"De-escalation" and Hybrid War:

Mutually Supporting Strategies or Dangerous Brinksmanship?

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Editor's Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of the Army, the U.S. Department of Defense, NATO, or any of their agencies.

IN FEBRUARY 2013, the Russian weekly newspaper *Military Industrial Courier* published an article by General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the Russian General Staff. Gerasimov's article outlined the means by which Russia could achieve its desired military objectives with limited use of force, espousing the incorporation of both traditional and non-traditional methods of waging war into a unified military strategy.

CHIEF AMONG GERASIMOV'S TENETS was the usage of political and economic influence and targeted information campaigns to shape the battlefield in advance of either conventional or unconventional military operations.[1] More than a year later, Russia employed this hybrid approach to warfare — the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine — during the annexation of Crimea, causing significant alarm in the West. Russia's ambiguous techniques blurred the definition of hostility and what constituted a violation of national sovereignty, presenting a unique obstacle to the development of Western resolve to counter Russia's aggressive behavior.

Augmenting the Gerasimov Doctrine — which at least tacitly acknowledges a conventional capabilities gap with NATO — is Russia's policy of "de-escalation" through the use of limited nuclear strikes. The "de-escalation" strategy, which surmises that Russia's enemies will capitulate in the face of the small-scale employment of nuclear weapons rather than risk a broader nuclear conflict, makes use of arguably the last remaining instrument in Russia's inventory upon which it can claim parity with the West, particularly the United States.[2] Indeed, Russia's declared willingness to use nuclear weapons in a tactical first strike capacity potentially neutralizes NATO's conventional superiority and, given the risks associated with nuclear provocations, conceivably adds to Western discord over the proper response to Russian intervention in the form of hybrid warfare.

Some, such as the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation's Nikolai Sokov, have argued that the improved conventional capabilities of the Russian military, which have been given renewed attention and investment since the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, have rendered the "de-escalation" policy unnecessary.[3] However, considering the ambiguity of the techniques espoused in the Gerasimov Doctrine and the articulated nuclear risks associated with confronting Russian militarily, it would seem that the two doctrines mutually support one another. If hybrid warfare creates a grey area in terms of hostility, then "de-escalation" ensures that any response will need to be measured. Thus, the renewed efficacy of Russia's conventional forces will not diminish their reliance on either hybrid warfare or the policy of "de-escalation"; rather, a convergence of the two doctrines allows Russia to execute its hybrid tactics with greater impunity and, therefore, exercise continued influence in its neighborhood.

Limited Nuclear Strikes and Hybrid Warfare: A Primer

In order to understand how the respective Gerasimov and "de-escalation" doctrines have come to augment one another, it is important to consider the nature of the respective strategies and how they fit into Russia's overall security posture. Both were developed independently of one another — "de-escalation" predates the

NATO Strategic Communications Conference, 2014. The slide explains the new type of warfare: A war of words, agressive propaganda and misinformation— "war was never declared". Photo by Henry Plimack.

Gerasimov Doctrine by roughly thirteen years — and there is nothing in Gerasimov's article to suggest that the hybrid tactics he espoused are linked to Russia's standing policy on limited nuclear strikes. However, both approaches indicate a certain level of self-perceived conventional limitations and, whether intentionally or not, the respective doctrines mutually support one another.

"De-escalation": The "de-escalation" strategy was conceived in the late 1990s after roughly a decade of degradation in Russia's conventional armed forces. As Iva Savic suggested, "The first decade of the post-Cold War era left the Russian military neglected, impoverished and, to a large extent, structurally and technologically obsolete."[4] This descent into obsolescence was offset — from a national security standpoint — by the deterrent capability of the nuclear arsenal the Russian Federation had inherited from the Soviet Union. After a period of intense negotiations, Russia eventually repatriated the nuclear stockpiles left behind in the Soviet successor states of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, leaving Russia as the only nuclear-armed state in the former Soviet space.[5] Thus, by 1999, despite the lack of conventional parity with its perceived military rivals, Russia still maintained one of the world's two largest nuclear arsenals and was the dominant nuclear power on the Eurasian land mass. However, while the nuclear arsenal provided Moscow with a deterrent against possible aggression, as Russia's military withered, so too did its ability to influence events on the global stage.

The catalyst for Russia's "de-escalation" policy was the NATO air campaign in Kosovo in 1999. The operation exposed a serious dilemma for Russian decision-makers; it became clear that there existed a wide gulf in conventional military technologies between Russia and NATO and, in Kosovo, "the United States utilized modern, high-precision conventional weapons to produce highly tangible results with only limited collateral damage. These conventional weapons systems, unlike their nuclear counterparts, were highly usable."[6] In other words, Russia's long-time adversary was fielding new and innovative weapons for which they had no answer in their conventional inventory.

In response, Russian security officials rewrote the employment criteria for their nuclear weapons or, more specifically, lowered the threshold at which nuclear weapons could be deployed in order to "de-escalate" a conflict. The doctrine, which would preferably serve as a deterrent for any potential adversaries, was officially signed by Russian president Vladimir Putin in early 2000 (after participating in drafting the policy as the Secretary of the Russian Security Council the year before) and

posited, "If Russia were faced with a large-scale conventional attack that exceeded its capacity for defense, it might respond with a limited nuclear strike."[7]

Codification of the policy was supplemented by the routine incorporation of simulated "de-escalatory" strikes in large-scale Russian military exercises beginning in 2000.[8] The inclusion of limited nuclear strikes in tactical military exercises indicated that nuclear weapons were no longer exclusive to strategic decision-making. The decision to incorporate nuclear weapons in military planning below the strategic level was noteworthy. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal was intrinsic to its strategic planning. However, as Sokov suggests, as the Cold War receded into history, the two adversaries' respective nuclear stockpiles took on a far less menacing significance:

> When the Cold War ended, Russia and the United States suddenly had less reason to fear that the other side would launch a surprise, large-scale nuclear attack. Nuclear weapons therefore began to play primarily a political role in the two countries' security relationship. They became status symbols, or insurance against unforeseen developments. They were an ultimate security guarantee, but were always in the background — something never needed.[9]

In other words, the doctrine introduced in 2000 represented a paradigm shift in the post-Soviet era. Nuclear weapons were no longer exclusively intended for the purposes of strategic equity and mutually assured destruction; they became a doctrinally accepted means for achieving battlefield victories. Russia had essentially redefined the concept of post-Cold War nuclear deterrence.

Moreover, despite the overall tactical nature of the "de-escalation" policy, due to the long-range precision capabilities of the United States' conventional arsenal, the Russians have not ruled out the employment of strategic delivery systems to fulfill the doctrine's intended objectives.[10] Thus, when former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, retired Air Force General Philip Breedlove, argues "The Russians speak about, write about, and train to use tactical nukes as a logical and understood extension of conventional war," it is important to note that the definition of conventional war and the tactical employment of specific weapon systems is constantly evolving.[11] Modern technologies have expanded the depth and scope of the contemporary battlefield and, considering that the intent of limited nuclear strikes is to overcome conventional deficiencies, the potential use of long-range delivery systems will remain a concern as long as Russian military decision-makers believe a tactical advantage can be gained by targeting areas that may otherwise be deemed strategic.

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It should be noted that a 2010 revision reined in the doctrinal language of the "de-escalation" policy to encompass only existential threats to the Russian state (previous terminology had suggested that limited nuclear strikes could be employed "in situations critical to the national security") and only applied to conflicts with other nuclear-armed states.[12] What is not addressed, however, is how Russia defines existential threats to its statehood. In justifying the annexation of Crimea at a July 2014 address, Putin stated, "When I speak of Russians and Russian-speaking citizens, I am referring to those people who consider themselves part of the broad Russian community, they may not necessarily be ethnic Russians, but they consider themselves Russian people."[13] With these remarks as context, the Kremlin ostensibly holds a different understanding of what constitutes the Russian state — borders and citizenship are at least rhetorically subordinated to ethno-linguistic determinants — and, therefore, what qualifies as an existential threat becomes murkier. Hence, while the language in the "de-escalation" doctrine has become more benign, likely in correspondence with Russia's improving conventional capabilities, the employment criteria for a "de-escalatory" strike remain nebulous. Combined with the blurring of lines between strategic and tactical targeting, the policy of limited nuclear strikes remains particularly menacing.

Hybrid Warfare: Like the policy of "de-escalation," the hybrid tactics Russia has employed in Crimea and Ukraine emerged from an acknowledgment that the nature of warfare had evolved and that Russia was ill prepared to fight on the modern battlefield. The utilization of non-traditional means to wage war became a necessity as Russia's military prowess degraded.[14] While the doctrine of limited nuclear strikes is articulated as a primarily defensive strategy, the tactics of hybrid warfare are far more offensive in nature, albeit less overt than traditional military maneuvers. Conceptually, the ideas behind hybrid warfare do not rule out the use of conventional forces but, rather, espouse the usage of the full spectrum of national power in the interest of achieving political goals or, should it be necessary, preparing the battlefield for a more traditional military effort.[15] Central to the Russian campaign in Crimea (and, later, in eastern Ukraine) was the clever use of media on the information front — the vast majority of Russian-language news sources are produced and broadcast from within Russia itself, where the Kremlin has consolidated control over the largest news outlets[16] — as well as operations in cyberspace and the limited use of irregular forces, which set the stage for more robust conventional units to complete the annexation.[17]

A number of articles have addressed whether hybrid warfare is unique to Russia or even a new method of waging war at all. The Kennan Institute's Matthew Rojanski and Michael Kofman argue in regards to the term hybrid warfare, "Despite sounding new and in vogue, its analytical utility is limited... the combination of war across domains is not new, but in fact is as old as warfare itself."[18] This, however, misses the point (although, perhaps analysts Mary Ellen Connell and Ryan Evans were more accurate in terming Russia's tactics in Crimea and eastern Ukraine *"ambiguous warfare"*[19]).

The RS-24 Yars (SS-27) rocket, Russia's newest operational fifth-generation intercontinental ballistic missile. Photo by Free Wind 2014/Shutterstock.

Whether Russia's multi-dimensional approach to warfare is premeditated and unique or hybrid warfare is simply a "catchall phrase" is ultimately irrelevant.[20] Far more pressing than the nomenclature used to define Russia's methods is the fact that the tactics employed in Crimea and Ukraine have called into question what, exactly, constitutes hostility and has sowed the seeds of discord in the West, stymying a coherent response. Indeed, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier recently remarked that NATO's exercises along its eastern periphery constituted "warmongering," suggesting that it was the Western military alliance — not Russia — that was acting provocatively.[21] This is where "ambiguous warfare" has proven most effective. Whereas an overt military offensive would likely engender a more unified Western response in the face of undeniable aggression, the grey area in which hybrid tactics are employed allows other national interests to creep into the decision-making process, fostering indecisiveness. For example, as a member of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), Steinmeier's comments reflect "a longstanding belief in the SPD's Russia-friendly policies which date back to Ostpolitik — Cold War-era rapprochement with Moscow."[22] In short, without a genuine impetus for action, responding to Russian aggression becomes more a matter of a political will than strategic necessity.

Ultimately, the merits of the West's response to the Ukraine crisis and the effects of NATO's operations near the Russian border are debatable. What is clear, however, is that hybrid tactics — those that are not clear-cut aggressions — have caused a rift among western decision-makers, particularly as they seek to define Russian actions through the prism of geopolitics and national interests. While the West has hardly been left paralyzed by indecision — in addition to the NATO exercises to which Steinmeier alluded, a sanctions regime against Russia was recently renewed by the member states of the EU[23] — hybrid tactics have affected Western political will to more forcefully counter Russia, allowing the Kremlin to exert pressure on its weaker neighbors without putting at risk its own security.[24] Hence, Russia's ambiguous warfare has succeeded in casting doubt on Western resolve and, as a result, the Russian sphere of influence remains intact.

The Confluence of Strategy, Ideology and Geopolitics

At the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy, Vladimir Putin railed against what he deemed a U.S.-dominated unipolar world order that had prevailed since the end of the Cold War. The remedy for this perceived ill was multi-polarity; a global order in which multiple superpowers essentially serve as a system of checks and balances on one another.[25] Pragmatic as such a worldview may sound, Putin's

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg talking to the media during TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2015, NATO's largest exercise in over a decade. The exercise demonstrated NATO's Visible Assurance, including a Live Exercise (LIVEX). Photo by NATO.

actions since his Munich speech have indicated that in his vision of a multi-polar world, Russia would remain a pillar of global influence vis-à-vis its dominance over the former Soviet space; by maintaining supremacy over its corner of the map, Russia would ensure its seat at the table of global powers and, therefore, its continued relevance. In this context, Russia considers Western influence and involvement in the former Soviet Union as a threat to its rightful standing as a leader in world affairs.

Commensurately, Russian foreign policy has been conducted in accordance with this conception of Russia as a regional power, establishing Eurasia-centric institutions under the pretext of being distinct-but-equal counterparts to other centers of gravity in geopolitical and economic affairs. The formation of a pan-Eurasian economic bloc (the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)) and a military alliance (the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)) essentially serve, in theory, as Eurasian equivalents to the European Union and NATO, respectively. However, as scholar Bobo Lo argues, "At the same time, Moscow's approach bears the mark of Soviet pseudo-multilateralism... in similar spirit, the Kremlin views the Customs Union, the EEU, and the CSTO less as vehicles for solving regional problems than as instruments for promoting Russia's interests in the post-Soviet space."[26] Essentially, under the auspices of combating a unipolar world order, Russia has carefully crafted a unipolar regional order. Therefore, the fact that Russia has maintained a leading role in both forming and perpetuating these organizations is concurrent with its aspirations as the principal power broker in the former Soviet area.[27]

Through this lens, then-Russian president Dmitri Medvedev's 2008 declaration of a zone of "privileged interests" for the Russian Federation in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian War comes into clearer focus. Although Medvedev stressed that the zone consisted of "countries with which [Russia has] friendly relations,"[28] the notion of a special sphere of influence denotes a sort of ownership, implying that the sovereignty of these states to conduct an independent foreign policy is something of a geopolitical formality, the preservation of which is up to the discretion of Russia. Inclinations by former Soviet Republics toward states and institutions not dominated by Russia are met with rhetorical and economic hostility and are used to justify military action,[29] such as in the case of Georgia, which authors Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer suggest serves as an archetype for renewed Russian assertiveness in the Eurasian region:

> The war with Georgia, clearly intended to punish the small neighbor for its western geopolitical orientation and desire to escape Russia's sphere of influence, sent a powerful signal to other former Soviet states not to push the boundaries of Moscow's patience. It also sent a message to the West to tread lightly in Russia's neighborhood.[30]

Hence, the Georgian war, which was largely predicated on Tbilisi's overtures to NATO, was essentially an outgrowth of Russia's patriarchal policies and the desire to maintain its preeminent status in the Eurasian region. It is little surprise, then, that in 2014, when Ukraine neared the signing of an association agreement with the EU, it was seen in Moscow as a threat to "Putin's plans for Eurasian integration and Russia's sense of security."[31]

Russian concerns over its territorial integrity and national security have endured for centuries. Perpetuated by one tragic incursion into Russian territory after another — from the Mongol Yoke through the Second World War — Russian policy along its frontier and toward its peripheral states has long reflected a sense of insecurity.[32] In this context, Russian preoccupation with the former Soviet space is neither unexpected nor entirely unreasonable. Russian control over the states on its border, many of which were once part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, has long been intrinsic to its conception of national self-defense. Hence, in keeping with these deep-seated insecurities, war has long been used as a domestic political instrument to rally popular support around the head of state (Imperial Russian Finance Minister Vycheslav von Plehve once remarked in the days before the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War "what this country needs is a short, victorious war to stem the tide of revolution," referring to the simmering discontent that led to the revolution of 1905). In other words, the defense of the motherland has long stoked patriotic fervor amongst the Russian people.[33]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, what has materialized is a hyperbolized anti-western narrative that Lo describes as "a self-serving falsehood,"[34] an imagined threat of encirclement exploitatively built upon Russia's deeply ingrained sense of vulnerability for the sake of political posturing. As author Lilia Shevtsova remarks, Russian actions in Ukraine were, arguably, as much about domestic politics as they were matters of foreign or defense policy:

> This blurring of the lines between war and peace when it comes to states parallels the blurring Putin has done within Russia itself, by turning to militarism and coercion to sustain the Russian System. The ongoing crisis merely represents the application of this model to Russia's relations with Ukraine. And Ukraine isn't an end in itself for Russia, but merely an instrument for the Kremlin. By destabilizing Ukraine, Russia is fighting a proxy war with the West. [35]

Considering the anti-Putin protests that erupted with the announcement of his third presidential term in late 2011 as well as cracks beginning to show in the Russian economy, there were arguably ample justifications to necessitate another "short, victorious war" to rally support behind the Kremlin. Thus, while the Ukraine crisis likely runs deeper than a mere diversionary tactic — there were additional historical, ideological and economic factors at play — the threat to Russian security posed by Western encroachment has nevertheless proven to be a useful tool in reconsolidating and strengthening Putin's hold on power.[36]

Changing international borders in Ukraine: Russian soldiers marching on March 5, 2014 in Perevalne, Crimea, Ukraine. Photo by photo.ua/Shutterstock.

Unfortunately for Putin, the tactic of acting provocatively toward the West in order to shore up political standing domestically is impeded by the considerable gap that remains in conventional military capabilities. This is where hybrid, or ambiguous, warfare has been most effective; by circumventing traditional standards of combat and aggression, the Kremlin can score rhetorical victories while avoiding a large-scale conflict with NATO. This hybrid approach is supplemented by the doctrine of "de-escalation". The policy feeds into NATO hesitation on declaring the Ukraine crisis an outright act of hostility because, as Shevtsova states, "The West doesn't want to call it a war, since it would then have to take concrete measures against the aggressor, a nuclear state."[37] Ultimately, the ambiguity of hybrid warfare coupled with the threat of limited nuclear strikes allows Russia to wield influence in its neighborhood — and therefore reinforce Putin's grip on power — without exposing itself to any real vigorous response beyond economic sanctions that, while painful, have been easily filtered through Russian state-controlled media for domestic consumption.[38]

The subsequent issue that arises is whether Russia's tactical success in utilizing hybrid methods has fed into a broader conceptualization of military strategy and emboldened the Kremlin. On the foreign policy front, events have developed rapidly and proven to be unpredictable in recent years. Hence, predicting what further designs Putin may have in Russia's perceived sphere of influence and how events may unfold is difficult. As Russia's economy contracts due to falling oil prices, the potential for another diversionary war building upon the lessons of Ukraine and augmented by the weight of the "de-escalation" doctrine carries broad implications for European and global security.[39]

Perhaps fortunately, Russia's conventional forces have been steadily improving in recent years, causing some to postulate that the policy of "de-escalation" is quickly becoming irrelevant.[40] Following the war with Georgia, seen by many military observers as an ugly victory for the Russians, Moscow instituted a series of military reforms buttressed by a $700 billion force modernization program.[41] This reform effort, intended to be complete by 2020, has been on display in the campaign in Syria, which has mostly involved air strikes and a limited number of ground forces, and has demonstrated the renewed expeditionary capability of the Russian military.[42]

The logic goes that as Russia's conventional military improves; the necessity to employ nuclear weapons correspondingly decreases. As Sokov suggests, the "de-escalation" policy was always intended to simply buy time for the Russian armed forces to rearm and reequip:

> The 2000 version of Russia's military doctrine characterized the limited use of nuclear weapons as a stopgap measure to be relied on only until Russia could develop a more modern conventional strike capability, similar to that which the United States possessed. Russia's efforts to develop such a capability have been under way for more than a decade.[43]

There exists, however, a certain disconnect when hybrid tactics are applied. By their very nature, such methods are less overt and do not rely on conventional forces. With this in mind, it is important to note that the Russian defense budget was decreased by 5% for 2016 in the face of a 3.7% contraction of the economy; the continuation of heavy defense spending was deemed "unaffordable" in the face of the mounting economic issues.[44] Thus, as budget cuts stagnate the force modernization program, further delaying the achievement of conventional parity, it is unlikely that hybrid warfare will be going away any time soon and, considering the mutual support lent to hybrid tactics by the threat of limited nuclear strikes, neither will the doctrine of "de-escalation".

The West and the Security of Europe

The efficacy of hybrid warfare and the policy of limited nuclear strikes lies in the discord it sows among NATO allies. Whereas limited nuclear strikes increase the risks involved with provoking Russia, the ambiguous methods outlined in the Gerasimov Doctrine make Russian provocations far less overt. As a result, hybrid warfare causes dissention over what actually constitutes Russian aggression while the "de-escalation" doctrine impacts the consensus over how to appropriately respond. Though on the surface, the "de-escalation" policy is seemingly defensive in nature and hybrid warfare is generally more offensive, the two doctrines actually mutually support one another and allow the Kremlin to exert low-cost, but heavy-handed influence in Russia's neighborhood with relative impunity.

Combined, the two approaches exacerbate the matter of political will amongst allies to confront Russia. A number of Western European states had fostered close or growing ties with post-Soviet Russia before the Ukraine crisis, particularly in the field of energy, and would likely prefer to return to the previous status quo.[45] Thus, the whole Ukraine crisis is viewed as an inconvenience; European leaders must fulfill their obligations to promote democracy and European security while acknowledging that there is little appetite for sustained antagonism with Russia.

Consider a 2015 Pew Research Center poll that indicates roughly six in ten Germans stand opposed to military intervention on behalf of a fellow NATO ally.[46] This has created a climate of hesitation and indecisiveness and, as Shevtsova argues, "The postmodern, transactional leaderships of Europe today find themselves poorly equipped to respond to the challenges posed by the Russian System, which is why their responses inevitably slide into accommodationism."[47] The natural question is whether this sentiment would be the same in the face of more overt Russian aggression, particularly if Moscow ever decided to test the collective commitment to NATO's Article 5 mutual defense clause.

For example, the narrow border between Poland and Lithuania nestled between Belarus and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad known as the Suwalki Gap represents a strategic vulnerability on the alliance's eastern boundary, given that it is the only land access for NATO into the Baltic region.[48] With the threat of nuclear "de-escalation" as a consideration in any decision-making, it is not unimaginable that Russian exploitation of the Suwalki Gap could create friction within NATO and cast doubt on the very foundations of the alliance (the large ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — all NATO members — mean that Russian hybrid techniques are potentially highly effective in the Baltic region).[49] Whether through hybrid or conventional means, a scenario in which further Russian aggression is tolerated by some of the NATO members in order to avoid an unpopular war with potential nuclear ramifications is entirely conceivable, calling into question the validity and endurance of the Euro-Atlantic order.

Ultimately, the ambiguity of hybrid tactics and the specter of limited nuclear strikes achieved the desired effect of shaking Western resolve in dealing with Russia. Indeed, while the West did coalesce around a sanctions regime, the overall response lacked cohesiveness, as summarized by a report from the Danish Institute for International Studies:

> Some disagreement among allies was observed, such as the United States and Poland

A Russian Sukhoi Su-24 attack aircraft makes a very-low-altitude pass by the USS Donald Cook in international waters in the Baltic Sea, April 12, 2016. Photo by the U.S. Navy.

over the French arms trade or Poland over Germany's energy dependence. The Western response never came to an open confrontation with Russia similar to the example of Iran, in which consistent pressure was exerted for the country to give up its nuclear program. Instead, incrementalism prevailed for reasons related to national interests or historical bonds with the post-Soviet region... which in most cases translated into a more downbeat assessment of what sanctions could achieve.[50]

Despite the EU's ongoing support for sanctions, there are lingering questions over Western resolve and whether there exists the political will to confront Russia along NATO's periphery. The issue facing the West, therefore, is one of the intent and objectives of the Euro-Atlantic alliance and it is the absence of cohesion on this matter that both hybrid warfare and limited nuclear strikes seek to exploit.

Conclusion

Russia's policy of "de-escalation" and its demonstrated reliance on hybrid tactics were necessitated by a lack of conventional military parity with NATO. While neither approach was developed in concert with the other, on the modern battlefield the threat of limited nuclear strikes can reinforce the efficacy of hybrid warfare by making any decision to discern hostile acts from ambiguous methods far more risky. Moreover, such an approach to warfare has proven useful in exploiting existing friction points among Western powers without tipping the scale of sentiment to the point where a unified and cohesive response against Russia materializes. The end state is that Russia has been able to maintain its status as the major power in the former Soviet space. Where legitimate means of influence fall short, it has developed the capacity to play to its strengths and overcome its weaknesses in order to coerce its neighbors. While sanctions have hurt the economy and events in Ukraine have left Moscow politically isolated, Russia maintains its status as an influential actor and power broker in Eurasia. Hybrid tactics reinforced by an improved conventional military allow the Kremlin to keep its weaker neighbors within its sphere of influence while the doctrine of "de-escalation" wards off potential Western actors intent on intervening militarily.

Despite the fact that Russia's conventional forces have seen significant investment and undergone substantial reforms since 2008, the downturn in the Russian economy and corresponding decrease in defense spending will likely stunt the progress of the military modernization effort. Therefore, considering Russia's existing nuclear capabilities and the demonstrated success of ambiguous warfare in Crimea, both "de-escalation" and hybrid warfare will remain fixtures in Russian military planning for the foreseeable future. Ultimately, while direct provocations of NATO are unlikely given the risks involved for Russia, hybrid warfare has given Moscow a means to antagonize the West under the politically expedient auspices of countering a perceived threat of encirclement while "de-escalation" continues to serve as an insurance policy against an unexpectedly aggressive reaction. ✦

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This article was submitted on November 4, 2016

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