COUNTERING RUSSIAN STRATEGIC APPROACHES: SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN HYBRID WARFARE

Dr. Spencer B. Meredith III
National Defense University

*Views expressed do not represent official NDU, DOD or USG positions

UNCLASSIFIED
RUSSIAN STRATEGIC IDENTITY

• Not a normal state but a very normal empire
  • Goal is power to control → autonomy, prestige, luxury for rulers
    • Influence is means to control
  • Mafia governance
    • Extract resources without transactional social contract – predictably arbitrary
    • Control disposable populace – citizens as serfs
    • Kremlin battles over prestige and wealth – Byzantine intrigue more than glories
  • Expansionist empire
    • Imperial DNA written through conquest
      • Mongols forged state
      • Muscovy fought for central control
      • Tzarist realpolitik – deceit, destruction and deportation
    • Messianic Mission
      • Eurasianism – unique place in history and the world
      • Third Rome – burden to stabilize through strength
RUSSIAN STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

• Challenge of US dominance and NATO expansion
  • **Rival power centers expose Russian weakness**
    • This is not fear of Operation Barbarossa 2.0
      • Kremlin knows NATO not offensive even if expansive
    • Real threat is *obvious weakness undermines core domestic control*
      • Cold War showed failure of “better life”
      • Kremlin today cannot even deliver “good life”
    • Undermines patron-client value to international “partners”
      • *руководитель* not seen as bully… seen as replaceable : irrelevant
        • China in CAS, Kazaks “go your own way”
        • *US narratives miss this by focusing on “bad” Kremlin instead of “feeble” one*
RUSSIAN STRATEGIC PARADIGM

• Russia is NOT reacting defensively
  • It was outmaneuvered by post-Cold War US actions
    • US Political Destabilization
      • Kosovo, Bulldozer Revolution (Serbia), Color Revolutions, Arab Spring, Maidan
    • US Military “Conquest”
      • Baltics, attempted Georgia, Iraq, Afghanistan, growing efforts in Ukraine
    • US Economic Chokehold
      • Fracking and Petropolitics, Arms Sales, IMF/WB manipulation, currency dominance
  • All undermine Kremlin’s ability to occupy unique place in history

• The evidence of US actions is clear but US responses of intent (“democratization ~ liberty, prosperity”) are unbelievable...
  • US/NATO expansion normal for a rival empire = Kremlin lens for itself/GPC

MEREDITH 2019
UNCLASSIFIED
RUSSIAN STRATEGIC METHOD

- “Lies, damn lies and statistics” – the center of Russian narratives
- Хитрость (cunning) is a virtue as much as necessity
- Лгать – истина (to lie is abiding truth)
- Враньё лучше чем ложь (lies with some truth are better than complete falsehoods)
  - Враньё requires control to ensure the lie does not stray too far from reality
- Kremlin assumes all others either do this or are too stupid to try
  - Views of any US expertise seen as exceptions to systemic foolishness of democracy
- Taken together, these lay the foundation for Hybrid Warfare
CORE HYBRID WARFARE CONCEPTS

- **Reflexive control** – setting the conditions for adversary perceptions to induce behavior favorable to one’s interests

- **активные мероприятия** – active measures as political warfare (statecraft)

- **Offense dominance** – logic of asymmetry means operationalize everything
  - Resilience harder in democracy
    - Inherent fissures are easily mobilized absent compelling (obvious) external threat

- **Маскировка** – camouflage and surprise
  - Predictably unpredictable
  - Credible capability and intent
  - Opaque as much as attributable
HYBRID WARFARE CONSENSUS

• Gerasimov was not outlining new approach, he described US approach – with an apparent degree of respect among enemies... as if to say “game on”

• Gerasimov confirmed the longstanding Russian view that hybrid warfare is full-spectrum
  • Conventional as much as unconventional capabilities and uses of them
  • State-society is the center of the battle
    • Governance capacity, autonomy and legitimacy as both tools and arenas
    • Tactical-Operational-Strategic nesting across geostrategic landscape

• Special operations have critical role – Russian concept more expansive than ours, even with far fewer resources
Russian “Special” Operations

Kremlin’s “special” equities used in GPC

- Spetsanz - direct action/recon, becoming more UW capable
- “SOF” support – limited breadth but branching out
- *Competition regarding regional military district and GRU control
- PMCs – technically illegal, vagary gives plausible deniability and outlet for intra-elite politics
- Non-state actors – most effective within democratic systems
  *Integrated with IO/Cyber
- VEO proxies, puppets, partners – expand the strategic game, raise US costs

*Competition regarding regional military district and GRU control

MEREDITH 2019
SAMPLE OF CURRENT APPLICATIONS

- Ukraine/Syria combat training (they see it like early post-9/11 US CT/COIN)
- Ensure security dominance in CAS/Caucasus Great Game – connect GPF~SOF
  - Increase 201st Motorized Rifle Division – example of other “pivots” to bolster, not expand footprint
  - Attempting to undermine US CT and China econ spread into security
- Libya: security for Haftar, support to contra-government messaging
  - Share in oil profits – financing siloviki owned PMCs
- Civil society – Night Wolves to volunteer brigades
  - NGOs highly effective tool even with foreign entity registration – *personnel placement gets them in system*
  - Democratic activism – operationalize BLM as much as BLM (KGB letter writing operations)
- Operations in the Information Environment
  - Redefining history, interpreting today, instigating tomorrow
LOGIC OF HYBRID WARFARE WORKS IN RUSSIA’S FAVOR

• Russian Special Operations expanding reach because hybrid warfare
  • Has low opportunity and sunk costs – can pull up stakes
  • Gives prime mover advantage
  • Acts as a force multiplier for Special Operations
    • Only limited by resources not targets

• However, there are real limitations to what Russia can do...
  • Primarily internal rather than what US/NATO does
DYNAMICS AFFECTING FUTURE RUSSIAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS USES

• Demographic time bomb – projected 1/3 population decline by 2050
  • Implications for Special Operations
    • Exacerbates recruiting problems writ large
      • Kremlin’s Operational Response = expand range of Special Operations and Compatriots to entice wider spectrum into system

• Petropolitics get more complicated – Entrance of US as major exporter changes OPEC~Russia balance of power
  • Implications for Special Operations
    • Exacerbates resourcing woes combined with declining tax revenue
      • Kremlin’s Operational Response = increase private funding with personal payoff (mining/oil field security contracts)
US/NATO RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN HW – INITIALLY REACTIONARY

- Increasing Hybrid Defense
  - US/NATO developing resilience ~ Russian operationalization of elections
  - Implications for Special Operations
    - Less mythology of little green men, more reality of naming and shaming (Finlandization less likely)

- Kremlin’s Operational Counter = distract widely, defend locally
- Kremlin’s Strategic Counter = return to logic of Hybrid Warfare
  - Enshrines opportunism (reactive) as much as predictable unpredictability (proactive)
  - Everything is on the table so spectrum of conventional and unconventional operations remains viable… space for special operations
EXAMPLES OF POTENTIAL FUTURE RUSSIAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS USES

• Staged provocation in Baltics
  • Referenda as much as security incident
    • Zapad and Suwalki Gap
    • Narva/Tallinn

• Balkans pivot
  • Radev (Bulgaria) and Dodik (Bosnia)
  • Social identity contra “liberal/decadent” Western Europe

• Building partner capacity for counter “terrorism” globally
  • Russian allies benefit from increasing narrative space and justification for stability/contra democracy “CT” operations
  • Turkey the golden ticket to destabilizing NATO

• Maritime interdiction skill development following Kerch
  • Counter piracy as precursor to “inspections” in expanded EEZ
    • Gdansk-Klaipeda flashpoint
HYBRID WARFARE OFFENSE-DEFENSE BALANCE

• Russia has inherent advantages over the West
  • Not because of inherent superiority but because of inherent vulnerabilities in open, integrated, democratic states/societies
  • They are there until the West figures out a way to build hybrid defense

• Russian disadvantages will remain hidden from mobilizable populations UNLESS/UNTIL the West exposes...
  • Russia’s trajectory
  • Kremlin’s feebleness
US/NATO SOF ABILITIES TO EFFECT STRATEGIC GAME AND RUSSIAN PLAY

• SOF can accomplish 3 primary tasks in Great Power Competition
  1. Presence operations raise operating costs
     a) Signal interest and raise questions about follow-on investment in area
     b) Probing adversary as much as reconnaissance for potential partners
  2. Building partner capacity since network matters as much as, if not more than range time
     a) Strategizing and integrating governance support
        • Door to influence and resilience, not endpoint as in previous “stabilization efforts”
     b) Strategic communication
        • Costs willing to pay, lines cannot be crossed, negotiables \(\rightarrow\) escalation management
  3. Build deterrent effect of resilience \(\rightarrow\) resistance mobilization \(\rightarrow\) reduce opportunities on the board
CURRENT AND PROJECTED US/NATO SOF EXAMPLES – PARTNERS

• Nordic & Baltic regions
  • State-society-business working groups, civil defense planning/exercises
  • Threat narratives balanced with empowerment – “we can and will fight”
    • Lithuania – Mobilization and Civil Resistance Department (MoI-MoD)
    • Estonia – Women’s Volunteer Defense Organization (Estonian Defense League)
  • Sweden – Civil Contingencies Agency “If Crisis Or War Comes” pamphlet
  • Finland, Denmark working on similar efforts
DEVELOPING US/NATO SOF EXAMPLES – JOINT/INTERAGENCY

- Civil Affairs – DOS Conflict and Stabilization Operations
  - Currently building pathways for co-deployments in INDOPACOM

- MARSOC, SFAB – DOJ
  - Partner law enforcement and police ethics training

- PSYOP – DOS Public Diplomacy
  - Messaging: coordinating authorities/permissions for increasing active Information Operations capabilities

- Proposed Example – Ukraine: GPF/SOF Joint Projects (N3/N5)
  - Seabees/Army Corps of Engineers Dnieper river lock upgrade
  - Navy Expeditionary Medical Unit – Reserve Civil Affairs MEDCAP
  - *SOF support in the human domain – governance, messaging, network development
IRREGULAR WARFARE WRIT LARGE

• Hybrid Warfare will be here for the foreseeable future... it has a long history

• Russia will adapt but with increasing domestic constraints and rivalries with China in Central Asia

• Russian Special Operations are expanding – the risk is overtasking US SOF to match

• Solution is making irregular warfare a broad skillset and SOF forward-leaning in the global competition space
  • Presence as much as proficiencies
  • GPF impact human domain SOF as conventional deterrent
  • Doing so expands opportunities to defend, deter, counter, and ultimately win in hybrid warfare