

H – Hybrid War

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The West firmly linked the concept of ‘hybrid war’ to Russia after it had reincorporated Crimea. This happened largely due to the myth that Russia had a special strategy of confrontation known as the “Gerasimov Doctrine.” Its existence has already been denied by the authors of the myth themselves. But the “Gerasimov Doctrine” story is quite indicative: a similar U.S. hybrid war strategy was passed off as the Russian one. The main features of this strategy have been studied by the Russian military and politicians through the lens of “color revolutions” of the 2000s and the Arab Spring of the early 2010s.

By the time of the Crimean events, military theorists not only in the West, but also in the East had analyzed various forms of non-military confrontation between states. High costs and appalling effects of modern high-tech warfare required finding such forms of involvement in conflicts that would make it possible to control escalation and achieve goals with the strictly dosed use of force.

These concepts (for example, in the 1999 book “Unrestricted Warfare” by Chinese Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui) are not limited to the current ideas of hybrid warfare. Rather, they refer to a comprehensive

strategy of confrontation between great powers which employ an unlimited arsenal of methods.

Hybrid warfare concepts make the struggle between states easier. A state that employs them gets a propaganda tool to demonize the enemy, but at the same time it harms its own strategic culture, thus impairing its ability to understand the opponent's intentions.

A hybrid war is most often defined as a conflict involving information warfare, economic and political pressure combined with limited use of armed force. It is assumed that action on all fronts helps offset the West's superiority in conventional weapons. But this assumption is vague and dangerous. It was put into use in the mid-2000s to describe the war in Lebanon in 2006, and became truly popular in the wake of the Ukraine crisis.

However, all of the hybrid warfare techniques have been known for years, if not centuries. The emergence of new technological opportunities provided by the advance of information and communication technologies bring virtually no change to the nature of relations between conflicting parties. Throughout human history, any well-planned military campaign has always been accompanied by propagandistic, diplomatic, intelligence, and economic measures. Even Sun Tzu wrote that a victory achieved with the use of these instruments was preferable to head-on collision.

There is nothing new about supporting rebel movements in a foreign state, sending regular troops to another country as volunteers or using other methods often described as an unknown and terrible threat. These methods were widely used by all Cold War participants, especially the United States, the USSR, and China. They were often used before the Cold War too.

In fact, hybridity makes it possible to attach the "war" label to a wide range of fairly routine foreign policy, propaganda and intelligence activities, which often are an inalienable part of interstate relations.

Ascribing a hybrid strategy to a country can be viewed as part of efforts to isolate it. The purpose of such efforts is to render the opponent unable to defend its point of view. Any of the opponent's attempts to explain its position, protect itself from accusations, and change the position of the other side can now be interpreted as disinformation and information attacks. This also provides a chance to limit the opponent's diplomatic activity, which by its very nature requires establishing ties, collecting and

disseminating information and influencing the views of the other side. The actual destruction of U.S.-Russia channels of political communication in the post-Crimean period, and especially amid the hysteria over Russia's alleged "interference" in the U.S. elections is quite telling in this respect.

Russia is also inclined to ascribe a hybrid strategy to its opponents. A hypothetical hybrid threat from Europe and the United States, assessed from a military point of view, leads to concrete and important conclusions affecting domestic policy. In his speech at the Academy of Military Sciences on March 1, 2019, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov named "color revolutions" and "soft power" as elements of the new military strategy pursued by the United States and its allies. It is assumed that the purpose of American strategies is "to eliminate the statehood of unwanted countries, undermine their sovereignty, and change their legitimately elected state bodies of power." Gerasimov noted that the Pentagon was developing a fundamentally new strategy called the "Trojan Horse," which will use the "protest potential of the fifth column" while simultaneously delivering high-precision strikes on critical facilities. Therefore Russia's response will include "a set of measures to preemptively neutralize threats to the security of the state."

Just like other major military powers, Russia has military and non-military capabilities that can be used in peacetime or low-intensity armed conflicts. This arsenal, in its present form, was created mainly during the Cold War era. Covert and unadmitted military interventions, aid to rebel movements, and the creation of "quasi-military" formations for interventions abroad, combined with disinformation, propaganda, and support for the opposition, were used by all major countries at that time.

As for the USSR, it had widely used limited and covert military interventions since the early Soviet period. A classic example is the intervention in the civil war in Afghanistan in 1929. Led by Vitaly Primakov, a 2,000-strong detachment of Red Army soldiers, clad in Afghan military uniform and armed with trophy English weapons, entered the country. The purpose of the "Primakov incursion" was to change the course of the war in favor of King Amanullah Khan, who was friendly to the USSR. The operation was prepared in close coordination with Amanullah's men, and the Primakov detachment was joined by local ethnic groups. The raid, which ended in the

capture of Mazar-i-Sharif in April 1929, was undertaken too late and was no longer able to reverse the course of the civil war. However, much in how it was organized can be considered characteristic of such operations carried out by the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia.

During the “Afghan special operation,” the USSR tried to influence the internal conflict through limited, covert and short-term intervention at a key moment (which, as it later turned out, was chosen wrongly). The Soviet forces were to change the course of the conflict in favor of the ally and leave. Under no circumstances were they to act as the main force in the conflict. The USSR carefully avoided drawing attention to its operation and sought to control the extent of its involvement in the war very stringently. After it became clear that the defeat of Amanullah Khan was unavoidable, the USSR stopped its intervention, despite the clearly overwhelming tactical and technical superiority of the Red Army.

Similarly, a larger and more successful intervention took place in Xinjiang in November 1933-April 1934. The operation in support of Governor-General Sheng Shicai involved NKVD troops disguised as White Russian émigré forces operating in the region. It involved former White Russian Guardsmen, recruited by the Soviet intelligence service, as well as pro-Soviet groups made up of local residents. The intervention did not last long. After all the tasks had been fulfilled, the Soviet troops left, leaving a limited contingent and a group of advisers in Xinjiang to monitor the situation.

The Soviet involvement in the Spanish civil war was also a “quasi volunteer” operation. The Soviet Union denied its participation in the conflict despite thousands of Soviet troops stationed in the country and large military supplies. Soviet pilots and military advisers fought in the Sino-Japanese War in 1937-1940 as “volunteers.” The same practice continued during the Cold War. Soviet fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft artillery units with personnel disguised as Chinese volunteers operated in Korea. Soviet pilots fought against the Kuomintang Air Force in Shanghai in 1950. Soviet anti-aircraft units and aircraft took part in the Vietnam War and in a number of conflicts in the Middle East.

The abovementioned interventions succeeded in achieving Moscow’s political and strategic goals. All of them followed the same pattern which dates back to the Primakov raid in 1929. These were short, unexpected, and

thoroughly planned operations aimed at helping an important ally at a key moment, whether it was a friendly state or one of the factions in a civil war.

Operations had varying degrees of secrecy; as a rule, the USSR either denied participation in a conflict completely or downplayed its scope. The main condition for success was careful calculation of the balance of power, and the choice of time, place and mode of intervention. The armed forces, security agencies and diplomats acted together in such instances.

The Soviet Union's strong point in such operations was its ability to achieve high results in training, and sometimes in building the armed forces of friendly countries or political groups from scratch. Throughout the Cold War, armed groups created by Soviet instructors successfully defeated their opponents trained and equipped by the United States.

Naturally, this was true only when the Soviet military had a real chance to manage the process of building the military organization, which was not the case, for example, in the Arab armies that fought Israel. The Afghan campaign of 1979-1989 was a gross violation of the Soviet principles of conducting foreign interventions. It was long, large-scale, and ignored local conditions, with the Soviet troops themselves rather than allied forces acting as the main warring party.

Nevertheless, the operation revealed many advantages of national military training, mainly the ability to work with the local population, create relatively capable local armed forces and act jointly with them. By the time the Soviet troops pulled out in 1989, Afghanistan had an army and security services that by far exceeded everything that was created subsequently during the eighteen years of American occupation of Afghanistan since 2001. The fall of the Najibullah regime was caused largely by the continued interference in the Afghan conflict by a number of foreign states when the Soviet Union had disappeared and Russia stayed aside.

Soviet military and security service officers involved in such operations during the late stages of the Cold War remained in active service after the outbreak of military conflicts in the 1990s, when this experience was greatly enriched and enhanced. The Russian military took part in clashes in the South Caucasus and in stabilizing the situation in Tajikistan in 1992-1997. But it was the fighting in Chechnya during two military campaigns there that had the most profound impact on Russia's army, security services, and state

apparatus. The army and security services gained great experience in solving the most difficult tasks with very limited resources through negotiations, intelligence, and interaction with a variety of assisting armed groups from among the local population.

The reincorporation of Crimea, events in Eastern Ukraine, and the Syrian campaign have clearly shown that Russia is going back to the old model of using its armed forces to ensure national interests. The focus is on rapid and unexpected actions, with the degree of involvement in the conflict strictly controlled. The considerable experience of building and using volunteer and local support units gained during conflicts in the post-Soviet space has been utilized in full measure.

Such actions hardly make Russia any more unpredictable or aggressive than other powers. Even China, which remained largely passive in its foreign policy pursuits in recent decades, has supported armed groups and unrecognized state entities in northern Myanmar (the so-called Wa State) in the 21st century. Its support involved training and equipment supplies, including heavy weapons.

U.S., French, and British interventions in the Middle East have been more systematic. They were accompanied by large-scale use of modern technologies, financial resources and technical capabilities not available to Russia. However, the results were almost invariably negative for the actors themselves as they, but especially Americans, showed their inability to interpret intelligence data and assess the political situation correctly. U.S. attempts to build allied armed forces from among the local population produced disappointing results despite huge spending and because of poor interaction between American forces and local armed groups.

By comparison, Russian actions are no more aggressive, but more effective. Unlike the United States and some of its allies, Russia did not invade foreign states, storm capitals or kill political leaders. Russia did not spend trillions of dollars to occupy other countries for years only to leave in the end and admit its defeat. By using force on a far smaller scale, Russia nevertheless has achieved far better results in attaining its political goals in recent decades.

The Russian army and security services have years of experience in fighting wars with strong irregular opponents supported from abroad,

while having only limited resources at their disposal. The re-equipping and reforming of the Russian army in the 2010s increased its combat capabilities immensely. The patriotic drive following the Ukrainian events and the reincorporation of Crimea produced an influx of volunteers for foreign operations carried out by regular and irregular forces.

So, in the new conditions, the Russian Armed Forces are becoming a flexible tool that can be used to influence the situation in various parts of the world that are strategically important for Russia.

Using the label of hybrid war leads us away from the fact that we are dealing with a set of very traditional combat techniques which date back to the beginning of the 20th century or earlier. These techniques are used in modern international politics by all major players. The only difference is that some of them use them skillfully, while others have been repeatedly failing to master them, while spending trillions of dollars and losing many thousands of soldiers.