

La pensée stratégiques Russe : Changement et continuité

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Introduction

This paper is transcript of the talk delivered on the subject in Sorbonne University in March 2017. The talk overviewed change and continuity in Russian military thought since the Soviet collapse. The paper consists of four parts. The first section reflects the evolution of Russian strategic thought and operational art during the last decades. The second section discusses the doctrinal-conceptual framework that shapes the current Russian approach. The third section situates this recent innovation in the Russian approach to strategy within the broader context of Russian strategic culture and military tradition. The final section offers several thoughts on the current Russian style of strategic conduct. Together, these sections complementing each other aim to enable better understanding of the current Russian approach to strategy.

Evolution of Russian Strategic Thought and Operational Art

To understand the current conceptual predisposition of the Russian strategists it is useful to situate it within the broader context of the dominant strategic narrative in Moscow within which these ideas evolved.

In the last several years the dominant narrative in Moscow has been the one of strategic competition that has been ongoing with the West since the Soviet collapse. According to this view, the end of the Cold War did not terminate the global geopolitical competition, but only transformed its form, essentially keeping the main predispositions of the actors intact. Along the lines of this mindset there have been two dimensions to this competition. Externally, on the international arena, Moscow has been trying to overcome the consequences of the post-Cold War unipolar moment that unprecedentedly for the modern history marginalized its role on the international arena. Moscow has been continuously making effort the shift the structure and the essence of the international system towards the multi-polarity, the setting that should ensure its role in a concert of the big world powers. In its turn, the West, according to the view from Moscow, has been systematically opposing this trend and preventing from Russia in many ways, shapes and forms to restore its lost status of international power (*derzhava*). In parallel, there has been a competition with the West on the internal arena. In Moscow's view, the West,

since the Cold War, has been actively trying to impose on Russia its political-economic values and its way of life, which it considered universal. Acquiring many forms, but mainly seen as tool of the cross-domain soft power influence, it has been seen from Moscow as a tool of geopolitical subversion. Moscow saw competitions on both arenas as interrelated parts of the same global geopolitical confrontation with the West.

According to this narrative, since early-mid 2000s this strategic competition has been steadily escalating, turning first into a confrontation and from a certain moment into a war. The West initiated the escalation for the straightforward reason – improvements in Russian internal and external positions following the post-Soviet decade of times of trouble. The more Russia was rising from geopolitical knees the stronger the Western pushback has been. The pressure was steadily increasing on all the azimuths. Despite what Moscow saw as the genuine Western pledges to dissolve the NATO Pact, or at least not to expand it, the alliance was systematically growing eastwards, first incorporating the former Warsaw pact allies, and then even the Baltic countries – the former Soviet republics. In parallel, Moscow observed systematic erosion of its nuclear deterrence potential – its only strategic remedy at the era of conventional inferiority. The US withdrew unilaterally from the ABM Treaty and started to deploy missile defense systems on the Russian periphery. While nuclear arsenals have been shrinking under the START treaty, the US further equipped itself with Prompt Global Strike capabilities, so the reliability of the Russian nuclear second-strike capability was suddenly under question. By the mid 2000s, at the backdrop of what Moscow saw as Western subversion in its zone of privileged interests in former Soviet space, and especially after the wave of the colored revolutions, these concerns went further up. The biggest issue became the Western strategic flirting with Ukraine and Georgia, which Moscow saw as a real incursion in its very backyard. Since 2008, when Moscow used force in Georgia, to stop its gravitation into the Western orbit, the confrontation crossed the red line and from then on became a real war.

The Five Days War in Georgia became not only a watershed of the confrontation but also a wake-up call for the Russian strategists. The war, that strategically was qualified in Moscow as victory, in pure operational-tactical terms was a total fiasco that demonstrated the awful state of the Russian conventional military. This poor performance was a function of the steady, almost twenty years long decay of the Russian conventional power. Since the Soviet collapse, in 1991, at the backdrop of the overall economic decline, and deterioration of its conventional military power, Moscow has been leaning on nuclear capabilities. For almost twenty years Moscow saw nuclear weapons as equalizer of conventional military inferiority, qualitative in the West and quantitative in the West. Dubbed among the Western experts as “escalate to de-escalate” it has been rather incoherent doctrinal concept, lacking an explicit mechanism. Implicitly, global nuclear deterrence was based on strategic nuclear weapons and deterrence of conventional regional aggression was based on the non-strategic (aka operational-tactical nuclear) weapons. From the start, Moscow envisioned this risky and problematic doctrine as a tentative strategic remedy for the period of its inferiority in conventional military

power. The first reforms aiming to improve the situation has been evident since early 2000s, when thanks to the prices boom at the world market of minerals the Kremlin started to steadily increase budget allocations to the military. Still, despite these efforts the 2008 war has been a clear fiasco in military effectiveness.

Professional discourse in Moscow and lessons learned by the Russian expert community following the war, highlighted deficiencies of Russian conventional military in the following three fields. The first flaw, was the very limited arsenal of precision guided munitions (PGMs) and standoff capabilities in all the corps of the Russian military. The second flaw related to the backwardness in the quality and quantity of command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities, and consequently inability to wage effectively operations of the network-centric warfare (NCW). Finally, the war demonstrated that Russian military in general, and ground forces in particular, deteriorated in their ability to wage joint, combined arms operations. Since then, Moscow embarked on the major military reform. The main aim of this mega effort has been rebuilding and modernization of its conventional military, after almost twenty years of decay. Specifically, the main focus and emphasize have been on the improvements in the three above-mentioned themes. The ultimate goal was bringing the Russian conventional military power as close as possible to the ideal type of the reconnaissance-strike complex.

The military and the strategy that evolved since then represents a discontinuity of the sorts, if compared to the previous period of the nuclear “escalation for de-escalation.” The military that has been emerging out of this major reform envisioned nuclear arsenal, without losing its importance, as harmonized with other non-nuclear and non-military forms of strategic influence. This development in itself represented a genuine paradigmatic shift. The innovation, while making the nuclear arsenal less exclusive tool of national security, diversified Russian strategic tool kit and further re-emphasized the strategic of coercion, and not of brute force. In sum, starting at 2008-2010, and onwards, there has been steadily ongoing conventionalization of the Russian military theory and practice, and the incremental rise of non-nuclear and non-military forms of coercion. This modernization is likely to go on for another several years, although would probably be less ambitious. In parallel with this funds allocation and force build up, in keeping with Russian military tradition and strategic culture, Russian military brass has been seeking conceptual-doctrinal framework to guide the modernization reform.

Doctrinal-Conceptual Framework

Experts in the West often referred to this emerging Russian doctrinal-conceptual framework as Gerasimov Doctrine after the programmatic address delivered by Chief of the Russian General Staff in 2013. Back then Gerasimov urged senior military brass to

conceptualize the changing character of war, and offered his interpretation of the emerging military regime. In his speech, and in the subsequent publications, Gerasimov argued that modern warfare has been again in the midst of another Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), outlined the contours of the current military regime as he envisioned it, and urged to develop military theory further to guide defense innovation and modernization. Despite the big splash that his vision made in Russia and abroad, the main insights offered in Gerasimov's outlines have not been entirely novel. His speech, probably prepared from him by the General Staff experts, reflected many ideas traceable in Russian expert community since mid-late 2000s under the name New Generation Warfare (NGW), or more recently, New Types of Warfare (NTW). Moreover, in contrast to the common wisdom, widespread in the West, Gerasimov's vision, frequently defined by a misnomer term "hybrid warfare," is not a written doctrine, or a playbook, but a cloud of ideas, a conceptual output of strategic community that is constantly evolving.

Still, some generalizations are possible about how New Generation Warfare or Gerasimov Doctrine envision the main features of the modern era operations and the current character of war. First, probably the most recognizable feature of the new approach, is its call to merge into one integrated operational whole all military tools - conventional, sub-conventional and non-conventional (nuclear). Thus, in contrast to the earlier era of "escalation for de-escalation," nuclear arsenal is seen as necessary but insufficient condition for operational success. Secondly, the current approach assumes that in the New Generation Warfare era military tools have been merged with non-mil forms of strategic influence, such as diplomatic, economic, informational-propagandistic, and even may include such tools of strategy as exploitation of population's protest potential. In contrast to the previous era, the ratio of contribution of every type of the above forms of strategic influence changed, and brute kinetic force has been minimized to the minimum necessary. Although, according to this approach, the ratio of military to non-military efforts is 1 to 4, the military is still seen as being in charge.

To illustrate this emerging approach to warfare Russian discourse on the subject often refers to the Western strategic behavior in Libya, Ukraine, and Syria aimed at the regime change. In all these cases Moscow perceived the West employing what it dubbed hybrid warfare - a form of strategic subversion that combined soft power, controlled chaos, and colored revolutions, and was backed by employment of regular and irregular military power. Libyan case has been presented as an illustration of the Western successful capitalization on this approach to warfare, mainly due to Russian strategic inaction on the matter. The Western attempt to change regime in Syria, on the contrary, has been presented in Moscow as a failed application of hybrid warfare, due to skillful Russian counter-action. The case of Ukraine has been presented as a story of the mixed results - first the Western success, and then, due to Russian counter-measures, the change in the overall correlation of trends in Moscow's favor.

In addition, this novel vision of warfare put a strong emphasize on both aspects of the informational struggle - cognitive-psychological and digital-technological, which includes

electronic warfare and cyber operations. Graphically, on Gerasimov's famous slide, and verbally, informational is a glue that links together all these efforts, military and non military, of the New Generation Warfare. In parallel, the new approach attributes more central role than in the past to the special operation forces. As such New Generation Warfare manifests transition away from massive battles of integral annihilation towards coercion and deterrence. Consequently, the current Russian approach envisions perception as a center of gravity of the modern operations. Coercive signaling across several domains manipulates the picture of reality and aims to influence strategic calculus (cost benefit considerations) of the adversary, and change his strategic behavior.

Mechanism of the novel approach has been rather straightforward. It is an integrated cross-domain operation where uninterrupted informational influence waged on all possible fronts against all possible audiences, augmented by nuclear signaling and supplemented by intra-war coercion aims to dissuade the adversary from aggression, or to deescalate it and impose Russia's will with minimal violence. Nuclear manipulations (nuclear brandishing, employing dual use systems blurring distinction between conventional and nuclear, and nuclear rhetoric), in conjunction with other forms of strategic activity, (conventional and informational coercion) aim to keep the opponent off balance, to exploit his disorientation and shape his strategic behavior in desirable direction.

Since 2013 there have been several innovations in force build-up, procurement, and concept of operations that aimed to transform the Russian military along these lines. Among other innovation, two new services have been established in the Russian military. One was the Command of Special Operations Forces, which designed special operation forces beyond the traditional missions of only intelligence collection and being tactical-operational force multiplier, to being the main tool of the battlefield. Another one was the establishment of Command of Information Operations Forces that probably along the lines of the indigenous Russian approach encapsulate both digital-technological and cognitive-psychological aspects of informational struggle.

This innovative Russian strategic approach that has been linking nuclear, conventional and informational (cyber) tools of influence into one integrated mechanism, manifested itself in several recent Russian gambits in Europe, Ukraine and in the Middle East. All these theaters enabled to test, to realize, and to further refine the above doctrinal-conceptual outlines. Trying not to idealize Russian approach, and avoiding from attribution to it non-existing capabilities, one may still argue that Russian military community has been recently functioning as learning machine of the sorts. The recurring pattern of innovation has been observable. Exercises and snap inspections test and explore the cloud of doctrinal ideas that emerges out of the theoretical discussions. Then the novel operational approaches have been tested empirically in the real combat activities. The later offered lessons learned, that have been systemically distilled, and that have informed the cloud of ideas conceptual ideas, which were then again tested in the exercises and in combat.

Thus, one may see combat operations in Georgia, Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, and Syria, and conceptual activism in between, as part of the same on going knowledge development trend. Partially, this pattern of knowledge development has been informed by an innovative professional climate that characterizes Russian strategic community in the recent years. Developing new knowledge by trial and error approach and apparent readiness to accept failure stimulates conceptual flexibility and dynamism. These, in their turn, enable constant experimentation and cycles of operational adaptation and strategic adjustments. In short, Russian strategic thought and operational art are constantly evolving and thus could not be understood as a point in time, but only in dynamic, and only when situated within broader historical and conceptual contexts.

Innovativeness of the Current Russian Approach to Strategy

Some critical analysis is due in order to establish how innovative is the current Russian approach to strategy. Western sources frequently mention the innovativeness of the Russian approach by qualifying it as hybrid, asymmetrical, and as the one that is not distinguishing between peace and war. These are the three most often mentioned features in relation to qualifying the Russian approach as novel. Although such a diagnosis is largely accurate, these characteristics are not particularly novel for the Russian tradition of operational art. Moreover, if judged by the yardstick of Russian strategic culture, these qualities represent continuity rather than change in Russian art of strategy.

The Russian quest for asymmetry is not fundamentally novel. “Military cunningness” (*voennaia khitrost'*) is a term in Russian professional terminology that stands for crafting operational behavior in a way, which addresses the weaknesses and avoids strengths of the adversary. The concept of military cunningness has been one of the central components of military art in the Tsarist, Soviet, and Russian traditions and it epitomizes what is dubbed today asymmetrical approach to strategy. The previous splash of asymmetry conceptualization in Russian military thought dates back to the 1980s when Soviet experts sought effective countermeasures to the US Strategic Defense Initiative. One of then architects of asymmetrical response, and today one of Russia’s leading defense intellectuals, Andrei Kokoshin, has been popularizing the term “asymmetrical approach” in the professional discourse since the 1990s. Thus, long before the publication of the current military doctrine, and before the emergence of the current cloud of theories, making references to asymmetry and to indirect approach to strategy turned into a *bon ton* among the Russian military and political leadership. Moreover, the Russian approach, at least in Russian eyes, is also symmetrical—the nature of the threat shapes the nature of the response. Moscow saw the United States waging a new type of (hybrid) warfare elsewhere, felt threatened, and sought adequate countermeasures.

Similarly, the tendency to utilize terminology of “hybridity” is another inaccuracy in qualifying the Russian approach as innovative. Russian sources do not define their approach as “hybrid warfare” and use this term to refer to the Western way of war, which they are trying to counteract. Until recently, “hybrid warfare” was not at all part of the

Russian lexicon and jargon. In early 2017, Chief of the Russian General Staff Gerasimov again expressed his professional reservation in utilizing this term even in reference to the Western strategic-operational behavior, let alone the Russian one. Indeed, the intellectual history of the term in the West and the empirical context for its development hardly had any Russian connection. The term emerged in the West around the mid-2000s, as the U.S. and its allies have been co-exploring emerging forms of warfare against non-state and state actors. Back then it was mainly the Middle East that served as the main source of inspiration for initial hybrid-warfare conceptualization.

The current Russian strategy and theory, even if similar in some respects to hybrid warfare model, mostly epitomizes the holistic nature of Russian mentality and its intellectual tradition, which may be qualified as holistic. The holistic approach (*kompleksnyi/systemnyi podhod*) - is an all-embracing view that grasps a big picture, and describes every element of reality as being in constant interplay with others in frames of a meta-system, views issues in different dimensions as interconnected, has a generalized frame of reference, and perceives every move of any element of the system as a complexity of measures. This approach has been emblematic throughout the Russian intellectual tradition in literature, religious philosophy, natural, exact and social sciences, and in the military theory. Thus, although it may sound as a novelty to some observers of Russian foreign and security policy, it perfectly demonstrates continuity in the Russian intellectual and military traditions.

Finally, Western scholars sometimes see the innovativeness of the Russian approach in its being uninterrupted, in contrast to the Western division between wartime and peacetime. Indeed, the Russian approach to strategy is often much broader than its Western equivalent. The Russian discourse often uses the term “struggle” (*bor’ba*) to refer to various forms of strategic interactions. In Russian military theory, this term has a broad meaning and refers to strategic interaction in its totality, in both wartime and peacetime. The term has been used and shaped Russian thinking since the dawn of the Soviet military thought. In the Western strategic studies lexicon competitive strategy would be probably the closest approximation to the Russian term “struggle.”

That said two genuine novelties could be identified in the current Russian approach to strategy. The first, and the main novelty is that essentially this approach is not a brute force but a strategy of coercion. Russian strategy orchestrates the military and nonmilitary measures across several domains, while minimizing kinetic engagements. As such it is a departure from the big war paradigm that dominated Russian military thought for decades and which now expresses a predisposition to the logic of deterrence and compellence. The second novelty that has been already discussed above the role of the informational domain that looms unprecedentedly large in this approach.

Russian Strategic Style

Recent Russian conduct on several theaters of operation enables to make several preliminary generalizations on the Russian strategic style.

First, Moscow's conduct on the Syrian theater well manifested that the main organizing logic of Russian strategic design and force employment has been reasonable sufficiency (*razumnaia dostatochnost'*). This term is an import or paraphrase of the Soviet term from the late Cold War that refers to the quest to ensure maximum political outcome while keeping the military involvement to the minimum necessary. Employment of this principle in Syria and elsewhere enables Moscow not to cross the culmination point of intervention and to avoid undesired overextension. New Generation Warfare naturally resonates and corresponds with this principle. The amalgamation of different tools of cross-domain coercion ensures that the limitations of each form of influence are compensated by other capabilities. When the effectiveness of one type of influence diminishes, it is supplemented by other types of coercion that could be employed in a more pressing manner including actual escalation in the use of force.

Secondly, it seems like Moscow assumes asymmetry of fundamental interests with its Western competitors on all the theaters of competition. As a result, driven by this conclusion, it seems like Moscow operates under the notion, that it can afford assertive and risk prone behavior, because the balance of coercive credibility is in its favor. Possibly, Moscow assumes that the West will back off due to the lower stakes in Ukraine and Syria, and it also seems like Moscow assumes that Washington realizes this and tries to avoid escalation. Consequently, it is possible that decision-makers in the Russian strategic community assume that they can dominate every stage on the escalation ladder.

Finally, Moscow has demonstrated in the last couple of years, especially at the times of crises, rapid decision–execution cycles and effective orchestration of various forms of national power in frames of one operation. Possibly, this quality resulted for centralized and institutionalized but not over-bureaucratized decision-making process. Overall, it seems like current Russian national security architecture and apparatus resonate with classical Svechin's model of integral strategic manager (*integral'nyi polkovodets*) and with the modern version of the traditional Russian wartime concept of the supreme high political-military command (*stavka*). Uninterrupted political control over military strategy formulation and execution possibly ensures better utility of force, and dialectical relation between ends and means along the classical Clausevitsian logic.