“De-escalation” and Hybrid War: Mutually Supporting Strategies or Dangerous Brinksmanship?

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The usage of political and economic influence and targeted information campaigns to shape the battle/field in advance of either conventional or unconventional military operations. 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. 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. 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.

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
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." 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. 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. 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 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." In other words, Russia’s long-time adversary was fielding new and innovative weapons for which they had no answer in their conventional inventory.

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The inclusion of limited nuclear strikes in [Russian] tactical military exercises indicated that nuclear weapons were no longer exclusive to strategic decision-making.

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 status symbols, or insurance against unforeseen developments. They were an ultimate security guarantee, but were always in the background — something never needed.

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Whether Russia’s multi-dimensional approach to warfare is premeditated and unique or hybrid warfare is simply a “catchall phrase” is ultimately irrelevant. 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. 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.” 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 — 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. 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. Pragmatic as such a worldview may sound, Putin’s
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 pseudomultilateralism... 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." 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.

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," 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, 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.

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."
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.\textsuperscript{33} 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.\textsuperscript{34}

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,”\textsuperscript{35} an imagined threat of encirclement exploitive 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. \textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{36}

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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.

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 mounting economic issues.

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. 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. 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.” 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. 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). 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...
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.19

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 coherence on this matter that both hybrid warfare and limited nuclear strikes seek to exploit.

Conclusion

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