:5 ratio. A particular emphasis has been placed on making all cadres of non-commissioned officers (NCOs) professional to improve the junior leadership qualities of the force. Achieving such a change has been complicated by a decline in the attractiveness of military

contracts since 2010 compared with civilian alternatives, but significant progress is apparent in making a military career more attractive compared with the recent past.

Russian Army

The Russian army has proved to be the most resistant to the changes Gerasimov has been driving in his long tenure as Chief of the General Staff. The central effort to modernize the force has focused on upgrades of artillery and armoured systems and formations, albeit with mixed success. Much has been made of the new T-90M main battle tank and its enhanced active armour protection. However, tests of the T-90M are unlikely to be completed before 2020 at the earliest. A sustained effort has also been made to improve the army's fires and counter-fires capability as the use of mass artillery still remains central to Russian land doctrine. New multi-launch rocket systems (MLRS) have been deployed, together with heavy-guided artillery munitions reinforced by the increasing use of drones to enhance the battlefield intelligence of artillery regiments. Russia's missile brigades are also capable of operating at a greater range than before with double the number of launchers compared with 2010. They are also equipped with new short-range systems, such as Iskandr M, with ranges up to 500 km.

Russian Navy

The Russian navy has benefited least of all by services from the reform program, even though a massive new missile arsenal is nearing completion on the Kola Peninsula close to the base of the Russian Northern Fleet, Moscow's principal naval force. While significant enhancements have been made to the fleets of Russian nuclear ballistic submarines with the (eventual) deployment of the four Borei-class boats (three of which are under construction), the development and deployment of the eight boats of the advanced hunter-killer Yasen class greatly concern Western navies. Russia has also deployed 11 boats of the effective Akula class and some very quiet conventional submarines of the improved Kilo class, as well as the new Varshavyanka and Lada classes. The Russian submarines' ability to fire a range of munitions, including cruise missiles and nuclear-tipped torpedoes, makes them potentially highly effective ship-busters.

However, the surface fleet has not fared so well. The shipbuilding yards have been unable to meet the navy's demand to replace principal surface craft, with budgets for such construction in any case reduced in recent years. The 30-year-old aircraft carrier, Admiral Kuznetsov, is undergoing a problematic extended refit following its return from operations in the Mediterranean in 2017 and 2018.

Lacunae

Russia's military lacunae confirm the nature, scope and ambition of Moscow's complex strategic coercion because they emphasize the ability of Russian forces to potentially do a lot of damage around Russia's self-declared near-abroad, but with limited strategic effect beyond without resorting to the use of nuclear weapons. Specifically, Russian forces lack strategic manoeuvre and strategic lift, which limits the range of likely conventional action from Russia's borders. The blocking of the two French-built Mistral-class amphibious ships was a particular blow. The

Russian air force also lacks precision-guided munitions, although steps are being taken to close that gap in the arsenal, and the development of so-called smart munitions is a priority. Russia's strategic bomber fleet is also very old, even though systems such as the Tu-22M and the latest variants of the Tu-95 are still capable of providing platforms for the launch of new long-range, stand-off hypersonic missile systems.

Assessment

The modernization of the Russian armed forces since 2010 has been impressive. However, the impression of an irresistible force that Putin likes to portray is still some way from the truth. The specific threat from the force comes in its role within, and relationship to, other forms of warfare Russia could wage, particularly on European democracies close to its borders. Today's Russian armed forces are certainly capable of undertaking a lightning 30-day conventional war at the margins of NATO and the EU that would enable them to seize strategic, albeit limited, objectives. Russia's nuclear forces are being modernized at pace (see the 2019 deployment of the Avangard system) with the objective to deter and prevent the major Western powers from intervening in sufficient force until a *fait accompli* land grab was completed. Russian grand strategy and military strategy are thus closely aligned either through the threat of force or, in extremis, the actual use of force. Why Russia would actually use such force is harder to discern, although the Kremlin's failure to reform either the Russian economy or society could create the conditions in which a desperate regime felt compelled to resort to extreme measures.

There are also significant constraints on the Russian defence budget. The slowdown in investment planned in the 2021-2030 Strategic Armaments Program suggests that Putin's original level of military-strategic ambition might also be somewhat reduced in the coming years. Much will depend on foreign-generated income from oil and gas sales and the extent to which Russian civil society is willing to accept the cost of the onerous burden of the Russian security state (civil and military). While no democrat, Putin has shown himself sensitive to the public mood, if not to the public voice.

Strategic welfare and countering complex strategic coercion

Europe is slowly awakening from a 30-year strategic slumber, as evidenced by the talk of strategic autonomy and even a possible European army the French and Germans are leading. For all the challenges the British face, the shift from an equipment/cost-led defence strategy to an effects-led strategy is also indicative. As with all such moments, the awakening is marked by an explosion in concepts that tend to create more heat than light for leaders and the policy and strategy choices they must make. Definition at such moments is thus vital for defence, particularly when it concerns the need to understand adversaries and their strategic aims. The future defence of Europe must thus be seen in the context of two main drivers. First, an offensive Russian strategy based on Moscow's systematic identification of the coercive strategic effects the Kremlin seeks to

generate and the role of both implied and actual force in the creation of such effects. Second, a revolution in military technology that is ever more apparent as the prospect of hyper-war-driven artificial intelligence, quantum computing and machine-learning, nano-technologies, drone and other semi- or fully autonomous delivery systems start to appear in an increasingly singular battlespace. This battlespace now stretches from the ocean depths to outer space, across all landmasses and within and between changing societies and communities.

The mistake the Americans have traditionally made at such moments is to see technology as strategy. Gerasimov and his staff have adopted a very different approach. They have considered the strategic and political objectives that Putin has set for them and the ends, ways and means (including technology) available to Russia to realize those goals. American concepts such as the technology-led cross-domain warfare in which the battlespace becomes an integrated air, sea, land, space, cyber, information (including electronic warfare) and knowledge super-domain for the conduct of operations are vital, but to the Russians of secondary important to strategy – a means to an end. Indeed, Gerasimov and his staff see cross-domain warfare as an outcome and a consequence, as well as a realizer of strategy. Europeans appear to embrace neither strategy nor technology in any meaningful and systematic way, rather seeing defence as what can be afforded after the costs of social welfare have been expended.

Russia's military modernization must thus be seen first and foremost as the foundation instrument for the application of complex strategic coercion across 5D continuous warfare in pursuit of the greatest influence at the least war-fighting cost to the Russian Federation. In other words, for Moscow, the utility of the Russian future force as a political extortion racket – the ultimate tool of strategic blackmail – is aimed primarily at the states around Russia's western and southern borders, with a particular focus on what the Kremlin would call the old Soviet Empire.

The logic of such a strategy is created by Europe's leaders, too many of whom continue to be in denial of the strategic ambition implicit in Russia's force modernization and the need to counter it. If Europeans and their allies are to successfully counter Russian strategy they need to see a 5D defence as strategic welfare and organize accordingly. To that end, new partnerships are needed between institutions, states and peoples to harden both systems and populations in addition to deterring Russia's implied use of force. Back in 1967, Pierre Harmel called for a dual-track approach to the then-Soviet Union – defence and dialogue. Dialogue with Russia remains vital to convince Moscow that the aggressive narrative about the West is not only wrong, but it will eventually be self-defeating. At the same time, if Europeans are to successfully demonstrate the errors in the assumptions that underpin Russian strategy, the defence of Europe will need to be recast with forces and resources applied systematically across the 5Ds and seven domains of 21st-century warfare. Such a strategy presupposes a strong albeit adapted transatlantic relationship, and a Europe that finally pursues strategic unity of effort and purpose. The need is great. As Russia has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate in and around Ukraine and elsewhere, 5D warfare is already a reality.

About the Author

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