

Russia's Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric—and Putin-Led

TIMOTHY THOMAS

Foreign Military Studies Office

This article details the development of Russia's military strategy and how elements of that strategy may have been applied in Ukraine. It examines both traditional and contemporary elements of strategy, with a particular focus on the effect of Russian President Vladimir Putin's competitive logic and the General Staff's reliance on non-military methods of thought. With regard to the latter, General of the Army Valeriy Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, noted that today, non-military measures in operations are used over military operations by a ratio of 4:1. Also examined is the concept of reflexive control, which may have been used as a propaganda method during the Ukraine intervention

This article is not subject to US copyright law.

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the US government.

Mr. Timothy L. Thomas (BS, Engineering Science, USMA; MA, International Relations, University of Southern California) is a senior analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Mr. Thomas conducts extensive research and publishing in the areas of peacekeeping, information war, psychological operations, low-intensity conflict, and political-military affairs. He was a US Army foreign area officer who specialized in Soviet/Russian studies. His military assignments included serving as the Director of Soviet Studies at the United States Army Russian Institute in Garmisch, Germany; as an inspector of Soviet tactical operations under the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; and as a brigade S-2 and company commander in the 82nd Airborne Division. Mr. Thomas is an adjunct professor at the US Army's Eurasian Institute; an adjunct lecturer at the USAF Special Operations School; and a member of two Russian organizations, the Academy of International Information and the Academy of Natural Sciences. He has written one book on Russia (*Recasting the Red Star: Russia Forges Tradition and Technology through Toughness*, 2011) and numerous articles on a host of Russian topics (traditions, cyber, information war, reflexive control, Chechnya, Russian urban warfare, Georgia, etc.).

Address correspondence to Timothy Thomas, FMSO, ATIN-F Mr. Thomas, 731 McClellan Ave., Ft. Leavenworth, KS 666027-1350. E-mail: timothy.l.thomas20civ@mail.mil

to exert an information-psychological influence on both Russia's domestic and international audiences.

INTRODUCTION

Since its independence in the 1990s from the Soviet Union, Ukraine has limited the staging of its military near Russia's border in an obvious attempt to downplay any potential confrontation with the Kremlin. Only a handful of Ukraine's 38 or so military formations were originally located east of the Dnieper River (the area near Russia). This peaceful environment was disrupted in 2013, however, when, after years of negotiating, Kiev finally had to make a choice between the West's European Union (EU) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union. Initially, Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich chose to join the EU, but at the last minute he reversed his decision. It was unpopular domestically and appeared to be heavily influenced by the last-minute demands and threats of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

This caused an uproar among the population and resulted in mass demonstrations in Maidan Square, located in the heart of Kiev, Ukraine's capital. The protests eventually turned violent, resulting in several deaths on 20 February 2014 that were blamed on government gunfire. The bloodshed 'prompted a mass defection by the President's allies' who began to understand that the crimes in the square would be pinned on them.¹ On 21 February Yanukovich signed a peace agreement with protesters. Within 45 minutes, Ukraine's riot police left all the government buildings, according to Poland's Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, who was present at the signing. No longer guarded, Yanukovich panicked and left Kiev in the afternoon or evening.²

With the Ukraine government in free-fall, Putin worried about a Western takeover of a land he coveted and felt still belonged to Russia. He had been following events with his military advisers and making plans, taking advantage of opportunities as they arose while following the military's understanding of war's new nature. The Russian propaganda machine was hyperactive, blaming the West for staging a coup d'état that, according to Russia's media version of events, put ultranationalists in charge and placed Russians throughout Ukraine in danger. No substantial evidence of a coup was ever presented by Putin, other than a few comments that the US State Department had supported the regime with money and that this was the locus of the coup attempt.

¹ A. Higgins and A. E. Kramer, 'Defeated Even Before He Was Ousted', *New York Times*, 4 January 2015, pp. 1, 10.

² *Ibid.*

With his self-proclaimed mandate of protecting Russian citizens, Putin decided to intervene, first in Crimea and then in eastern Ukraine. By March 2015 he had taken Crimea and most of the sector of eastern Ukraine that interested him just as a ceasefire went into effect, finalized when separatists acquired the rail station at Debaltsevo. Putin (cynically) said of the Ukrainian army's defeat there that 'it is always a hardship when you lose to yesterday's miners or tractor drivers'.³ Perhaps more importantly, Putin now has militarized Crimea with missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and troops, creating a strategic bridgehead there. Currently 96 divisions, military units, and organizations have been formed.⁴ From this location, Russian forces are well positioned to attempt to take control of Transdnier, Odessa, and Mariupol and create a buffer zone between Ukraine and Crimea if they so desire. It is highly unlikely this conflict will end before this final takeover is attempted.

Putin seeks to increase Russian power through the use of threats and support of military-backed separatists. He wants to restore former territories, retain the unfettered ability to obtain and sell oil or natural gas, neuter NATO and European Union influence, and acquire additional natural resources. These issues, along with his aggressive and competitive personality, guide Putin's political goals, which in Russia precede the implementation of its military's strategy. For that reason, the military's strategy is 'Putin-led'. Without his input, there would have been no Crimean intervention.

To implement Putin's policies, the military can rely on several key elements from its array of historical and contemporary strategic templates in support of these political goals:

- Official definitions of strategy that have stood the test of time;
- Three specific concepts: foresight/forecasting, the correlation of forces (COF), and the strategic thoughts of A. A. Svechin;
- The recent use of indirect, asymmetric, and non-military measures;
- Reflexive control measures;
- The development of a specific logic for each conflict, to go along with the competitive logic of President Putin.

These points are discussed here in greater detail.

OFFICIAL DEFINITIONS OF STRATEGY

Strategy is defined officially as having precepts 'based on an evaluation of the state and development trends of the military-political situation, scientifically

³ J. Marson, 'Separatist Advances Imperil Ukraine Truce', *Wall Street Journal*, 18 February 2015, p. A11.

⁴ *Interfax* (in English), 30 March 2015.

sound objectives, principles, guidelines and tasks, and the objective requirements and actual functioning and development capability of a nation's military organization'.⁵ Russia's military strategy depends on the balance of power in the world and the means of armed combat. After conducting an analysis of the nature of future war, strategy then

looks at the likely composition and objectives of the warring sides; ways to unleash and wage wars using various weapons; the forms of the armed forces' strategic operations; the intensity and scope of military operations; and the possible duration, reoccurrence, and aftermath of wars.⁶

An 'evaluation of the state and development trends of the military-political situation' was apparently made by the Kremlin, and the opportunities appeared lucrative. Putin is an opportunist of the first order, who knows how to use intelligence from his days in the KGB. He is able to size up a winning hand and play it, such as he did with his move into Crimea. The first card he played as he evaluated the military-political situation was to label the evolving events in Maidan as a 'specter of an impending coup' initiated by the US. Russia's charge was that the US was using persuasion to get Ukraine to align with the EU instead of Russia, which appears plausible in the absence of other information. However, former Ukrainian President Yanukovich and several Ukrainian generals are now known to have been pro-Russian. They had been informing Putin of the weakness of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, adding to Putin's rationale for intervening. Yanukovich knew that Putin was behind the push to get Ukraine to align with Russia and was feeling heavy pressure from the former KGB operative. Yanukovich fled to Russia, not the EU.

Further, Russians continued to cite the promises made by former Secretary of State James Baker that NATO would not move closer to Russia. This point was a much better motive for Putin to use regarding events in Maidan than the coup charge, since in fact this has occurred. This is a clear anti-NATO card that Putin put in play, and it was used to show that you cannot trust NATO and therefore the EU as well, since NATO expansion did take place around Russia's periphery. However, Baker's promises were not formalized in a legal agreement, as was the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which Russia abrogated in Crimea.⁷ According to the latter memorandum, Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom all committed to: (a) respect the

⁵ S. B. Ivanov (ed.), *Military Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7, p. 675, Moscow Military Publishing House, Moscow, 2003.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ D. Henninger, 'Cold War 2.0, the Videogame', *Wall Street Journal*, 17 April 2014, p. A13. In 1999 Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined NATO, while in 2004 Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Romania became members. These are former Iron Curtain countries, in the words of Winston Churchill, which chose the West, not Russia.

independence, sovereignty, and existing borders of Ukraine; (b) refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine and pledged that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self-defense or otherwise in accordance with the UN Charter; (c) refrain from economic coercion; (d) seek immediate United Nations Security Council action to assist Ukraine, should it be threatened or attacked with nuclear weapons; (e) not use nuclear weapons against Ukraine unless attacked by Ukraine in association or alliance with a nuclear-armed state; and (f) consult if a situation arises that raises a question concerning these commitments.⁸ Russia failed to live up to this arrangement.

A second card Putin played was his close relationship with European economics, that is, he felt he had the ability to hold out against sanctions or look elsewhere for relief due to the clients he had fostered. A Chatham House report, which focused on Putin's ability to change the impact of sanctions through economic policy, noted: 'Across Europe, national corporations — such as banks, energy companies, and major law firms — are strongly lobbying against any further second- and third-tier sanctions against Moscow as short-term profits would be undermined . . .'⁹ Initial sanctions imposed by the West did little more than amuse many Russians. Moscow's stock market actually rose a little when the sanctions were announced. However, ensuing rounds of sanctions have hit a bit deeper in the pocketbooks of some of Putin's closest associates. Pain seems to be growing with the arrival of each new set of sanctions. Of course, Russia has responded with sanctions of its own against the West. Interestingly enough, and perhaps not by chance, cyberattacks from Russia against US banks and Internet sites have increased.

A third card in Putin's hands was his geopolitical capabilities, that is, his ability to block nuclear talks with Iran, hinder further the peace process in Syria, and make it more difficult for US supplies to be transported through Russia to American troops in Afghanistan. Each of these geopolitical issues lies at the heart of Putin's strength. He and his staff know how to manipulate political issues to Russia's benefit. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has the experience and dedication to assist Putin in each instance.

A fourth card was Russia's European supporters, who are scattered among key nations. Former Premier Silvio Berlusconi of Italy says isolating Russia 'goes against history' and Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of France's far-right National Front, notes that 'Mr. Putin hasn't made a single mistake'.¹⁰ In Germany the media's moniker is 'the Putin-understanders', since much of Germany's support for Russia's actions is tied to strong business links that

⁸ J. Lewis, 'Ukraine and the 1994 Budapest Memorandum', 29 April 2014, condensed here. See <http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/7316/ukraine-and-the-1994-budapest-memorandum>.

⁹ I. Zaslavskiy and R. Bosch, 'Europe Can No Longer Cling to Russian Profits When Security Is at Stake', 1 April 2014, <http://email-chathamhouse.org/1TYG-2BYVB-BLOMUK-103L57-1/c.aspx>.

¹⁰ A. Troianovski, D. Gauthier-Villars, and N. Winning, 'In Europe, Putin Also Has His Defenders', *Wall Street Journal*, 5–6 April 2014, p. A8.

the nation does not want interrupted. Key German figures of influence are involved as well.

For example, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder called Putin a flawless democrat in the past and stated that Putin, as a historically thinking person, has a certain fear of encirclement. Who would have imagined that Schröder, after having confronted the Soviet Union's forces in East Germany during the Cold War, would not only be working for Nord Stream AG, which is controlled by Russian energy giant Gazprom (not all that unusual), but also be acting as if Russian actions in Ukraine today are inconsequential (very unusual). Former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt found Putin's Crimean actions 'absolutely understandable'. And Siemens AG Chief Executive Joe Kaeser used these two former chancellors to justify his visit to Putin in late March.¹¹ Clearly Putin played this business angle well. He seemingly had several of Germany's economic giants (Siemens, Volkswagen, Adidas, Deutsche Bank, etc.) in his hip pocket. Hans-Werner Sinn, President of the Ifo Institute for Economic Research in Germany, recently wrote that since Germany killed millions of Russians in World War II, 'it is the duty of Germany in particular to de-escalate the conflict with Russia'.¹² Writing at a time of impending civil war in Ukraine, one must ask if he is oblivious to events on the ground in Odessa and eastern Ukraine. The situation in Ukraine is about the future of the nation, with armed groups storming and occupying numerous buildings across eastern Ukraine, holding journalists and OSCE negotiators hostage, thwarting attempts at imposing order and stability, and shooting down helicopters (and civilian airliners). This is not about free trade but rather freedom from the illegal conduct of separatists and surrogates.

A fifth card Putin began to put into play was to simply raise gas prices (which Russia has done in the past), as Gazprom did in early March to increase the financial pressure on Kiev. It is no secret that six European nations rely on Russia for 100% of their gas, while several others get about half of their gas from Russia. Putin knows their dependency on him limits any fast turnaround options, so he will cajole or threaten them in the meantime. However, the glut of oil on the market and the ensuing low prices have hurt Putin as much as Ukraine. And other nations are trying to reroute oil and gas supplies to the nation.

A sixth card that Putin held (and which limits conflict and allows him more room to risk taking land) was simply the fact that the US Armed Forces are broke and tired from a decade of deployments. This fact fit well with the thought that strategy 'looks at the likely composition and objectives of the warring sides . . . and the possible duration, reoccurrence, and aftermath of wars'. The US force is reorganizing and reenergizing. Putin and his staff calculated that his actions in Crimea would not result in an immediate Western

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² H.-W. Sinn, 'Why We Should Give Putin a Chance', *Wall Street Journal*, 3–4 May 2014, p. A11.

response. This put doubt into the minds of US allies. However, Putin has miscalculated here, since some NATO forces (to include US forces) have been deployed to nations bordering on Russia in response to Russian moves.

FORESIGHT/FORECASTING, THE CORRELATION OF FORCES (COF), AND THE WORK OF A. A. SVECHIN

Foresight is a process of gaining knowledge of possible changes in the area of military affairs and determining their future development. An analysis of events taking place in a given specific historical situation constitutes the basis of scientific foresight.¹³ Foresight's complexity is determined by risk, chance factors, and insufficient information on an enemy.¹⁴ Forecasting (*prognozirovanie*) is a component of foresight (*predvidenie*). It is defined as 'the scientifically substantiated determination of the prospects of future development of armed forces, military equipment, military art, the probable course and outcome of individual wars'.¹⁵ It is also a term associated with prediction.¹⁶ In addition to these two terms, strategic patterns of thought are also developed through the use of the Marxist prism that analyzes objective reality and then applies subjective thought to manipulate Putin's new reality to one's advantage. Based upon the cards Putin had to play, military foresight envisioned an opportunity that could be exploited. However in the March 2015 film *Crimea: Road to the Motherland*, Putin refuted this supposition, stating that this operation was not preplanned. Rather, he said he acted to save people who had to 'fend for themselves, under the steamroller of nationalists'. This is a strange comment, since there were no military actions ongoing in Crimea. No one was threatened. And, as Putin stated in the film, Crimea is where Yanukovych sought refuge. The situation there had to be totally calm for him to go there. No one was threatened.

With no on-site witnesses regarding the elections or the number of Russian troops in Crimea (which Putin asserts did not break the required troop limit), all we have to go on is Putin's word, which of course is truly troublesome. He couldn't even tell the truth about whether troops in Crimea were his until weeks after the incursion began. He also stated in the film that the Ukrainian troops in Crimea were well armed. Yet they never left their garrisons. Russia's military could hardly find any equipment they wanted to keep after taking over the Ukrainian garrisons. Putin stated there were 43 S-300 launchers and up to 20 Buk launchers and armor. Further, Putin only puts forward his version of a Western coup that took place in Kiev in the

¹³ N. V. Ogarkov (ed.), *Military Encyclopedic Dictionary*, p. 585, Military Publishing House, Moscow, 1983.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 593.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

film, without providing any proof other than his contention that the West trained people in Ukraine and Poland, and he totally ignored discussing his role in the event and the pressure he put on Yanukovich. As it was once said, it is nice to be king. For the rest of the world, one-sided and illogical versions of events don't work.

The term *correlation of forces* (COF) assists in the military's determination of objective reality. It helps determine the degree of superiority of one force over the other based on a variety of factors. Both quantitative and qualitative characteristics of friendly and enemy forces are compared. The COF is calculated on strategic, operational, and tactical directions.¹⁷ This evaluation includes military-technical evaluations, as well as economic, sociopolitical, and spiritual factors.¹⁸ Other factors to consider include a commander's ability to exploit opportunity, which is where a commander's subjective thought plays a key role; the ability of nuclear weapons to change the COF immediately; the importance of timely logistic deliveries; the use of the offensive to change the COF most effectively; the preparation of forecasts ahead of time to anticipate events; the requirement to consider the functions of time and surprise, which can change the COF quickly when properly employed; and the need to uncover hidden factors if possible.¹⁹

Theorist Alexander Andreyevich Svechin, who was born in 1878, appears to have had the greatest impact on current strategic thought. He was not only an outstanding military leader but also a professional writer. His most famous book was aptly titled *Strategy*. It was translated into English in 1992. In this work Svechin offered the following definition of strategy:

Strategy is the art of combining preparations for war and the grouping of operations for achieving the goal set by the war for the AF [armed forces]. Strategy decides issues associated with the employment of the AF and all the resources of a country for achieving ultimate war aims.²⁰

Strategy begins

when we see a series of successive goals, or states, toward the achievement of the ultimate goal of the war. Strategy must look forward and take the very long term into consideration. The strategist advances by operations, and these strategic steps extend several weeks or even months in time.²¹

¹⁷ N. V. Ogarkov (ed.), *Military Encyclopedic Dictionary*, p. 691, Military Publishing House, Moscow, 1983.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–70.

²⁰ A. A. Svechin, *Strategy*, Moscow, 1927 (*Military Journal* translation provided by East View Publications, 1992, p. 69).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

In strategy the center of gravity lies in developing an independent point of view, which primarily requires careful homework.²² Adopting an independent point of view resulted in the use of surrogates, little green men, and the use of surprise, among other factors, in the decision to take Crimea and intervene in eastern Ukraine.

General Staff thinking has combined Svechin's thoughts with new methods and techniques for the conduct of war. For example, with regard to new methods, in 2014 General of the Army Valeriy Gerasimov noted that 'wars are now not even declared, but having begun, are not going according to a pattern we are accustomed to'.²³ He added that the techniques and rules of war have changed, since non-military methods (described in the next section) are now used to achieve political and strategic goals. After reacquiring Crimea without firing a shot, who appears to understand these new rules better than the Russian military? Perhaps more importantly, Gerasimov stated that remote non-contact influence on an enemy is becoming the main method of achieving goals, where differences among strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war, as well as differences between offense and defense, are fading away. With regard to strategy he stated that:

The renowned Soviet Military Academician Aleskandr Svechin wrote: 'It is unusually difficult to foresee the circumstances of a war. . . . It is necessary to work out a particular line of strategic conduct for each war, and each war represents a partial case, requiring the establishment of its own peculiar logic, and not the application of some sort of model'.²⁴

This latter sentence is the most important line of this entire article. Models and dictionary definitions are useful to a point, but unique logic and creativity applied to the situation at hand (developed through the use of foresight and an analysis of the COF) may best offer the Rosetta stone for understanding Russian strategic thought. This logic would be supplemented or backed up by the historical experiences of Soviet and Russian theoreticians. Cyberattacks against Estonia, a Russian armed intervention into Georgia, and the use of surrogates in Ukraine all indicate the use of a 'peculiar logic, and not the application of some sort of model'.

INDIRECT, ASYMMETRIC, AND NON-MILITARY OPERATIONS

Russia's current strategy involves the use of indirect and asymmetric operations. In 2010, in an article in *Military Thought*, two Russian analysts

²² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²³ V. Gerasimov, 'The Value of Science Is in Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations', *Voyenno-Promyslennyy Kuryer Online*, 26 February, 2013, <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

noted that Putin had stated that ‘our responses are to be based on intellectual superiority. They will be asymmetrical, and less costly’.²⁵ Asymmetrical approaches feature a combination of forms and methods of using forces and means that depend on an adversary’s unequal combat potential. This Russian definition allows for the avoidance of a direct confrontation²⁶ and the application of something like Russia’s use of little green men. Further, the terms *asymmetrical approach* and *asymmetrical actions* are close in substance to the concepts of indirect actions and indirect action strategy, according to the authors.²⁷ This trend in viewing contemporary conflicts as winnable through a confrontation of indirect or asymmetric actions instead of direct confrontation appears to continue unabated today.

A 2013 *Military Thought* article stated that new-generation wars would involve asymmetric actions that are used to offset an opponent’s superiority.²⁸ Plans will be made in advance (foresight?), battles will rage in the information environment (see reflexive control initiatives in the following section), and untraditional and non-military forms of the armed struggle will be used, among others.²⁹ Gerasimov added that the initiation of military operations in peacetime, the development of highly maneuverable, non-contact operations, and the development of robotic systems and weapons based on new physical principles are all aspects of the new forms and methods of conflict.³⁰

Gerasimov’s account of the use of asymmetric operations appears to fit with the opportunities/cards Putin and his staff put into play. These asymmetric counters offset sanctions to a degree as well as US and NATO military superiority. In Crimea shots were not fired. Gerasimov added that the use of special operations forces and internal opposition among the populace resulted in the creation of a ‘continually operating front over the entire territory of the opposing state’.³¹ Further, he noted that the involvement of the population’s protest potential (especially the Baltics, where there are huge Russian populations), was becoming a new method for carrying out combat operations.

Many in the West use the term *hybrid* to describe Russian actions, noting that hybrid actions use hard and soft tactics. The Russian military does not use the term to describe its own actions. For example, in a *Military Thought* article this year, two Russian authors stated the following:

²⁵ S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, ‘Asymmetrical Actions to Ensure Russia’s Military Security’, *Military Thought* 3 (2010), p. 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19. For a discussion of indirect operations, see I. N. Vorobyov and V. A. Kiselev, ‘Indirect Action Strategy in Its New Form’, *Military Thought* 9 (2006), pp. 2–5.

²⁸ S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, ‘On the Character and Content of New Generation Warfare’, *Military Thought* 10 (2013), pp. 13–24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Gerasimov, 2013.

³¹ *Ibid.*

'Hybrid warfare (*gibridnaya voyna*)', then, is not exactly the right term and is slightly at odds with the glossary used in this country's military science. Essentially, these actions can be regarded as a form of confrontation between countries or, in a narrow sense, as a form in which forces and capabilities are used to assure national security.³²

Gerasimov states that non-military versus military methods are his focus, and he never mentions hybrid war. He makes the important comment that non-military measures are occurring at a rate of 4:1 over military operations. This is an important point, and one that encourages the use of surrogates. Covert operations, to include information warfare measures and special operations forces, accompany such methods. Information conflict, in particular, opens up 'extensive asymmetric capabilities for the reduction of an enemy's combat potential'.³³ This was particularly apparent in the extensive propaganda apparatus that went to work on Russia's domestic population. Further, Russia on occasion called into service 'separatist' forces, 'self-determination' forces, peacekeepers, Cossacks, Chechens, and even private military companies and forces from other nations.

Gerasimov concluded by noting that 'a dismissive approach to a new idea, a nonstandard approach, to a different point of view in military science is impermissible. . . . Each war represents an isolated case, requiring an understanding of its own particular logic, its own unique character'.³⁴ Asymmetric and indirect operations can be expressed

in political isolation, the conduct of economic sanctions, a blockade of maritime, air, and land lines of communications, intimidation through force, and also in the introduction of an international peacekeeping contingent under the pretext of the defense of human rights and humanitarian operations.³⁵

Russia's focus on asymmetric and indirect operations and the extensive use of the information domain has continued throughout 2014 and into 2015.

³² V. B. Andrianov and V. V. Loyko, 'Questions Regarding the Use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in Crisis Situations in Peacetime', *Military Thought*, 1 (2015), p. 68.

³³ Gerasimov, 2013.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ O. Falichev, 'The Future Is Being Laid Today: Armed Forces Structure Theory Must Correspond to the Nature of Future Wars to the Maximum Extent Possible', *Voyenno-Promysblennyy Kuryer Online*, 13 March 2013, available at <http://www.wnc.dialog.com>.

REFLEXIVE CONTROL

A truly unique Russian concept that has assisted Russian actions over the past several decades is known as reflexive control (RC). It was developed and used during the Soviet era. It is defined in several ways, depending on the author. RC has generally been understood as a means of conveying specially prepared information to a partner or an opponent to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action. Even though the theory was developed long ago in the Soviet Union, it is still undergoing further refinement.

Russia's use of RC in Ukraine appears to be extensive. In 2013 an interesting article on the concept appeared in *Military Thought*. V. L. Makhnin noted that going from the appearance of cooperation to that of conflict can break the will of the adversary's military and political leaders. This is known as strangling the enemy in a 'friendly' embrace.³⁶ One is reminded of the Putin-Poroshenko September 2014 Minsk truce that was followed by a Russian military invasion of Ukraine, resulting in the seizure of an additional 200 square miles of territory. Was Poroshenko strangled in the 'friendly' embrace? Not surprisingly, only hours after the February 2015 Minsk agreement, separatist forces took Debaltseve. The same 'friendly' embrace repeated itself.

Makhnin stated that simulacrum,³⁷ analogies, and other forms of influence are introduced into the reflexive process to control perceptions. If simulacrum are representations of reality, then one can expect to find many simulacrum in Putin's 'new reality', which discusses events for the Russian population without skepticism or situational context, just Putin's point of view. Past experiences can be used, as a reflexive process, to mislead both domestic and international opinion and decision makers. A simulacrum can paralyze an adversary's intelligent (creative) activity.³⁸

Analogies can be used to discuss subjects that cannot be observed. In military art, analogy is a cognitive approach that helps one develop concepts and a new way to achieve specific results. One is reminded of the fascist and Nazi analogy Russia's media used in reference to people fighting in Maidan Square against Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, an analogy drawn to acquire support from the Russian population. Russians well remember the Nazi onslaught in World War II, and so this analogy touches a raw nerve. Analogies can reflexively serve as a strong unifying force. Putin often uses analogies against the international community. He stated on several

³⁶ V. L. Makhnin, 'Reflexive Processes in Military Art: The Historico-Gnoseological Aspect', *Military Thought* 1 (2013), p. 40.

³⁷ An image or representation of reality. See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/simulacrum>.

³⁸ Makhnin, p. 37.

occasions that Russia's incursion into Crimea was little different from NATO's incursion into Kosovo. He forgot to add, of course, that Russia consumed Crimea, while no NATO country incorporated Kosovo.

Another Makhnin comment is that RC allows the commander to uncover an idea unknown to himself or his opponent 'at the moment'.³⁹ Interests, motivations, and reasons that shape the operational-tactical situation are conveyed to an adversary to stimulate his actions, reasoning, and conclusions. This can make an opponent slow down his operations, abandon plans, and make irrational decisions, which can result in a creative and more RC approach for a Russian commander after viewing an enemy response to such criteria. This could be exactly what is happening in Ukraine. Creative moments or strategic opportunities become evident to members of the General Staff as the conflict progresses, and they are taking advantage of them.

More importantly, and not mentioned by Makhnin, is that Russia's provocations in Ukraine and the threats it is making to its neighbors have recreated an older fear, that of NATO troops on its borders. Whether this was a planned RC action or not is unknown, but Russia's actions have produced the exact RC outcome desired by Russian nationalists, resulting in more money being pumped into Russia's military forces and equipment. One can almost hear nationalists shouting, 'The threat is back!' A recent unannounced set of field exercises, designed to test Russia's readiness, does two things: The field exercises put additional stress and fear on NATO and bordering nations, and they condition bordering nations to look at these exercises as nothing more than practice, when in effect they could also be used to launch an attack. That is, they can be considered as RC exercises. Such an exercise took place on Georgia's border before Russia's intervention there. Finally, Russia's unannounced flights over the Baltics may have been activated to search out just where Baltic radars are located, an RC use that other countries have manipulated in the past.

Another tactic is to blame an opponent for actions that Russian forces are performing. For example, Sergei Ivanov, Putin's Chief of Staff, stated that the West is targeting Putin with an information war, complete with mudslinging, juggling of facts, and other lies.⁴⁰ Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, recently made a similar claim, noting that Russia is facing an 'unprecedented' information war over Ukraine,⁴¹ when in fact it is Russia that has unleashed the most expansive information war since the days of the Cold War.

On occasion the use of RC has unintentionally backfired on the Kremlin. The *Moscow Times Online* has printed parts of a letter from Russian intellectuals requesting that Channel One TV acknowledge its 'falsifications' in its

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁰ *Interfax* (in English), 24 October 2014.

⁴¹ *RIA Novosti*, 10 April 2015.

reporting on Ukraine. The authors of these TV accounts, the letter adds, are blamed for young Russian men, swayed by their reporting, traveling to Ukraine and dying for a trumped-up cause.⁴²

PUTIN'S IMPACT

NATO has attempted to engage Putin, trying to assure Russia's leadership that NATO is not a threat to it, even bringing it into the NATO fold for the past several years. NATO knows that Russia is 'border sensitive' and rejects any foreign activity near its borders. Any approach by another country or bloc elicits an immediate reaction. Unfortunately Russia still has many analysts with Cold War mentalities (Alexander Dugin, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Alexander Prokhanov, Yevgeny Kiselyov, etc.) who play on this fear. They are influential and feed into Putin's distrust of the West.

Border security issues and a sense of humiliation due to Russia's loss of power were two primary aspects of Russia's history and psyche that strongly affect Putin's personality and agenda. To advance the cause of grabbing Crimea, the Kremlin used intimidation (demanding Ukraine soldier defections), provocation (blocking Ukraine's warships from leaving the harbor at Sevastopol), deception (masking the faces and unit insignia of Russian soldiers in Crimea), propaganda, disregard of international norms, opportunism, and, in some rare instances, the legitimate protection of interests. Meanwhile, US Secretary of State John Kerry found it difficult to properly address this chaotic situation, unable even to discuss the actual state of affairs on the ground with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. While Kerry looked to solve problems elsewhere such as in the Middle East (Iran and Syria), Ukraine and Europe became 'open seasons' for opportunists like Putin. At times like these it becomes clear that the US role as world mediator simply is asking too much of it. Too many issues required simultaneous resolution. Or is the chaotic state of affairs that demands US participation elsewhere something that Putin and his staff realized in their assessment of strategy ('an evaluation of the state and development trends of the military-political situation') and offered yet another card for them to consider and play?

Putin's charges that the West is responsible for the conflict do not add up: Other nations in the area would be supporting Russia if that were the case. When the collision between the EU and Russia became clear to Yanukovich, and it appeared the nation was siding with the EU, he reacted by traveling to Russia. Putin acted to take Crimea. Russian journalist Alexander Golts has noted that Putin's way to gain respect for a Russia that

⁴² A. Dolgov, no title, *Moscow Times Online* (in English), 24 October 2014, available at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com>.

lacks money, faithful allies, and industrial capacity is to act unpredictably, as former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev did years ago.⁴³ Putin's creation of an apocalyptic image of the potential of mutual destruction is representative of his unpredictable nature.⁴⁴

If each war has its own particular logic, as Gerasimov proposed, then the logic that Putin has used to justify his actions in Ukraine must be a focus of attention. He has ordered these interventions because he says Russia has been humiliated and treated as a second-class nation, and he intends to rectify the situation. In a recent discussion forum in Sochi, known as the international discussion club Valdai, he blamed the West, and the US in particular, for forcing their standards on other countries,⁴⁵ which, interestingly enough, is exactly what Putin is doing. Putin charges other nations or organizations with tactics that are actually his own.

It is ironic to hear Putin state that the US has to deal with the consequences of its own foreign policy mistakes and fight new threats,⁴⁶ since NATO troops were nowhere near Russia's borders before Putin decided to intervene in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Putin must now deal with the consequences of *his* actions and *his* strategic logic: He himself created the conditions that caused his neighbors to want NATO troops in or near their countries. Putin's actions have scared his neighbors, who now view Russia as the threat. It was Putin who put the heat on Yanukovich and persuaded him to abandon the EU, which set off the Maidan protests.

As part of his mission to increase Russian power, Putin wants Russia to teach other countries that it does not pay to ignore the feelings or concerns of the Kremlin. He ignores the fact that Russian concerns were taken into account, and the nation was integrated into many Western organizations, including invitations to participate in NATO activities and join the G8. Perhaps deep within the Russian leadership's psyche remains the necessity of maintaining not only safe and secure borders but also control over neighboring lands, even a friendly one such as Ukraine. Putin's concept of the 'Russian World' is one that expands beyond its borders.⁴⁷ He has also used his competitive logic to ascertain that former Soviet states were taken from the USSR illegally, when, in fact, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was accomplished according to international law, which he is now breaking. Finally, Putin is worried about Russians adopting what he terms the West's 'quasi values', which, in his opinion, are hard for Russians to accept.

⁴³ A. Golts, no title, *Moscow Times Online* (in English), 6 November 2014, available at, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com>.

⁴⁴ *Interfax* (in English), 24 October 2014.

⁴⁵ *Interfax* (in English), 24 October 2014. The next three *Interfax* citations are all different, but were published on the same day without title or author.

⁴⁶ *Interfax* (in English), 24 October 2014.

⁴⁷ Wikipedia describes the "Russkiy Mir Foundation" (Russian World Foundation) as a soft power initiative that President Putin created by decree in 2007, with the aim of promoting values challenging Western cultural traditions. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russkiy_Mir_Foundation.

Not all Russians would agree with him. Ukrainian Economic Minister Pavlo Sheremeta noted that if Ukraine is successful, it will be proof that democracy, rule of law, and human rights are better for development, not the bullying with tanks and oil that Putin is professing.⁴⁸

CONCLUSIONS

There are several conclusions that one can draw from watching Russian strategy unfold in Ukraine. First, the official definitions, concepts of foresight/forecasting and the COF, and Svechin's theoretical input all continue to serve as useful background for assessing Russia's geopolitical and military strategy. It appears that many of these methods continue to be in use. However, the development of indirect, asymmetric, and non-military measures, combined with the General Staff's understanding of new methods and forms of warfare, indicate the further refinement of Russian military strategy. Strategy, under these conditions, is revised and adapted to exploit opportunities that arise according to a specific logic, in Gerasimov's opinion. Second, any consideration of Russian strategy must include an estimate of how President Vladimir Putin's own competitive logic is influencing the situation. He has in place his own hand-picked cadre who appear to support his anti-Western diatribe. He trusts no one, and his logic, based on revanchist aspirations, is the one that really matters. He sets the main vector for strategy. Third, more attention must be paid to the types of non-military methods that Russia intends to employ. Since it was the Chief of the General Staff who noted that they are used in a 4:1 ratio over military methods, this ratio becomes more significant. The main non-military methods to date have been self-determination elections, the use of surrogates, and a vast information and cyber warfare campaign. The prevalent and extended use of reflexive control concepts and deception has been evident throughout the campaign to date and must be considered for their potential use by Russia in future confrontations. The main use of military force has been the surreptitious use of regular Russian forces, which has never been acknowledged by the Kremlin, but their movements have been followed by Western satellites. Finally, it is clear that the logic Putin used in the 2015 film on Crimea has come back to haunt him. He stated that 'in effect, we were left with no choice even. We simply had to protect these people' in Crimea, again the area to which the threatened Yanukovich fled (which makes no sense). Now NATO has no choice due to Russian actions, to defend the Baltics, if we are to use his logic.

As other nations' strategies evolve in the digital age, the West must work to evaluate how they are changing and what methods they are adapting. This

⁴⁸ T. L. Friedman, 'Who Will Influence Whom?', *New York Times*, 27 April 2014, p. 11.

requires a keen understanding of other countries' strategic prisms, technological developments, and local lexicons. In the long run such knowledge helps minimize mirror-imaging that produces false templates and results in mistaken or unsubstantiated analysis. It also allows friendly forces to visualize the battlefield as an opponent might, allowing for the quicker discovery of counters that could be effective. Such key knowledge is required to help understand and offset future enemy actions.